Author: Kate Grim-Feinberg

Title: Shifting Identities: Fashion Choices as Social Capital for Korean Women in the United States

About the Author: I am a second year Ph.D. student in Sociocultural Anthropology at UIUC. My research interests center on children’s learning and socialization, and how different forms of socialization in the home and community compare with and influence the ways that children learn in formal schooling. I am currently working with an indigenous Quechua community in the Peruvian Andes, exploring the ways in which public school teachers and administrators are adapting curricula to the local cultural context, in response to pressures for educational reform coming from both the outside (the Peruvian state and foreign-based NGOs), and the inside (parents and community members). I approach these issues by looking at how children learn and negotiate various aspects of their identities through the bodily practices of everyday routines in school and at home.

In this project on Korean women’s fashion, I explore how Korean students at UIUC negotiate their identities in a transnational context through their clothing choices. Other students working on this project are Kyung Sook Kim and Sergio Lemus.

Keywords: South Korean university students, fashion, social capital, transnational migration, racialization, consumption

Abstract: We began this project by asking how female Korean students’ fashion at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) reflects both macro and everyday discourses of individual self-development, which have intensified with the neoliberalization of both Korean and U.S. universities. We sought to explore how students attribute meaning to their fashion choices within particular social and political contexts. We looked at these issues through four interviews with female Korean students, observations of students on campus, and analysis of local clothing advertisements and a Korean television drama. We consider this research to be preliminary. Rather than revealing definitive answers, our data has led us to suggest possibilities for future research by highlighting the complex nature of how structural social categories influence individual choice for Korean students at UIUC.

We found that knowing how to switch between different fashion styles that are identified with particular groups of people in different contexts is an important form of social capital. The students we interviewed are clearly aware of how their fashion choices influence the way others perceive them. The ability to accentuate different aspects of their identities through fashion choices appears to be a form of social capital that allows Korean women to study, work, and live in
transnational spaces.

Response Paper #1:

Response Paper #2:

Response Paper #3: Kate Grim-Feinberg

East Asian Youth and Global Futures

April 8, 2008

Response Paper 3 on Week 10 readings:

Abelmann, Kim, and Park 2008 “College Rank and Neoliberal Subjectivity in South Korea”

Song 2007 “‘Venture Companies,’ ‘Flexible Labor,’ and the ‘New Intellectual’”

Choi 2005 “New generation’s career aspirations and new ways of marginalization in a postindustrial economy”

Film My Generation

Each of these articles and films on South Korea illustrates a different aspect of the “Indeterminate Futures” of South Korean youth. Abelmann et al. (2008) explore how South Korean college students talk about their futures in terms of personal responsibility, obscuring structural inequalities. Song (2007) looks at young people in the next stage of life—highly educated college graduates who are unable to find professional jobs, and instead depend largely on their own creativity and skill, along with a new kind of “proactive” welfare that provides them with capital to start their own businesses and, in turn, provide work for other young people. Choi (2005) takes us a step back again in her work with lower-class high school students at a “second chance” high school for drop-
outs. Like Abelmann, et al. (2008), Choi (2005) finds that these students accept responsibility for their own failure to make it through mainstream schools and for the limited employment options available to them, thus obscuring the structural constraints that also contributed to their current situation and outlooks for the future. Finally, the film *My Generation* appears to portray yet another subset of Korean youth—young high school graduates seeking to make a living and finding themselves sinking further and further into debt. This film belies the discourse of personal responsibility by painting a rather dismal portrait of South Korean youth who try to use their skills and creativity to get ahead, only to run into structural constraints that push them further into debt with every step they take.

What I found most interesting about Ablemann et al.’s (2008) research are the metaphors of consumer capitalism that the students they interview use to describe their own self development. Heejin refers to her university as “her brand (*mak’û*)” (11), and talks about how important it is to her that her university set and stick to high standards so that people will know just by looking at her degree that she is a highly educated professional, just as people know when they see certain brands of clothing that they are high quality and valuable. Later, Sori talks about her “item (*ait’em*)” to describe the special talent that she is cultivating in herself to sell on the job market (18). In these discourses, students equate getting ahead and successfully obtaining professional employment with working to meet the high standards of those
institutions that are most dominant and influential, and working to develop
unique skills that will be in demand on the job market. While students talk
about these processes in terms of individual responsibility, a close analysis of
their words reveals the structural constraints under which they work to get
ahead. Just as wearing designer and name brand clothing requires first and
foremost having disposable income, accessing top-rung universities also
requires that social and monetary capital that not all young people have.
Additionally, just as clothing is designed for certain kinds of people with
particular body types, university standards and curricula are designed for
people who are familiar with particular styles of communication, work, and
patterns of living. Similarly, successfully developing a sellable “item” requires
familiarity with the interests of people who have the means to buy your “item,”
and access to resources and capital that allow you to invest in your “item.”

Choi’s (2005) interviewees seem to be well aware that their high school
degrees will be equivalent to imitation brand clothing. They won’t be naked,
but any employer will know that what they are wearing is not the real thing. In
light of this lack of opportunities, they have fantasies about developing talents
in sports or pop music, the only highly sellable “item” that people with
imitation degrees can still have a stab at. In the end, their resignation that they
will probably just work in service sector jobs (like their parents and
grandparents) reflects the structural inequalities behind a discourse of
individual failure. What this article does not recognize is that service sector
jobs are still jobs, just as imitation clothing is still clothing. It doesn’t matter whether you have an Armani jacket or a homemade jacket if your purpose is to stay warm, just as it doesn’t matter whether you work as a doctor or a janitor if your purpose is to make a living (especially if you’re a union janitor). It only becomes meaningful when social pressures attribute more respect to people who wear Armani jackets and work as doctors.

Song (2007)’s look at welfare as a form of start-up capital is also interesting in terms of structural inequalities. In order to access this kind of welfare, you have to already have a quality brand name and an item to sell. The idea of welfare has shifted from the socialist concept of a safety net for people on the bottom rung of society who have no other options, to the capitalist concept of something that you have to earn by showing you are capable of investing the money so it will trickle down to the rest of society.

It seemed from our class discussion that the film *My Generation* was easier to follow in Korean than it was for those of us who depended on the English subtitles. It looked like it might be a portrayal of the kind of life that Choi’s (2005) interviewees have ahead of them, upon graduating with their second-rate high school degrees. There was clearly no welfare for these young people, who instead turned unsuccessfully to the private sector to help them climb out of their debt. Their inability to develop sellable items clearly translated into self-blame. This film made me wonder, is there really a whole generation of depressed young people living in debt in Korea? And, how
Response Paper #4: Kate Grim-Feinberg

East Asian Youth and Global Futures

April 15, 2008

Response Paper 4 on Week 15 readings:

Kelsky 2001 *Women on the Verge*

Park 2006 *Language Ideologies, Attitudes and Policies: Global English in South Korea*

Film *Please Teach me English*

These two readings together with the film provided a vibrant and complex portrait of the place of the English language and western cultural values in South Korea and Japan. I thoroughly enjoyed *Please Teach me English’s* satirical portrait of English language learning in South Korea. Through an engaging tone of absurd exaggeration, this film portrayed the very real lived tensions between mastery and competence in differently valued languages; interethnic tensions that intertwine with these linguistic tensions; and connections between English language and western cultural competence on the one hand, and success in employment and marriage on the other. Park (2006) contextualizes this film through her linguistic analysis of attitudes and policies toward English, Korean, and other Asian languages in South Korea. She explores how English gained such an elevated status as a global (even supposedly ethnicity-less) language in South Korea; while simultaneously linguistic nationalism, particularly in the context of increased immigration from
other Asian countries, has kept alive a fear of foreign dominance and preservation of the Korean language. Finally, Kelsky (2001) provides a comparative perspective with her ethnographic study of professional Japanese women who see English, along with the foreign cultural practices and values that accompany it, as either their most appealing or their only opportunity for professional advancement beyond secretarial jobs.

Despite or perhaps because of its light, humorous tone, *Please Teach me English* effectively portrays many of the linguistic and ethnic tensions in South Korea that Park (2006) discusses. As a former English as a Foreign Language teacher myself, I found this movie particularly easy to relate to, and I was struck by the similarities between interactions with the English language and English-speaking foreigners in South Korea and those in Chile, where I taught English. I think this speaks to the global nature of English linguistic and cultural domination. A close look at this film belies Bok’s (1998: 181) claim that “English is, now, a standard language of human race,” that does not belong to any particular nationality or ethnicity (cited in Park 2006: 46). The special status afforded to English-speaking foreigners is apparent in the first scene, when a young man enters the public office where “Candy” works and complains about his water bill in rapid and complex English, with no acknowledgement whatsoever that the Koreans attending him might not speak English fluently or at all. The boss’s subsequent decision to send one employee to English classes in order to avoid future embarrassment reinforces this
cultural and linguistic hierarchy, and exemplifies the ideology of learning English to help place your country on the global market.

Later, Candy’s nightmare is an eerie reference to the US military forcing its will on civilians in occupied countries, but in this case the soldiers are forcing Candy and her classmates to answer test questions in English. Park (2006) describes the US military as having played a key role in rebuilding the Korean economy, which makes English the “language of the saviors of the country” (40). On the other hand, one of the Korean women I interviewed for my EUI project told me that Koreans view the US military presence in their country negatively due to accidents that have cost civilian lives. It seems that this contradictory relationship makes Koreans feel simultaneously obliged and resentful toward the US and the English language. Contrary to Bok’s (1998) insistence that English is “odorless” (to use Iwabuchi’s term), this popular representation of English language learning leaves viewers with no doubt about which nations, politics, and power structures lie behind the dominance of English in South Korea.

When Candy wonders, “Why can’t I just be Korean and speak Korean?” she is clearly reacting to the linguistic and cultural hierarchies apparent in her boss’s decision to send her to English classes. But despite this recognition that English is hegemonically imposed on South Koreans, in the end it appears to be for their own good. Once “Elvis” has learned enough English to say “I love you” in English, he changes his mind and says that “‘Love’ sounds better in Korean.”
But this does not mean that he’s given up on the utility of English and decided that Korean is all that matters. In the epilogue, Candy and Elvis are a happily married couple who speak English fluently to foreign tourists passing by. Candy looks at her baby and says that someday she too will have to struggle to learn English. All of the students from Candy and Evlis’s English class are now cosmopolitan global citizens who have used their English and the cultural competence that came with it to fulfill themselves personally and professionally. In the end, English seems to be a sort of bad-tasting medicine that you have to resist and struggle with (because if you didn’t, you wouldn’t be a good nationalistic Korean), but eventually have to master and use as a form of social capital that puts you, along with your country, in a favorable position on the global market.

Rather than seeing the English language and its associated cultural values as a form of outside dominance, the women Kelsky (2001) describes these as forms of cultural capital that provide opportunities to escape from the male dominance of Japanese society. In contrast to Korean youth who learn English to gain access to jobs in Korea, Kelsky looks at professional Japanese women who seek to learn English and gain foreign cultural experience in order to pursue high-status professional careers abroad that are off limits for women in Japan. Rather than articulating their desires in terms of Japanese nationalism or personal economic status, these women express willingness to sacrifice both their Japanese-ness (115) and their wealthy economic status (85) in order to
gain personal respect and professional opportunities. While the dynamics of English language and culture have played out differently in Japan and South Korea, both are locations of struggle between building social capital and negotiating the national, ethnic, and gender hierarchies that accompany it.

Response Paper #5:

Response Paper #6:

Response Paper #7:

Preliminary Question:

Interview/Observ. #1:

**March 31, 2008**

**Group Members: Kate Grim-Feinberg, Sergio Lemus, and Kyung Sook Kim**

**Group Research Question: **

Crossing Identities: Fashion of Korean women in the United States

**We hypothesize that female Korean students’ fashion (manifested through clothing, make-up, and accessories) at UIUC reflects both macro and everyday discourses of individual self-development, which have intensified with the neoliberalization of both Korean and U.S. universities. Our hypothesis draws from literature on the expression of social identities through fashion and consumption (Bourdieu 1984, Nelson 2006); neoliberal education in South Korea and the U.S. as an individualist project of cultivating a sellable self (Ablemann et al. 2008, Brooks 2001, Choi 2005, Ong 2006); and the influence of transnational migrant students on U.S. racialization and neoliberal education (Ong 2006).

**These students’ aesthetic self-presentation is part of a larger project of fashioning the self as a sellable product on the job market. Notions of what kind of self-portrayal is desirable shift when students transition from Korean to U.S. universities. We argue that students attribute meaning to their fashion choices within particular social and political contexts.**
**Fashion is a powerful means or technology of expressing oneself. It is a physical marker, like “habitus,” indexing participation in certain kinds of consumption. It is also a type of cultural capital that “needs inculcation, assimilation and personal investment,” and serves “as a social function that justifies social difference” (Bourdieu 1984). According to Laura Nelson (2006:24), “consumption is a system of human communication....No individual has a process for rational choice that is divorced from culture or from the dynamic social world that frames and alters values.” In other words, fashion consumption reflects tastes that distinguish social group categories, such as class, race, ethnicity, and gender. Here we will deal with Korean women’s—especially graduate students’—fashion trends at UIUC and their implications. How do people see these trends as differentiating between Koreans and other ethnic groups, and among one another intra-ethnically—between Korean-Koreans and Korean-Americans, and between newcomers and longer sojourners? How have these distinctions been influenced by gender expectations, national policy, and the global market order?

**Abelmann et al. (2008) demonstrate through an ethnographic study that students in Korea increasingly view school diplomas as “mak’ů,” or brand names (11), and their talents and passions as “ait’em,” or sellable items (18) that they will carry with them as they go onto the job market. Students both in South Korea and in the U.S. have internalized these neoliberal notions of education as the cultivation of sellable selves, accepting individual responsibility for their own success by engaging in intense self-sacrifice to gain a competitive edge (Abelmann et al. 2008, Brooks 2001); or conversely, accepting personal responsibility for failures that are often influenced by social constraints such as gender (Abelmann et al. 2008) and social class (Choi 2005). We suggest that by examining Korean students’ attitudes toward fashion, we can uncover the subtle connections between structural social categories and neoliberal self-cultivation that are so often masked in neoliberal discourses around discussion of “freedom” and “choice.”

**Lastly, our research problem addresses Aihwa Ong’s (2003) argument that the nexus of flexible citizenship (through transnational migration) and academic institutions’ increasing focus on technical training has created a “neoliberal anthropos” that seeks knowledge for the sake of employment opportunities only. We will take this neoliberal anthropos as a given and investigate the racialization processes of international students here at the University of Illinois, by examining how Korean students not only bring ideas about neoliberal education and racialization to the U.S., but also become subject to socialization practices and processes in their host society. We will explore how racial classifications prominent in the U.S. affect Korean students’ socialization...
vis-à-vis other racial groups, and how that in turn affects their own subject formation and projects of self-cultivation.

**References not on the course syllabus:**
Bourdieu, Pierre

**EUI Links:** Lee-Chung, Sangsook


This project found that Korean students who come to the U.S. at a young age for early study abroad (in middle or high school) tend to adapt quickly to U.S. cultural norms and often express sentiments of rejection toward recently arrived Korean students who act and appear more markedly “Korean.” Lee-Chung (2007: 20-21) states, “It seems that ESA students’ extent of acculturation to the U.S. society including language acquirement affects their perception, attitude, or judgment of other Korean students.”

Our project builds on these internal distinctions that Korean students make amongst themselves, by examining how students view fashion as a marker of their own identities in contrast with other Koreans, and how students use fashion to distinguish themselves as marketable in a highly competitive neoliberal job market.

Whitley, Anona

2007 Korean American Aesthetics and Style. Ethnography of the University Initiative online archive. https://www.ideals.uiuc.edu/handle/2142/1791

This study concluded “that style is intertwined with values about education, religion, and class and is used to mark one’s ethnic identity or to reject it.” One of the distinctions that Whitley found Korean students make through clothing is who is here to have fun and who is here to study. Our project seeks to explore this aspect of dress and self-presentation more deeply, and to look at the implications of fashion for Korean students’ success on the global job market. Through our theoretical perspective, we may be able to take Whitley’s research a step further and address the question of implications for the
Interview/Observ. #2:

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Data Gathering Activity 1

On March 6, 2008, I conducted an interview with a spouse of a Korean graduate at the University of Illinois, who was herself a graduate student at another university in the Midwestern United States before coming to Illinois with her husband. She has lived in Champaign-Urbana for 1 ½ years, and in the U.S. for 5 ½ years. Her husband has been in Champaign-Urbana for 4 years, and in the U.S. for 8 years. Both came to the U.S. for graduate school, shortly after completing their undergraduate studies in Korea. The woman who spoke with me studied and taught English literature, and her husband studies agricultural engineering. She preferred not to have the interview taped, so the following is a summary of my written notes. I will call the interviewee “Jess.”

Jess told me that five years ago, before she left Korea, there were two images of what Americans were like. One came from television shows like *Friends* and *Sex in the City*, which led people to believe that Americans were very fashionable, like the young professionals on these shows. The other image came from the U.S. military, which has a base in South Korea. Koreans generally view the U.S. military presence negatively, because the military has caused accidents hurting Korean civilians. Jess personally knew some Americans who she worked with teaching English in Korea, and she found that they were independent, easy-going, valued personal privacy, and were
interested in learning Korean cultural practices but not the Korean language. She also saw them as very professional and well-prepared for their classes, but noticed that their dress was more casual and less stylish than that of Americans in the media.

When Jess came to the U.S., her Korean friends expected that she would live like the Americans they’d seen on TV in *Sex in the City*. She found, however, that Americans dress much more casually than Koreans, at least in the small cities in the Midwest where she has lived. Young people in Korea, she said, are more concerned about following trends in fashion than are young people in the U.S. She has observed that when Korean students first come to the U.S., they try to continue dressing fashionably for 1-2 semesters, and then dress more casually, like American students. She can identify newly arrived Koreans easily by their clothing and hairstyle (the current trend includes wearing Ugg boots and tight pants). Koreans who have lived here longer, she says, dress more like Chinese people, and it becomes more difficult to distinguish them from Chinese students. While Koreans are still able to recognize one another quite confidently when their clothing styles change, Jess said that Chinese people have often mistaken her ethnicity and spoken to her in Chinese at restaurants.

Jess has returned to Korea for two summer visits in the last 5 ½ years, in 2005 and 2006. The first time she returned to Korea, she said that “everybody, my mom” felt sorry for her because her clothing made her look poor. She wore t-shirts, jeans, sneakers, and no make-up, and people were surprised that instead
of looking more fashionable, like the young people in *Sex in the City*, she returned looking much less fashionable. Her mother bought her new clothes, and she tried to dress fashionably during her visit, but reverted again to her casual style when she returned to the U.S. In general, Jess said, she spends less money in the U.S. than she used to spend in Korea. She enjoys shopping more in the U.S., because clothing is cheaper and salespeople are less bothersome.

When Jess was in college in Korea five years ago, students wore heels and skirts to classes. Men’s dress was also trendy, but she didn’t specify what they wore. When she taught as a TA for three years in Korea, she wore more formal suits. In contrast, in the U.S., both students and professionals (at least in college towns in the Midwest) dress casually. Here, she often can’t tell by looking at someone’s clothing whether they are a student or a professor. She thinks that Korean fashion trends tend to follow trends in the U.S. (for example, North Face clothing is trendy in both countries now), but people are more concerned about following these trends in Korea.

When I asked Jess about how social class manifests itself in fashion, she said that very rich people in Korea do not follow trends and do not show brand names on their clothing. Instead, they expect that other upper-class people will recognize the brands of their clothing without seeing the names. Other than this, however, it is difficult to determine a person’s income level by their clothing. Even people with lower incomes tend to spend a large portion of their income on fashionable clothing. She told me about a recent news report’s
finding that some young unmarried working women in Korea spend around 75% of their monthly income (about $1,500 out of $2,000) on clothing and designer bags. In the U.S., she has noticed very little social class differences in dress. Occasionally, she sees someone wearing a designer suit who appears to be showing off their wealth, and the U.S. media gives her the impression that this happens more often in large cities. The only difference she has noticed in dress between ethnic groups in the U.S. is between Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans—the Japanese style, she says, is particularly different. While there are a considerable number of immigrants from other Asian countries in Korea, they do not tend to dress differently from Koreans.

Jess told me that she doesn’t know many other Koreans here, but if she wanted to, she could meet them at Christian churches or in Korean student groups. She is not Christian, and not interested in going to a church to socialize. This comment reminded me of a conversation I had with another Korean woman last year. This woman told me about her dilemma of whether to attend church in order to meet other Koreans or not to attend church because she is not Christian. She had started going to a local church with a friend occasionally because she liked the social environment, but she was very concerned that her mother-in-law not find out, because non-religious Koreans (like her mother-in-law) held strong stigmas against Christian Koreans. I also recall that this woman was eager to talk with my husband and me about Communist leaders and movements in Latin America and Asia, and I wonder whether this divide
between Christians and non-Christians in Korea reflects a political divide between Communist anti-religious ideology and Christian (anti-Communist?) ideology.

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Kate Grim-Feinberg

March 14, 2008

East Asian Youth and Global Futures

Data Gathering Activity 2

On the recommendation of my first interviewee and with the help of a Korean classmate, I watched the first episode of the Korean television drama Love Story in Harvard (from Youtube with English subtitles) which was popular in Korea last year. I found this portrayal of the life of graduate students at a U.S. university quite interesting in relation to comments from my first interview and to the Korean consumer culture that Nelson (2006) describes. I cannot speak to how accurate the portrayal was, since I have never been to Harvard. However, I think it is useful and relevant to our research problem to view this drama as a popular media discourse that shapes how people in Korea imagine student life in the U.S., and how Korean students at UIUC categorize themselves in relation to popular media images.

This drama reinforced the images of classy, trendy youth portrayed in Sex in the City and Friends that Jess (3/6/08 interview) identified as key in shaping Koreans’ ideas about life in the U.S. Like these two U.S.-based sit-coms, Love
*Story in Harvard* focuses on upper-class youth, in this case at an elite university. In one scene shortly after the main actor’s arrival to the U.S., students and professors mingle at a formal cocktail party, with tuxedos and formalwear, a situation which is quite different from my graduate school experiences, and is portrayed in the show as a regular part of life at Harvard. When Korean graduate students come to UIUC, I wonder, do they expect to encounter this type of social situation? Do they have doubts about the quality of the university when they find that it is socially not like Harvard? Do Korean students who have been here longer view well-dressed newcomers as elite wannabes?

The show also portrays law and medical students as extremely competitive. Even before the main character arrives on campus, on the plane to the U.S., he hears rumors that one of the professors he’ll have a class with makes life extremely difficult for students. This continues to play out as the professor lives up to these expectations and the students compete with one another to gain the professor’s favor and be among the few who pass the course. My sense is that this kind of competitive environment is, to some extent, a reality for engineering students at UIUC, who, unlike anthropology grad students, are systematically weeded out as they go through the program. (This is based on casual conversations with engineering students, and not on any formal information about how the program works.) Like in Brooks’s (2001) description of “The Organization Kid” at Princeton, the Harvard students
portrayed in this TV drama appear to accept their responsibilities to work hard and make themselves competitive within the system, sacrificing social life and recreation, in order to out-compete their classmates.

Of course, if social life were left out completely it would be a rather boring drama. These students engage in a very formalized version of social interaction, as demonstrated in the cocktail party among students and professors that I mentioned above. Unlike the UIUC anthropology department potluck, students and professors in this Harvard cocktail party engage in a sort of formalized social competition, presenting themselves as sophisticated and professional through formal dress and etiquette. I wonder whether there are similar formalized social gatherings in internally competitive UIUC programs such as engineering, and if so, in what ways Korean graduate students judge one another according to their dress at such gatherings? Or even if such cocktail parties are not a reality here, to what extent does the formality of dress affect perceptions of who will be most successful in their education and professional life?

Korean students’ interactions with white people in this episode are clearly marked by the blanket categorization of Koreans as “Asian,” along with stereotypes that accompany “Asianness” in the U.S. Before the start of classes, the dreaded professor runs into the main character playing around with his girlfriend in the lecture room. The professor makes a despising comment about “you Asians” who think you’re so smart. After the professor leaves the room,
the main character turns to his girlfriend and comments in dismay, “That was racial discrimination!” Later, a key element of the drama’s plot arises from a hotel clerk’s apparent inability to distinguish between Asian men. A Korean woman says something like, “I’m looking for someone who is—“ and the clerk interrupts her to say, “Asian?” The woman says, “Yes,” and the clerk directs her the main character’s room. When she walks into the room, the main character is wearing only a towel, and they stare at one another for a moment in surprise as she realizes she’s been directed to the wrong Asian man’s room, and then says sorry and leaves. Once again, in the same episode, a professor at the cocktail party remarks that he is not surprised by the main character’s choice to go to law school, because Asian students usually study business or law.

All of these interactions reinforce a perception that white people in the U.S. 1) cannot distinguish between different individuals, and much less different nationalities, of Asians; 2) expect Asians to study business and law; and 3) resent Asian students for being too smart. If Korean students come to the U.S. expecting to encounter this kind of attitude, how does that affect the way they present themselves through clothing, cosmetics, and accessories as students in the U.S.? Do they make a conscious effort to dress in ways that differentiate themselves from other Asians? Do they, as Jess suggested, give up on this effort after a semester or so, and does this resignation have to do with a realization that many white people will still call them Chinese no matter how they dress, refusing to look beyond their most broadly Asian features to even
fairly obvious intra-group distinctions?

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Kate Grim-Feinberg

April 3, 2008

East Asian Youth and Global Futures

Data Gathering Activity 3

On April 3, 2008, I interviewed a female Korean student (“Mary”) in her second semester of a master’s program at UIUC. Mary had lived in the U.S. once before, four years ago, for a one-year study abroad program at a Midwestern university in a city somewhat larger than Champaign. Some of her comments reiterated Jess’s, while others portrayed a different point of view. I also talked with her about my observations of the Korean drama Love Story in Harvard.

At some points in the interview, I sensed that Mary had trouble finding the right words to express her thoughts in English, or that I may have been interpreting her words differently than she intended. I tried to clarify these situations by rephrasing her comments and asking if I had understood correctly. Nevertheless, I think that a more profound study of this topic would require conducting an interview in Korean and then working carefully with native speakers of both Korean and English to translate or describe the Korean concepts as accurately as possible in English.
Mary confirmed Jess’s observation that Korean students who have been in the U.S. for longer than 1-2 years dress more like Americans, with more casual and comfortable clothing. Mary has not changed her style much in the few months she’s been here, but she told me about a friend who has been in the U.S. for five years and wears comfortable clothing and no make-up, like many U.S. women. In Korea, she said, popular fashion trends change every year. The trends in Korea aren’t too different from those in the U.S., because Korean entertainers copy U.S. entertainers and then young people copy what they see on TV. She pointed out that her own style is constantly changing, and when she shops for clothing in the U.S. her style is different than it would be if she were shopping in Korea. Personally, she does not base her choices on what she sees on television, but instead, on what clothing is available in trendy stores like Abercrombie and Banana Republic.

When Mary came to the U.S. four years ago, she said that she didn’t realize how her style had changed until she returned to Korea. A Korean friend in the U.S. had encouraged her to buy more “American style” clothing, “like what black people wear… hip-hop style.” At the time, she said, hip-hop was popular on Korean television. She agreed with my suggestion that it is more popular among Korean undergraduate than graduate students to adapt their clothing style to U.S. norms. As we were conversing, a table next to us filled up with several Korean undergraduate students. Most of them women wore jeans and sweatshirts, while a couple wore long narrow sweaters and shirts that seem
to be a trend among Korean students at UIUC (based on my everyday observations). Mary, in contrast, wore more formal clothing and make-up.

Mary echoed Jess’s comments on differences between Chinese and Korean dress, but seemed more interested in Japanese fashion. She said that Koreans tend to like Japanese style, which they see on Japanese television dramas shown in Korea (cf. Iwabuchi 2002). Japanese dress is more complicated, she explained, with more different colors, while Korean fashion is simpler and more monotone. On the other hand, Koreans tend to have a good sense of color and match well, while some Chinese are less matched. Mary was careful throughout our discussion to point out that there are many individual differences in fashion, indicating that she did not feel comfortable making broad generalizations.

When I asked about marked differences in dress among Koreans, Mary, like Jess, talked about distinguishing very rich people by the brands they wear. Interestingly to me, Mary identified Korean music and art majors as synonymous with upper class. I suspect that this is a symptom of a Korean academic system shaped around technical training, as opposed to citizenship education (Ong 2003), in conjunction with an economy in which lucrative careers in arts and entertainment are few and far between (Choi 2005). In such a system, paying for a college education that will probably not prepare you to get a job is a luxury that only the very rich can afford.
When I asked Mary whether the intense competition portrayed in the drama *Love Story in Harvard* is a reality for her, she said that she feels some competition, but not very much, because the economic situation in the U.S. is better than in Korea. In Korea, she said, there are many highly educated people and not enough professional jobs for them, which makes job-seeking quite competitive. She also felt that personal appearances are more important in Korea than in the U.S. In Korea, she said, “people look at you more,” so the dress code is more important. In the U.S., people ignore each other, and they don’t notice if your dress differs a little from the norm. This makes her feel more comfortable, not having to worry so much about exactly how she dresses.

Mary is clearly aware of the steep competition she will face on the job market after graduation, but this competition does not appear to be an important part of her everyday life as a student at UIUC. She does not articulate the kind of intense engagement in self-cultivation that Abelmann et al. (2008) found among college students in Korea. Mary’s assertion that clothing and self-presentation matter more in Korea, where “people look at you more” than in the U.S., may be a key factor explaining this difference. The relaxed gaze on clothing that students experience in the U.S. seems to accompany a relaxed discourse on self-development within a strong economy where job prospects for educated people are not so dire.

Mary also mentioned that she does not have funding through an assistantship or fellowship, and that her parents are paying for her graduate
studies. As a graduate student who depends on my tuition waiver and stipend to get by, it struck me as quite luxurious to have your graduate education funded by your parents, especially in light of Mary’s earlier comments that it is very difficult for educated professionals to find jobs in Korea. While Mary clearly differentiated herself from music and art majors, who are the very wealthy students, it is apparent that she too comes from a family with considerable disposable income. Considering her job prospects in comparison with those of young people interviewed in Choi’s (2005), Abelmann et al. (2008), and Song (2007), it seems that obtaining a high level of education for Koreans may be more an issue of social class status than employability. This complicates Ong’s (2006) portrayal of neoliberalized education as a primarily technical endeavor.

Group Summary:

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East Asian Youth and Global Futures
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Shifting Identities:

Fashion shows which group a person belongs to. When I’m here, I don’t wear in Korean style, because I don’t want to give an impression that I’m not a member here. I don’t want to draw others’ attention by my unfamiliar fashion. However, when I feel like attracting others’ gaze, or embellishing myself through being fashionable, or when I have a special date, I make myself in Korean style. I think it’s cuter. I can’t express my hilarious feeling at this special case in American style.

-Jaeyoon, UIUC undergraduate student from South Korea
Research Problem

We began this project by asking how female South Korean students’ fashion at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) reflects both macro and everyday discourses of individual self-development, which have intensified with the neoliberalization of Korean and U.S. universities. We sought to explore how students attribute meaning to their fashion choices within particular social and political contexts. We consider this research to be preliminary. Rather than revealing definitive answers, our data has led us to suggest possibilities for future research by highlighting the complex nature of how structural social categories influence individual choice for Korean students at UIUC.

In forming our research problem, we drew from three bodies of literature. First, we looked at how people express social identities, such as ethnicity, race, class, nationality, and gender, through fashion (Bourdieu 1984) and consumption (Nelson 2006). We also drew from literature on neoliberal trends in education in both South Korea (Abelmann et al. 2008, Choi 2005) and the U.S. (Brooks 2001, Ong 2006). The neoliberal emphasis on individual responsibility, privatization, and education for employment rather than citizenship puts increased pressure on individuals to train and shape themselves into the ideal professional who will be competitive on the job market. We asked, then, how students living within this framework cultivate a professional,
sellable self by choosing fashions that allow them to shift strategically between identities that are more or less advantageous in particular social contexts. Lastly, we examined the influence of transnational migrant students on the process of racialization in the U.S. (Ong 2006), and conversely, the ways in which racial categories prevalent in U.S. society influence Korean students’ fashion choices. Through all three of these frameworks, we sought to connect micro-level discourse on individual preferences with broader discourses on neoliberal subjectivity and race.

Research Team and Methodology

We explored these issues through four interviews with female Korean students, observations of students on campus, and analyses of local clothing advertisements and a Korean television drama. As a Korean international student herself, Kyung Sook provided additional insight from her own experiences and informal conversations. My interviews and analysis tend to focus on how Korean students are situated in a small college town in the Midwest region of the United States, which is similar to the town where I was born and raised. Sergio has lived in the U.S. for several years as a racial minority, after having grown up in Mexico. This position allows him to compare Korean students’ experiences as transnational migrants living in the U.S. with his own. The varied perspectives that all of us have brought to the project have forced us to look beyond simple answers and explanations to the
multiplicity of factors that influence Korean students’ fashion choices and the many possible implications of these for wider social processes of transnational migration, neoliberal education, and racialization.

Findings

The Korean students we spoke with express and perceive many aspects of identity through clothing. We began by asking them about differences between Korean and American fashion, and found general agreement that Koreans tend to wear formal, professional-looking, name-brand clothing and accessories, while American students at UIUC dress much more casually. All four of the people we interviewed observed that fashion is more closely monitored among Koreans than among Americans:

“If Korean students put on those deeper neck line shirts [a characteristic of American fashion], they’re likely to be on the others’ lips…. [Koreans are] too fashion oriented and very uniform.” (Jin-ah)

“[Koreans] look at you more.” (Mary)

“Yes, I do think [that Koreans consider appearance more]. And also think that Koreans tend to evaluate one’s social status by one’s appearance and attire. There’s a strong tendency of thinking that fashion is one’s capability.” (Jaeyoon)

Jess also commented that young people in Korea are more concerned about following fashion trends than are young people in the U.S. While they often spoke of efforts to dress like mainstream Americans and fit in with UIUC trends, these women appeared to be more concerned with how Koreans and Korean Americans at UIUC see one another than with how non-Koreans see
them.

All of the women we spoke with agreed with Jaeyoon’s comment that “Koreans seem to spend much on clothes comparing with their income. That’s the social atmosphere.” When I asked about social class, Jess and Mary both indicated that very upper class Koreans can be distinguished by their designer apparel, but that most everyone else shells out the money necessary to follow the trends. Jess told me that when she returned to Korea with her casual American clothes, her mother said, “You look poor,” and bought her appropriate clothing. Jin’ah described a similar experience: “When I first went back to Korea… [my friends] said, What’s this? scoldingly…. [When I go back] I buy all the new clothes. They’re like, what Mommy picked out for me, the up-to-date stylish fashion at the time.” This makes sense in light of Nelson’s (2006) description of state-sponsored efforts to bolster the South Korean economy by encouraging individual spending and widespread dependence on credit. According to Nelson, to be South Korean is to be a consumer. When these consumer habits are transferred to the Midwest U.S., however, many UIUC students view Koreans wearing fashionable brand-name clothing as extravagant spenders.

When Korean students first arrive at UIUC, they are often surprised by how much their fashion style makes them stand out on this campus. Most Koreans get their ideas about American fashion from popular American television shows, which also play an important role in setting fashion trends in Korea.
Everyone we spoke with emphasized that to keep up with Korean fashion, one must be current with the pop culture figures in Korea who set and re-set the rapidly changing trends. The more time a person spends in the U.S., the more difficult it is for them to maintain Korean styles of dress. Ironically, many of the popular television shows that set Korean trends are not Korean, but Japanese and American. The Japanese, as Mary explained, have a complex and colorful style that Koreans incorporate into their more conservative, simpler, and well-matched fashions. Jaeyoon described Japanese and American television shows as representing “the urban, sophisticated, somewhat formal style. I find the model of this style in American drama such as *Friends* and *Sex in the City*: the single, young, professional career women’s fashion.” This emphasis on Japanese and American media in describing Korean fashion indicates that the very process of dressing Korean involves imagining oneself as a cosmopolitan global citizen who transcends Korea, who must desire something beyond Korea in order to be genuinely Korean.

While Koreans in South Korea tend to view this sophisticated style as representative of Americans, those who come to study at UIUC discover that in fact, if they dress like Sarah Jessica Parker in rural Illinois, they will look very out of place and perhaps pretentious, and will fall well outside of the casual trend of wearing brand name outdoorsy or athletic clothing from Northface, or the t-shirts, sweats, and pajama pants and shorts common among undergraduate girls. By coming to the U.S. and encountering this disjunction between popular
media and reality, Korean students begin to see the “American” styles portrayed on television as distinctly urban and East Coast. What none of those we spoke with mentioned is that these styles are also distinctly white and upper class. It seems that race and class in the media are obscured by the presence of a different white, upper middle class style here at UIUC.

In fact, the students we talked to barely if at all mentioned differences in the dress of lower class people or racial minorities in the U.S., even when I probed them on this point. I suggest two possible explanations for this. Perhaps the segregated patterns of residence in Urbana-Champaign and the dominance of white middle-class undergraduate students on the UIUC campus make these differences less noticeable. In my observations, the “American” trends that interviewees identified as prominent on our campus are followed most faithfully by members of sororities, most of whom are white upper middle class young women. On the other hand, Koreans may be so caught up in their own struggles of being racialized and Othered as Asian that they look to those Americans who have the most dominance and power in U.S. society to learn how to fit in.

Within the first episode of the Korean television drama *Love Story in Harvard*, white Americans, from professors to a hotel clerk, refer to Korean students as “Asian” and stereotype Asians as homogeneous, business-oriented, and too smart. Through such media representations, Koreans arrive in the U.S. already keenly aware of the racial categories of Asian and white. They develop
a “double consciousness” (Du Bois 1904), seeing themselves as Asian through the eyes of the white majority. It seems that the desire to dress like white Americans and the scorn that Korean Americans hold for “Fresh-Off-the Boat” Koreans with their formal, sophisticated clothing (Lee-Chung 2007, Whitley 2007) may stem from an internalization of anti-Asian racism.

While Jaeyoon, an undergraduate student, and Jin-ah, who came to the U.S. at a young age, both talked about consciously changing to a more casual style in the U.S., graduate students Jess and Mary talked about this shift as more of an inevitability than a conscious choice. Jaeyoon stated, “I don’t wear the clothes I brought from Korea. I have to get all the new clothes here…. [My Korean clothes are] too conspicuous,” and Jin-ah asserted, “I wear differently when I join company with Koreans and Americans.” On the other hand, Jess explained that when Koreans first arrive in the U.S. they try to maintain their fashion style for one or two semesters, but gradually start dressing more casually, and begin to look more and more like Chinese people. Mary agreed that while she had not changed her style after one semester in the U.S., her Korean friends who had been here longer dressed more casually. Mary also supposed that by buying her clothing at U.S. stores, her wardrobe was becoming increasingly Americanized. When I asked about Chinese dress, Mary described it as generally less matched and more thrown-together than Korean outfits. This begs the question: What is the difference between Chinese casual and American casual?
Jaeyoon, Jin-ah, and Mary, who talked about their shift to casual as a shift to American style, said that they bought clothing from the brand names Seven Jeans, Diesel, Guess, Abercrombie, Banana Republic, and Gap. While we did not have the opportunity to investigate all of these brands, Sergio found that Abercrombie’s advertisements at the local mall portrayed white males, while Gap ads depicted professional women with more ambiguous racial phenotypes. Both Jin-ah and Mary mentioned Abercrombie first when listing places where they like to shop, and Jin-ah qualified Gap with “sometimes, not often.” It seems, then, that the most influential store in these women’s wardrobes does target a white clientele, supporting my suggestion that Koreans aim to dress like white Americans. On the other hand, when talking about casual Chinese dress, neither Jess nor Mary mentioned any brand names. Perhaps American is casual with a brand name, or deliberately casual, while Chinese style is viewed as more of a cheap, accidental casual.

On revisiting Mary’s statement that Koreans “look at you more” than Americans, I wondered, do Americans really look at you less, or do they just look at another aspect of you? Rather than looking at how you dress and whether or not your clothes are trendy, do Americans look more at your racial phenotype? While Jin-ah and Jaeyoon rearrange their wardrobes to appear more American, Jess has to tell people at a Chinese restaurant that she does not understand them when they speak to her in Chinese. After living for over five years in the Midwest United States and adapting to local fashion trends, Jess
has not become white, but Chinese.

Conclusions

South Korean students come to the U.S. to gain social capital as cosmopolitan, English-speaking professionals. American clothing style simultaneously marks this social capital that they bring back with them to Korea and marks them as lacking up-to-date knowledge about Korean dress and social norms. Jaeyoon commented, “Here when I log on to my friends’ Cyworld [personal blog in Korea] and look at their photos, I feel a sense of crisis that I am the only one who is behind the fashion, the trend.” On the other hand, Mary affirmed that young professors in Korea are dressing more casually than their older counterparts, marking themselves as U.S.-educated through their clothing. When UIUC students return to Korea, they must choose their clothing strategically to portray just the right balance of their Korean and global/cosmopolitan identities.

In the United States, clothing serves as a form of social capital that marks ethnicity and class in different ways for different groups of people. Koreans appear to change their dress styles in order to gain access to spaces of white privilege. However, it is often Koreans and Korean Americans, rather than white Americans, who notice these changes. They attribute value to white American style not because it actually makes them into unmarked Americans,
but because it shows that they understand the social hierarchies of the U.S. that place Asians below whites. This awareness of racialization in the U.S., demonstrated through dress, along with the ability to master and strategically employ different fashion styles in different contexts, is a form of social capital that allows transnational migrant students to live, study, and work in South Korea and the United States.

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[1] This project was designed and carried out by Kyung Sook Kim, Sergio Lemus, and Kate Grim-Feinberg. Names of people we interviewed are pseudonyms.

[2] I use the term “American” in the way that Koreans (following mainstream language use in the U.S.) use it to describe people from the United States. I find this use of the term problematic because it denies the existence of the rest of the American continent. However, I use it here to reflect the discourses of nationality and ethnicity that we encountered in this research.

**Reflect:**
I have appreciated the opportunity to work with a group of researchers, especially for such a short-term project. I have found it interesting and enriching to see how three different people approach the same problem, both in theory and methodologically. Not only were we able to obtain more data as a group than we would have individually, but we were also able to compare the kinds of data that each of us obtained as 1) a Korean woman (Kyung Sook), 2) a Mexican man (Sergio), and 3) a woman from the Midwest U.S. (me/Kate).

I have found the online EUI format to be a bit messy, especially when
looking up other projects. I would prefer if the data fields were ordered differently, so the first thing we see are the author, title, abstract, key words, and findings (i.e. what you would find in a published article). The in-progress work, like interview data and drafts of the research problem, should come later, like an appendix. I think this would make working and referencing previous work online much easier, and would greatly contribute to our ability to build on previous students' research.

It would also be useful for a group project like this if we could have one page that we all worked on together, so we could have all of our data and reflections in one place. I hope that when this project is archived, we will be able to combine our three individual reports into one, or juxtapose them through internet links so that students can reference our research more easily.

Recommendations: For students interested in pursuing this topic further:

Even with three researchers, the amount of information we collected in one semester left us with more questions than answers. Here are some questions that students could pursue further to build on our preliminary data analysis:

-What are the most important aspects of their identities (e.g. nationality, race, gender, social class, area of study) that Korean students seek to highlight through dress in their strategizing for academic and professional success?

-Which of aspects of their identities do female Korean students shift between through dress, and which are they either unwilling or unable to change?

-How does popular media influence trends and personal choices? To what extent must a person be familiar with popular culture in the U.S. and Korea in order to make strategic fashion choices?

-How do clothing advertisements influence Korean students’ perceptions of racial, gendered, and social class categories in the U.S.? How does this, in turn, shape their strategies for adjusting to U.S. society? To explore this topic, it would be interesting to look at clothing advertisements with Korean students and ask them about their impressions of the people portrayed and which brands are more or less appealing in different contexts.

-How do Korean men make their fashion choices? Do they categorize one another by dress in the same ways that women do? Do men spend as much on clothing as women? Do they worry as much about
being trendy?

-How do Korean men view Korean women's fashion choices? Do they monitor women's dress as much as women monitor one another's dress? What role do men play in creating women's fashions? What influence do (potential) male employers and professors have, directly or indirectly, over their female employees' and students' fashions?

-What social categories are marked by fashion in Korea? How do these compare with the social distinctions made through dress in the United States? Are there clear distinctions between Koreans who have the means to study in the U.S. and those who do not; and between Koreans who have lived in the U.S. and those who have not? Ideally, these questions would be approached through ethnographic work in South Korea.

These are just a few of the questions that came up in our research, and that I hope future students and researchers will help us answer!

For the university:

I recommend that diversity education initiatives such as Inclusive Illinois include more discussion about diversity within ethnic and racial categories such as "Asian" or "Korean." We need to move beyond clumping all minorities into one category and assuming they share a similar experience of exclusion from the dominant White majority. While to some extent this may be true, it perpetuates the "Othering" of non-White students and immigrants by defining them as fundamentally different. Inviting Asian, Korean, or other broadly categorized students to talk about tensions within and outside of their ethnic communities could help students of all backgrounds understand these complexities and move beyond the overly simplistic distinctions of ethnic and racial categories.