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Title: Study Abroad Experiences as Processes of Forming, Negotiating, and Resisting Neoliberal Subjectivities

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Abstract: The purpose of this research is to explore how East Asian students at the IEI (Intensive English Institute, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign) give meanings to their study abroad experiences, particularly focusing on how the narratives of our interviewees are informed by neoliberalism. Based on semi-structured interviews with 8 IEI students and 1 former IEI instructor, our group was able to see how East Asian students in IEI program fit in the neoliberal subjectivity by aiming for becoming competitive skilled, competitive workers and accumulating cultural capital with global/American experiences and gain packages of “quality education.” These creations/reproductions of neoliberal discourses are mediated by the IEI, as not only an educational but a market-oriented institution. At the same time, however, we were intrigued by the emergence of subtle contradictions, resistances, and negotiation, which demonstrated that study abroad participants are not always passive followers of the neoliberal current, but rather constantly negotiating both macro and specific micro situations of their life context.

Response Paper 
#1: Ong, Aihwa. (2006). Higher Learning in Global Spaces
#1: Austin, Joe. (2005). Youth, Neoliberalism, Ethics: Some
Questions

Ong and Anagnost specifically deal with the effect of globalization and neoliberalism on education for Asian youth. Drawing on the cases from China, Anagnost describes how every aspect of “the educational” -- not only test scores but the character-building spheres-- has become commodified, in a package of “quality education.” The entire project of “quality education” dismantles the boundary between public and private by transforming family life. Neoliberalism penetrates the family sphere as parents become managers who invest on their only child both economically and emotionally. The past educational systems are now denied because “… the regimentation of childhood ultimately fails to produce a fully modern subject, one who is independent, self- confident, and fearless in confronting new situations” (p. 14). Anagnost interestingly points out that the utopian nostalgia toward the ideal childhood carried by the parents who survived suffering era implicitly conspires with this newly faced “quality education.”

Whereas Anagnost observes the experiences of Asian, particularly Chinese, Ong rather sees the effect brought by the influx of Asian youth on the American universities. She or he argues, as American universities become increasingly multinational sites particularly attracting Asian students who seek for the edges to survive harsh global competitions, the universities have been directed toward the borderless professional/technical training institutions that produce “neoliberal” citizenship, instead of national citizenship which is available through moral training based on Western humanist beliefs. In other words, it is a shift “…from the goal of constituting national subjects allied by common values of equality, pluralism, and free speech, to a global function of shaping free-floating individuals…” (P. 154). This is largely a result of collusion as a survival strategy between the aspiring Asian students and American colleges as “there is a tendency among Asian immigrants to focus narrowly on the vocational aspects of American education, a trend that is further exacerbated by fears that the globalization of the university has resulted in an overall decline of the humanities” (p. 153). It also should be noted that “for those children who have not performed very well at home, a diversity of American colleges will give them a second chance” (p. 150). Criticizing this trend as it has deprived
democratic values of the American college education, Ong proposes Kantian “cosmopolitan citizenship,” which is able to be acquired “...through the cultivation of the fine arts and sciences that we realize our shared humanity and develop a global sociality based on human fate as a shared enterprise” (P.156) and it is differentiated from either “flexible citizenship” (middle-class family planning to seek both educational and citizenship abroad) (p. 151) and “global citizens,” that are equal to “yompie” (p.154). A* Star Yearbook 2006/07 represents the ideal future for the neoliberal citizens, products yielded in the backgrounds depicted in Ong and Anagnost.

The above studies and the representations in A* Star Yearbook 2006/07 well describe how the life of Asian youth and their family are structured under the effect of globalization/neoliberalism, and how, in turn, such mobilizations cause structural changes in the global education system, particularly American. (Although some critiques should be cast against Ong: 1)She/he seems to excessively emphasize that it is the Asian students who causes the loss of democratic education. The sides of American students/education systems should be more examined. 2) The distinctions among different citizenships are not well articulated.)

What is missing, however, is an agency. Not only both Ong and Anagnost lack of individual lived voices, the analysis frameworks themselves seem to underestimate agencies. Are the kids and their parents merely acting controlled by neoliberalism? Are they pursuing their careers without any hesitations/ reflections, believing in the value of “neoliberal” citizenship? Are the students in A* Star Yearbook 2006/07 really such happy global trotters, free from any bounds/constraints? Or, are they merely the victims of the overwhelming structural forces?

Austin’s argument seems to have possibilities to answer to these questions. He attempts to find agency by linking the study on youth and the literature on govern mentality as the latter is “more concerned with ways in which agency is produced, promoted, and shaped” (paragraph 8) as opposed to the former, who tends to merely victimize the youth. According to Rose, cited by Austin, “...agency in this framework does not spring from some inherent or essential source within the individual or collective; agency here is a socially and discursively mobilized construction, albeit a construction that is never fully predictable” (Paragraph 14). Relying on this definition of an agency, we would be able to begin to ask; what is being produced under the effect of the given constraints, instead of only looking at how the constraints are produced and governing individual’s life.
There are so many traps that any agencies are swallowed by structural forces: even the seemingly “active” attitudes for self-development are captured into the packages of “quality education.” But even so, we need to (or I want to) focus more on the struggles where young people negotiate their positions/strategies under the given structural constraints. (That is actually what I am trying to do in my research on the Japanese young adult’s experiences in their study abroad. The informants tend to deny instrumental aspects of their experiences while their experiences inevitably include such aspects even unconsciously, and their stories of “self-discovery” probably would be well compatible with the notion of “quality education.” Could we say that such their denials/resistances against normative expectations are meaningless? .. I am exploring this issue.)

**...for the roles of ethics Austing argues, which seems important to fully understand his position, I am still struggling to digest them as it is dense!


The three readings of this week commonly focus on freeter-- a particular status that began to be frequently found among Japanese young adults since 90s. While, as Driscoll mentioned (p. 170), freeters have been defined in different ways by Japanese government, researchers, and journalists, the essences attracting particular attentions are that they are not belonging to Japanese traditional styles of employment (for males), namely full-time and lifetime employment in a company. Flexibility and self-responsibility, the keywords to illustrate their ways of working and lifestyles well resonate with the concept of neoliberal subjectivity. Freeters have been situated both positively and negatively. As Driscoll well summarized, “these representations have oscillated wildly from celebrating the freeters’ newfound ‘freedom’ and independence to blaming them for all the socioeconomic woes impacting postindustrial Japan” (p.171), and these three authors of our readings indeed captured freeters differently.

Genda pointed out how freeters had been criticized because they
were thought to be voluntarily choosing to be freeters to enjoy luxurious life by depending on their parents, without taking any responsibilities. What was hidden behind this “choice” discourse was, however, structural forces that had many young people choose to be freeters and Genda presented this fact with an excellent command of statistical data, powerfully rejecting a flood of anecdotal illustrations of freeters. According to his analysis, the rise of freeters was explained by a combination of specific demographic factors and “displacement” strategies that protect vested interests of older generations at the expense of younger generations. This type of discourse that insist youth as victims of structures that are created and maintained by adults has rapidly become common and “appropriate” among researchers in sociology of Education in recent years, after the discourses celebrating or criticizing freeters in extreme tones were overflowed and calmed down. The Japanese researchers are now sifting their focus into how to save such victims practically and place them back to better secured employment.

On the other hand, there are studies attempting to shed lights on how freeters have been and still is attracting young people, by explicating complicit relationship between neoliberalism and young people’s agency that reject traditional lifestyles. The studies of Lukacs and Driscoll would probably fit with such a category. Based on her case study focusing on the popularity of Japanese workplace TV dramas (Shomuni and a couple of other), Lukacs found the attempts of office ladies in Shomuni to connect their self-realization (having fun) to their jobs with their own responsibility and flexibility indeed serve to promote and complicit with neoliberalism, despite that it looked like an emancipatory alternative to previous unrealistic and obsessive way of seeing their work and life. She further went on to argue that the spirit and attitude of the office ladies were sympathetic to freeters and that would be one of the reasons why Shomuni was accepted by a wide range of young people. Driscoll examined two cases of freeters, those who radically contested against Iraq war and a young bestseller novelist who lives as and with freeters and lost her interests and relevancies to society. In the former case, freeters were situated as troubling groups who often fail to command their personal responsibility and end up relying on public support. The latter case, on the other hand, represented “a neoliberal utopia, where young people can exist without complaint but minus any social support” (p.184). In either case, freeters are understood as those who are insensibly influenced and invaded by neoliberalism.
While I appreciate that each study is genuinely struggling to describe the ambivalent positions of freeters who stand between agency with choices and victims of structure, I found a risk that these studies would serve to solidify biased images of freeters despite their efforts to present diversities among freeters. Genda’s work presents freeters as victims of structures. Driscoll picks particular extreme types of freeter. Lukacs’s analysis looks at office ladies, who are not defined as freeters but only a symbol of “freeter-like” way of life. What is missing here is how each freeter’s experience is different depending on specific bounds they have—particularly class and gender. Celebrity or victim?—the dichotomy that has repeatedly appeared is not only a matter of moral stance of observers but also is linked to any attempts to give an unified “appropriate” image to freeters, without contextualizing each person’s position enough. What is strikingly important but was not mentioned enough in the readings is that how much we can find freeters everywhere in Japan now. It is neither about partial group of youth nor about sensational icon any longer. Many young high school graduates “naturally” become freeters now. If so, in addition to these types of research that look for what is so special about freeters as a whole, how being freeters are naturalized among Japanese youth, and how they are still bounded with specific position, and how they have different experiences are needed. They would not be "equally victims."

This point might relate to the methodological issue I found in the studies of Driscoll and Lukacs. While I fully understand that the cases they focused on—TV drama Shomuni, Iraq kidnapping—would symbolize important trends and changes in Japanese society and youth, their way of linking each case to freeters were not convincing to me at all. I remember the news reporting about Iraq kidnapping but I, as one of the viewers at that moment, do not have any impressions that the fact the victims of kidnapping were freeters were particularly focused. I enjoyed Shomuni and assume freeters would sympathize with the office ladies easily but am not sure how much the rise of freeters is relevant to the popularity of Shomuni. Their analysis is unconvincing mainly because we do not know how the drama and news were actually perceived and consumed by ordinary viewers. Because of this fatal lack of actual experiences of freeters, their struggles to get out of anecdotal stories-like analysis were not successful enough and even served to create some images biased to extreme or partial examples of freeters.

Response Paper Interview/Observation #3
Koji, a 28-year-old male student, is one of the participants of the study abroad program sponsored by his company in Japan. This program sends 5-6 employees to different English language schools in the U.S. for a semester and it is completed after they are placed at factories owned by the company for a month. Whereas Koji belongs to sales department, employees from a variety of sections participate this program. After finishing this program, some of them will be posted abroad for an extended time as “oversea personnel.” According to Koji, to create such skilled workers, who could work abroad and develop good relationships with foreign traders, is the company’s aim in maintaining this study abroad program.

Koji has long been interested in English learning, and a possibility to be posted abroad was one of the important factors when he decided his job. While the program he is participating is new, launched about 5-6 years ago, and did not exist when he entered this company, he knew the company was known to give good chances for employees to work abroad. He thinks this kind of program (study abroad) is beneficial in terms of self-development. On the other hand, he also sees this period as a break. While he has been satisfied with his job and work environment, he did not have such time for self-development or break simply because he worked so much that he did not have time. He describes his company as a “typical traditional Japanese company.” I asked him if that kind of work condition should be changed, and his answer was no. He acknowledges that employees of oversea companies in the same trade do not work as hard as the Japanese do and tend to have more flexible work styles. While he thinks it might be a good idea to relieve pressures from hard-work, he still believes that such toughness is necessary to survive global competitions.

He plans to continue to work in the same company unless he got such special skills to be widely applied. He went through in-house training systems of the company, therefore to him, changing his job means he has to start over from the beginning of his career. He has seen a lot of people who are changing their jobs particularly recently and, according to him, those people seemed to have changed their jobs because they felt they were forced to do something against their will. However, Koji thinks many of them are just lucking efforts to be able to be satisfied with their jobs. These specific Koji’s views of working are indeed
compatible with the company’s strategy as they try to train and keep competitive employees and they have the study abroad participants promised to stay in the company after completing the program. As Koji mentions, it has become rapidly common in Japan that company sponsored degree-seekers change their jobs right after gaining their degrees. Koji thinks degrees are not necessary for the jobs in his company, and certain level of English proficiency that enables communication with foreign traders is sufficient enough.

While he is dissatisfied with the IEI classroom with too many Korean students and he wants to have more opportunities to talk to “Real American” (native English speakers) to improve his English, instead of only hanging out with Asians, he is mostly enjoying his relaxing life as a student here and has gained a confidence that he could manage his life overseas. He spends most of his time with his friends (Korean, Taiwanese, and a few Japanese). Although most of his friends are younger than him, he does not have to care about it in a way he would have to in Japan.

Koji’s views of work is particularly interesting in that it contains both traditional Japanese work style (life-time employment in a same company, after being educated though in-house trainings) and neoliberal work style, which requires workers to be flexible and responsible thorough constant self-development. Another intriguing point is that while Koji shares a feeling of “worn-out” with other Japanese study abroad participants (including the other Japanese interviewees in this research and other examples from other similar study (Furukawa, 2008)), he still supports the current Japanese work conditions. Furthermore, he is critical against those who seemingly change their job rather easily without making great efforts in a company. This presents remarkable contrasts with the experiences of other types of participants, who plan to change their career path, often shows dissatisfaction with Japanese work environment, and use study abroad period as a turning-point of their life. Perhaps, he is a beneficiary of “typical traditional Japanese companies,” which is characterized by in-house training system and employees’ loyalty but is declining in its numbers in Japan. This specific traditional relationship between employers and employees, contradictory discourse of “to be flexible” and “to be bound to a company” deeply structures his way of giving meaning to study abroad experiences.
The two readings and the film this week commonly touch on the issues of language, ideology, and identity. As Kelsky points out, "English and other foreign languages are far more than simply professional tools, however; they are the means by which women enter bodily into alternative systems of thought and value" (101). This would apply to men to some extent, though in different way as Kelsky explains.

Both Kelsky and Please Teach me English illustrate how individuals reshape/negotiate their identities through English learning and that process even could lead to dramatic transformative experiences. In Please Teach me English, learning English change Candy’s life—life of a “normal” Korean girl— and (seems to) give her a sense of confidence as it is tied to nurturing relationships with not only Elvis, but her English teacher and other classmates, and the whole processes are described as a success story that ended with a happy marriage. In contrast, Kelsky focuses on particularly ambitious “internationalist” Japanese women, who seek a liberatory space in the West (or West-like spaces such as gaishikei) because of their dissatisfactions against the Japan’s male-dominant corporate culture. Those women try to find a “new self,” by escaping from “insular and outdated Japanese values to what they characterize as an expansive, liberating international space of free and unfettered self-expression, personal discovery, and romantic freedom” (87).

While active agencies in such transformative experiences are vividly presented in Kelsky’s analysis, her emphasis is rather on the specific power structures that direct the internationalist women to “exploit transnationally circulating public images and narratives of the West” (87) and to produce “phantasmatic other” (125) rather than to more realistically observe and radically question whole unequal power relations. The internationalist women idealize the West based on the supremacy of White males and instead, exclude Japanese men from their cosmopolitan utopia as they are backward. This indeed overlaps Park’s analysis of the debate on official languages in Korea. What Korean government excludes from their vision of “globalized Korea” through introducing English language education are immigrants from non-Western countries. English can be such a powerful agent of transforming social and
individual scapes because it is loaded with hegemonic socio-economic and cultural capitals. As Park explains, in Korea, Globalism and nationalism, which seems in constant tension, in fact derive from a same interest: securing national economy by surviving global competitions, where English is the lingua franca. The two ideologies, therefore, converge on homogenization of diverse cultures by ignoring non-Western cultures.

While Park’s argument on the complicit relationship between neoliberal national policies and globalization is not quite new, what intrigues me was that it seems Park sees some critical possibilities of English language education (unlike forced Japanese education) to liberate those in disadvantaged positions, as she says “The term globalism and its ideological system have the potential to include both linguistic imperialism and its critics” (52) or “English is a language of inequality itself, but also considered a language that saves people from global-level economic inequality and local-level class inequality” (62). Kelsky also seemed like (although this is only speculation) she gets irritated with that Japanese internationalist women escape into romantic fantasies of white males despite their possibly powerful critique against existing social inequalities. Their narrative are not only liberatory for themselves but affect those who never study abroad or work in gaishikei as the imagined foreign alternative becomes “an internalized marker of transformed identity” (121). While learning English and studying/working in Western countries easily lead to sustain existing power relations, obtaining a same weapon also could enable oppositional praxis against them—otherwise any kinds of education only continues to reproduce status quo. Subtle resistance can be found Please Teach me English as well. Whereas Please Teach me English does not explicitly question why only Elvis tries to learn English when Victoria does not make much effort to speak Korean, in the last scene where Elvis finds Korean language (corny “love”) fits his feeling better, we might be able to read some resistance toward the trend of English education, and that would be the products of their negotiations between English-based “cool”, privileged identity and Korean-based “corny,” local identity.

*For Kelsky’s work, I am very interested in how those internationalist women change (or does not change) as they stay longer abroad because many of the subjects of my research, who went abroad partly because they are dissatisfied with Japanese society that emphasize “group conformity” (Kelsky, 120) often re-appreciate “Japanese-ness” and begin to find faults of American
cultures as they stay longer. Also how their relationships to their parents, who might have very different ideas about lifestyle but often had sacrificed their own lives to give whatever opportunities her daughter wish to have, affect their life would be interesting point as well.


The two readings this week locate gender/sexual identities as places of negotiations/struggles over cultural hegemonies. Takeyama sees Host club in Japan reinforce/reproduce the prevailing hierarchical gender relations. Similarly, Rofel argues “…overt and self-conscious expression of a range of sexual desires that paradoxically both subvert and uphold normalization” (95).

Takeyama vividly describes how the female customers of host clubs attempt to challenge both heteronormative sex and the gendered understanding of heterosexuality by prioritizing their own physical and affective needs and valuing non-penetrative sex. While these findings are intriguing, Takeyama’s analysis reminds me common difficulties of case studies. First, by positing these women as resistive, it seems as if Takeyama assumed other “ordinary” women only as victims of structural forces in a stereotypical way. It would be valid enough to argue the female customers in host clubs have liberatory possibilities, yet resistances indeed might be found in other women if we think about the broader trend of sexless among Japanese couples (both married and unmarried). Takeyama mentioned such cases only by giving the example of Maki, whose marriage “became sexless because of her ex-husband’s inconsiderate and disinterested attitude” (210). There are, however, couples who became sexless base on mutual agreements and Chizuko Ueno (*1), a Japanese leading feminist, sees them as covert negations of normalized marriage where penetrative sex is in its core. Resistance would exist not only in over examples like in Takeyama’s case but in other seemingly “ordinary” cases. It would be also interesting to think about if the particular kinds of power relations between host and customers Takeyama illustrated are found only in host clubs and how they are/aren’t
radically different from the relationships among ordinary couples. Secondly, I wondered if these cases of resistances against patriarchic norms by insisting on the supremacy of romance are only about Japan or not.

These types of “what is missing” critique might not be appropriate or productive considering the limited spaces given to Takeyama in this article and particular attractions of case studies, but I dare do this here because I felt this Takeyama’s way of representing host club customers vs. ordinary women in her article itself is actually linked to one of the important points of Rofel’s arguments: who represents competitive cultures? (Does only “assertive” culture win?)

The central argument of Rofel is “…the idea that neoliberalism fully encompasses all aspects of social and economic life, that it exists as a neat package, is a fantasy that needs a lot of work to make it seem plausible, exciting, or worth pursuit” (110), and this applies to globalism and cosmopolitanism as well. These “-ism” are not unquestioned truths, but rather fantasies people struggle to reach and fit by becoming proper citizens with proper cultures at multiple levels: state, business and everyday life (13). These actualizations of the fantasies of neoliberalism/cosmopolitanism rest on structural forgetting/remaking of past and exclusion of anything that does not easily fit in “universal human nature” where individuals are required to operate “through sexual, material, and affective self-interest” (3). Through this differentiation based on structural dichotomies, while social integration is realized (19), any lived experiences of excluded individuals (older generations and rural experiences) are silenced.

I am not arguing that Takeyama tried to silence ordinary women in order to illuminate the liberatory possibilities of host club customers. Rather, I was struck by that how any attempts to represent certain voices could almost inevitably lead to politics over cultural hegemonies. When Rofel argued that “Moving from the global to the transcultural means moving from identity to identifications, which means toward a politics of contingent alliances rather than toward simple essences or self-identical recognition” (110), I was reminded that the theory of identity itself is a product of Western cultures and originated in the desire to have individuals identified with any parts of social norms. All of these put so much challenge to researchers who are engaged in ethnographic studies: how should we represent others, whose experiences are such diverse, indeterminate, and full of
I am broadly interested in working on the following question: How do Asian students give meanings to their study abroad experiences? For the research in this class, I propose more specific questions: How do the Asian students in the IEI (Intensive English Institute) give meanings to their study abroad experiences and how much are their experiences explained by the theories of neoliberalism?

The literature we reviewed in this class so far has informed us that neoliberalism is one of the most influential backdrops that have framed their study abroad experiences. From this perspective, they argue that Asian study abroad participants are expected to develop themselves to be globally competitive through “quality education.” Whereas this points out an important trend surrounding Asian youth and higher education, it is still underexamined how much this neoliberal aspect explains the experiences of Asian study abroad participants, because the literature does not provide enough empirical evidences, which should be based on lived voices of Asian study abroad participants. Any possibilities of conflicts, ruptures, negotiations and struggles of the students against the stories of neoliberalism have not emerged but could be unveiled through closely examining their actual experiences. On the other hand, for the same reason—lack of voices—, any diversity among Asian study abroad participants is critically missing in their arguments. Are there any differences in the way of giving meanings to their study abroad experiences among the students from different Asian countries, among Asian students going to different destinations, or among Asian students involved in different kinds of study abroad programs with different purposes (Are they in undergraduate program? Graduate? What major? Or in language program?). These kinds of questions should be considered to explore any diversity among the experiences of Asian study abroad participants.

To conduct a research with a specific focus and with a
consideration of the availability of research subjects/field on this campus, I propose to interview the Asian students in IEI about how they give meanings to their study abroad experiences. Ideally, the subjects will be selected from different Asian countries in order to compare their experiences and examine any diversity among students with different nationalities. I am not sure at this point how much the matter of English language competency causes any problems for this research design. If only English should be used throughout the interviews, the subjects would be limited to those who are in advanced program in IEI. But if we could make the most of each research member’s foreign language skills, it would be possible to target on wider range of subjects. In any case, from my own research, I have been convinced that the experiences of Asian students in the language schools have been rarely explored compared to the ones of degree seekers, particularly from a perspective focusing on effects of neoliberalism. While the number of the subjects would be limited in our research design due to the time constraint, this research surely will contribute to present new evidences and discussions on neoliberalism and its effects on Asian youth experiences.

Interview/Observ. Yoshiko, a 29-year-old student from Japan, worked for a company in Japan for about five years after she graduated from a university with a bachelor degree in Accounting. While the job required her to travel around foreign countries (mainly Europe) and to command English skills, according to her, the English language skills she needed for her job was very specific and limited. Having found a good timing to take a break from her hard work and hoping to have better language skills to extend her job opportunities, she decided to quit her job and study abroad for a semester. Enough savings to manage the life in the U.S. all by herself also pushed her decision. Studying abroad was her dream for many years.

She chose IEI as a place for her study abroad just because one of her relatives had a close relationship with this campus and that gave a sense of security to her and her family. In addition, she knew she would be distracted too much from study if she would chose East or West coast because she traveled there before. Although she felt shocked to experience such a cold winter here, she is generally satisfied with the environment. She spends most of her time with her Korean friends both in and outside classrooms. That naturally happened because most of her classmates are from Korea. There are only a few students from Japan and they are not in same classrooms, so she talks to them
only occasionally. While she regrets that she had not prepared enough to be ready for learning English and insists she could have been placed in higher level classes with more preparations, she thinks the classes are OK so far. She never had a chance to study English since she graduated from a university. When I asked her how she finds IEI classrooms, more than half of which consist of Korean students, she answered that she felt a bit tired of that her Korean friends tend to start to talk only in Korean once classes are over as it makes her feel alone. In her dormitory, where she lives with other three domestic students who have never gone outside Illinois and have very few knowledge about Japan, she sometimes wonder if she could talk more to native speakers who have genuine interests in Japanese cultures.

While her initial plan was to stay here for only a semester, now she plans to stay one more semester because she begins to feel that adding a couple of months more is not going to change her life so dramatically. She also has started to think about an option to be enrolled in graduate schools in the U.S. for a master degree in business areas, and to look for a one-year program that enabled her to do so. Whereas she has already contracted with a company in Japan to work for after she gets back from the U.S. and she needs to negotiate with the company in order to extend her stay in the U.S. or to proceed to a graduate school, she is trying to spend much time on exploring and deciding her future career plans because once she starts her new career in the company in Japan, she believes, it would be very difficult to take a long term off again. When she was an undergraduate, she did not think about going to graduate schools and instead she wanted to work as soon as possible. At that moment, she thought she liked meeting with people through her job, more than studying or getting jobs related to accounting. Now she feels like spending some time just on studying would not be a bad idea. Seeing people who study in the U.S.—she talked about how much she was impressed with the life of an IEI teacher, who was a teacher, a student, and a mother or two kids at the same time — probably inspired her if partly. Two years to get a degree might be too long to leave the life in Japan and she has never thought about leaning her home country forever because she has her family in Japan. But if only for one year, she wants to give it a try.

Whereas she is not particularly dissatisfied with Japanese society, she finds the U.S. society is more open to those who look for second chances because they are relatively free from discriminations based on gender or age, comparing to Japanese
society, which is generally intolerant against older starters even when they have enough qualifications.

Throughout this interview, what was most striking to me was that she did not look ambitious at all (unlike “neoliberal subject”), despite that she is actually trying to extend her career opportunity by improving her English language skill and declares that is her primary goal. It seemed that she never had embraced unrealistic dreams/expectations toward the life in the U.S. and that she was only modestly pursuing and enjoying her study abroad during her limited time. This might be explained by her career/life experiences, which much younger students would not have gone through yet. Still it is worth noting that she has maintained such a calm manner, judging realistically both possibilities and limits of her career life. For her, becoming a competitive employer through obtaining English proficiency is neither anything extraordinary nor anything requires her to be particularly greedy, but just a natural part of her life. At the same time, however, it was interesting that spending some time on this campus gave her new insights and inspirations that might redirect her life to slightly (or possibly dramatically) different ways.

Our research group is, in the broadest sense, interested in how Asian students at the Intensive English Institute (IEI) give meaning to their study abroad experiences at the University of Illinois and, to be more specific, the ways in which those experiences and expectations are shaped by the prevailing forces of neoliberalism, accumulating cultural capital, and the idea of a global space. We will not assume that the three – neoliberalism, cultural capital, and global space – are necessarily countervailing forces. Instead, it would be best to think of three as being in a constant state of flux, perhaps one in which expectations and actions are shaped by them and how these students navigate these discourses to create unique subject positions as global citizens.

Of neoliberalism, we already see a common thread among our interview subjects of the “push factor” that compels them to seek study abroad opportunities mostly designed to improve their English proficiency. This seems to be especially true as the horizons of global capital are being expanded under the aegis of neoliberalism, which tirelessly promotes the de facto international
language of English as a necessary component for being able to compete in Asian countries. The recent propensity of Asian governments for slowly divesting themselves of social welfare networks pushes these students to seek out study abroad opportunities at the IEI and the University of Illinois; as Aihwa Ong argues, this influx of Asian students compels the university to "go global" in ways that emphasizes the technical education that these students crave while consequently putting the university's traditional mission of a moral education at risk. Thus, we are interested in the twofold question of how these students expect their experiences to shape themselves as viable, hardworking citizens back home and in how their priorities are reshaping the IEI itself.

It is also clear from our preliminary interviews that these students are interested in accumulating cultural capital, a sort of global experience that they can bring back to Asia and project. For example, we are interested in how these Asians students encounter, perceive, and interact with other internationals and especially Americans. What are their perceptions before and after these encounters, and how do these experiences match or contradict their expectations? These experiences are, of course, something that these students project back to their friends and families back in Asia, most notably through social networking websites that are so popular over there. This can be linked to the gender issues as well. In this, we would ask: Does the cultural capital accumulated in the U.S. have the same effects among students of different genders – female and male – when they return to their home countries?

A final question to explore is the students' own conception of the IEI as a space defined by themselves. The students already interviewed have variously defined the IEI as a global space for a multicultural, multiethnic experience and also as a transitional space, where they accumulate the necessary technical skills (English) and cultural capital necessary to succeed later in life. The interviews would, thus, be interested in how these students conceive of, for example, what is "global" and, perhaps, with how this – perhaps, inadvertently – intersects with the age-old dichotomy of East-West.

OLD REVISION:

The project of our group tries to see how our discussion of neoliberalism and global education during seminar is lived in the real life of students at UIUC. Particularly we are focusing on IEI
students, who are learning English here, and how they conceive of their experiences in the U.S. through not only interviews but also through the virtual space of the Internet. We are also interested in the idea of how these students accumulate various forms of capital in the U.S. - at one, the literal capital of being able to speak English and, at another, the cultural capital derived from living in the West - and how that capital is spent back in Korea. Below are some of our questions until now:

Why did you decide to come to the United States?

What were your expectations and purposes before you came here?

Are you satisfied with IEI program and your experiences here?

What is your major and future plan?

Has your future plan been changed after you came here?

How your current experiences in the United States would help your pursuing your dream?

What do your parents think about your studying here?

Do you use facebook or cyworld to communicate your experiences of living in the U.S.?

EUI Links:

Interview/Observ. #2: Chul, a junior male student from Korea, decided to study in the U.S. after he joined in his university’s summer English learning program in the Philippines. He went there to look around a different country, not just for English. With other 40 students from the same university, he had some chances to talk mostly Philippine people and other a couple of “native American teachers” (by this word, he meant native English speakers, who are American). His primary purpose was not learning English at this moment since, he said, “Philippines’ English is a little different from other countries’ English.” After this experience, he felt like he wanted to learn English in the U.S. He came to the U.S. for new experiences and for improving his English. He needs English because most Korean companies want someone with English skills. He believes, however, the number of people who really need to use English in their workplaces in Korea is small, so he feels strange about that Korean companies still want people with English skills and he does not like the idea. His major
is civil engineering and he decided his major because his teacher in high school recommended it as it makes a lot of money. Nevertheless, he likes his major, and thinks about either getting a job in Korean companies or applying to graduate schools in the U.S. He chose IEI as his destination because it was cheaper than other schools and also has good engineering programs. UIUC is one of the possible places he would want to come back after he graduates from university in Korea.

He likes the life in the U.S. because everything-- buying something, traveling, and so on -- is challenge to him mainly because his English is not so good yet. That is fun to him. Studying for entering college and getting good grades in Korea were not so easy, but he just knew how to handle them. He has already finished his military service after he finished his freshman year. He just did not like it because nothing was so special about the experience and he did not feel he had changed through the two years. In the U.S., he feels he is very motivated. I asked him if any specific cultural differences between Korea and the U.S. makes him feel in that way, but he answered “there are so many different cultures in the U.S… some are very similar to Korean and I cannot understand some cultures,” and he did not mention any particular points he liked about the life in the U.S. other than the challenges caused by English. For classroom pedagogy, he explained that the discussion style in the U.S. is good for social subjects, but for math, Korean style (lecture) works better.

Whereas he was disappointed with and does not like that there are so many Korean on this campus and he always hears Koran everywhere, he hang out with not only Korean but “American,” especially his roommate, John. Chul met him when he went to play billiards. They met a lot and talked there, and started to live together. John is an undergraduate students of UIUC and strongly interested in Asian cultures (can speak Japanese). Since John volunteers for conversation partners with non native English speakers, he often hangs out with many IEI students. Chul describes his life with John as “sometimes difficult because of English, but sometimes fun.” He thinks talking to “American” is much more effective for improving English, than attending classes. He is a little dissatisfied with the fact that his class is often too easy for him but he could not be placed for upper levels of classes because his teachers did not admit based on their evaluations. He also thinks his English has been improved, but not to a degree he expected. Nonetheless, he feels ready for entering graduate schools in the U.S. now.
Chul’s narrative is interesting as it illustrates the processes both of how he has become “neoliberal subject” mostly without being aware of that and of how he resists against the notion of skilled workers and against the superiority of the U.S. culture. He insists that many Koreans actually would not need English skills as long as they work in Korean companies. He is reluctant to improve his English to work in good companies in Korea although he just follows the trend. For him, English is rather something that gives him challenges he can enjoy. On the other hand, he does not uncritically accept U.S. culture/education as something strikingly different from or better than Korean culture. These present very different images from the ones of students who came to the U.S. strongly believing that English skills will change their life opportunities, or of those who found liberatory or transformative spaces enabled by the U.S. cultures, which are different from their home cultures in Asian countries. However, denying Philippines as a suitable space to learn “authentic” English, seeing “American” (i.e. native speakers of “Authentic” American English) as a key to improve his English, he implicitly accepts some superiority in the U.S. white cultures not necessarily over Korea but over other Asian countries. I find here more complex negotiation processes over the meanings of learning English and becoming global, rather than one simple process where one young student easily follows the myth of neoliberalism.

**Group Summary:**

Summary of Preliminary findings

Hee Jung, Chie, and Ben

By investigating the ways in which Asian students at the IEI give meaning to their study abroad experiences, we were keen to explore how the narratives of our subjects are informed by neoliberalism and the extrinsic factors that “pushes” these students to seek that study abroad experience in the United States. But these Asian students also exert a presence of their own, by shaping the very institutions where they choose to study and creating new social spaces that are cosmopolitan and multicultural.

Ann Anagnost reminds us that every aspect of “the educational”--not only test scores but the character-building spheres--has become commodified, in a package of “quality education.” The emphasis on cultural/moral eduction does not necessarily mean their experiences are separate from instrumental, namely neoliberal, aspect of education. It is evident that the interviewees’ narratives, which are full of dreams and aspirations for
academic/career success in the future, overlap with neoliberal discourses of self-development and self-management. Learning English plays pivotal roles for their future plans especially since all of the students we interviewed want to go beyond IEI program, pursuing further degree-seeking programs in the United States. They tend to perceive English as being necessary to realizing these opportunities. Also, as a global player in English language education, the IEI itself participates within a market where they compete to sign students, a function tantamount to being a business. The interview with one instructor at IEI reveals that the institution tries to customize its curriculum and makes efforts to recruit students from non-Asian countries in order to satisfy the concept of a multicultural education.

Although the students identified their primary purpose of being at the IEI as being primarily the purpose of improving their English, the cultural experiences gleaned from living and learning in the United States is not less important for them. All of the interviewees value socializing with Americans and other foreign nationals in their IEI classes and their new experiences in a new country with different culture. In one, it is the package of “multiculturalism” that they eagerly signed up for at the IEI that may not just be beneficial in a solely instrumentalist sense. While Aihwa Ong problematizes the trend of global education and its leaning toward instrumental/vocational directions, our interviewees seem to be experiencing not only instrumental education (language learning) but also cultural/moral education in the U.S.

Whereas these findings confirm how the experiences of study abroad participants from Asian countries are structured through neoliberal discourse, what are struck by how our interviews demonstrated contradictions and resistance against neoliberalism. The case of a Japanese student, who looked less ambitious than other Korean interviewees, and one Korean student’s skeptical views against the boom of English leaning, illustrate study abroad participants are not always passive followers of the neoliberal current, but rather constantly negotiating both macro and specific micro situations of their life context.

Overall, from the previous interviews, our group was able to see how East Asian students in IEI program fit in the neoliberal subjectivity, while they accumulate cultural capital with global/American experiences. At the same time, we were intrigued by the emergence of subtle contradictions, resistances,
and negotiation.

**Paper:**

Study abroad Experiences as Processes of Forming, Negotiating, and Resisting Neoliberal Subjectivities.

*<Anth499 (EUI project) Final paper>*

Chie Furukawa

Project group members: Hee Jung Choi and Benjamin Cheng

**Introduction**

The purpose of our project is to explore how East Asian students at the IEI (Intensive English Institute, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign) give meanings to their study abroad experiences. Our particular focus is how the narratives of our interviewees are informed by neoliberalism, which drives contemporary youth to become skilled, flexible, and self-responsible workers. What we attempt to describe is, however, rather than how they passively accept neoliberal subjectivities, how they struggle to negotiate social/cultural expectations that are shaped through both neoliberalism and rather traditional views mainly brought by their parents, their own desires, and the realities they face in the lives at IEI. I also emphasize that IEI as an educational yet market oriented institution offers specific learning/living spaces to the East Asian students, and at the same time, those students with particular expectations
toward IEI influence how the IEI spaces are shaped as the IEI tries to meet such expectations, often against their own educational philosophy. Through this paper, therefore, three levels of analyses—macro (socio-economic, cultural structures), mezzo (workings of institutions), and micro (individual voices/experiences)—are observed. They are not presented as separately but as intersecting each others. The following analysis is based on our semi-structured interviews with 8 IEI students (5 Korean, Two Japanese, and One Taiwanese students) and one former American instructor of the IEI (see appendix for more detail)[i]. In the interviews for the IEI students, we asked how they decided to study abroad, how their study abroad experiences are, and how they are planning their future careers.

_Surviving neoliberal world through buying and selling “packaged self.”_

Aihwa Ong (2006) argues, as American universities become increasingly multinational sites, which particularly attract Asian students who seek for the edges to survive harsh global competitions, the universities have been directed toward the borderless professional/technical training institutions that produce “neoliberal” citizenship, instead of national citizenship which is available through moral training based on Western humanist beliefs. Against this views that underscore vocational/instrumental aspects of education among Asian students, most of our interviewees
rather put their emphases on new “experiences” that are achieved through meeting people with different backgrounds in a “global” or “cosmopolitan” space, which are supposed to be offered by IEI and UIUC campus. “Playing is studying here,” a phrase by Eunhee, a Korean female student, illustrates cultural experiences are essential part of their learning during their study abroad. Other interviewees such as Kerry and Kim lively talked about how their encountering with foreign students and native English speakers are meaningful experiences for them. While experiences of degree seekers in the U.S. colleges (the focus of Ong) and the students in language schools cannot be directly compared, this presents East Asian students who study abroad do not necessarily see their experiences in the U.S. as simple tools to boost their employability.

What we should further pay attention to is, however, that the students’ desires for new, global “experiences” are also discursively shaped under the effects of neoliberalism. It is evident that the interviewees’ narratives, which are full of dreams and aspirations for academic/career success in the future, overlap with neoliberal discourses of self-development and self-management. Ann Anagnost (forthcoming) reminds us that every aspect of “the educational”— not only test scores but the character-building spheres— has become commodified, in a package of “quality education,” that aims for “…a fully modern subject, one who is
independent, self-confident, and fearless in confronting new situations” (Anagnost, p. 14). Phillip Brown, a British sociologist, articulates the relation between neoliberalism and the emerging new competitions over “packaged self.” Brown explains that, as those from middle-class are no longer able to guarantee their privileged class positions in globalized harsh competitions, students began to be forced to find new ways of gaining edges without depending solely on educational credential. The means of differentiation is, according to Brown (1995), to purchase a “personality package,” that consists of credentials, skills, and charismatic qualities. The charismatic qualities can be paraphrased by “soft skills”—such as communication skills, organizational skills, and team working skills. Brown precisely describes how what seems like just spending some money on having-fun-experiences is inescapably linked to purchasing and accumulating cultural capitals that are necessary to survive contemporary global competition:

...There is nothing new about this focus on the ‘rounded’ person, whereas a range of broader interests and hobbies which offered time-out from academic study was seen as a form of cultural consumption which was enjoyed for its own sake, it has increasingly become a form of investment as part of the construction of a value-added curriculum vitae. It involves an increasing ‘commodification’ of the socio-emotional embodiment of culture, incorporating drive, ambition, social confidence, tastes and interpersonal skills (Brown, 1995, p.42)

Abelmann et al. (forthcoming) confirms that this trend applies to Korean
young students based on their ethnographic study, arguing “today’s
college students are committed to becoming vial—people who lead active
and enjoyable lives…” and they aware that is a requirement for them to
survive a rapidly changing globalizing world (p. 2). Learning English
plays pivotal roles for their future plans especially since all of the
students we interviewed want to go beyond IEI program, pursuing further
degree-seeking programs in the United States. They tend to perceive
English as being necessary to realizing these opportunities. As long as
their goals are to success in this globalized competition over better
employment, their needs of English as hard/instrumental skills are tied to
the soft skills that are unconsciously (or sometimes consciously) sought
and obtained through their study abroad experiences.

Attracting both students and their parents who expect that study
abroad experiences provide the students with both hard skills and
enjoyable experiences (that are likely to be transferred to soft skills), the
IEI itself participates within a market where they compete to sign
students by tailoring their curriculum and school climate to students’
tastes. Whereas Nancy, a former instructor at the IEI was skeptical about
the current curriculum of the IEI that segregates each aspect of language
learning instead of integrating them as task-based learning—one of the
ideal styles of ESL pedagogy, the IEI adopts the former because by doing
so they become able to flexibly meet the needs of a variety of students with different motivations and different levels of English proficiency. She also reveals that the IEI makes efforts to recruit students from non-Asian countries in order to satisfy the concept of a multicultural education, being aware of students’ general dissatisfaction with the overwhelming number of Korean students in the IEI, a claim that were heard across our interviewees as well. Most of our interviewees indeed positively evaluate the pedagogy of IEI because its discussion-based learning style, which is part of the larger U.S. school culture, is new to them and gives them more opportunities to practice speaking compared to a lecture-based style that many of East Asian students have frequently experienced in their home countries. They expect more than that, however, not only because the preponderance of Korean students hinders English learning but because it disturbs their images of being “multicultural/cosmopolitan,” namely meeting people with a variety of nationalities. Logically speaking, the more study abroad becomes popular among East Asian students like Koreans, the less opportunities for students to meet “different” people. Current East Asian study abroaders could be described as they struggle over the scarce resources of global/cosmopolitan cultural experiences. Simultaneously, on the other hand, inevitably market-oriented institutions such as the IEI try to create a specific learning space that provides such valuable resources to succeed
Are they all neoliberal subjects in a same way?

Whereas these findings present that the experiences of study abroad participants from East Asian countries are structured through neoliberal discourses, what is intriguing at the same time was the salience of contradictions and resistance against neoliberalism that our interviewees demonstrated. Austin (2005) proposes directing our attentions toward “…[the] ways in which agency is produced, promoted, and shaped” (paragraph 8), rather than merely seeing youth as victims of structures. Drawing on Nikolas Rose, Austin defines agency as not something inherent in human, but “…a socially and discursively mobilized construction, albeit a construction that is never fully predictable” (Paragraph 14). Then, the question is: what is being produced under the effect of the given constraints? While it is true that most of our interviewees share a tendency that they seem to largely enjoy their study abroad experiences, both language learning and cultural experiences, it does not mean that they are equally happy vigor study abroaders. Rather, each of interviewee juggles specific bonds that affect or even constrain their career/life decisions.

The most notable one is gendered expectations put by their

in their business.
parents, which are mentioned in Abelmann et al. (forthcoming) as significant burdens that constrain neoliberal subjectivities of female students. Among our interviewees, Kim, Eunhee, and Kathy—all female students—mentioned conflicts between their parents and them about their future career plans. For Kim and Kathy, it still seems a matter of different opinions about job stability and expected income (veterinarian vs. international business for Kim, and civil servant vs. graduate school in the U.S. for Kathy), yet for Eunhee, her parents’ expectation is distinctly gendered since they hope that Eunhee will have a traditional, “ordinary” family life rather than choosing professional life. Traditional customs/relationships frequently bind flexible neoliberal subjectivities to local spaces. For Yoshiko, a Japanese female student, her ties to family back in Japan discourage her from planning to stay in foreign countries more than two years. For Koji, a Japanese male student sponsored by his company in Japan, traditional Japanese corporate cultures characterized by life-time employment and loyalty for a company directed him to decide that he continues to work in the same company for a long future. It worth noting that the two Japanese students do not take this specific bonds negatively but rather actively choose to be bound to them, that is perhaps because they are such indispensable ties for them, giving comfortable, secured, relatively stable spaces and significant personal relationships with family members or colleagues. Kathy, a Taiwanese
female student, secretly studies to become civil servants in Taiwan, being against her parents’ expectations/orders that she should find her career outside Taiwan because they worried about the strong influences of China on Taiwan. Kathy’s desire to root her career in Taiwan is so strong that she never enjoys her study abroad experiences. This case vividly proves that study abroad participants are not always blindly pursuing for becoming flexible workers free from any constraints.

Some students seemed to have been attracted by study abroad and the U.S. cultures particularly because of critical deficiencies in their home society. First of all, it is apparent from the students’ voices that the educational cultures and systems for English language education in Korea, Japan, and Taiwan are less likely to improve students’ communication skills in English. Contacting native English speakers in English speaking countries would undoubtedly facilitate English language learning more easily than in those East Asian countries, but it is worth attentions that most of the IEI students mentioned that the discussion-oriented class styles in the IEI helped them better to practice speaking than lecture-oriented one did. On the other hand, Korean educational structures, which are not flexible enough to give second chances to those who failed in entrance exams for schools, seemed to be one of the forces that drove Kim to study abroad. Kim hoped to become a
vet in Korea, but she could not continue to pursue the dream unless she would leave Korea because of its educational system. Broader social/cultural norms and structures also can be push factors for East Asian youth to decide study abroad. When Yoshiko talked about how she was impressed by a female IEI instructor, who was a teacher, a student, and a mother at a time, and thought such kind of career is rarely found in Japan, she implied that the strict age norms in Japan are discouraging the Japanese from exploring flexible life-courses with multiple options.

While Yoshiko realized a critical difference between Japan and the U.S. only after she came to the U.S., the informants in Kelsky’s study (2001) decided to come to the U.S. exactly because they acknowledge this difference. Kelsky illustrates how individuals reshape/negotiate their identities through English language learning and such processes even could lead to dramatic transformative experiences. While this might be less applicable to our interviewees than was in Kelsky’s informants, who were particularly ambitious “internationalist” Japanese women seeking a liberatory space in the West with a strong sense of dissatisfactions against the Japan’s male-dominant corporate culture, at least it is evident that the East Asian students came to the U.S. partly in order to discover new self and new choices by exploring what they could not encounter in their home countries. Eunhee mentioned study abroad was a period of self-discovery for her, thinking about her futures by exploring different
options. It is important to note that their explorations are never free from their situatedness in their specific experiences/familiar cultures in home countries and, as Kelsky points out, the critical differences they found could be not so much real as rather superficial or distorted ones. It should be emphasized, however, that our interviewees demonstrated that they were trying to find and give their own meanings to their study abroad experiences within their specific life contexts, rather than just becoming competitive survivors in neoliberal world.

Such specificities of each way of giving meaning to study abroad experience even can form a shape of resistance against neoliberal ideals. Chul, for instance, insisted that “It is strange that Korean companies want those with English skills because most of their employees really don’t need English.” Learning English, however, is still important and his goal of study abroad because it is an “enjoyable challenge,” which he could not experience in Korea, where he knew how to manage their life smartly. Yoshiko looked less ambitious than other Korean interviewees but only modestly situate her study abroad as opportunities for a sight skilling-up. Furthermore, interestingly, she admitted that this period of study abroad is a relaxing break for her, as she had worked so exhaustively in her previous company. Koji also mentioned he really wanted to enjoy his study experience because this would be a once and
last long break in his career. Koji said he sometime a little envied the workers in the U.S., who look less likely to work for far less hours, while he insisted that the Japanese cannot work like that in order to survive the harsh competitions. Neoliberal subjectivities require workers to be vigorous and competitive to be successful. The ideal of becoming “vigorous” even co-opts playing, and study abroaders more or less acknowledges that not only English skills but their experiences as a whole could be a part of their CV. Still, it might be also true that they need real break/escape from neoliberal world—endless, risky, rigorous, and vigorous competitions over money and stories of self-actualizations.

Conclusion

Overall, based on our interviews, our group was able to see how East Asian students in IEI program fit in the neoliberal subjectivity by aiming for becoming competitive skilled, competitive workers and accumulating cultural capital with global/American experiences and gain packages of “quality education.” These creations/ reproductions of neoliberal discourses are mediated by the IEI, as not only an educational but a market-oriented institution. At the same time, however, we were intrigued by the emergence of subtle contradictions, resistances, and negotiation, which demonstrated that study abroad participants are not always passive followers of the neoliberal current, but rather constantly
negotiating both macro and specific micro situations of their life context.

Reference


Appendix: Demography of interviewees
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name (Pseudonyms)</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chul</td>
<td>Korean</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Junior (Civil engineering)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yoshiko</td>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Employed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Koji</td>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Taking a break between jobs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kim</td>
<td>Korean</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Reflect: I appreciate that EUI projects provided us with opportunities to accomplish meaningful ethnographic group project in such a short period of one semester, by making it much easier and more manageable for us to go through IRB procedures. Sharing works with others online was effective as well. However, I myself found a little conflict during recruiting interviewees. Whereas being a part of EUI project allows us to contact any individuals involved in UIUC, when we try to focus on those who belong to particular organizations, like our study did, I felt it is still extremely important to fully explain about our research and obtain a permission to recruit informants from the gatekeeper(s) of the organization in order to establish a good rapport and build a good relationship with them toward future research. But if we take such official steps, it typically takes a long time and may not fit in the timeline, which force us to rush.

Recommendations: What the East Asian students expect for study abroad often mirrors what are structurally missing in their home countries (e.g. tournament-like educational systems that do not give second chances to those who failed once). It is useful, therefore, for the governments and those in educational areas in those countries to examine the students' voices/experiences and reflect on why those students had to leave home countries to improve their own educational and wider social-economic systems. At the same time, this way of situating study abroad experiences plus understanding complex way of giving meanings to their study abroad experiences by youth warns parents and other adults against uncritically and blindly promoting and even forcing children/youth to study abroad, only believing it is vital to boost their employability and life chances.

Prelim. Research Prop.: Anth499 Research proposal

Chie Furukawa

Title: Can we find class within study abroad experiences?

The purpose of this study is to explore experiences of Japanese young adult students in a particular untypical type of English language school in the U.S., in order to illuminate how and why they are motivated for exodus from Japanese society and more importantly, how class factors
articulate their experiences.

Research problem

Much of the previous research on study abroad experiences of youth has been devoted to describe either developmental merits or individually constructed meanings of study abroad experiences[1]. Yet some of the studies have critically approached this topic and revealed social-cultural dynamics driving the current trend of study/travel/work abroad experiences (e.g. Simpson, 2005, Rizvi, 2005). In our exploratory study of East Asian students in an English language school (Furukawa, 2008c), it is elucidated how neoliberalism that require youth to be flexible, skilled, vigorous, and self-responsible future workers shape the students’ narratives/experiences and the curriculum/climate of the language school. On the other hand, those focused on gender as a demarcating factor of study abroad experiences (e.g. Kelsky, 2001, Ono& Piper, 2004) present particularly significant findings as they unveil why the study abroaders had to escape from their countries, namely gender discrimination.

There is, however, something still critically being missed here—class. While there have been much discussions on how the trend of study abroad has played a certain role to widen the gap between the privileged
and non-privileged, namely those who can afford study abroad and those who cannot as study abroad experiences began to be defined as a part of cultural capital that are vital to survive harsh competitions over employment (Brown, 1995, Heath, 2006), class factors within study abroad participants have hardly been paid attentions to. This is surely because study abroad has long been seen as only for the affluent since it is an expensive experience.

Whereas it is no doubt that study abroad is a costly experience, it is wrong, however, to jump to a conclusion that study abroad is a segregated area of the affluent for the following reasons. Firstly, there are visible attempts to include lower class youth into this area. For instance, as observed in the trend of gap year in the U.K., considering the situation where study/travel/work abroad have begun to be recognized as upskilling, therefore empowering experiences, the British government has launched a project to provide youth from lower class with study abroad opportunities (Furukawa, 2005). Second, as Kelsky (2001) points out in her study on “internationalist” Japanese women, empowering/transformative images of moving to and living abroad, which continue to be produced/reproduced through the represented voices of those who experienced living abroad, have an effect not only on those who fortunately gained actual opportunities of going abroad but
also on how those who remain and just dream of living abroad re-shape their value systems. Furthermore, as Abelmann et al. (forthcoming) vividly demonstrates, a neoliberal ideology that directs youth to be vigorous, skilled, and self-responsible, which well fit the prevalent image of those who have gone through study abroad, differently influence the lives of youth from different class/socio-economic backgrounds.

Finally—and this is the focus of this research, even if coming from relatively lower class and having been unable to afford study abroad in earlier periods of their lives, young adults who could work and save money on their own can achieve living abroad later, after dreaming about it for a while. Some might argue they are still categorized into middle class because they could still find a job to fund their traveling abroad. Even so, however, the experiences of youth in this category and the way they give meanings to their experiences abroad in relation to their life contexts would be significantly different from those who could go abroad easily with their parents’ financial supports. The difference will be further articulated if we particularly focus on those who are trying to extend their stay period abroad even by working illegally.

A question then naturally emerges: what motivate them to go abroad, taking such efforts and even risks? They may have a clear goal or staying abroad itself may be their goal. A report by a Japanese journalist
Shimokawa (2007) offers interesting insights to approach this question. Shimokawa examines experiences of Japanese young adults who periodically visit Thailand and stay as long as possible with the fund they raised through intensive temporary works (typically manual works in factories) and/or some illegal works in Thailand. Shimokawa called this group of young adults *Soto-komori* (withdrawal abroad) since they do not actively socialize with others in Thailand but finding comfortable places for their own there as they are tired of and dissatisfied with Japanese society—particularly work environments, and they are contrasted to those who legally gained decent jobs in Thailand, with clearer career goals. While this might be an extreme way of differentiation of youth going abroad experiences and it is not necessary a clear-cut class-based analysis, this report informs that those who have gone through socio-economically marginalized experiences may tend to invest extra efforts in living abroad and they are likely to have more complex motivations compared to those who could easily afford study abroad.

Considering this underexamined but indispensable way of analyzing and understanding study abroad experiences by way of class/socio-economic backgrounds, in this study, I highlight those who take extra costs and risks to stay in the U.S., while attending English language schools, as “ordinary” study abroad students do.
Method

In order to effectively illuminate class factors within study abroad experiences, I strategically select and focus on young adult students in a particular “untypical” type of English language school. In the course of my previous field work in a metropolitan city in the U.S. (Furukawa 2008a, 2008b), I was informed by one of my Japanese interviewees that there are some specific language schools called “visa gakkou” (visa school) in the same city, where she began to attend after leaving a school she was previously enrolled in. In contrast to the school she formerly attended, where students typically spend their time on attending classes and hanging out with friends to learn English and enjoy the whole cultural experiences, in the visa gakkou, students who regularly attend classes are rarely found. Instead, the students in visa gakkou, according to my interviewee, seem to be occupied in part-time jobs to save for extending their stay in the U.S. For these students, an enrollment in an English language schools seems to be for maintaining their visa status to stay in the U.S. rather than for learning English or meeting friends there. Apparently relating to this uniqueness, tuitions of this type of schools tend to be far cheaper and the existences of such schools are far less known compared to other “ordinary” schools, which attract international students by heavily investing in promotions. The age
range of students also tends to be older. Considering these distinct characteristics, the students in a visa gakkou are expected to demonstrate significantly different experiences from the widely observed/known ones of relatively privileged study abroaders, and therefore, workings of class factors will be likely to become salient.

Analysis will be based on semi-structured in-depth interviews of students in visa gakkou. A number of interviewees will be 10 female students and 10 male students. Interviews will be conducted in Japanese. In interviews, while they should be proceeded flexibly along interviewees’ interests, the central question is how their previous life experiences have led and been connected to their study abroad and how they are planning/trying to direct their current experienced toward future careers. Interviews will be tape-recorded under permissions of the interviewees. After interviews, the data will be transcribed, translated, and coded. In the course of analysis and writing, I will take a debriefing step, by sharing the transcribed data and my analysis with them and incorporate their feedbacks to the analysis in turn.

During fall (2008) semester, I will contact and obtain an official permission from the targeted language school to recruit students in the school, and obtain an IRB official permission to conduct the research. In January 2009, I will stay for approximately a month to conduct research:
recruiting students inside the language school and interview them. In February, I will transcribe, translate, and code the interview data. By May, I will write a summarizing report of this research, which will be later developed into conference presentations, journal papers, and a central part of dissertation.

*Ethics*

The risk of participation of this study is not beyond minimum. While the interviewees may be afraid of being identified as illegal workers in the U.S., I will carefully keep their identities confidential by giving pseudonyms to all the proper nouns such as their names, school name, city name, and modifying some part of information. Participants have rights to withdraw from this study anytime they want. Additionally, by taking debriefing processes, participants can claim against my way of representing their narratives when they feel their experiences/voices are distorted in my analysis, and the claims themselves will appear in my final writing products.

*Significance*

Shedding light on class factors in study abroad experiences will inform if the trend of study abroad reproduce or shake/break class structures, more concretely, if those from relatively lower class or socio-economically
marginalized backgrounds continue to be marginalized even after moving abroad, or study abroad indeed functions as a vehicle to empower them, leading them to more satisfactory life. The answers to this question will be useful for the Japanese government and educators to reconsider the educational and wider socio-economic systems: if the former is true, uncritical praise of study abroad should be recognized as merely maintaining/widening gaps among classes, yet if the latter, it would suggest that study abroad or similar type of extra-curricular experiences are effective to empower marginalized youth, hence should be widely introduced.

Reference


Furukawa, C. (2008c) Study abroad Experiences as Processes of Forming, Negotiating, and Resisting Neoliberal Subjectivities. (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, EUI project conducted with Chen, B. and Choi, H.)


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[1] For a comprehensive critique of study abroad research, see Landis & Wasilewski (1999).