

“Escape from Hell-Joseon”: A Study of Korean Long-term Travelers in India*

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(In lieu of an abstract) The objectives of this study were: 1) to understand present day long-term travels of Korean youth by connecting these to a “Hell-Joseon” discourse; 2) to examine the Korean phenomenon of *tal-Joseon* (escape from Korea), a practice that is difficult to explain through concepts related to tourism or immigration; 3) to identify the life changes travelers experience after *tal-Joseon* travel with a focus on their increased mobility. The results of this research are the following. First, people, mostly youths, who are frustrated by Korea’s social structure and culture are traveling abroad for extended periods to get away from Korea. Second, the migration routes *tal-Joseon* travelers take are different depending on the traveler’s social class. Lower-middle class youth travelers, for example, follow a repetitive pattern of physical labor in developed nations and long-term rest in developing nations. Third, the main goal sought by long-term travelers in India, one of most popular destinations for long-term rest, is “detoxing from Hell-Joseon” through rest, healing, and a search for the self. Fourth, when long-term travelers finish their trips, the meaning of “home” changes for them; an increased mobility is observed in their lives. The *tal-Joseon* travel phenomenon is related to an increasing global mobility, a trend of blurring boundaries between tourism and migration, and the structural problems in Korea where young people are increasingly excluded from society including the labor market. This study contributes to reflective research on those who choose to run away from Korean society and contributes to a new theory of global mobility.

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1. Introduction

The objectives of this study are to: 1) understand present day long-term travels of Korean youth by connecting such travels to a “Hell-Joseon” discourse; 2) examine the Korean phenomenon of *tal-Joseon* (escape from Korea), a practice that is difficult to explain through concepts related to tourism or immigration; 3) identify the life changes travelers experience after *tal-Joseon* travel with a focus on their increased mobility. The topic of this study is a new and problematic phenomenon in Korea as suggested in the following answer a traveler gave to my question “Why do you travel abroad for such a long time?”:

It is because I don't want to go home. There are a lot of young people like me recently. Most of the young people I met in Southeast Asia were similar to me. They didn't go back to their homes for 3-4 years. They mostly go to Australia on a working holiday¹ program, earn lots of money, travel, and since they don't want to go back to their home, they make some more money and travel to Southeast Asia. France and Germany started working holiday programs this year. I am thinking about doing those after working in New Zealand for 3 months.

I received this answer from Hyeonjeong (female) who was 28 years old in early 2011. Many young long-term travelers I met in Southeast Asia or India also told me similar stories; first, they do physical labor in developed nations such as Australia through working holiday programs. After saving enough money, they move to inexpensive countries such as India or Thailand and stay for a long time² and then repeat this pattern. These travelers move around in foreign countries as vagabonds for several years without returning home, and it is not because they like to travel, but because they are extremely pessimistic about life in Korea. Study participants felt that they could not lead a humane life in Korean society

¹ Working holiday: A system that permits nationals of countries that are members of an agreement to visit other member countries to work and travel for a temporary period to experience and learn about the culture and lifestyle of the country. A working holiday visa commonly permits 12 months of residency.

² Travel is a concept that encompasses both mobility and stay. Therefore, it is possible to say that “long-term stay” is a concept that is included in long-term travel. This article uses the terms “long-term travel” and “long-term traveler.” Exceptionally, when there is a special emphasis on individuals who are staying in a certain place for a long time, I use the term “long-term stay.”

due to its structural problems. They were frustrated and claimed it was inevitable that they would travel for long periods.

In the past, there were lots of Korean long-term travelers in Southeast Asia or India as well, but those travelers were not as impoverished as the present-day Korean youth who travel. University students in the 1990s were easily able to pay for their tuition and backpacking expenses by working for a few months as tutors during a vacation. Also it was not difficult for them to land a good job upon graduating. Long-term travelers at the time were individually and positively motivated, to pursue mystical worlds or seeking adventures, rather than avoiding the structural problems in Korean society. The older generation in Korea who are familiar with this prior travel culture may find it difficult to understand that a growing number of young long-term travelers are wandering around foreign nations just to get away from their homeland.

Tour conductors who work in the travel industry have expressed disapproval of the way “young people these days” travel, claiming that it is not “real travel.” Many tour conductors backpacked through Europe in the 1990s after reading books such as *The Story of Travelling Around the World without Money* (Kim Chansam 1962) or *Daughter of the Wind: Three and a Half Times around the Globe on Foot* (Han Biya 1996). For these tour conductors, real travel means young people bravely exploring the world with hunger, it is an adventure of achieving self-growth by overcoming challenging situations. A traveler in his 60s who retired from a construction company spoke out on the Khao San Road³ in Thailand: “When young people go to foreign countries, they should learn from developed cultures and contribute to the development of our nation. However instead of doing that, they are just pursuing fun without goals, what about our nation?” Members of older generations who worked in Saudi Arabia in the 1970s to earn foreign money served as pillars of Korea’s economy. From their perspective, the ideal overseas trip would be a learning experience that would help to build a better country. They believe that an ideal global experience for Korean youth is an educational immigration (or an educational tourism) or labor immigration to

³ Khao San Road: A street of travelers located in the city of Bangkok in Thailand. Since the 1960s, backpack travelers who travel to different countries around the world have been gathering in this street before they leave for their next destination in order to buy flight tickets, rest, and collect information. There are many cheap accommodations, restaurants, and travel agencies concentrated in this area.

developed nations such as USA, Japan, or Australia undertaken on the pretext of language learning or a working holiday. The media depicts these experiences as rites of passage, or processes of self-growth among young people who live in the age of globalization, and have highlighted passion, ambition, and the progressive spirit contained in these travel experiences.

Considering the perspectives of older Koreans, the recent long-term travel phenomenon of Korean youth presented in the introduction to this article leads to the following questions. Why do young people increasingly travel abroad for a long time? What kind of people travel in this way and where do they travel? Why do they stay in developing countries such as India for a long time and not in developed countries? How are their lives going to change when they finish their trips? This study aims to answer these questions through reflecting on the opinions of young people like Hyeonjeong.

In order to undertake a multidimensional study of long-term travel and long-term stays, this research refers to previous studies on concepts of tourism and migration as well as studies of hybrid phenomena that combine these two concepts. First, "tourism" is defined as "a type of leisure activity undertaken by individuals who travel outside of their usual environment with the intention of returning to see, listen, understand, and enjoy the subjects of tourism in another country or another region" (The Tourism Sciences Society of Korea 2009: 30).⁴ This definition suggests that tourism is a concept referring to a narrow range of movement phenomena with palpable goals of return and pursuit of fun. Previously "migration" has been defined as a movement between a country that one migrates from and a country that one migrates to. The definition recently has expanded and now "migration" often refers to "a long-term process that happens across the entire life of a migrant that also influences a succeeding generation" (Castles and Miller 2003: 52). It is also possible to further expand the concept of "migration" as a phenomenon that covers a more inclusive range of movement such as long-term travel and "working holiday."

In this context, the questions this study raises can be primarily

⁴ There are different definitions of tourism including definitions that highlight an economic perspective, a sociocultural perspective, a leisure activity perspective, a systemic perspective, and more. This article uses definitions from the "Introduction to Tourism Study" published by the Tourism Sciences Society of Korea (2009).

approached through migration research. Castles and Miller (2003) named the modern era as the age of migration. According to their research that classified and analyzed history, forms, fundamental causes, processes, and the influences of global migration, globalization is an essential background in understanding migration in current times. Globalization induces migration and changes its direction and forms (ibid: 109). Many scholars have argued that present day international migration is not simply moving from one society to another. Instead, it has the transnational component of migrants sustaining significant connections with more than two places (Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton 1992a, 1992b; Kearney 1995; Portes, Guarnizo, and Landolt 1999; Vertovec 1999). This study applies these perspectives and views the long-term travel of Korean youth as a result of globalization and a transnational phenomenon of holding connections to various places such as Korea, India, Thailand, Australia and more.

Numerous researchers, including Castle and Miller, deal with labor migration, which is a movement of people who migrate to more developed nations seeking higher salaries, better chances of employment, or to advance their work skills. Such research, however, is limited when the approach is turned to interpret the phenomena focused on in this study. The first problem is that the direction of movement from developed nations to developing nations cannot be explained. The second problem is that the concept of migration, which refers to long-term or permanent movement, cannot effectively be applied to the phenomena focused on in this study.

Lifestyle migration is a concept that can effectively solve the first issue regarding the new direction, the movement from a developed nation to a developing nation. Benson and O'Reilly defined the concepts of the lifestyle migration phenomenon. They claimed that various migration phenomena should all be understood through the single phenomenon of “lifestyle migration” (2009). Lifestyle migration is a concept that encompasses various phenomena: Scandinavians moving to Spain, Malta, Italy, Portugal, Greece or Turkey; British or Dutch moving to France; North Americans moving to Mexico; Europeans or Americans owning a second house in Croatia. It also covers such movements as retirement migration, leisure migration, half-urbanization, ownership of a second house, amenity migration,⁵ seasonal migration, and more. According to

⁵ Migrating to places such as rural communities for environmental or social reasons

Benson and O'Reilly, a lifestyle migrant is a relatively affluent individual who moves to another country where prices of living and/or prices of land are lower, for varied purposes that could be loosely defined as quality of life either permanently or temporarily. The characteristics of a lifestyle pursued by lifestyle migrants include re-balancing work and life, improvement in quality of life, and freedom from limitations. Lifestyle migrants seek an improved life through the strategy of setting new life directions. Lifestyle migrants exhibit certain tourism-informed aspects of mobility (Williams and Hall 2000); they decide a migration destination through traveling, which helps them to figure out their preferences. However, the concept of lifestyle migration is mainly about single-time mobility, such as moving from Northern Europe to Southern France or from Britain to Spain (Benson and O'Reilly 2009). Compared to the previous notion of migration, lifestyle migration has an expanded denotation. However, it has not been able to completely break free from the classical notion of migration. Therefore, the concept of lifestyle migration is not able to actively grasp the more flexible mobility focused on in this study.

As mentioned above, even though the concept of migration is expanding, it still cannot cover the type of long-term travel focused on in this study. Lifestyle travel and lifestyle mobilities are two concepts that resonate here. According to Cohen (2010, 2011), a "lifestyle traveler" is defined as an individual who travels without having specific plans, and they do not travel for temporary vacations or as an escape from regular life. Tourists and travelers, according to the general definition, return to normal life after traveling. In contrast, lifestyle travelers refuse to return home. They transform traveling into their norm and their way of life. Lifestyle travelers may briefly visit their home country in order to meet friends, to attend family events, to earn money, to pay for travel cost, or to ruminate on their travel experiences. However, they are more dedicated to travelling rather than to a career or a home.

The concept of lifestyle mobility arises from a new paradigm of mobility that focuses on mobility itself without limiting human movements to migration or tourism, in the context of the gradually blurring of lines between migration and travel around the world. Migration and travel have mostly been studied separately in the fields of the social sciences. However, as boundaries between the two concepts are blurring in

rather than economic reasons.

practices around the world, it has been pointed out that two concepts should be studied together to efficiently understand their interconnectivity (Williams and Hall 2000; O’Reilly 2003). The concept of lifestyle migration represents one attempt to study the two concepts together. However, this concept cannot overcome limitations associated with the notion of migration. Lifestyle mobility is a new concept that was created in order to focus on mobility in long-term travels that exhibits more flexible, continuous, dynamic, and multifaceted processes than lifestyle migration. The concept of lifestyle mobility emphasizes that mobility is a lifestyle choice. Unlike the concept of migration that stresses a one-time, one-direction movement, or the concept of tourism that assumes an individual will return to home, lifestyle mobility does not assume one’s intention of returning to home. Returning to a departure point, or moving to another point during the process of movement, can all be a part of lifestyle mobility. Lifestyle mobility does not assume that there is one “home” to which an individual must return. Instead, it assumes that there are multiple “homes” to which an individual will return and/or re-visit as time passes. Ultimately, lifestyle mobility deals with constant movement. This kind of increased mobility can display supernationality by creating multiple affiliated locations (Cohen, Duncan, and Thulemark 2013).

This study offers a multidimensional analysis of the characteristics and background causes of the long-term travels of Korean youth with a focus on theories about human movement across state boundaries and suggests how these theories can be enhanced in the future.

2. Objects of Study and Research Methods

The primary location of research is a small city in India called Rishikesh. India is one of the main destinations where long-term travelers from different countries, including Koreans, stay for a long time. Particularly popular places in India include Rishikesh, “the global capital of yoga”; Dharamsala, the capital of the Tibetan government in exile where travelers can listen to a Buddhist sermon from the Dalai Lama and learn about Tibetan Buddhism and culture; Varanasi, the center of India’s traditional music and religion; Goa, the shrine of hippie culture and trance music; Pushkar, the Hindu shrine in the desert. Lots of long-term travelers repeat staying in one of these places for several months in order to learn

something they like, or simply because they like the city's atmosphere.

I initially chose Rishikesh as an ideal place to research long-term travelers because long-term travelers with different nationalities live communally in Rishikesh for several months. Many serious long-term travelers are attracted to Rishikesh because of its various yoga classes that gave it the nickname, "the global capital of yoga." People also travel to Rishikesh because it offers miscellaneous alternative medicines such as Ayurvedic medicine, which are traditional in India, naturopathy, massage, Reiki, New Age programs and products. In order to meet young Korean long-term travelers and conduct research on their lives and travel patterns, I stayed in the biggest and most popular Ashram⁶ in Rishikesh and in different guesthouses. I also attended yoga classes and various new age classes, and I visited restaurants where foreigners gather and other neighboring areas of Rishikesh.

The core material for this study is based on the field research I conducted in Rishikesh for my M.A. thesis. I visited Rishikesh on two separate occasions; for two months between December 2010 and February 2011 and another two months between Sept-Dec 2011, approximately 4 months in total. I also conducted a follow-up study by visiting Rishikesh for approximately two months on two separate occasions. One month between December and January in 2012, and one month between July and August in 2014. I have continued to interact with people I met in Rishikesh through Facebook. Through this research, I was also able to observe the daily lives of long-term travelers after they returned to Korea. I looked at their long and short journeys and changes in their lives over the course of several years, having a longer and broader context of time and space. Some participants of this study continuously sent me updates about themselves through Facebook, or by meeting me in Korea. The follow-up study periods contributed significantly to improving my perspective.

India is known for having the largest number of long-term travelers in the world. In India, travelers form a strong bond with each other and share their deepest thoughts. This characteristic of India allowed me to pick up on the travel patterns of people with whom I did not conduct an in-depth interview as well. I asked profound questions of people with whom I formed rapport about their lives in Korea through formal in-depth interviews. I collected their life stories to a great extent by asking questions

⁶ Communities dedicated to spiritual activities.

Table 1. Age, main occupation, and monthly earnings of formal in-depth interview participants

Name	Age	Gender	Educational Level	Main Occupation	Monthly Earnings
Huigyeong	49	F	Bachelor's degree	Secretary in a large company (12 years) → Self-employed (2 years) → Freelancer	Unknown
Yeonil	45	M	Master's degree	Part-time jobs (street food vendor, <i>goshiwon</i> (cheap living spaces) manager)	Very small (irregular)
Dalhui	42	F	Master's degree	Full-time interior designer (more than 10 years) → Freelance interior designer	4.2 million KRW → Unknown
Byeongcheol	41	M	Bachelor's degree	<i>Hakwon</i> (cram school) teacher, stage director, producer, part time jobs (food delivery) → Accessories (jewelry) making and sales	Unknown → 1.2 million KRW (irregular)
Jiyeon	33	F	Bachelor's degree	Hotel event coordinator, hotel inspector	2,700 USD
Yujeong	33	F	Community college graduate (2 years)	Counselor (3.5 years) → Working Australian working holiday → Counselor (2.5 years)	1.5 million KRW
Inhye	30	F	Bachelor's degree	Computer programmer (6 years)	2.8 million KRW
Yeongsu	29	M	High school graduate	Part-time jobs (restaurant waiter, store salesman, <i>hakwon</i> manager ...)	900,000 KRW
Gwanuk	26	M	Currently studying at university	Part-time jobs (office assistant, restaurant waiter)	2.5 million KRW
Seungeun	26	F	Community college graduate (2 years)	Part-time jobs (bread factory employee, phone counselor, survey worker, cooking instructor, yoga instructor...)	700,000 KRW (irregular)
Eunsuk	23	F	Community college graduate (3 years)	Part-time jobs (restaurants)	1.3 million KRW

including: What was your migratory route to India and Rishikesh? For what reasons did you visit Rishikesh? What kind of activities do you engage in in Rishikesh? What is your future movement plan? What is your relation to your “home”? I conducted formal in-depth interviews with 11 Korean long-term travelers in total. Considering the socio-economic status of their parents and themselves, most of them could be classified as lower-middle class. Table 1 shows the age, educational level, main occupation, and monthly earnings of 11 Koreans travelers with whom I conducted in-depth interviews. Very few had ever had a stable job. It is noteworthy that all four people who were in their 20s have had only part time jobs and earned 70,000-1,300,000 won per month.

What significantly contributed to my understanding of Korean long-term travelers in India are my own diverse travel experiences. I went on miscellaneous personal trips to India over a long period of time and got to know travelers with diverse cultural backgrounds. I encountered many young Korean travelers when I led a group on a backpacking trip to India for 20 days in December of 2010. I also met many of them during five backpacking trips I took independently in India since the mid-late 1990s, when I travelled to places where long-term travelers like to gather such as nations in Southeast Asia and when I worked on a cotton farm in Australia.

During the research, I discussed Korea informally with foreigners from various countries including 50 travelers from 17 countries with whom I conducted formal in-depth interviews. The discussions helped me approach the stories of Korean travelers from a multidimensional perspective. Communication through the Internet was also very useful. Especially Facebook served a significant role by allowing frequent updates of news from individuals in the study and by making it easier to maintain connections. Lean (2013) used the Internet in order to study travelers who are constantly moving. He went on travels in order to understand the people’s mobility as transformed through their travel experiences. He also conducted numerous email interviews in order to study individuals he could not personally meet with and built a website to interact with an extensive range of participants. As Lean claimed, I experienced that it can be more effective to approach study participants through virtual space rather than physical space where they actually are located. Virtual space also led to deeper interviews. Using diverse approaches utilizing both online and offline methods was an adequate way to study people who are

constantly moving and their mobility.

3. Long-term Travel to Escape from Hell-Joseon

I received similar answers when I asked young Korean travelers I met in India why they decided to travel. In summary, they answered that they escaped from Korea because they felt no hope in Korea, and they were tired of an inhumane life. In this section I look at this perception long-term travelers have of Korea in a detailed way to figure out whether their perception matches the Hell-Joseon discourse that has been a hot topic lately. This article examines their travel as one method for escaping Hell-Joseon.

1) Frustrations with Korea's Social Structure and Culture

Long-term travelers from Korea indicate that they have significant frustrations with their lives in Korea. The following cases are accounts by young people who were not able to find employment. Those who had been hired were exploited and treated like they were expendable at work, and they left their jobs right before they were completely consumed. These cases mirror how the exacerbating problems of the structural realities in Korea, the exclusion of the young from society including the labor market and the social security system in particular (Bak Sumyeong 2013), are experienced by individuals.

The primary cause of frustration for young people is Korean society's culture of judging an individual based on so-called “specs”⁷ and material achievements. In 2011, terms like “escape from Hell-Joseon,” or “*tal-Joseon*,” did not exist yet. However, when foreign friends asked Yeongsu (28 years old in 2011, male) “Why did you come to Rishikesh?” Yeongsu answered, “To escape from Korea.” The context for why Yeongsu, a high school graduate, had to escape from Korea was described as follows:

I wanted to go to a foreign country. I felt like I was suffocating in Korea. I

⁷ An abbreviation for specification. The term is used in Korea to indicate an individual's qualifications or general achievements or to refer to technical specifications of an object.

was really stressed out, because I do not have any qualifications to show to other people. I have many experiences but I do not have any certificate. (My friend) told me, women do not like you in the end because you don't have anything. Indeed, that was true. I didn't have anything. No job, no money, not much education, no achievements; that is why women leave you. The reason I wanted to go abroad, was because it was so hard being in Korea. I did not know what I should do. Working in a gym, I felt trapped.

For Yeongsu, Korea is a place where individuals are judged based on specs such as certificates, occupation, money, educational background, and other material achievements rather than experiences and skills. Yeongsu constantly emphasized that he has diverse experiences, that he can do things better than other people when he works at it, and that he is popular among people. However, in his actual life, after graduating from high school he worked part time jobs in the hotel industry, wine industry, magic industry, acting industry, restaurant industry, physical education industry, and never had a stable job. Yeongsu figured that the irrationalities of Korean society were to blame. The reason it was difficult for him to work in the wine industry was because “weirdly there are big age limits in Korea,” and the reason he gave up on becoming an actor was because “every actor has to pay bribes to enter the industry in Korea,” and “PDs [producers], writers, and other major roles are only given to people who are backed by their agencies.” In other words, for Yeongsu, Korea is a place where unjust and unfair customs are prevalent. It is a suffocating place where he cannot expect good results even if he works really hard. The reason Yeongsu is trying to get a yoga instructor certificate is to escape from hopelessness in Korea and live his life teaching yoga in foreign countries.

The second cause of frustration is the fact that it is extremely difficult to secure a job in Korea. Seungeun (26 years old in 2011, female) made efforts to get a job for several years after graduating from a university, but she finally gave up. As she described it she was always irritated and disgruntled until she came to India.

Everything was irritating. Why am I doing this, something like that. No one imagines their future like that. Life was too different from the future I had imagined. I used to imagine vaguely, when I would turn 20-years-old, I could do everything I wanted and everything would go well ... Adults always say that, just become 20-years-old. But things did not change when I became 20 years old. Things were not very different even after graduating from

university. The reason I chose my major was to get a job, I even had to give up the major that I liked for it.

Seungeun resented the grownups who made her give up on the major she liked and change to a different major, because the major she had to choose was not landing her any jobs. Seungeun “worked small part time jobs without being too committed, like being a cashier in a supermarket,” and she felt bored. “I did not express it very much, but I was annoyed and I couldn’t find a good job, so I wanted to leave Korea and go somewhere else and feel new things,” and she suffered because her mother “indicated that I should try something different.” She said she escaped from Korea because she thought that the reason it was difficult for her to get a job was not her fault and she felt burdened because not only was she suffering herself, but she also had to deal with her family and other people around her who added pressure.

Third is the labor culture of Korea where people have to put in an extreme amount of overtime. Inhye (29 years old in 2011, female) worked as a computer programmer in Korea. She worked until 9 p.m. or 10 p.m. in the evening from Monday to Thursday and sometimes worked all night in the office. Her health deteriorated. When she was stressed, her stomach ached so much “I was rolling on the floor in pain,” and “my bones hurt even from the touch of clothes.” Inhye sometimes took a vacation for a week because of her illness and she finally quit her job after 1 year and 8 months. She was going to take a break from work for one year. However, she felt scared when her acquaintance warned her: “You will be a beggar if you stay unemployed for more than 6 months.” She started to feel anxious. “What if I become a person who cannot find a job?” Finally, she got another job after resting for 4 months in order to relieve her anxiety. However, the new company was even tougher. Inhye worked for 3 months telling herself: “Other people can deal with it, so I should be able to deal with it too,” but finally she thought “If I get promoted to a position higher than a section chief, I wouldn’t be able to bear it anymore.” When she heard her friend’s plan of going to Australia, Inhye announced “I am coming too,” “without hesitating for one second.” She collected information and changed the travel route, and went to Boracay in Philippines to learn English and then travelled in Southeast Asia and India for a long time.

Inhye said: “Until this point, I had been taught that I should always be doing something. Especially in Korea, a person should always be working.”

Even when she was really ill, she could not rest without feeling concerned. Inhye lived her entire life worrying about other people's opinions. She said: "I do not plan to return to work for a company again. I do not want to lead a competitive life anymore. Even if I make just a little bit of money, I want to live peacefully with lots of private time and I want to professionally develop myself in areas of my interests."

A fourth cause of frustration is the unreasonable organization culture of Korea. Dalhui (42 years old in 2011, female) had worked as an interior designer in China. Similar to the above described case of Inhye, Dalhui suffered from many illnesses due to overwork, so she went to India and stayed there for a long time learning yoga. After that Dalhui went back to Korea to work for a few months and then returned to India, and she repeated this route several times. She said the conformist organization culture of Korean companies she worked for during this process was unbearably exhausting.

It is almost impossible to work with other people without changing my lifestyle to one similar to that of the people I work with. We stayed together for more than 14 hours a day, so I had to eat three meals a day with them. Because we eat three meals together, not only did I have to eat the same food as them but I also had to stay with them in my leisure time, and sometimes even had to sleep in the same place as them. All my daily conversations were with them, we had to eat snacks together. Because people have to be together for such a big part of their lives, a person with very different lifestyle would get excluded from the group. Because of those things, I also did not like to do my work.

Like Dalhui, many young Korean people were criticized by their organizations, for example, "Why do you act differently from others?" and they were sick of Korean organizational culture that oppresses individuality and diversity. These frustrations examined so far are the main motivations for young Korean people to go abroad, and also resonate with the currently widespread Hell-Joseon discourse.

2) Hell-Joseon Discourse and Long-term Travel

In this passage I examine the Hell-Joseon discourse and connect it to the long-term travel phenomenon of young people and look at long-term travel as an escape from Hell-Joseon. "Hell-Joseon" is one of the most sensational newly coined words of 2015. It is known to have been first used

on a history board of an internet forum called “DC inside”⁸ and the term was used widely on the same forum’s stock board. This expression has since become widespread in Korea. Hell-Joseon is a term that describes modern Korea as a pre-modern hierarchical society, Joseon, and the expression ridicules the society in a way that older generations often find unpleasant to hear. The term strongly criticizes the rapidly increasing inequality and class gap in today’s Korean society. The term “tal-Joseon” (escape from Hell-Joseon) carries the desperate cries of young people who hate Korea and would rather live in a different country. It is important to pay attention to the popular usage of these words, which are gaining sympathy, especially among young people. These terms can work as a lens that can help us closely examine present day public opinion towards Korea and people’s practices based on younger peoples’ perceptions and resulting social changes.

The tal-Joseon phenomenon is statistically supported. According to a newspaper article that cited information⁹ from the Isaac Brock Society, an internet forum for U.S. citizenship counseling, among the nations with a strong economy, South Korea has the highest rate of people giving up their original nationality after migrating to another country [and being naturalized there]¹⁰ (*The Korea Herald Business*, April 28, 2014). Although they were not included in these statistics, the data that reveals that the number of Koreans who would like to emigrate or are currently preparing for emigration is even more astonishing. According to a *Newsis* article that analyzed the results¹¹ of a survey that asked 1,655 men and women about

⁸ <http://www.dcinside.com/>

⁹ An article posted on the Isaac Brock Society website by a user named Eric who cited statistical data between 2002 and 2010 from each Asian nation (The Isaac Brock Society, May 23, 2012).

¹⁰ According to this article, the number of people renouncing their original nationality per 100,000 people is 4.5 in New Zealand, 25 in Hong Kong, 152 in Taiwan, 431 in Singapore, and 1,680 in Korea. Korea has a significantly greater rate of nationality renunciation than the countries of comparison; the nationality renunciation of Koreans is almost 20 times higher than that of the neighboring nation Japan (89 people). The article analyzed: “The number of people giving up South Korean citizenship is 25,000 per year. South Korea is the only developed country in Asia where the number of people relinquishing their nationality exceeds the number of immigrants naturalizing.”

¹¹ Respondents in their 30s (82.1 percent) had the highest rate of intention to emigrate, followed by those in their 20s (80 percent), 40s (72.4 percent), and over 50s (59 percent). The countries respondents most wanted to emigrate to were Canada (16.8 percent), Australia (16 percent), New Zealand (10.8 percent), the United States (9.6

their “intentions regarding emigration” in November of 2015 on the job listing website “Saramin,” 78.6 percent of the respondents answered “I would like to emigrate if it were possible.” The top reason for wanting to leave Korea chosen by respondents is “I need more private time in my life rather than being overwhelmed by work” (56.4 percent; multiple answers were possible), followed by “General poor labor conditions” (52.7 percent), “Large income inequality” (47.7 percent), “I feel insecure about employment and life after getting old” (47.4 percent), “I dislike the social atmosphere that forces competition” (46.3 percent), “The country does not protect its people,” and “I want to enjoy the developed welfare system in foreign countries” (30.7 percent). Respondents who answered that they were currently preparing for immigration totaled 47.9 percent. The most important criteria in choosing a destination for migration was the destination country’s welfare system (41.2 percent), followed by its culture (17.5 percent), job availability (13.1 percent), income level (6.7 percent), weather, and environment (5.8 percent (*Nerwis*, January 18, 2016).

We can take a look at detailed perceptions and practices regarding Hell-Joseon of young people in the internet site “Hell-Joseon.”¹² On the boards of this website, posts that criticize and mock Korean society are uploaded, such as “The reason why I detest Hell-Joseon,” “Survival is a goal in Hell-Joseon,” “Reason why gold spoons¹³ criticize shit spoons for being lazy,” “How companies steal your tax,” “The end of a person who was dedicated to Hell-Joseon,” and “The profession of one’s father equals the level of that person in Korea.” From observing this site’s posts, we can figure out that young people call Korea Hell-Joseon, because of Korea’s harsh reality where even surviving is a challenge, and because of its fixed structural inequality and corruption. Young people share solid methods of escape from Korea on this website. They ask questions related to migrating to developed nations such as the United States, Canada, and Australia by learning skills such as welding, piping, and computer skills, and they post

percent), Germany (9.5 percent), Sweden (6.9 percent), Japan (6.3 percent), Finland (4.9 percent) and Switzerland (4.7 percent) (*Saramin*, January 18, 2016).

¹² The site name is “Hell-Joseon.” The site address is www.hellkorea.com.

¹³ “Spoon-class theory” is related to a Korean proverb that says a baby is born holding a spoon in his/her mouth. This theory divides individuals into gold spoon, silver spoon, bronze spoon, soil spoon, and more according to the amount of capital one possesses. Spoon-class theory has been popular since 2015 along with the discourse on Hell-Joseon as a theory criticizing the problems of Korean society.

answers and share real experiences.

However, emigration to developed nations such as the United States, Canada, and Australia as mentioned above is not the only way of escaping from Korea. In order to successfully emigrate to a developed nation, in most cases one needs *specs* such as a high score in English tests, certifications, work experiences and/or savings in an account. Lots of young people who are frustrated by this reality go on long journeys including working holidays in order to leave Korea for some time or to learn English and to make money to build specs. As it is shown through the case of Hyeonjeong in the introduction to this article, many young people repeat working holidays in various developed nations and take a long term rest in India or one of the Southeast Asian nations.

As we can see, media cases of emigration in which an individual picks a certain destination and fulfills all the legal requirements before successfully moving there only take up a small percentage of the increasing Hell-Joseon escape phenomenon. Dissatisfaction toward Korea of this study’s participants is similar to discourses on Hell-Joseon. Study participants chose long-term travel as a way to escape from Hell-Joseon; therefore, I call their practice “long-term travel to escape from Hell-Joseon” or *tal-Joseon* travel. In order to achieve a holistic understanding of the *tal-Joseon* travel phenomenon, it is necessary to escape the view that focuses only on successful emigration cases; one must consider both the diverse movement routes and complicated processes entailed by *tal-Joseon* practices and identify the distinctive features of this new mobility.

4. Aspects of *Tal-Joseon* Travel

Here I identify the movement routes of *tal-Joseon* travelers and the complicated processes involved in detail. I also examine how *tal-Joseon* travel routes differ according to one’s social class and take a special look at the repetition of routes of laboring in developed nations and traveling in developing nations among lower-middle class youth.

1) *Different Migration Routes According to a Traveler’s Social Class*

First, in order to understand that Hell-Joseon escape is a dream shared by countless young Koreans regardless of their social class, let’s take a look at a

part of a novel that drew great public attention in 2015 with its straightforward title and story (Jang Gangmyeong 2015).

If I have to summarize why I left Korea, it's because "I hate Korea." Or I could summarize it as "because I could not live here." Don't quickly criticize me. I can hate a country I was born in, am I wrong? (p. 10)

The reason I am going to Australia now is not because I hate Korea but it is in order to be happy. I don't know how to be happy yet, but I instinctively felt that I could become happy in Australia more easily. (p. 161)

I was asked, why don't you love your Motherland? [My] Motherland didn't love me back. Frankly it was indifferent to me. They say my nation fed me, gave me clothes, and protected me, but I also fulfilled all my duties including keeping laws, getting education, paying taxes. (p. 170)

In this novel, a woman in her late 20s who is pessimistic about her future in Korea narrates the story about how she quit her company and migrated to Australia. The protagonist is an average woman who graduated from a university and worked in a company. She describes how she fulfilled her duty as a citizen, but she was not happy in Korea, so she finally left to go to Australia because she hated living in Korea. This story is a realistic and common dream of *tal-Joseon* written based on extensive research by an author who had worked as a reporter in a society section of one of Korea's leading newspapers.

As we can see from the story of an ordinary protagonist who escapes from Hell-Joseon, escaping from Hell-Joseon is a desire widespread among Korean youth. One of my interview participants said, "These days when people are gathered, most of time they talk about their dreams of escaping from Korea." However, even though this is a dream shared by everyone, plausible forms of escape are determined by an individual's social class and capital. Emigration of Korean youth has a dual structure. The upper-middle class youth with rich families and higher levels of educational capital often migrate to developed nations as exchange students and study abroad before getting a job in Korea or in other developed nations where they choose to settle; on the other hand, lower-middle class youths labor in Korea or in developed Western nations such as Australia or New Zealand and then travel for a long time in developing nations in Asia such as India or Thailand.

In this article I focus on the *tal-Joseon* phenomenon of lower-middle

class youth. However, in order to present a multidimensional comparison, the cases of upper-middle class travelers are introduced by the following example. Jinhui (24 years old in 2016, female) often travels to Japan to buy cosmetics and to enjoy good food and drink. She laments being born in Korea and frequently talks about how she wants to escape from Korea. Both her parents have a stable job. They are a middle-class family of four with enough economic and cultural capital that they can travel abroad for 2-4 weeks every year. Jinhui has a top education from Korea. In sum, she does not seem to be lacking anything, so why does she want to escape from Korea? Jinhui answered this question as follows: “The objective indexes might be like that, but subjectively speaking, I really feel there is no hope,” “I feel apprehensive about the possibility I might become a temporary employee at any time and that I can instantly fall to the bottom.” Jinhui received good grades during her four years of study in the university and she has been successful. However, she said being in a “society characterized by academic factionalism, a competitive atmosphere, and an overwhelming amount of studying,” was too painful. She feels “dejection and resentment about the fact that my precious adolescent period in life, a period of growth, was consumed by Hell-Joseon.” She explained, “When I entered high school I studied from 8 a.m. to 10 p.m. at school.” She gave up having lunch and dinner, and only quickly ate snacks and watched internet lectures. She did this because she thought that if only she would be successfully admitted to good universities on her first try, then she could escape “the terrible time I never want to experience again.” Jinhui became a “subject of self-exploitation,” and she recollects that she dedicated herself to “studying,” by “sacrificing all of my energy and time as a means to achieve goals.” Jinhui’s case demonstrates that even young people who seem to be leading a successful life can be tired of the competitive atmosphere of Korean society and wish to escape from Korea.

Jinhui once read a book called *I Am a Taxi Driver in Paris* (Hong Sehwa 1995), and she “envied” the sense conveyed there that within the French education system and with the French social security system “there was no need to be worn out from working too much as a young person and worrying about life after getting old.” She thought, “I was only accidentally born in Korea. Why do I have to live a difficult life chained to my coincidental nationality?” Jinhui learned French when she was a student at a good Korean university and went to France as an exchange student for one semester. She plans to go to a graduate school in France after finishing

her Bachelor's degree. Young people like Jinhui who acquire a high level of education by getting support from their parents, quickly decide on a method and direction of escaping Korea. These young people are able to focus on their university without having to work, and therefore, effectively acquire useful educational capital such as speaking a foreign language that enables them to "opt to study abroad to escape from Korea."

There are a multitude of middle- and upper-class youths like Jinhui in Korea. They mostly take the route of staying in developed nations in Europe or North America for a long time through the exchange student system or other extended study abroad. Some middle- and upper-class young people stay in India for a long time, but typically their goal is to learn yoga or meditation. Even if they stay in India for an extended period, their lives after finishing their travels differ considerably from the lives of lower-middle class young people. For example, Jiyeon (38 years old in 2016, female) who describes herself a "golden spoon," is one of these cases. Jiyeon stayed in India for a long time over several occasions. She majored in music, and has a father who is a doctor and a mother who is a cultured housewife. She said:

Studying abroad after graduating from Seoul National University was an expected course of life. I had this in mind from the time I was in an elementary school. Then one day, I suddenly had serious doubts and I thought, no matter how talented I am and no matter how much effort I put forth, even if I study abroad and become a professor, I will spend my entire life in a small room teaching students who are just like me, with a tired face away from sunlight. What good will it be even if I have money or fame? The quality of my life as a human being will be horrible.

Jiyeon thought "If I stay in Korea, no matter what I do, it will be the same," so she studied in a high school in Germany sponsored by her parents and graduated from a university in Switzerland. After graduating from university, "the thought of working in Korea and living in that society felt too horrible," therefore, she worked in Thailand for about 7 years and learned yoga. Jiyeon escaped Korea and lived abroad after her high school years. She was fluent in English and German. However, she had an endless conflict with her parents who demanded a Korean way of life and success. Her body had escaped from Korea, but as long as she was tied to Korea through connections like family, it was difficult for her mind to escape. After a few serious conflicts with family, she returned to Korea and now goes to India for a few months every year. She tries to live thinking at least

now her mind has escaped from Korea.

The two cases illustrated above indicate that even a young person in her mid-20s with a large amount of capital envied by all and a person in her late-30s who perceives herself as upper class still find it horrific and unacceptable to live the “life of being worn out by work at a young age and having to worry about life after getting old.” In Korea where there is extreme competition, they dream of escaping and actually put their dreams into practice. Escaping from Korea is a relatively manageable goal for the upper-middle class young people because of their parents’ capital and the cultural capital they acquired through the help of their parents.

2) *Lower-Middle Class Youth in a Repetitive Cycle of Working Holidays and Extended Rest*

What is the migratory route of *tal-Joseon* travel for lower-middle class youth? As Hyeonjeong described in the introduction to this article, many Korean young people work in Australia for several months and earn more money than they can in Korea. They use their savings to travel to Australia, Southeast Asia, or India. When their savings run out, they go back to Australia or travel to another working-holiday nation and earn money and again travel to Asian countries.

Hyeonjeong was travelling for the longest period of all the young Koreans I met in Rishikesh. The specific migratory route Hyeonjeong took is explained in what follows. Hyeonjeong majored in film studies at a Korean university. After graduation, she “could not get a job,” so she travelled to India for 3 months. After that, she went to Australia on a working holiday and worked for one year and then travelled throughout Southeast Asia for a long time. Afterward, she again went to Australia on a working holiday and worked for a year and then travelled in Southeast Asia and India. When her visa expired, she stayed in Nepal for 2 months and received a new visa and went back to India. She finished a one-month yoga instructor training program in Rishikesh. Hyeonjeong plans to go to New Zealand on a working holiday after practicing yoga for a while.

She traveled around foreign countries constantly for more than 6 years. As Hyeonjeong described, the numbers of “young people” in Southeast Asia “who don’t return home for three to four years,” and “young people who don’t want to go home” at all has been increasing in recent years. In my research I frequently met young people like this while backpacking and

I would hear numerous stories of others from these travelers and from an introductory pamphlet about working holidays, as well as from Southeast Asian travel records, blogs, and Facebook.

There are people like Hyeonjeong who rarely go back to Korea and continue to travel in their 30s and 40s. There are also people who return to Korea to work in a company, and save money and travel abroad again. The latter are cases of people who have certificates that help them easily find a job. Yujeong (32 years old 2011, female) graduated from a two-year college and obtained a youth counseling license. She worked in a company for three and a half years. Then she went on a working holiday to Australia for one year and came back to Korea again and worked in a company for another year. After that she applied for a working holiday in Canada, but was not accepted. While preparing for other long-term travel plans, she again got a job in Korea and worked for one and a half years and then went on another long-term trip. She had been travelling for 10 months straight when I met her. She rested for several months in Southeast Asia, volunteered in Dandong for 6 weeks, learned Tai Qi in Yunnan province for another six weeks, and then travelled Southeast Asia and India again for 6 weeks. After learning yoga for two months in India, she planned to travel to Egypt on foot.

The life stories of young people like Hyeonjeong and Yujeong show they lack good educational backgrounds, certificates, and parents with good occupations. They have no network from which they can get help; they go through their lives on their own. These young people are not respected in Korea because they do not own much. They deal with pressures from people around them because they can't get a job, and they have to work so much overtime it endangers their health. In these ways they suffer from unreasonable organizational culture. After performing physical labor in developed nations to earn money like Hyeonjeong, or after working for one year in Korea and "thinking that I have died," like Yujeong, such young people often feel that they want to heal their damaged health and slowly think about their own identity. Around the world, India is known among Korean youth to be the best place to visit for these purposes and the local economy allows travelers to stay for a long time with limited funds.

5. Hell-Joseon Detoxification Activities in India

In this section I demonstrate that the goal of young people who stay in India for a long time is “detoxication” from the ills of Hell-Joseon through resting, healing, and searching for one’s self. Subsequently, I look into the reasons why India serves as the ideal place to pursue this goal.

To begin, I look at why people who escaped Korea went to India to pursue activities such as rest, healing, and self-realization. When I asked for the reasons lower middle-class youths went to Rishikesh, Dalhui replied: “I first came here with expectations that this would be a place where I could rest. Not a journey to the outside but a journey inside myself. I repeated inside my mind when I first chose India, it is to search for my lost self. I said it to myself over and over again.”

Dalhui says she came to India to rest and to search for her identity. This is linked to the culture of excessive and competitive work environments in Korea and is a step toward healing the body that becomes ill from constant overwork. According to Dalhui, the reason she desired to travel to India is because when she was working in a company “I was exploited but could not speak against it, and I also do not have a personality that can exploit people working under me, and finally I was seriously sick with *hwabyeong*¹⁴ and my body was so exhausted and it was ruined.” Around the age of 30, she was in a car accident that gave her facial nerve palsy. The illness made her mouth droop to one side. However, Dalhui continued to work and the stress of overworking gave her breast fibro adenoma, uterine leiomyoma, unexplained pain in the knees and ankles, scoliosis, headaches, indigestion, and joint pain. Finally, at age 41, she could not work anymore. In order to heal her body through yoga, she came to Rishikesh.

As is shown in the life story of Dalhui, for many Korean long-term travelers, overwork, illness in mind and body, losing oneself, and questioning the meaning of life are all linked and lead to *tal-Joseon*. The case below of a university student is one of the rare examples of long-term travelers in India who led a successful life in Korea but escaped from Korea still for the same reason.

Gwanuk (26 years old in 2011, male) was a senior student in a top engineering university in Seoul. Gwanuk was working as an intern until

¹⁴ (Translator’s note) A Korean somatization disorder that arises as a result of not being able to confront one’s anger in stressful conditions.

the summer of his senior year in order to land a good job and he had a few final interviews left with companies to which he had applied. He always vaguely had in mind that he wanted to backpack after reading the book *A Traveler of Planet Earth* (Ryu Sihwa 2002), but people around him were all going to graduate school or getting a job. People he knew who went abroad went to Europe or to other nations to learn languages or to study in famous universities. He thought about it a lot, and finally he concluded that people who major in electrical engineering could easily find a job because of the great demand, and he would probably regret not traveling when he reaches 40-50 years of age if he didn't backpack now. He knew that if he started working for a company he could not travel for 6 months without quitting his job. Gwanuk stopped preparations for getting a job. He cancelled all the interviews, and did physical labor all summer to save up enough to travel to India. During his university years Gwanuk ate only breakfast, and skipped lunch and dinner and studied. He had to take four tests in each of the 5-6 subjects he focused on in each semester and also carry out two program projects. He was always short on time. Gwanuk recollected, "Maybe I was stressed out but didn't realize it." Gwanuk felt heavy because "When I was in Korea, I was always thinking about tests or projects," and when he was interviewing for jobs he thought "Maybe I should find a job I really want regardless of salary." However, before he came to India, he became ill and went to a hospital. Surprisingly, he was diagnosed with a gastric ulcer, anemia, and hypertension in his mid-20s. Gwanuk described the reason for coming to India as follows:

I was hoping to be away from Korean culture. I never tried or have listened to my inner voice because my social identity, an identity formed by society, was too strong. I thought, maybe if I escape here, I will be able to hear my inner voice, even if it is just a small one. I desperately needed that, but [while in Korea] I felt that something like an inner voice was too superficial.

Gwanuk most wanted to find his inner voice that was buried in Korean culture under his social identity. In other words, he wanted time to search for his self. His wish was closely tied to the activities of healing a consumed body and taking a rest. On the outside, Gwanuk appeared to be walking a successful path in Korea. However, in reality, he couldn't do what he really wanted while submitting to the hard working Korean culture. He ignored his bodily needs or inner voice and then all of a sudden, he discovered that his body had cracked under the pressure. Gwanuk

constantly expressed that “I want to rest,” during his conversation with me. When he read an article about Rishikesh in a guidebook, “There was a picture of a sunset in Lakshman Jula and when I saw that I thought, maybe here I can have time for myself, time that is difficult to have in Korea.” When he arrived to Rishikesh, he decided “Let’s try spending moments like that. There are too many things to worry about in Korea. I always have to worry about tests or projects. Here I will enjoy sunshine and take a stroll.”

Like Gwanuk, many Korean youths expressed a desire for rest. When I asked about the goal of her travel, Yujeong answered with the following: “I will travel around and look inside me more. Who am I? I thought about it when I was a teenager, and now I am thinking about it again. I will travel around and ponder a lot, and I thought I want to be stronger inside and escape from reality. But it’s difficult. When I work, I only think about work.”

Yujeong explained that her motivation for escaping from Korea was to “look inside myself,” in other words, searching for her own self. She connected this to escaping reality and strengthening her inner self. Yujeong was stressed out from the unreasonable corporate culture and interpersonal relationships surrounding her in Korea. She suffered from bulimia, digestion problems, and a rapid weight increase of 25 kg over a short period that gave her pain in her knees, lower back, and neck. She was desperate for rest and healing, thus she escaped from Korea. After taking a deep rest for a few months, she started yoga because she wanted to become “a person who can who can protect myself from stresses that may be caused by interpersonal relationships when I return to Korean society.”

As shown in the above cases, the reason Korean young people escape from Hell-Joseon is because they are desperate to detoxify themselves from the society through rest, healing, and the search for self. Then why do they do these kinds of activities in India instead of other places? In the aforementioned case, Dalhui said she was fulfilling her desires to rest and search for her self in India because “I thought the monthly cost of living is cheaper in India than Korea,” “Because I can eat, sleep, and just practice yoga without working,” and “I believe India is the birthplace of yoga.” The reasons other respondents came to India are mostly similar to this.

As Dalhui mentioned, in order to pursue these goals, an inexpensive cost of living is essential. The main reason why most Koreans do not stay in Europe or America for a long time is because prices are high and it is

difficult to stay in those places for an extended time. Young long-term travelers cannot rest in developed nations where travelers usually have well-planned trips with crammed schedules for each day in order to be able to see most things and stay only for a short while. However, in Rishikesh India, for only 300-500 USD per month, it is possible to stay in a nice single-room accommodation, attend the best quality yoga classes, and enjoy meals and snacks. In addition, there is a nice environment and cultural appeal. Rishikesh is a holy area where the Ganges River and Himalayas meet and it has beautiful nature. As the birthplace of yoga, Rishikesh offers excellent yoga classes. As Dalhui mentioned, it is the ideal environment to “eat, sleep, and just practice yoga.” This environment in Rishikesh is well-described in travel guidebooks and the records of travelers. Furthermore, Rishikesh is reputed to be an effective place for healing. These rumors attract countless travelers.

Lifestyle migration is a concept that views the pursuit of a better quality of life as the main reason travelers from developed nations move to and stay in developing nations for a long time. Korpela (2009) conducted a case study in Varanashi, India by doing participation observation of long-term stayers who come from Western nations. She views these travelers as lifestyle migrants and analyzes the characteristics of their lifestyle. Long-term stayers gather in Varanashi to learn Indian musical instruments, and according to Korpela, most of them play Indian instruments, practice yoga, meditate, and do charity work while spending a great amount of time hanging out with friends. The lives of these people are slow, do not have a tight daily schedule, entail few material possessions and offer lots of time to enjoy the moment. Korpela argues that these people look for a better life in places that make this possible and use their long-term stay as an opportunity to live a better life in a place where spiritual and artistic meanings exist.

It is possible to interpret the direction of people who stay long-term in India moving from a developed nation to a developing nation in this way. However, the problem with the concept of lifestyle migration is that it gives the impression that migrants move from their homeland to India once and they settle down permanently. However, in reality, most of lifestyle migrants in India are long-term travelers who stay in India with tourism visas that are valid for 3-6 months. In order to renew the visa, they must visit neighboring countries, or frequently return to their home country to make money or use medical services. Also Hell-Joseon escape

travelers focused on in this research do not simply travel to a final destination but have diverse migratory routes, such as laboring in developed nations like Australia and then travelling to various Southeast Asian nations and India. How might life change after *tal-Joseon* travel for those people who wander around various locations for a long time?

6. Changes in Life After *Tal-Joseon* Travel

In order to figure out how lives change for people who travel for a long time to escape from Hell-Joseon, this section examines changes in the meaning of “home” for them and connects their mobility to the concepts of lifestyle travel and lifestyle mobility.

1) *Changes in the Meaning of “Home”*

What meaning does “home” hold for people who wander around after escaping from Korea? To my question, “Why do you wander around for such a long time?” Hyeonjeong answered (as quoted in the introduction): “Because I don’t want to go home.” And she added that she feels uncomfortable when she is at home. “When I go home, I feel like it is not a place for me to be. I feel uncomfortable. So I go abroad again. Mom gave me cooked rice three times a day, and I got that bloated feeling I had when I ate bread three times a day.”

Hyeonjeong’s statement leaves two issues to contemplate. The first is that Hyeonjeong, a Korean person, feels bloated when she eats cooked rice. Even though it is less so than before, the desire to eat kimchi and soybean soup after traveling abroad for only a few days had always been a major part in the stories of overseas travel of Koreans, along with fond memories of sharing kimchi and *soju* (distilled beverage) with other Korean travelers and sharing their Korean identities. However, for young people like Hyeonjeong, the Korean sentiments and identity that had been embodied in “cooked rice” have been weakened.

A diminishing Korean sentiment and identity is experienced through places as well. This is the second noteworthy point in Hyeonjeong’s statement, in which she said, “I feel uncomfortable at home as if I am in a place I should not be.” In the past, lots of Korean travelers have declared that “my home,” and its expanded concept “my country,” represent the most

comfortable place to be in the world. A figure like Han Biya, a travel writer who speaks many languages and traveled abroad a lot, has frequently expressed how much she misses her home and country during her travels. For Koreans, home and country have been embodied as a root of social being and as a point to return to. This has been considered “natural” by Koreans. However, young people nowadays like Hyeonjeong feel uncomfortable in their own home and native country, and take steps to escape.

This perception can be clearly seen in Dalhui’s statements. While practicing yoga, there were many occasions when she suddenly got teary eyed and went into a prop room to cry. When I asked her about the reason for it, she answered she cried because: “I don’t have anything to do when I go home, I don’t want to go back.” Dalhui expressed the burden she felt by saying, “When I am in Korea, I have to constantly worry about what I have to do tomorrow, what I have been doing so far, and what I have to do from now.”

Home and native country where family lives become increasingly uncomfortable for travelers who escape from Korea. Home becomes a place that serves practical goals such as earning money temporarily, extending visas, or receiving medical treatments. The travelers do not want to return to their home. They live a life with an increased mobility, constantly wandering around foreign countries or travelling abroad while keeping their main residence in Korea.

2) *Increased Mobility*

There are people like Hyeonjeong who continue to travel for extended periods by repeating laboring and long-term stays after escaping from Hell-Joseon. There are also people who settle down in one location when their long-term trip is finished. How do lives of *tal-Joseon* travelers change when long-term travel ends? And what are the new characteristics of their lives? This study identified the following two patterns.

The first pattern is connecting career to an increased mobility focused on a specific activity like yoga. Dalhui travelled between Korea and India for several years. While she was travelling she decided to become a yoga instructor, and she became one. When I met Dalhui, she was visiting India for the third time. She learned different kinds of yoga for three years in multiple places for a few months each time. She had taken an instructor

training course in Bangkok for three years beginning in July 2012. She returned to Korea in 2015 and looked for vacant yoga instructor positions, and she is continuing to attend yoga workshops in Thailand, India, and other countries.

In this way Hell-Joseon escape travelers who are yoga practitioners maintain their lifestyle by moving to places where one can learn or practice yoga like Rishikesh. They sometimes move within India depending on conditions such as season or preferred instructor, or to learn new things about yoga or new teaching methods. If they find better places to stay, they sometimes move out of India. Unlike Westerners who may travel the globe, the movement range of Koreans is often limited to Asia. Koreans mainly stay in Korea or India, and sometimes go to yoga centers or yoga workshops in Southeast Asian nations such as Thailand. They also go on working holidays in Australia or New Zealand, or they work in Korea during a short period to earn money for travel.

This constant movement of yoga practitioners serves as mobility capital that helps them to be better yoga instructors. Bell (2013: 24) classified musicians who constantly move as lifestyle travelers. She analyzed these musicians arguing that they acquired mobility capital in the form of individual and occupational richness instead of financial wealth. She concluded that where they drop life’s anchor permanently or most importantly, is not a geographic location but their career. Their mobility is a part of professional training and it is necessary for their success. Mobility has a great influence on success for yoga instructors. Learning yoga from a famous instructor in the birthplace of yoga, India, can work as a symbol that guarantees authenticity, legitimacy, and knowledge of a practitioner. Therefore, yoga practitioners who maintain high mobility can be defined as closer to the concept of lifestyle traveler, whose travelling is a way of living, rather than lifestyle migrants who travel to find a better way of living.

According to Erskine and Anderson (2013: 140-141) who studied lifestyle travelers who are constantly moving, initially lifestyle travelers may pursue mobility in order to escape from their home or to avoid social pressures and expectations, but gradually they may shift toward an agenda of building an identity. Considering that Korean yoga practitioners initially had the goal of escaping from Korea and gradually shifted to focus on becoming better yoga practitioners, it can be said that their cases are applicable to this characteristic of lifestyle travelers.

In the second pattern, increased mobility changes the lives of long-term travelers when after finishing extended travel and returning to reside in Korea, they make an effort to keep their mind open and independent of mainstream Korean values and practices. To achieve this, they maintain high mobility by constantly going on short-term trips. Sometimes they organize their career or interpersonal relationships in different ways than before. Jiyeon married a foreigner after returning to Korea, and she became a yoga instructor. She goes to yoga workshops two or three times a year to Japan or countries in Southeast Asia. She also sometimes goes to India for one or two months to practice yoga. Jiyeon complained about life in Korea: "In Australia, Europe, and Canada, even in cities, there are nature areas and I can relax. I want to live with people who have values similar to mine. In Korea none of my needs are met." And she added "I decided to quit my original job and just do yoga." "I try to control my life in a way that can avoid unwanted mental distress, or unwanted relationships with people" in order to maintain "a life that gets minimum influence from Hell-Joseon." She also said, "Now I have changed my way of living, and I have secured space in life to make it not become Hell-Joseon." Although not one of the participants of this study has yet succeeded in immigrating permanently to developed countries other than Korea, there are many who maintain a highly mobile life.

7. Conclusions

By focusing on the concept of mobility this study connects the long-term travel phenomenon of young Koreans nowadays to the discourse on Hell-Joseon and examines parts of the phenomenon that remained unexplained when *tal-Joseon* was addressed through concepts such as tourism or migration. Results of this study include a series of insights. First, long-term travel of young Koreans is a phenomenon widespread among young people who are frustrated with Korea's social structure and culture. The phenomenon mirrors the Hell-Joseon discourse, therefore, it is named *tal-Joseon* referring to long-term travel to escape from Hell-Joseon. Secondly, movement routes of *tal-Joseon* travelers are dualized depending on one's social class. Long-term travel of lower-middle class youth focused on in this study involves a cycle of physical labor in developed nations and rest in developing nations for extended time periods. Third, the goal pursued by

Hell-Joseon escape travelers in India, a place where they frequently choose to go and stay for long periods, is detoxication from the ills acquired in Hell-Joseon, through rest, healing, and a search for self. Fourth, life changes that appear after *tal-Joseon* trips include changes in the meaning of home and patterns of increased mobility.

This phenomenon is a result of a combination of various factors including increased potentials for global mobility, blurred boundaries between travel and migration, Korea’s structural problems that frequently exclude young people from productive participation in the labor market and more. Given this setting, the individual and social changes that occur after *tal-Joseon* can be effectively theorized through the following steps.

First is the question of whether *tal-Joseon* travelers or lifestyle travelers who turned mobility capital they earned through tal-Joseon travel into a traveling career can actually maintain the desired mobility even after they get older. In the West, there are many people who live in this way in their 60s or 70s, but it is only possible because their countries have a good welfare system. Among the growing number of long-term travelers in Korea since the 1990s, regardless of how much “free spirit” one possesses, when someone’s trip finished most got a regular job and focused on making a living. Medical fees for aging parents had to be paid for and the travelers also had to prepare for their own lives after getting old. Unlike long-term travels in the past, the recent long-term travels to escape from Hell-Joseon have been undertaken by young people who were not able to build a solid career base or career experiences. The travelers aim to escape from Korea, a place that has a strong centripetal force. And so many return. But it is difficult for long-term travelers to lead a regular life after returning to Korea, what are their alternative career and family options?

The second issue concerns whether it is relevant to apply the concept of lifestyle to long-term *tal-Joseon* traveling. Although I have attempted to explain *tal-Joseon* travelers through concepts of lifestyle traveling and lifestyle mobility as well as social and personal angst. Considering that lifestyle is a concept that focuses on consumption, future research is needed to address whether this concept can be used to cover and explain the alienated young people who escape to survive.

Exploring the various aspects and outcomes of long-term travel as an escape from Hell-Joseon sheds light on the complexities of Korean society and on the place of alienation from mainstream Korean society in creating this newest phase of global mobility.

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