

The Differences between International Students and Korean-American Students in their  
University Experience and Future Plans after Graduation

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## **Introduction**

In a global world, more and more countries are interrelated through education. As traveling from country to country has become more accessible, many people have chosen to study abroad. Of those countries, the U.S. has been one of the top choices to receive education. Naturally, the amount of international students in U.S. universities has risen steadily. As a result, international students eventually form organizations and groups according to their mother country, which, in this case is Korea. However, it is important to note that these international students are not the only Koreans who are currently attending universities in the U.S. In many cases, some Koreans are 'Korean-Americans', or 2<sup>nd</sup> generation children from parents who immigrated years ago. As mentioned above, the categorization between international Korean students and Korean-American students is very important because while both groups share same ethnicity, they are radically different in both overall university experience and future prospects after graduation. In recent years, a third group that is a sort of hybrid between the two former groups have formed, thus needing observation and research upon students who belong to this 'hybrid group,' or most notably known as 1.5 generation. By interviewing and researching the differences between these groups, it will benefit the university in analyzing what is needed for these foreign groups, and what services should be provided to aid the future of these students. Ultimately, this research paper aims to identify the differences between each student group regardless of what group they are categorized into by interviewing individual students, comparing experience in college, and contrasting plans and prospects for the future of each student.

## **Methods**

Since the hypothesis is related to students and the universities they are currently attending, all fieldwork was done on UIUC campus. Throughout the semester, I have asked friends and close acquaintances the difference between these students and what their usual activities would be, closely comparing and contrasting each group. In order to follow the hypothesis and gather information on each Korean student group, students who had backgrounds that fit each group were located and interviewed. For the most part, some of the interviewees were close friends and therefore, some information was known before-hand. All interviews were conducted in campus cafes and buildings in order for interviews to be in a relaxed and academic atmosphere. Three students, each from their respective categories, were interviewed. Each interview was either taken in person, or through electronic means, and notes were taken during conversation if applicable. Although each student was of Korean ethnicity, it is important to state that each student had unique answers and perspectives despite the question set being identical with each other. Each student, according to their cultural background and education during youth had different thoughts about the university as well as their future plans. During an interview with Kevin, he stated that many of his friends, also categorized as the same group from which he belonged, were in similar circumstances, and that he (Kevin) believed that in many cases he would tend to be closer with friends in similar situations rather than other Korean students. As is in most cases, the international Korean students seemed to struggle in adjusting to the atmosphere of the university compared to Korean-American students and the hybrid group students.

## **Findings and Analysis**

When it comes to foreign ethnic students, the first that comes to mind are international students. Therefore, in order to answer my hypothesis, I interviewed an international student. Bo-min is a student who was born in Korea, and attended school there until high school. After deciding to study abroad in the U.S. she decided to attend UIUC. Her main objective to study abroad not only consists of learning English, but also using her U.S. university degree to help her find a job in Korea. Bo-min explained during her interview that “in Korea, knowing to speak and write perfect English has become a big deal” and that “the advantages of a university degree from foreign countries” provide a big incentive when finding jobs. Most importantly, I asked if her experience at the U of I was any different from her brief stay in a Korean university. Bo-min replied that except class and discussion sections, most of the time she spends time with fellow international students and that their choice of language is Korean.

From her interview, it was obvious that most international students tend to expect to work in their home country after graduation, and that they spend most of their free times on campus with fellow group members. Bo-min specifically stated that “it is hard to spend time with American or even Korean-American students when there are a lot of international students that speak Korean.” It was obvious in her statement that after graduation, her most desired jobs were not in the U.S. Most international students who come to learn English prefer to return to their home country once their course in learning English is finished. This identifies the ‘English boom’ in Korea, where not only learning English, but to speak and write perfect English matters, as stated in: “...detailed the intensive English boom at all education levels, including adults (Abelmann & Park 669)”, proves that learning English has become one of the key aspects of education, not only for students but also for adults as well. Therefore, although exceptions exist, most international students, even those who expect to

find jobs in the U.S., still have a yearning to return back to Korea and find jobs. This in many ways are different from the other two groups because of the fact that Korean-American students and hybrid group students showed a tendency of enjoying the experience of the university rather than objectively trying to learn English.

The next common student group associated with Korean students is Korean-American students. In most cases these students were either adopted from Korea by American parents or were born to Korean parents who immigrated into the U.S. in the past. The biggest difference between these students and international students is the fact that most Korean-American students identify themselves as ‘Americans’ rather than ‘Koreans’. Taylor is a Korean-American student who lived in the U.S. for twenty years. Her parents immigrated to the U.S. at the age of 7, thus making the whole family fairly ‘Americanized’. In that, the whole family is dependent more on English than Korean. They speak English to each other even at home rather than in Korean. It is evident from her background that Taylor is more of an American than Korean. Her overall experience in college and her friends are more various than compared to Bo-min. It seems through her interview that Taylor has both Korean-American and American friends, and is open to spend time with whichever group. Her overall plan for the future only considers working in the states, and not to go to Korea. She stated that although she has studied abroad in Korea, she has never thought of going to a Korean school full time. Compared to Bo-min, Taylor is more involved in university activities, participating in intramural sports and groups related to her major: electrical engineering. Most importantly, Taylor does not know how to speak fluent Korean. She mentioned in her interview that “international students are impressive, the ability to speak bilingual between English and Korean is a good advantage.” Despite my initial thought of each group viewing each other in a negative perspective, some people seem to look for opportunities to become friends. Taylor mentioned that some of her friends’ parents were adopted. As stated by Eleana

Kim in 'Adopted Territory', many children were sent to the states as adoptees following the Korean War. "President Rhee attempted to establish channels with an organization in the United States to facilitate adoptions (Kim 61)." Therefore, the children of these children would be about the age of Taylor. Similar to the case of Taylor, these students would identify themselves more of an American heritage rather than Korean. Although students like Taylor should be identified as Korean-American, they themselves tend to think that they are just 'American'.

The third group mentioned above as hybrid, is the most difficult to identify and categorize. These students have recently come to light because of their unique circumstance. Through the interview with Kevin, I have found that many students like him are currently attending universities across the nation. At surface value, these students are international students. They are from abroad, and therefore are labeled as international students. However, many of these students have American citizenship, and can speak fluent English. Kevin, who lived in the states for more than ten years during his youth, had to travel back to Korea due to his father's work. Because he had a hard time adjusting to the Korean education system, he attended a '*Wegookin hakgyo (International School)*.' These schools are privately owned and located in parts of Korea providing an American-based education. Although these schools are located in Korea, they have requirements which must be met such as: being a foreign citizen, or living in a foreign country for more than five years. After being admitted, students who attend international schools will receive American education, ultimately studying to go to college in a foreign country. Kevin and most of his friends are from this background. These students, compared to international students, are fluent in English and adjust to the American background more easily. Kevin's goal is to stay in the states after graduation, preferably working too. What is considered hybrid of these student groups is the fact that although they are fluent in English and do not have a hard time adjusting to the background, most of their

friends are international students and their preferred language is to be Korean. Despite having mostly Korean friends, these hybrid groups of students tend to want to stay in the U.S. and work.

In order to relate each group and compare, the most important aspect is to acknowledge that each group comes from a completely different background. With the comparisons of each interview that were done, Korean-American students without doubt considered themselves to be American students. Because of their cultural background, and experience growing up, they would say they are only ethnically Korean. Most Korean-American students are not fluent in Korean and do not have experience living in Korea. Compared to these students, international students are more likely to consider themselves Korean. They are completely from a Korean background and often have different goals compared to Korean-American and hybrid students. Hybrid students on the other hand, are very difficult to categorize, but in summary are more similar to Korean-American students rather than international students.

Despite the range of interviews being only limited to one student per group, because information on friends of these students were also asked, it is possible to say that immediate differences between groups are easily identifiable. The only similarities that are found are between Korean-American students and hybrid students who both wish to study in the states rather than in Korea. One aspect that was interesting is that despite the differences of each group, negative perspectives were hard to find, each group finding features to envy from their counter-parts. For example, Korean-American students who are not bilingual tend to envy the bilingual 'hybrid group'. Some international students were envious of the 'perfect English' spoken by the Korean-American students. The most challenging portion of this research was to unexpectedly find that a third 'hybrid' group of Korean students existed. Interestingly, these students were the most difficult to categorize due to their 'mixed' backgrounds, and

thus a 'hybrid' category had to be made. Through fieldwork, it was possible to apply the readings and materials that were learned in class, such as the process of increasing Korean adoptees in the U.S. and the English boom in Korea. Finding firsthand evidence about these Korean issues through students at the U of I showed that the issues learned in class were indeed real and not just 'class material'.

### **Conclusion**

Although there is no 'right answer' to the hypothesis set in this research paper, there is an answer that is more interesting. Through the interviews conducted, information about student groups and what they represent could be interpreted through the materials learned in class. Although on paper there are only two major groups: Korean-American and international students, it was interesting to find that there is indeed a more various community consisting of students from different backgrounds, such as the 'hybrid group' or 1.5 generation. Finding Kevin and his friends' circumstances, and categorizing their group as 'hybrid' was probably the most unexpected result of conducting the interviews. Experiencing issues stated in class firsthand through the experience of students not only helped to analyze and compare each student's situation, but proved to be evidence of such discussed issues. Indeed to find that many Korean students are categorized into different groups at the U of I serves as proof of the globalization that went, and is still currently undergoing. The U of I serves as a medium to these Korean students of different backgrounds to meet and interact with each other, creating a whole new different community that will no doubt help various students. Although each individual may have unique circumstances to how and why they are attending the U of I, they still are united under one cause: *Learning and Labor*.

## Bibliography

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