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

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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. Thorough 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). 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 viable—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 succeed 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 in their business.

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 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 dissatisfaction 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-opt 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

Abelmann, N., Kim, H., and Park, S. Forthcoming. College Rank and Neoliberal
Subjectivity in South Korea: The Burden of Self-Development.

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>19</td>
<td>Freshman (Animal husbandry)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eunhee</td>
<td>Korean</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Senior (Architecture)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kathy</td>
<td>Taiwanese</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Graduated from college last year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kerry</td>
<td>Korean</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Junior (Science)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Han</td>
<td>Korean</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Postgraduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nancy</td>
<td>American</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Graduate student</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
We also obtained anonymous information from a person concerned the IEI. While we do not directly cite what he told us, the general information about the IEI that person gave to us confirmed what Nancy, one of our interviewees and a former instructor of the IEI, talked about the issue of students’ nationalities.