

Chapter 6

Undergraduate Korean Americans and “Korean Koreans” in the Millennial American University¹

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In the 2000s, the “Korean” undergraduate student landscape in the United States began to change as increasing numbers of South Korean citizens (i.e., “international students,” or *yuhaksaeng*), among other Asian international students, joined the American university: a change reflecting both South Korean demand and the financial needs of American colleges and universities.² At my own university, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (U of I), long South Korea’s no. 1 American university destination (at both the undergraduate and graduate student levels), this trend made for a veritable sea change, as the numbers of South Korean citizen undergraduates came to exceed “domestic” Koreans (e.g., Korean Americans) beginning in the late 2000s.³ Over the late 1990s and into the early 2000s, I was conducting an ethnographic study of Korean Americans (largely second generation Korean Americans and some so-called 1.5 immigrants, namely those who emigrated later in childhood), but by the time I was putting the finishing touches on *The Intimate University: Korean American Students and the Problems of Segregation* (2009), I could already feel that our local “Korean” undergraduate scene was very much in transition.⁴

While my book lavished much attention on intra-ethnic othering (i.e., distancing oneself from co-ethnics), that is, the ways in which many Korean Americans went to considerable pains to distinguish themselves from a “Korean American mainstream” (i.e., normative ways of being Korean and normative life trajectories, including, for example, a focus on material success and appearances), into the second half of the first decade of the 2000s, many Korean Americans

began to voice their distinction from “Korean Koreans,” namely those “South Koreans” in their midst at college.⁵ When I taught the University of Illinois’ first course on “Korean America” in spring 2007, I met both groups of students in my class, and the tensions between them were already evident.⁶ As I began new collaborative research on the University of Illinois as a veritable contact zone as the numbers of South Korean and Chinese students in particular soared into the late 2000s, I learned that these “international student” “Korean Koreans,” echoing their Korean American co-ethnics, were similarly interested in distinguishing themselves from a Korean international student mainstream (i.e., from other students like them), and sometimes from Korean Americans as well.⁷ With other scholars I appreciate that intra-ethnic othering unfolds in the context of U.S. racism which colors racial groups with particular images and ideas that in turn lead some co-ethnics to distance themselves from particular ethnic peers. In this paper, I am thus interested in these two systems of intra-ethnic othering, and also in the ways in which these two groups are interested in distinguishing themselves from each other. This said, however, as I will discuss below, the lines between “Korean Koreans” and Korean Americans are often not so clear at all, given South Korea’s already decades of globalization regimes and a recent history of considerable long- and short-term early study abroad (ESA).

I begin this chapter on these increasingly blurry lines (i.e., between Korean Americans and “Korean Koreans,” and turn then briefly to my already published discussion of Korean Americans’ intra-ethnic othering, and at greater length to findings on Korean international students from our in-progress research. Taken together, these systems of intra-ethnic othering suggest that both groups of racialized students (i.e., marked in some way for their race) navigate the American university highly aware of ways in which they are “seen” by both other “Koreans” and “Americans” at large. At issue for both student groups is what it means to fully “belong” at

the American university, one that is often still predominantly white (as is the case with the University of Illinois). The interviews with international students in particular reveal that these students' identifications (e.g., with or against other international students and in relation to Korean Americans) are, in fact, quite fluid as they navigate the various—and in some cases contradictory—ways that they are “seen” by co-ethnics and an American mainstream.

The blurry lines between Korean Americans and Korean Koreans

The lines between Korean Americans and Korean Koreans are, in fact, often very blurry ones, making for a landscape in which ethnic identification is increasingly more fluid and elective (i.e., rather than a given based on citizenship, residence, or even personal history).⁸ “South Korean” international students are already a confusing category, because the majority of South Koreans who make their way to American universities have participated in early study abroad (ESA, *chogi yuhak*) before college; some will have spent a single year in the United States in primary, middle, or high school, some multiple years, and a significant number will have graduated from U.S. high schools.⁹ A subset of ESA students will have been abroad with their families (e.g., in the case of parents with overseas work assignments) or in so-called “geese family” (*kirogi kajok*), arrangements in which typically the bread-winning father remains behind in South Korea, while the mother and children reside abroad. The remaining students will have been abroad either in private boarding schools or residing with relatives or guardians, and attending local public or private schools. Some of these students, depending on the timing and nature of their ESA and on their proclivities, will be quite bicultural and bilingual; others might even be considerably more acclimated to the American youth scene than the South Korean one;

and others still might remain squarely in the “Korean” youth scene, despite considerable time abroad.¹⁰

Finally, there is another important group of South Korean students, namely those who have not participated in ESA, but who attended either American or international schools or so-called specialty South Korean schools in which most or the entire curriculum was taught in English. Further, some of these often more elite students might have traveled extensively abroad, even as they did not participate in ESA. To complicate this ESA group, a significant subset is U.S. citizens, most often because they were born in the United States while their parent/s obtained advanced degrees; these students can choose early study abroad with greater legal facility. Nonetheless, as these students’ parents remain in South Korea, many of them are culturally no different from other South Koreans and share legal obligations if they would like to work in South Korea as an adult (e.g., military service for men). It is also important to note that ESA students are, in fact, a very class-stratified group: while some upper/upper-middle-class students/parents move between the United States and Korea frequently and with great ease, other middle/lower middle-class families tax themselves enormously to “pull off” ESA. These class differences – e.g., the global or cosmopolitan capital differences (e.g., parents’ English abilities, comfort in the world, etc.) of ESA families -- can make for significant differences in ESA students’ abilities to acclimate abroad.¹¹

Further, for some ESA students as well as *yuhaksaeng* (with or without ESA backgrounds), their futures—in terms of both citizenship and residence—are best thought of as indeterminate: they might be in a familial situation that allows them to apply for a green card, or as aforementioned, they might already be American citizens, or again they might envision becoming a citizen or permanent resident through post-college employment.¹² If we consider

that ethnic, racial, and cultural affinities might align with a person's thoughts about their futures (e.g., in the United States, South Korea, or elsewhere), this indeterminacy would make for exactly the sort of elective flexibility we found across our conversations with these "technically" "Korean Koreans." Our interviews reveal that those international students who transitioned from American high schools described much more ethnically and racially integrated lives in high school (and sometimes in the early days in college), and found their circles becoming increasingly (international) Korean as their college years went on. While some students describe this transition in positive terms, others seemed to observe that this transformation was neither wholly of their own volition, nor entirely positive.¹³

The picture is complicated further by the heterogeneity of Korean Americans. While most U of I Korean Americans completed all or nearly all of their pre-college schooling in the United States, the aforementioned 1.5-generation immigrants might have emigrated to the U.S. as late as their final years of high school. We can then imagine, on the one hand, a 1.5-generation U.S. citizen Korean American whose English is very spotty and is at sea in American youth ways; and on the other hand, a South Korean citizen student who, having spent the lion's share of her pre-college education in the United States, is "typically American."

"I'm not *that* kind of Korean American"

Korean Americans are racialized. With all Asian Americans, Korean Americans share the experience of being sometimes considered members of the "model minority," namely exemplary students who succeed by virtue of their own efforts, and in some versions of this perspective, the predispositions of their "culture/s." In *The Intimate University*, I argue, however, that today it is Asian Americans' image as "instrumental strivers," namely students motivated principally by

practical concerns and material rewards, that is perhaps more important.¹⁴ For Korean American students, these images—for example, of social mobility-oriented action at all costs—fly in the face of what I dub their often deeply held “liberal dreams” for education, namely ideas of becoming broadly educated, cosmopolitan people who have, in the language of many of my research interlocutors, been able to “get out of their comfort zones” and “grow” or “develop” at college. While these sorts of liberal dreams are shared by many Americans, I think they are disproportionately embraced by Korean Americans whose parents hail from South Korea, a country whose modernity story is intimately tied to U.S. economic and political involvement and to an “American dream.”

At the University of Illinois, what posed perhaps the greatest challenge to this liberal dream was that many of my interlocutors found themselves in quite segregated (and often Christian) social circles, and some of them felt that somehow they were responsible for self segregation—or at least they worried that others might think so. Some Korean Americans are then burdened both by the both the stereotype of the instrumental striver and by their sense that their segregation is seen by others as “self segregation”—both posing a challenge to a liberal education. Thus, many Korean Americans I spoke to worked hard to distinguish themselves from the “mainstream” of their (more segregated) co-ethnics.

If Korean Americans were busily fending off this “illiberal” Korean American mainstream, Korean international students both echoed this same problem (they too could be seen as overly instrumental) and presented new problems: they appeared to be rich and spoiled. One student offered his own well-honed taxonomy of “Korean” undergraduates at the U of I, one perhaps more interesting when we understand his own complicated history—his having been a childhood immigrant, an early study-abroad student (after his parents re-immigrated to South

Korea and left him alone in the United States), a (self-described) international student, and later in college, a green-card holder. His taxonomy is as follows: (1) Twinkies (who are primarily Korean Americans, but can include some Korean international students who did ESA, and even some who didn't) can be seen in sweat pants, UGGs, and Abercrombie clothing, are not fashion conscious, unmoved by fads, more muscled, and use "Asian American-style make-up"; and (2) FOBs (who are largely international students who didn't do ESA, but can include international students who did and even some Korean Americans) are above all fashion conscious, heavily made-up, loud, and smoke. He thus described international students with ESA experience as veritable switch figures, able to "choose" between these groups. Revealingly, however, he explained that although FOBs can become Twinkies with no problem, it is much harder for Twinkies to become FOBs, who are thus a much more exclusive social group. This image of international students as exclusive (and rich) is one that is often shared by Korean Americans who sometimes think of Korean international students as cashing in on an American education without having suffered the indignities and hardships of emigration.¹⁵ This sort of attention to matters of students' varying style, clothing, and affect was widely shared by our interviewees: Many noted that the fashionable Korean international students really stood out at our otherwise rather unfashionable campus.

"I'm not *that* kind of Korean"

Not surprisingly, Korean international students are quite aware of the ways in which some Korean Americans and Americans more generally have come to think of them, and of their international student colleagues at large: most notably as rich and spoiled ("wasting their parents' money"), materialistic (e.g., as evidenced by their luxury cars and clothing) and

segregated (i.e., hanging out only with themselves). While the students we have interviewed have indeed worked to distinguish themselves from this pejorative stereotype, we have found that their own stereotypes of their mainstream exceed these characterizations to include particular ideas about Korean culture—for example, its narrow-mindedness, hierarchy, and obsession with education. In an entirely contradictory vein, however, some distinguish Korean international students in a positive manner, for being serious and excellent students, in contrast to lazy, partying “Americans” or Korean Americans who (unlike them) have the luxury of easy employment on account of their U.S. citizenship and fluent English. Let me again underscore that we must appreciate this system of intra-ethnic othering in the larger context of the U.S. racial order that casts particular traits and proclivities in a negative light.

This concern about the insularity of the community spoke to many international students, who were self-conscious that they are seen on American campuses as “cliquey” or self-segregating. One woman worried about the “reputation” Koreans had for “tend[ing] to stick with themselves” and distinguished herself from what she called “the very very international students, so to say FOBs,” chiding that they need to “branch out.”¹⁶ One student, however, compared Korean international students favorably to *other* Asian students who insist on speaking their own languages in class, proclaiming, “When in Rome ...”

An advertising major with an ESA background, who began college in Korea and made her way to the U of I via a local community college, wanted nothing to do with the “stupid Korean kids,” choosing instead the “smart and serious [international students],” among them many from Hong Kong and Taiwan who are often, she described, “more reliable” than Koreans. She described these other Asian international friends as being free from the gossip of the Korean community, a refrain that was quite common among our interviewees. Having grown tired of our

small and monotonous college town, she was determined to become a “somebody,” imagining herself someday “moving all over the world.” Interestingly, her sister, whose academic biography is nearly identical and imagines having a “typical Korean life” in South Korea someday, described being able to get along with both the Korean international “good student” and “bad student” groups.

For some of our interviewees, even those whose college circles were becoming increasingly “Korean,” the cliquishness of Korean international students spoke to Korean ways that troubled them. Again and again, students described the insularity of the community, in which all eyes were on a person’s behavior, and most of all, their transgressions. One student described the Korean international student “church kids” who think of themselves as “good natured and nice” but “tend to ignore non-church kids.” Another student who described having partied hard at his California high school and who decided to head to “snowy” Illinois when he didn’t get into the colleges of his dreams (figuring that without the beach he wouldn’t “play so much that I’d end up feeling bad for my parents”) found himself squarely in the Illinois party scene his freshman year. Although “determined” to find his way to the Korean church, he was very critical of the homogeneity, hierarchy, and small mindedness of the Korean community.

The most ridiculous thing about Koreans—I know it’s weird for *me* to say “Koreans”—but anyways, you know how Koreans can’t handle anything that’s different from them. You know, in Korea, if some people say something’s good, everyone goes crazy for it ... So on account of my being a bit different, I felt like I was really watched by other Koreans (in the church).

Although he had decided to turn his social circles in an ethnic direction, he described his considerable affinities with Americans: his ability to enjoy a range of pastimes from Frisbee to pick-up rugby (“When it comes to Koreans, the ways they have fun are pretty limited, drinking

and Karaoke”); his “tell-it-like-it-is” style (while Koreans are chided if they go against the grain of a social group -- they would say, “How can you act like that to friends, don’t you have any sympathy,” “Americans respect the dissenter if their anger is reasonable”); and his impatience with age-graded Korean culture in which the senior-junior (*sônbae-hubae*) system is such that, for example, a person’s year in college really matters (one night out at a bar he grew so angry at his seniors’ obsession with calling attention to their age and school year—“They were so arrogant—I couldn’t stand it!”—that he turned over a table and walked out).

A business college major who went to some lengths to distinguish himself from other Korean international students nonetheless described that his social circle had become increasingly Korean international, largely on account of having joined an ethnic club in his major. His own background adds more complexity to the mix: he began as an ESA, came to college as international student, but at the time of our interview was transitioning to a permanent resident. Despite his increasingly international student social circle, he prided himself on his more laid-back approach to grades (“for international students” grades are really important but I’m not [i.e., no longer] one, so ... if I look at my friends who study hard, they *really study hard*—compared to them I’m *for sure* not studying hard.” Another student who was floundering in his freshman year and was soon heading to Korea for his mandatory military service, thinks of himself as a fish out of water in South Korea, where “everything is busy and not relaxing for me,” and chuckled when he answered a question about Korean Americans: “Some of them,” he said, “are just Koreans like me ... [but] they don’t need to go to the military—that’s the biggest difference.”

Like Korean Americans, these international students were keenly aware of ways in which they were seen. As they negotiate, however, the often blurry boundaries between “Korean” and

Korean American, the landscape of their affinities and identifications is a moving target, making for often complex calculations.

Where to?

As more South Korean international students, and just as importantly, students from Asia at large (with currently rapidly increasing numbers from the People's Republic of China) arrive at U.S. universities for undergraduate education, I anticipate that the intra-ethnic othering I have begun to sketch here will only intensify. As American students (Korean American students among them) become more keenly aware that their colleges and universities are relying on these students to foot the bill in an era of precipitously falling public support for education, and as they realize that their own job prospects are diminishing in hard times, I anticipate that some of these international students will meet intensifying American racism.

Also, as Korean Americans and Asian Americans at large become on some campuses the Asian minority (i.e., outnumbered by their international co-ethnics), I think that they will become increasingly interested in asserting their own "Americanness," understanding, however, that this will take on a range of and perhaps even contradictory meanings. I also predict, however, that the porous lines between "Korean Koreans" and "Korean Americans" will continue to blur even further in our increasingly globalized world in which many people travel the world for many services (education among them) and opportunities (including employment). As more and more young people's futures are more indeterminate—i.e., it is not clear where they will work, marry, raise children, etc.—their affinities will likewise be both more flexible and in flux. Thus, I imagine a paradox: an escalating system of intra-ethnic othering even as it will also likely become harder and harder to assume what sorts of South Korean or Korean Americans will identify or disidentify one way or the other.

Some of these seemingly negative-sounding predictions aside, we can perhaps think of this South Korean–Korean American contact zone as a space in which young transnational Koreans will experiment with what it is to be global citizens, navigating the perils and opportunities of our shared futures. In this sense, perhaps the “Korean” case will have a great deal to teach the rest of the world.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. According to Abelmann, how do Korean Americans and Korean Koreans see themselves differently?
2. What does this statement mean, “I’m not *that* kind of Korean?”
3. Although this article distinguishes between South Koreans and Korean Americans, Abelmann also asserts that the lines between them are often blurred. How so?

ENDNOTES

1. I am grateful to Hee Young Choi, Yoonjung Kang, and Sujung Kim for their helpful comments on a draft of this paper.
2. By nationality, India, China, and South Korea are the top overall and graduate student senders for 2009/10, representing a 9% single-year increase for India and South Korea, and an impressive 30% for China—accounting together for nearly 300,000, nearly half of all international students. At the undergraduate level, China leads, followed by South Korea (in 2009 South Korea was still in the lead). Putting educational migration to the United States in a global perspective, China is the world leader in educational migration, sending 15% of the total (number of circulating students) at 421,000, followed by India at 153,300 and South Korea at 105,300. If we keep in mind that China is 19.5% of the world’s population and India 17.3%, it is South Korea, at .67% of the world’s population, whose statistic is perhaps most remarkable. Noteworthy here is that China is no longer only a sending country: by 2008, China had become the world’s sixth largest host of international students, 6% of the global student mobility pie (*Open Doors 2009: Report on International Educational Exchange*. Institute for International Education; *Open Doors 2010: Report on International Educational Exchange*. Institute for International Education); in consideration of the financial needs of American institutions, of note is that the fastest growing sectors, undergraduate and non-degree are those that are overwhelmingly funded by personal and family funds, 81% and 76.7%, respectively (*Open Doors 2009*). At the U of I, for example, international students are paying 2.5 times the rate of in-state students, with sizable additional surcharges in some colleges.
3. In 2010 Chinese students at the U of I nearly doubled to 1,118, and the South Koreans slightly increased to 999 (there had been 20% increases in 2009 and 30% in 2008).

4. Nancy Abelmann, *The Intimate University: Korean American Students and the Problems of Segregation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).
5. Karen Pyke and Tran Dang, ““FOB” and “Whitewashed”: Identity and Internalized Racism among Second Generation Asian Americans,” *Qualitative Sociology* 26, no. 2 (2003):147–72; Kyeyoung Park, “Establishment and the Domestic Cycle,” in *The Korean American Dream: Immigrants and Small Business in New York City* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); many Korean American interviewees refer to South Koreans this way.
6. Indeed, on our campus these two groups’ social lives appear to be quite distinct: Korean American young men, for example, gather for basketball while their South Korean peers are well organized in some 12 soccer leagues; they largely attend different churches, and so on.
7. With U of I colleagues Soo Ah Kwon, Tim Liao, and Adrienne Lo. The research team also includes a number of graduate and undergraduate students: I draw here on interviews conducted by Jirapa Jadecharoonviwat, Yoonjung Kang, Sujung Kim, Kyou-ho Lee, Anna Prior, and Christopher Stillwell; our own quite dramatic increases reflect the general national trends: in 2009/2010 with a remarkable single-year 9% increase (largest since 1980/1), international students reached an all-time high (690,923) with the highest percentage increases at the undergraduate level (11%) and with 16% increases for “new” international students (*Open Doors 2009*).
8. Agnes M. Kang and Adrienne Lo, “Two Ways of Articulating Heterogeneity in Korean American Narratives of Ethnic Identity,” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 7, no. 2 (2004):93–116.
9. Jiyeon Kang and Nancy Abelmann, “The Domestication of South Korean Pre-College Study Abroad (PSA) in the first Decade of the Millennium,” *Journal of Korean Studies* 16, no. 1 (2011).
10. Jung Sun Park, “Korean American Youth and Transnational Flows of Popular Culture across the Pacific,” *Amerasia Journal* 30, no. 1 (2004):147–69; Hyunjung Shin, “From FOB to Cool: Transnational Migrant Students in Toronto and the Styling of Global Linguistic Capital,” in *South Korea’s Education Exodus: The Life and Times of Pre-College Study Abroad*, eds. Adrienne Lo, Nancy Abelmann, Soo Ah Kwon, and Sumie Okazaki (no date). Hyunjung Shin “From FOB to Cool: Transnational Migrant Students in Toronto and the Styling of Global Linguistic Capital” *Journal of Sociolinguistics* (forthcoming)
11. SA destinations are also class-variegated; Southeast Asia, for example, is a cheaper destination (Jeehun Kim, “‘Downed’ and stuck in Singapore: Lower/middle class South Korean wild geese (*kirogi*) children in Singapore,” in *Globalization, Changing Demographics, and Educational Challenges in East Asia (Research in the Sociology of Education, Volume 17)*, eds. Emily Hannum, Hyunjoon Park, Yuko Goto Butler (Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2010), 271–311; So Jin Park and Nancy Abelmann, (second author, with So Jin Park), “Mother’s Management of English Education in South Korea: Class and Cosmopolitan Striving,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 77, no. 4 (2004):645–72).
12. Adrienne Lo and Jenna Kim, “Early Study Abroad Returnees in Seoul: The Elusive Global and the Trouble with English,” in *South Korea’s Education Exodus: The Life and Times of Pre-College Study Abroad*, eds. Adrienne Lo, Nancy Abelmann, Soo Ah Kwon, and Sumie Okazaki (no date).
13. cf. Hee Young Choi, *The Experiences of Korean Early Study Abroad (ESA) College Students in the Midwest* (dissertation, University of Illinois, 2011).

14. Abelmann, *The Intimate University*.
15. We are quickly learning that many of our undergraduates, Asian Americans among them, know the dollar amount that international students need in a bank account in order to enter the U of I (circa \$50,000).
16. See C. Kim (2000) and N. Kim (2008) on the culture of race in South Korea and Korean America (Claire Jean Kim, *Bitter Fruit: The Politics of Black-Korean Conflict in New York City* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); Nadia Kim, *Imperial Citizens: Koreans and Race from Seoul to L.A.* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2008); Sohyun An, “We Are More Racist”: Navigating Race and Racism in (Korean) America,” in *South Korea’s Education Exodus: The Life and Times of Pre-College Study Abroad*, eds. Adrienne Lo, Nancy Abelmann, Soo Ah Kwon, and Sumie Okazaki (no date).