

Living and working as a teacher in Seoul

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Abstract: This commentary addresses some of the cross-cultural issues of teaching abroad in the Republic of Korea (South Korea). Germans can apply directly to teach at 'German schools abroad', which are private schools around the world, or can sign up with the Central Agency for Schools Abroad (ZfA). The ZfA provides assistance and professional quality management. The German schools abroad are often a hub for German speaking communities, easing entry into new cultural contexts and institutions. I discuss teaching in such a school in the megacity of Seoul. Advantages are lifestyles, ease of travel and personal safety. Leisure and sports activities are good, especially at the River Hangang. Traffic and multi-lane highways traverse the city, affecting the riverside. South Korea has a mixed record in terms of sustainability, with a strong reliance on fossil fuels, although southwest of Seoul is the world's largest tidal power plant, and waste separation is very strict. Seoul suffers periodically from bad air quality, for which China is partially blamed. Songdo is an exemplary smart city near Seoul, but construction required the draining of valuable tidal flats. The close proximity to North Korea is omnipresent.

Keywords: Seoul, Megacity, Republic of Korea, (German) School Service Abroad, sustainable development, Hangang, Songdo

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Introduction

After several job applications, interviews with school heads from Pretoria and Seoul in hotel lobbies in Hamburg und Berlin, I had several early morning phone calls from Germany to South Korea (each with a 7–8-hour time difference) at the end of 2015. In early 2016 I finally received an offer for a teaching position at the Deutsche Schule Seoul International (DSSI)¹ in the heart of Seoul, which I gladly accepted. My family and I forwarded our belongings, sold our car and deregistered our place of residence. On the plane to our new destination, feelings of unease were combined with those of independence and of new beginnings.

Relocating to South Korea did have institutional support. The Central Agency for Schools Abroad (Zentrale für das Auslandsschulwesen, ZfA) offered preparatory courses for those about to undertake an overseas placement. The Deutsche Schule Seoul International eased settling into a new country, including help with finding accommodation and many administrative matters. My wife was born in South

Korea, which meant that the language barrier of less concern for us than other potential migrants to the country.

German School Service Abroad

Between 2016 to 2020 I spent four years with my family in Seoul. The job at the Deutsche Schule Seoul International (DSSI) was to be a biology and geography teacher. I was also acting deputy headmaster, and had responsibility for chairing the educational quality management of the school.

The DSSI is a small school. It includes a kindergarten and a school with about 160 students (grade 1 to 12). The teaching staff consisted of approximately 25 teachers. This gives it a small community atmosphere, almost like a family experience, since it offers a full-time education.

German schools abroad are privately run by a school association and receive institutional support from the Central Agency for Schools Abroad (ZfA) following a vetting and inspection procedure. This includes the pre-selection of

school management positions by the agency, as well as the placement and support for, and financing of, teachers working abroad (a so called *Auslandsdienstlehrkraft*, also known as ADLK). In addition, the schools employ local teachers. Teachers with civil servant status in Germany must take a leave of absence to work on secondment overseas.

The parents pay relatively high school fees and as a consequence, a high degree of pedagogical guidance and counselling is demanded of teachers. The professional quality management of German schools abroad is exacting. They are subjected to regular school inspections and offer qualified further training. This degree of quality management sets a good example for schools in Germany itself.

We felt at home quite quickly, since my two sons (who at the time were aged 7 and 9) attended the school, and the German community is strong. However, the boundaries between work and free time sometimes became blurred. My family and I joined the great Taekwondo



Figure 1: Panorama view from our apartment. On the left side in the background is the landmark N Seoul Tower, a television tower on Namsan mountain.

courses at the school. At weekend we were part of school soccer matches, which the parents organized. Teaching one's own child was unavoidable. Reprimanding my own child with an "... I guess I'll have to have a word with your father!", would provoke an outbreak of laughter. On the other hand, it was possible to know all pupils attending the school by name, and supervise a class trip with only 6 pupils. Admirably, class trips would take place once a year in every class. Every year in February the whole school goes to a nearby ski resort for several days. During this trip, the senior grades are assisted with preparation for Abitur final exams.

Parents, largely German or bi-national, often with a German-Korean background, helped with school parties, Korean celebrations and other events. Parents of other nationalities enrol their children because they want them to benefit from the German school system and from the opportunity to learn German. Language learning is prioritised, benefitting students of differing abilities. Korean language classes are offered on a voluntary basis, both for students and staff.

'German schools abroad' are community schools and are committed to a holistic, inclusive approach. In Korea, access to foreign schools is highly regulated. Korean families must have lived abroad for three years in order to enrol their children at an international school rather than a national one. A high school diploma like the Abitur or an equivalent international school qualification obtained at an international school in Korea does not grant direct

access to a Korean university. There is an enormous pressure within the Korean school system to perform well and the parents are quite results-oriented. Centralised final examinations decide on the all-important entrance to the domestic elite universities. Attending these universities almost guarantees future professional success. The international schools in Korea are allowed to operate independently from this performance-oriented Korean school system. This explains their attractiveness to some families.

Life in the megacity

Seoul has about 10 million inhabitants, as well as being part of one of the largest and richest metropolitan areas in the world. It is a modern and rapidly changing metropolis, that coexists with a distinctive historical legacy, including the historic royal palaces, city gates and walls, and Buddhist temples. Its mountainous setting is particularly impressive.

By Western standards, it is a 'safe' megacity. There are many security cameras and a visible police presence. Attitudes towards the community and private property are distinctive. There is no graffiti, no vandalism and you can even leave a bicycle unlocked once in a while - a circumstance unimaginable to anyone living in my hometown, Hamburg. The Seoul subway is safe and pleasant to use. Each platform has an additional security wall. Everyone behaves considerably, except rowdy tourists.

The fact that you live in a megacity is not always noticeable, because of the complex hilly terrain, and a dis-

persed urban structure. Most people live in large housing complexes, which helps to reduce sprawl, but eventually leads to the displacement of traditional housing areas with a preponderance of elderly residents. Modern complexes are accommodating and offer shopping centres and leisure facilities, and their apartments can be very comfortable. Housing prices are generally very high, so less wealthy residents live in small and older flats or seek cheaper options on the outskirts of the city.

Every high-rise complex has its own guard who keeps an eye on what's going on, and sometimes residents too, for example if the rubbish hasn't been sorted properly. We lived on a 16th floor, close to the centre, with a great view over the city. A quaint market centre with small restaurants, coffee bars and shops were nearby. There is a sociality to eating, and food in Korea is a whole culinary universe that is very healthy (although with few vegetarian options). Restaurants serve you rapidly, soon after you order. Traditional food is cheap, but meat and foreign cuisine are very expensive.

The city meanders along the great river Hangang. Owing to its close proximity to the North Korean border, shipping has diminished. Instead, the river offers water skiing and windsurfing courses. During our time we were amazed by the range of sports and leisure facilities. Cycling is popular, with professional sportswear and modern racing bikes. There are excellent cycle lanes along the river. Unfortunately, there are none anywhere else in the city. There are basketball and soccer



Figure 2: Bicycle Lanes along the Hangang River.

itches, and public fitness equipment parks, popular with older residents. Along the river some sports facilities are under motorway bridges.

Seoul is designed to be a very car-friendly city. Multi-lane highways criss-cross the entire urban area. In Korea, people are on the road a lot. You are entitled to only a few holidays; on the other hand, there are numerous public holidays and on these occasions all streets in Seoul are blocked by traffic. Overall, it is easy to travel throughout the country - and also by fast trains and buses although infrastructure is still being improved. You have the impression that almost all mountains have now been perforated by motorways and train tracks. There are many interesting regions to visit and accommodation is easy to find, although communication in English is much more difficult outside the metropolitan area. Many local hotels offer *ondol*, sleeping on futons on the floor. The word means underfloor heating, and has its origin from there.

Close to North Korea

The close proximity to North Korea (Democratic People's Republic of Korea) is an omnipresent factor of life in the city, thrilling and frightening,

Seoul is just 50 km from the border. The urban area of Seoul has military installations, and there are fenced and monitored coastal areas throughout the country. There is an emergency SMS system and frequent testing of emergency systems. During our time, the mood fluctuated between war scenarios and the hope of an early reunification. It was the time of threats and 'expressions of love' between Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un, and a memorable meeting took place with President Moon Jae In in the demilitarized zone between the two countries in 2018. During this time the German School stocked up on hundreds of water bottles and giant amounts of huge ravioli cans for a possible emergency.

Sustainable Development

When it comes to environmental pollution and sustainability, South Korea has a mixed record. A high level of airborne particulate matter is often blamed on China. In Seoul, the air quality or particulate matter (PM) is a daily preoccupation and wearing FFP2 masks is unfortunately quite normal. Domestic industry and energy production based predominantly on fossil fuels, as well as car traffic, are certainly a major source of pollution. Energy

prices are relatively low, with renewable energy systems in their infancy.² On the other hand, South Korea is probably the world champion in waste separation, especially from climate-damaging organic waste.³ The current government is beginning to decommission its nuclear energy plants, particularly as a result of the Fukushima meltdown in Japan.⁴ The country is innovative, and a good example is the world's largest tidal power plant that was built southwest of Seoul. Another is the ultra-modern smart city Songdo, which hosts the headquarters of the Green Climate Fund.⁵ It is built on unique East Asian tidal flats, however, habitat for migratory waterbirds on the East Asian-Australasian Flyway.^{6&7}

The inter-border Korean Demilitarized Zone has become a valuable near-wilderness for flora and fauna. As part of a student field trip we were able to meet the rare large Manchurian Cranes as well as to experience several ghost towns and a creepy Cold War atmosphere. The German Hans-Seidel-Foundation has worked on environmental protection in the Zone, and across into North-Korea.⁸

Seoul even has a very small Fridays for Future movement among students and youth, fighting for climate justice



Source: Gerd Vetter.

Figure 3: Friday for Future event at Seoul 2019, with as many press than demonstrators.

and lowered emissions. I joined a meeting with my 7th grade class after school without really demonstrating. Students are not allowed to engage in politics and politically active Korean teachers will be suspended.⁹

Addendum

My family and I returned to Hamburg in 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted life in both countries, but we were able to resume contact with great friends and neighbours with whom we have always been in contact. We miss our new-found friends and Korean relatives. I didn't manage to learn Korean during my time in South Korea. At some point, my Korean relatives gave up hope of having a moderately comprehensible conversation with me, and after the second bottle of soju (traditional rice liquor) during a Korean barbecue, the language almost didn't matter anymore. Today, when we see pictures of street scenes in Seoul, we feel transported back to the special atmosphere

there. We miss life in Korea and certainly some unique features of working as a teacher in German schools abroad. Due to our contacts with Korean relatives and explorations of rural Korea we had the chance to look beyond a more exclusive kind of life as expats. The opportunity to live and work in Korea has been an enriching experience for my family and I.

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