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**Korean International Students (*yuhaksaengs*) in New York City:
A phenomenological study on the US college experiences of Korean
international students in relation to privilege, class, and race**

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07 May 2021

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A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Bachelor of
Arts in Educational Studies and Asian Studies.

Abstract

This study examines the college experiences of Korean international (KI) students who are currently enrolled in U.S. colleges located in New York City (NYC); it attempts to understand and humanize their personal experiences and struggles in the educational sphere before and during college. Based on previous literature on globalization in education and transnational mobility of international students in the educational landscape, this study uncovers multiple phenomena such as globalization in education and a rise in study abroad in modern Korean society. The in-depth interviews with eight KI students in NYC present nuanced narratives of the participants that reveal both privileges and challenges of the US college experiences: an early exposure to global education before college, accumulation of social and cultural capital through western education, racialization and ethnic categorization in social spaces, and the legal complexities in employment. Through this study, I hope to provide a more comprehensive and balanced portraiture of the US college experiences of KI students.

Keywords: Korean international students, higher education, study abroad, Asian international students, racialization, transnational mobility, globalization, capital

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Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

Early march of 2020, two months after it swept through Asia, COVID-19 finally hit Europe and North America. My mother and father, who were already well aware of the pandemic situation, called me from Korea and the week after, I was on a plane back home. But I was not alone in this journey - an overwhelming majority of my friends were flying back to Korea from the West around the same time. The night I arrived home, I overheard my parents' conversations about their friends' sons and daughters booking flight tickets back to Korea.

The next morning, Mom was on a call with her friend whose daughters live in New York City, the COVID-19 hotspot back then. In the midst of packing, travelling, unpacking and jet lag, my mind was fixated on the mundane conversations with friends and family which brought me to a realization that the vast majority of people around me and my family had some sort of higher education background outside Korea, mostly in the United States. In addition to the similar higher education backgrounds, my peers and I had more similarities than differences in our K-12 educational experiences, one of which was an early departure from a traditional Korean educational system in exchange for an introduction to Western education, the term that encompasses various international academic programmes taught in English across the world.

Furthermore, my previous research in the higher education backgrounds of the Korean entrepreneurs revealed that 14 out of 17 business leaders of Korea's ten largest and richest conglomerates including Samsung and Hyundai also studied abroad at American Higher education institutions (refer to Appendix A). Due to the fact that an overwhelming number of family members of richest conglomerates in Korea attained higher education degrees outside Korea, *yuhaksaeng* (Korean international students), a Korean word for domestic students

studying abroad, is often associated with wealth and extravagance (Sung-Choon Park, 2020). While this understanding of the KI students has its validity as the costs of tuition and living at most American HEIs exceed the national median household income in Korea (Statista Research Department, 2021), this notion represents a facet of the KI students' experiences and overlooks other aspects of their educational experiences and especially college life in the United States.

What came to me as a fortuitous realization grew into a strong desire to understand the positionality as well as the educational experiences of people like me, the *yuhaksaengs* in Korea: my fellow *yuhaksaengs* who grew up consuming Western education and came to America for college education just like I did. The *yuhaksaengs* who were sent back to Korea as soon as the global pandemic outbreak took over America. The *yuhaksaengs* who seem to freely traverse between the boundaries of Korea and America in their languages and cultures.

How do we make sense of our identities that are neither fully Korean nor American? What are some of the systemic forces in play that are infiltrated in our collective struggles on US college campuses? What power does our yuhaksaeng identity exert in our society? What role do we play in a larger Korean and American society? Through this study, I hope to get close to the shared essences of our experiences and thus provide a more comprehensive overview of the KI students' educational experiences at the intersection of class, race, and immigration law by centering the first-hand accounts and narratives of the KI students in New York City.

Chapter 2 introduces two key theories that underpin my research, Bourdieu's theory on habitus and capital and Wallerstein's World-systems theory. After the introduction to the theoretical framework, this chapter surveys the scholarship on the outbound mobility of the Korean students to the United States, the challenges Asian international students enrolled in

American universities face and identity crises, and ends with the studies on international students' postgraduate plans and career decisions.

Chapter 3 provides an overview of the sample and methodology which includes short descriptions of all eight participants and explanation for my choice in research methodology and design. This chapter also discusses the process of data collection and analysis in depth, laying out everything from the preparation of an interview to the final round of data analysis.

Chapter 4 and 5 present a synthesis of the findings from the interviews in relation to the underpinning theories of the study. I position the participants' experiences in the wider contexts of education and society as an attempt to evaluate the social, racial, and systemic forces that shape the educational and American college experiences of the KI students.

Chapter 6 summarizes the key findings and takeaways of the study and offers suggestions for further research on the topic of Korean international students and recommendations for American HEIs to provide better assistance to the Korean and Asian international students not only in the sphere of education but also in social life and career.

Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

Bourdieu's Habitus Theory and Cultural Capital. Bourdieu describes the habitus as “a system of durable, transposable dispositions which functions as the generative basis of structured, objectively unified practices” (Bourdieu, 1986; Harker, 1984). Through various exposures to social phenomena such as interactions with families and friends and schools, people come to unconsciously learn and internalize a set of social codes or “capitals” in a way that is accepted by the society one belongs to. With the continuous interplay of structures, habitus, and practice, Bourdieu suggests that class and social inequalities are reproduced in society.

One type of Bourdieu's capitals is cultural, which subcategories include objectified, institutionalized, and embodied (Bourdieu, 1986). The objectified capital is one's property and commodities that have economic values. The embodied capital is one's understanding of social behaviors and knowledge inherited by socialization, and lastly, the institutionalized capital includes academic credentials or professional qualifications received from schools or businesses. Harker argues that the appropriate cultural capital must be obtained for an individual to transcend from non-dominant background to the dominant background or, in simpler terms, to succeed (Harker, 1984).

Among three forms of capital, the institutionalized capital is where education comes into play. Bourdieu claims that educational institutions are structured to “favor those who possess cultural capital, defined according to the criteria of the dominant hegemony” (Harker, 1984) that

controls the economic, social, and political resources, similar to economic institutions that favor those who already have economic capital (Bourdieu, 1973).

“Apart from the fact that the increase in the proportion of holders of the most prestigious academic qualifications among the members of the ruling classes may mean only that the need to call upon academic approval in order to legitimate the transmission of power and of privileges is being more and more felt, the effect is as though the cultural and educational mechanisms of transmission had merely strengthened or take over from the traditional mechanisms such as the hereditary transmission of economic capital... it is, in fact, as if the investments placed in the academic career of children had been integrated into *the system of strategies of reproduction...*” (Bourdieu, 1973)

In the quote above, Bourdieu contends that academic qualifications and credentials bestowed by educational institutions are utilized as a way to legitimize the transmission of wealth, class, and privilege in the system of generational economic and cultural reproduction. In Bourdieu’s theory on capital reproduction, educational institutions are framed as a site of reproduction that is already filtered based on individual’s cultural capitals rather than a ladder that helps people from lower socioeconomic class gain access to social and cultural capital associated with the dominant hegemony, quite a direct antithesis to the prevalent notion in Korean society that “a degree from a prestigious university sets one on the track of upward mobility through the status, class, and income structures” (S. Lee & Brinton, 1996). Although the study by Lee and Brinton is from more than 20 years ago, I argue that this belief still holds true in Korean society as suggested by its 96% tertiary school enrollment rate (World Bank, 2020).

It is also worth noting that Bourdieu’s work may not be fully transferable in cross-cultural contexts as France, Bourdieu’s home country as well as the place his work is based off of, and

Korea have different cultural and social foundations. However, I contend that with this particular subset of the Korean population, the Korean international students enrolled in American universities instead of Korean universities, Bourdieu's argument on cultural capital and its role as a filter in educational institutions is more applicable in this study than other studies focusing on Korean universities as the focus is on the Western institutions.

Wallerstein's World-systems theory. First introduced by Immanuel Wallerstein, the World-systems theory is an analysis of the hierarchical global structure based on each country's accumulation of economic capital and power (Wallerstein, 2004). According to the theory, the world system is divided into three different tiers of global hierarchy: core, semi periphery, and periphery. Core countries produce high technology and capital-intensive goods and services that are exported to the periphery and semi-periphery nations while the periphery focuses on the production of labor-intensive and low technology goods for the core and semi-periphery. The semi-periphery floats between the two and engages in both capital-intensive and labor-intensive activities (Chen & Barnett, 2000).

As the international flow of students increased with the rise of globalization, researchers started to apply World-systems theory as a lens to investigate the flow of international students at a macro level and explain the flow of international students to the periphery to the core (Barnett et al., 2016). The students from periphery countries are encouraged to study abroad in core countries to gain desired capitals and knowledge and facilitate national building (Altbach, 2003). Research revealed that the United States remains by far the most central country in the international student network (Barnett et al., 2016).

One of the problems that arise in this process is that the students from periphery countries often decide to stay in host countries due to its abundance of better resources and

opportunities, which further “reinforce[s] the inequitable distribution of resources and knowledge” (Barnett et al., 2016). However, the return rates for South Korean students are found to be quite high because of its rapid industrialisation and economic growth (Altbach, 1991).

East to West: Motivations for Studying Abroad in the United States

Despite the study’s focus on Korea, I broaden the scope from Korea to East Asia and opted for a comparative approach due to a dearth of literature specific to Korean students. The following sections therefore include studies about international students that are from various countries but are studying or have studied in the United States.

The existing literature about the U.S. study abroad phenomenon in Asia centers its discussion around human capital theory and contends that study abroad increases the likelihood of securing better and higher paying employment opportunities in a globalized labour market (Beine et al., 2014). As Korea quickly transitioned from mainly agricultural and industrial societies to the knowledge economy, human capital has become increasingly important (Ghazarian, 2014; Varghese et al., 2008) and thus the dominant narrative in the discussions about the country’s further development.

The World-systems theory by Immanuel Wallerstein provides a potential explanation as to why the United States, the core, has become the most popular study abroad destination for Korean international students. In the global education landscape, higher education in particular, the United States is considered the center of knowledge production and carries prestige and symbolic values that are transferable to other countries (Altbach, 1987). The studies have shown that symbolic values of Western academic institutions and universities are recognized by

Chinese universities, parents, students and teachers (Cebolla-Boade et al., 2018). many Korean families view foreign college degrees as more worthy than a South Korean college degree unless it is from one of the top South Korean universities (Park, 2020).

Not only are foreign degrees considered more worthy than the domestic degrees, but the attainment of English Language proficiency is also highly valued in East Asia (Park, 2009; Wu et al., 2015), a cultural capital that enables people to widen their global network through communication. Based on two surveys conducted by the Korean Educational Development Institute (KEDI) in 2005 and Job Korea in 2006, Korean students and parents preferred studying abroad for potential improvement in English language and global competitiveness the most (Park, 2009). Based on the statistics, Korean parents spend between 10% to 30% of their household income on private English classes after school. Korean parents believe that sending their children to English-speaking countries can give their children a head start over other children, ultimately helping them win the competition in the job market in the future.

Other factors that drive international students from East Asian countries to study abroad include socioeconomic and political forces (Martinez & Colaner, 2017). Research shows that parents in mainland China also are willing to take on financial burden and stress induced by the participation of cross-national education to attain “the goals of economic progress they have set for their children” (Bodycott, 2009; Martinez & Colaner, 2017), a finding that is in parallel with the world-systems theory as well as the power of cultural and social capital emphasized by Bourdieu earlier. Similarly, Aihwa Ong argues in her seminal work *Flexible Citizenship* that studying abroad in the United States and other western countries serves as a method to accumulate capital that enable Chinese international students to cross borders to reposition themselves and maximize their benefits according to the political and economic climates of

both countries (Ong, 1999; Sung-Choon Park, 2020). Although this study is focused on the Chinese overseas students, Park suggests that this finding may apply to other ruling elites of Asian countries that are emerging as industrialized markets and growing economies (Sung-Choon Park, 2020).

Another common driving factor for study abroad that emerged in both China and Korea was escape from the fierce competition of the local education systems. In Korea, American undergraduate degrees experienced relative devaluation in recent years partially due to the perception of KI students as “escapees” domestic competition in schools (Park, 2020). In China, the students who studied abroad expressed discontent with their local educational practices characterized by high-stakes testing and rote memorization, which made study abroad a desirable option to escape from the educational system in China (Wang, 2020).

Historical Context: The U.S. Contribution to the Korean Education and Immigration

The history of the US-Korea relations goes back to the late 1880s when Korea signed the Shufeldt treaty in 1882 and opened its doors to the West, allowing both nationals to freely cross borders. Korean students began arriving in the United States as students and refugees who escaped from famine and political oppression (Wang, 2013), and American Presbyterian and Methodist missionaries settled in Korea (Choy, 1979). Not only did American missionaries convert many Koreans to Christianity, they also built social infrastructure such as schools, hospitals, and churches (Yoo, 2010). American missionaries taught at schools, created textbooks and first public schools, and founded universities such as Yonsei University and Ewha Womans University, two of the best universities in the nation until today (Robert Kim, 2019). Aligning with their mission to educate both elite and nonelite Korean populations, American missionaries emphasized the use of the vernacular Korean language to teach nonelites, levelling

the field for both elites and nonelites (Yoo, 2010). Although there is not enough evidence that American missionaries had a direct impact on the Korean education system, they clearly left their legacy in the form of educational institutions which are highly esteemed and active to this day.

The first wave of Korean immigration to the United States took place between 1903 and 1907 when a shipload of Korean migrants were brought to Hawai'i to work on sugar plantations (Patterson, 1994; Yu & Choe, 2003). By 1905, more than 7000 Koreans were in Hawaii to escape from the famines and unstable political climate in Korea (Patterson, 1994). From 1905 to 1924, 2000 additional Korean females immigrated to Hawaii and California as "picture brides" of the bachelor immigrants who are working in sugar plantations in Hawaii. In 1924, the U.S. Congress passed the Oriental Exclusion Act of 1924, banning all Asian immigrants except the students who came to study at the U.S. academic institutions. When Korea was under Japanese rule, elite Korean students and political refugees came to the U.S. to study at universities such as Harvard, Columbia, Princeton (I. J. Kim, 2004).

The second wave of Korean immigrants was between 1950 and 1964, with the Korean war playing a key role in the second mass immigration. Five years after Korea gained independence from Japanese annexation, the country got split by two political entities, the south governed by the U.S. and the north governed by Soviet Union. During the Korean War, the second wave of Korean immigrants arrived in the United States, largely classified in three groups: war brides, war orphans, and intellectuals and skilled professionals such as students, businessmen, lawyers, professors, and medical doctors.

The third wave of Korean immigrants is considered to be from 1965 when the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act lifted the quota for Asian immigrants to recruit more skilled professionals. The 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act allowed

students-turned-professionals and naturalized citizens' family members to apply for permanent residence visas, which rapidly increased Korean immigrants in the United States. As a whole, 827,156 Korean immigrants came to the U.S. between 1948 and 2001, that is the total of the second wave and the third wave. (Yu & Choe, 2003).

In recent years, however, both Korean immigrants and Korean international students in the United States have been gradually decreasing; the Korean immigrant population had decreased by 37,000 since 2010 (Batalova, 2019) and the number of Korean international students in 2018/2019 decreased by 4.2 percent from the year before (Institute of International Education, 2019), which can be attributed to the increasing abundance of foreign degrees in the South Korean market (Sung-Choon Park, 2020).

Many Korean immigrants in the United States such as plantation workers, war brides and orphans, political exiles were temporary byproducts of a series of major political events, namely the Japanese annexation of Korea and the Korean War. However, the immigration of Korean students and intellectuals has persisted through a century of sociopolitical turbulence in both nations. In fact, the majority of Korean immigrants consist of Korean international students who adjusted their immigration status to live and work in the United States instead of going back to Korea in recent decades (Min, 2011). The history of the two countries manifest that the U.S. study abroad in Korea is not just a result of globalization; it is a longstanding phenomenon embedded in the Korean history with the United States.

The Challenges of the Asian International Students at Western Universities

The three largest sources of international students in the United States in 2018/19 were China with 369,548 students in undergraduate, graduate, non-degree, and optional practical training (OPT) programs, India with 202,104 students and South Korea with 52,250 students (Institute of International Education, 2019). Considering that China and India have two largest populations both in the world and in Asia whereas South Korea ranks 27th in world population and 13th in Asia population, 3.7% of the Chinese population and 3.9% of the Indian population (Central Intelligence Agency, 2017), the number of Korean students studying abroad in the United States is proportionately greater than that of two other countries when compared to each nation's population. As mentioned earlier, this paper draws a multitude of studies that focus on Asian students instead of just Korean students due to the lack of literature on Korean students. This section in particular research about the challenges of the Asian international students enrolled in Western universities and classified them into two different categories: academic and psychological challenges.

Academic challenges include English language proficiency and in-class discussion and participation. Research revealed that one of the common challenges Asian international students faced was the language barrier (Andrade, 2006; Bjork et al., 2020; J. J. Lee & Rice, 2007; Wu et al., 2015; Young, 2017). Young reported that most international students who have difficulty with English language are often from Asian countries (Young, 2017). Many international students attributed their difficulties in adjusting to their college lives abroad to their lack of fluency in English language (J. J. Lee & Rice, 2007). Another research echoed the

findings in other studies; American English is deemed as a challenge for Asian international students despite the fact that they learned English rigorously back in their host countries. They pointed out differences in accents, pronunciation, and rate of speech as the main struggles regarding language barrier (Wu et al., 2015). A research focusing on Korean international students reported experiences of native students' explicit ridicule when a Korean student asked a question in class which significantly affected her academic performance (Sung-Choon Park, 2020).

In addition, the researchers found that several international students struggle with participating in class discussions (Bjork et al., 2020; Diangelo, 2006; Sung-Choon Park, 2020; Wu et al., 2015). Some students who were interviewed in the study voiced concern and frustration with their inability to actively participate in class discussions. One student shared, "I don't feel the courage to talk in class" and another student said, "Why do I feel so nervous about participating sometimes? I honestly feel like it's because... psych majors tend to be mostly white students and white professors, and that's a little awkward to deal with" (Bjork et al., 2020). Similar experiences were found in another research about Korean international students. Korean students at the U.S. universities indicated that they don't feel comfortable speaking up in class because they are worried about what white people would think of their accents. Due to discomfort and self-consciousness, the students choose to withdraw or abstain from class participation, making themselves 'invisible' in class (Sung-Choon Park, 2020). These students' frustration with their English language proficiency as well as the struggles with communicating with white people and native speakers illustrate racial and colonial dynamics between the East and the West, further exacerbating Asian international students' academic experiences.

While a lot of Asian international students do face linguistic challenges on American college campuses, it is also important to acknowledge that every international student's English language proficiency differs. For instance, a small subset of the international students who had been exposed to the English-speaking learning environments at an early age and therefore are as fluent in English, if not more, as in their native languages, which was the case with almost half of the interviewed participants of the study. Therefore, it is critical to take their pre-college educational backgrounds into account to understand the different levels of English-language proficiency as well as struggles Asian international students may face collectively.

Research studies revealed that Asian international students face psychological challenges such as acculturative stress and feelings of isolation and discrimination (Tian et al., 2019; Wu et al., 2015; Young, 2017). It is consistently suggested in research that Asian international students in the United States and Canada report more heightened acculturative stress than their European counterparts, which may be due to increased cultural distance and the students' cultural misfit in Western cultures (Tian et al., 2019). In another study, Asian international students reported feelings of isolation and discrimination both in and outside class. For example, a Chinese international student who joined the Frisbee team noticed that he was always the last one to be selected for the team among his teammates. Another Asian student shared that she was never invited to join small group discussions during class (Wu et al., 2015). The interactions and situations imbued with subtle discrimination trigger feelings of isolation among Asian international students, making them even more difficult to adjust and engage in new cultures and social circles.

Another layer that contributes to the acculturative stress and feelings of isolation of Asian international students is race. Existing literature on Asian international students in the

West focus heavily on the academic challenges including lack of English-language proficiency and acculturative stress stemming from cultural disparities between host and home countries. However, there is not much research exploring the impact of race on Asian students' college experiences. For this reason, I broadened the scope of the population to Korean international students to students of Asian descent in America regardless of citizenship. However, there was also very limited research on racial climate specific to Asian American students' experiences as most research focuses on the experiences of white and black students (Teranishi et al., 2009).

Amongst the limited pool of literature, I was able to draw some substantial findings regarding the racial and ethnic identities of Asian college students in the United States. A research about second-generation Chinese and Korean Americans revealed that the shared racial identity and experiences of Asian American students such as being racially labeled and stereotypes as "nerdy," and "foreign" brought them closer to each other in college (Kibria, 1999). Other shared experience among these Asian American students included a shared feeling of "racial rejection" from other races, especially whites, and their upbringing with "an emphasis on education, family, and work" (Kibria, 1999). Through collective experiences of racial division and racism, Asian American students often befriended one another which overlapped with their participation in organized pan-Asian organizations and events in college.

Similar narratives emerged in another research on second-generation Korean American evangelical students on an American college campus. Rebecca Kim contends that the homophily principle, the notion that the ties between similar individuals are more binding, serves as the root of comfort within the Korean-American community (Kim, 2008). According to Kim, a rapid increase in diversity and multiethnicity in the United States created conditions for comfort based on homophily, which enabled Korean Americans to notice many similarities in their

experiences such as hovering between Korean and American cultures, having intercultural conflicts with their first-generation parents, and feeling pressured to study and work hard all the time. Another explanation for homophily is a desire for majority status and marginalization. Growing up and living as a minority in the United States, Asian-Americans strive to find more opportunities to exert power and leadership and to be treated like the majority. In a separate ethnic space where everyone shares similar experiences, people feel a lot more comfortable to voice their opinions without having to think about the power dynamics between different races (Rebecca Kim, 2008). In addition, a more recent research on KI students corroborates the findings from previous studies by reporting that KI students cope with racialization and marginalization through ethnic identification and solidarity, similar to earlier immigrants (Sung-Choon Park, 2020). These studies provide a valuable insight into Korean students' social experiences in relation to the issues of race and ethnicity and sets the background context of the development of social circles among Asian students on college campuses in the United States.

Post-graduation Plans and Destinations of International Students

Some commonalities were found in the experiences of international students in the United States navigating their plans after graduating from their undergraduate colleges. The literature on international students' career choice and destinations exhibited mixed results. In one study in 2015, 80 percent of international students expressed that they hope to stay in the United States after they graduate from college (National Career Development Association, 2015). In another study, 51 percent of 597 international graduate students in the study answered they prefer to stay in the United States compared to twenty two percent who prefer to start their

careers in their country (Musumba et al., 2009). The proportion of international students hoping to stay in the United States after graduation fluctuate based on various factors such as the economic and political states of both countries (for instance, the lower percentage of the students wanting to stay in the United States in 2009 may be an influence of the Great Recession which took place in the same year). However, it is noteworthy that even during economic instability, more than half of the international students hoped to stay in the United States after graduation.

Researchers identified a number of factors why international students may prefer the United States to home country as a career destination, which include higher political and public safety, access to recreational activities, cultural diversity, a higher standard of living, and better gender equality (Musumba et al., 2009). The same research discovered that females are 15 percent more likely than males to prefer beginning their careers in the United States and attributed the result to more freedom of expression and better opportunities and work environment than home country (Musumba et al., 2009).

Legal requirements and its impact on their academic and career choices

Despite the large number of students who hope to stay in the United States after graduating, the process of employment and professional development for international graduates from U.S. colleges entail a number of potential obstacles (Lin & Flores, 2013; Hayes & Lin, 1994; Spencer-Rodgers, 2000). One obstacle that was most frequently mentioned in the literature was intricate legal requirements (Lin & Flores, 2013).

Typically, international students who are enrolled in U.S. colleges are permitted to stay in the United States through a F-1 student visa. The students who successfully complete their studies at U.S. higher education institutions are eligible to apply for the Optional Practical

Training (OPT) program, temporary employment which allows F-1 international students to gain work experience in the United States (USCIS, 2020). However, in 2008, a 17-month OPT extension was introduced for undergraduate and graduate students holding degrees in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), which means international students who majored in STEM were allowed to work in the United States for almost three years (Amuedo-Dorantes et al., 2019). From 2008 to 2016, the number of international STEM majors under OPT grew 400 percent, whereas the increase in non-STEM international majors was only 49 percent (Neil G. Ruiz et al., 2018). Among 1.5 million graduates on OPT between 2008 and 2016, approximately three quarters of them came from Asia, 57 percent of which consisted of international students from China, India, and Korea. These statistics suggest that the OPT STEM extension could be an important factor that determines F-1 international students' course of study, along with other factors such as their interests, the reputation of the program, and the quality of faculty members in respective departments; the very fact that foreign national STEM majors increased four fold in less than a decade testifies the impact of the STEM OPT extension policy on international students' choice in their course of study.

Another condition for OPT authorization is that temporary employment must be directly related to a F-1 student's major (USCIS, 2020); F-1 students are responsible for providing an explanation of how their jobs relate to their major areas of study which the school's Designated School Official (DSO) must review and approve. If there are any concerns regarding relevance of a student's major to a job, then students are required to provide more documentation proving the connection between one's major and the job (ICE, 2019). Because student's majors must be directly related to their jobs, the jobs they land under the OPT program are highly likely to be in STEM fields, which not only increases the workforce in the fields but also advances the development of science and technology in the nation.

Conditional Inclusion of Asians: Asian Immigration in favor of STEM workforce

The favoring of STEM professionals in America is not a newly emerging trend; it is ingrained in the history of the U.S. immigration policies dating back to the 1960s. Since the enactment of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 (Wong, 1986) that “repealed national-origin rules and opened legal immigration to all countries” (Nee & Holbrow, 2013), the number of Asian immigrants to the United States increased tenfold during the two decades. Asian immigrants that accounted for only 7 percent of all immigrants in the early 1960s soon took over 44 percent of the total annual immigration stream in 1986 (Wong, 1986). Currently, Asians are the fastest-growing racial group in America and are projected to make up 36% of all American immigrants by 2055 (Budiman et al., 2021).

Not only are Asian Americans the fastest-growing racial group but they are also the most educated in the United States, exceeding the percentage of college-educated whites in America (Nee & Holbrow, 2013). Such statistics hint at “the selectivity and incentives embedded in the rules, guidelines, and priorities of U.S. Immigration laws” (Nee & Holbrow, 2013). By the Immigration Act of 1965, Asian immigration in the United States was made possible under two conditions: family unification and skilled workers. Among Asian immigrants that were admitted on a preference system, 74 percent were through family unification and 20 percent were skilled workers.

Although Asian Americans who immigrated took an extensive advantage of the family unification criteria, Hsu and Wu argue that these preferences, especially occupational preferences of special skilled workers, privileged Asian immigrants with higher education as exhibited by the statistics above and special skills in the STEM fields “whose employers were more willing to negotiate immigration bureaucracies in order to hire” (Hsu & Wu, 2015). It was also reported that Asian Americans are disproportionately concentrated in the core

technological jobs, attributing to the fact that high-tech firms often recruit skilled professionals from Asian students at American universities due to the shortage of skilled workers and engineers (Nee & Holbrow, 2013). A careful examination of the Immigration Act of 1965 provided an underlying racism in the policy as well as America's meritocratic and capitalist values that prize skills and talents, especially in the STEM fields that are in high demand, in the context of Asian immigration in the United States.

Chapter 3: METHODOLOGY

The objective of this study is to investigate the essences of the shared yet distinctive educational experiences of Korean International (KI) undergraduate students who go to college in New York City (NYC).

The research is anchored by the following questions:

- What factors determine the KI students' decisions to study abroad in NYC?
- In what ways are the KI students' college, both academic and social, experiences in NYC similar to or different from their expectations?
- How have their college experiences in NYC influenced future trajectories of KI students?

Sample

Sampling Method and Recruitment

I opted for convenience sampling for this study because there were already a handful of people I know who met all the criteria and it was less time consuming to directly reach out to them than having to contact third parties who have connections with KI college students in NYC. Convenience sampling is a sampling method in which the researcher "locate[s] a nearby source of potential participants who are convenient in their proximity and willingness to participate" (Robinson, 2014). Although convenience sampling can create unwarranted generalizations in qualitative research if the sample universe is broad, the use of convenience sampling is justified in this research as it has a very focused demographic and geographic population and therefore not prone to rendering generalizations about "people in general" (Robinson, 2014).

After I identified the full list of criteria for participants, I looked to my personal networks to find people who meet the participant criteria. I started by reaching out to the acquaintances who met all criteria, explained the study and asked for their availability. In addition, I made a posting on a personal social media site which included a brief description of the study and the recruitment criteria. Seven participants were through direct recruitment, and two participants saw the posting on social media and volunteered to take part in the study. Among all nine participants, I first reached out to acquaintances who I have had a few interactions with, and I reached out to closer friends who meet the criteria. The primary reason for preference for acquaintances to friends was to protect myself from researcher bias;

Participant overview

Eight Korean International students - six female and two male undergraduate students who are currently enrolled in four different private higher education institutions in NYC - participated in this study during the academic school year of 2020/21. The average age of the participants was 21.75, and all participants spent at least one year in NYC as a college student. The participants' majors included a wide range of disciplines: Art, Engineering, Computer Science, Architecture, Nursing, and Economics. Prior to their arrival in NYC, five participants went to high school in Korea, two went to boarding school in the United States, and two participants went to school in other countries such as China and Hong Kong. Among eight participants, six of them are Korean nationals who are studying in the States on a F-1 student visa and two of them are US permanent residents.

All participants were recruited based on both criteria and personal networks. All participants had to meet the following criteria in order to be recruited:

- age over 18

- a non-US citizen
- ethnically Korean
- currently enrolled in college in NYC and has experience living in NYC

The length of residence in Korea was not included as one of the criteria because I wanted to exhibit diversity in the KI student population to broaden the notion that the KI students only indicate those who lived in Korea for the majority of their lives. It is also important to mention that all participants except one did not receive any forms of financial assistance either from their institutions, meaning they paid full tuition which amounted to \$62,000 each year.

Name (pseudonym)	Age	Gender	Class Year	School	Major	nationality
Megan	21	F	2023	Columbia University	Operations Research	Korean
Abby	20	F	2022	Columbia University	Computer Science	US resident
Tina	22	F	2021	New York University	Nursing	Korean
Brandon	23	M	2021	The Cooper Union	Mechanical Engineering	US resident
Jasmine	21	F	2022	New York University	Changing Representation of Women in American Media with a minor in producing	Korean
Laura	22	F	2021	Columbia University	Operations Research	Korean
David	23	M	2022	New York University	Finance, Accounting	US resident
Cindy	21	F	2022	The New School	Strategic Design and Management	Korean

Figure 1. Table of the participant's demographic information

Megan is a 21 year old, second-year female studying Operations Research at Columbia University. Megan was born and raised in Korea and went to a local private school until 5th grade and attended a private international school located in Korea until college. She first

enrolled at New York University but transferred to Columbia University in the beginning of her second year. Megan is a Korean citizen and does not hold a green card. Megan and I are high school friends.

Abby is a 20 year old, third-year female majoring in Computer Science at Columbia University. She was born in Korea but moved to the United States with her family when she was three years old. She lived in Ohio and Pennsylvania until third grade in elementary school, and her family moved back to Korea in the beginning of fourth grade. She then enrolled in a private K-12 international school in Korea and attended the same school until college. Although Abby's citizenship is Korean, she is also a permanent resident in the United States. Abby and I never met in person, but we came into contact through mutual friends and she volunteered to participate in my research after seeing a recruitment poster on my social media.

Tina is a 22 year old, fourth-year female studying nursing at New York University. Born in Korea, Tina moved to the United States with her family three months after she was born. She lived there for five years and her family moved back to Korea. She went to a Korean local school up until seventh grade and moved to Hong Kong in middle school. Since middle school, she attended a K-12 private international school in Hong Kong until she came to college. Tina is a Korean citizen and does not hold a green card. Although Tina and I never met in real life, we connected on social media through mutual friends and she agreed to participate in my research when I reached out to her.

Brandon is a 23 year old, fourth-year male studying Mechanical Engineering at Cooper Union. Born and raised in Korea, Brandon lived in Korea and attended a public Korean elementary school until third grade. He then moved to the United States with his mom and older sister and finished two years of elementary school there. After two years in the United States, he and his family moved back to Korea and he went to a local middle school and graduated from a

private, independent boarding school. He did not have to serve in the Korean military in the middle of college because he was a permanent resident in the United States. At the time I interviewed him, he was finishing up his last semester in college. He and I met last summer through mutual friends and he volunteered to participate in the study after seeing my recruitment poster on social media.

A 21 year-old, third-year female at New York University, Tina is doing an individualized study in Changing Representation of Women in American Media with a minor in producing. Tina was born and raised in Korea and went to Korean public school for elementary and middle school. Towards the end of middle school, she decided to move to the United States and attended a private boarding school there where she finished her high school. She is a Korean citizen and not a permanent U.S. resident. She and I met at a school-organized event at New York University two years ago and she agreed to participate in my study when I reached out to her.

Laura is a 22 year old, fourth-year female studying Operations Research at Columbia University. She was born and raised in Korea, went to a private elementary school where half of the curriculum was taught in English. She then went to a public middle school and decided to apply to private boarding schools in the United States. She enrolled in a private boarding school in the United States and finished her high school there. She is a Korean citizen and not a permanent resident of the United States. She is graduating by the end of the academic year 2020/2021 and will start working in the United States from this summer. Laura and I met through mutual friends before freshman year and are close friends to this day.

David is a 23 year old, third-year male studying Finance with concentration in Accounting at New York University. He was born in Korea and attended a private elementary school until third grade and transferred to a public school in the middle. After he finished his first year at a

public middle school in Korea, he and his family moved to China and he went to a K-12 private international school and graduated high school there. He went back to Korea to perform compulsory two-year military service after his freshman year and re-enrolled in college last year. David is a Korean citizen as well as a permanent resident in the United States. David and I met through our families and he agreed to participate in the study when I reached out to him.

Cindy is a 21 year old, third-year female studying Strategic Design and Management Parsons School of Design at the New School. Born and raised in Korea, she went to a public elementary and middle school until the end of seventh grade and transferred to a K-12 private international school in Korea where she graduated high school. Cindy is a Korean citizen and does not hold a green card. Cindy and I went to the same high school and when I reached out to her, she agreed to participate in the study.

Research Design

This study is grounded in the principles of qualitative research which is characterized by “interpretive techniques which seek to describe, decode, translate, and otherwise come to terms with meaning, not the frequency, of certain more or less naturally occurring phenomena in the social world” (Van Maanen, 1979). Qualitative in nature, the study aims to achieve a depth of understanding of the shared educational experiences of the KI students prior to and in college in NYC.

Due to a heavy focus on the study abroad phenomenon and college experiences of the Korean Students in the United states, I opted for phenomenology in this study. According to Creswell and Poth, the definition of phenomenological research is a qualitative research design that “describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This research design helped me focus

solely on the lived experiences and interpret data without having to validate their stories because phenomenology is about describing and making meanings out of their experiences.

Another aspect of phenomenology that was particularly appealing was the inclusion of the researcher's personal experiences in research. In some phenomenological studies, the researcher "brackets himself or herself out of the study by discussing personal experiences with the phenomenon" which encourages the researcher to share one's experiences but also help set aside so that the focus of the study is on the participants, not the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 166). Although not a college student in NYC, I consider myself to share a lot of characteristics with the participants as a KI student studying in the United States. Therefore, it is crucial to include my positionality and past experiences in this study to mitigate potential researcher bias or preconceptions about the study abroad phenomenon.

Data Collection

Semi-Structured Interview

Research Technique. The primary data collection technique used in this study is a semi-structured interview with each participant who has experienced the phenomenon studied in this research. The main purpose of an interview is to "find out [from them] those things we cannot directly observe [such as] feelings, thoughts, and intentions... [and] to enter into the other person's perspective" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), and for that reason, most qualitative research which attempt to interpret humans and the social world collect their data through interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In light of the nature of phenomenology and its focus on documenting the participants' lived experiences, I opted for semi structured interviews in this study. Semi structured interviews include a mix of structured and open-ended questions. Open-ended questions allow participants to define and interpret their experiences more freely,

and the researcher to respond to “the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Online Interview. Due to disruptions by Covid-19, all the interviews were done digitally on Zoom and each interview took approximately 30 minutes to one hour to complete. Although this defeats one of the main purposes of choosing NYC as the research destination, I did not expand geographical regions of the study because I witnessed some elements that are unique to NYC college life through my older sister and her friends who attend a four-year college in NYC and wanted to dig deeper into the unique experiences of KI college students in NYC. Nonetheless, an online interview saved travelling time on my part and lowered the barrier for participation as the only requirement was reduced to an online call for 30 minutes to one hour anywhere instead of a face-to-face interview that may require additional preparation.

Ethical Guidelines. All interviews were videotaped for the transcription purposes only and were not released anywhere. The research proposal and details were submitted to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Vassar College and this study obtained exemption from IRB review under section §46.104 (d)(2)(ii)* of the governing regulations. However, the letter stated that “exempt status does not lessen your ethical obligations to the participants in your research” and the researcher should inform participants of the nature of the research and the protection of confidentiality and anonymity of their data. I abided by the advised ethical guidelines by sending an informed consent form and a video recording release form via email prior to the interview. Due to Covid-19, all signatures were collected digitally via email.

Interview Preparation. Before sending out the informed consent and video recording release forms to all participants, I drafted a list of interview questions to get a sense of which topics will be addressed. The questions are divided into three sections based on each research question: the first question “What factors determine the KI students’ decisions to study abroad

in NYC?” focuses on the participants’ educational experiences before college. The purpose of this section is to provide a full dimensional picture of the participants’ educational background and to examine in what ways their past experiences influenced their decisions to study abroad. The second research question “In what ways are the KI students’ college, both academic and social, experiences in NYC similar to or different from their expectations?” is the highlight of the research. This section delves into the participants’ college experiences ranging from their academic lives to their social lives both at an American college and in NYC. The last research question “How have their college experiences in NYC influenced future trajectories of KI students?” gets at potential post graduate destinations and career choices of the participants. This section invites the participants to reflect upon possible influences of their college experiences on their lives moving forward and to discuss factors that complicate their decisions after college such as financial security or visa status. All interviews were conducted in English and the interview questions were proofread by the advisors prior to the first interview.

Survey

In addition to semi-structured interviews, all participants were asked to fill in a short pre-interview survey before the interview. The survey was made with Google Forms and the link was sent to the participant before each participant’s interview. The form asks for the participant’s basic information such as name, class year, date of birth, school, major, and two short-response questions on the source of financial support for their college education and their definition of the word “elite”. Because the question about the financials may be more of a sensitive topic to some participants, I added an option “prefer not to say” and that way participants are not forced to disclose information they feel uncomfortable sharing. Answers to the last question about elitism were limited to one to two sentences so that the participants do

not feel pressure to write an extensive response. All information collected through pre-interview forms were kept confidential in my thesis.

Data Analysis

Rudimentary data analysis was done simultaneously with data collection by revising literature review and research questions before every interview to remind what I am looking for in the interviews and writing memos during an interview with timestamps. After the first half of the interviews, I revised my memos taken during the interviews and identified themes that constantly emerged in the participants' interviews in common under each research question which had predetermined subcategories. These themes were then assigned a one-word capitalized code each which were recorded in a document separate from the interview memos. After all interviews were conducted, they were transcribed verbatim based on the audio recordings of online interviews with the help of Otter.ai, an online transcription service. I used Dedoose, a cross-platform app for qualitative research data analysis, for coding.

Once all the interviews were transcribed, I revisited every interview and highlighted all the parts that aligned with my eight preliminary categories: WHY US, WHY NYC, COLLEGE CHOICE, MAJOR, ACADEMIC CHALLENGES, SOCIAL CHALLENGES, FINANCE, POST-GRAD. These categories were created based upon the three temporal divisions of the interview questions: pre-college, college, post-college. After an initial round of coding, I started drafting the results by dividing data into three large domains equivalent to the temporal divisions. However, the temporal divisions of the results section made it difficult to draw from underpinning theories and literature reviewed in the previous sections. The initial results draft was then discarded and I conducted two more rounds of coding with the new codes that are more closely tied into the studies and theories of this study. The new codes included identity, race, immigration policy,

cultural & social capital, wealth, west as superior, transnational mobility, money/pressure/parents, identity in limbo, prestige, and english as power. Data Analysis was conducted on Dedoose, which provided count and frequency of each code in the study. I ranked the four most frequently brought up codes which were race, cultural & social capital, wealth, and immigration policy, and included codes with smaller counts into bigger categories if they are at least tangentially related, and dropped the rest. As a result, four big categories were created for the results and discussion section: Class and Elite Education, Accumulation of Capitals through Western Education, Racialization and Ethnic Categorization, and Employment and Legal Status of International Students.

Chapter 4: PRIVILEGES

Globalization and Class in Pre-College Elite Education

Understanding the Definitions of Elite

The widely accepted definition of elite is “the richest, most powerful, best educated, or best trained people in a particular group of society” (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). Before I could refer the sample of the study to as soon-to-be or future elites, I wanted to get a sense of their understanding of the elite group. The word “elite” (pronounced as *elliteu* in Korean) is defined as “a person who is lauded by the society for one’s outstanding skills or position” in the Korean dictionary (Naver Korean Dictionary, n.d.), which places a heavier emphasis on the skills and abilities of the person rather than the socioeconomic status. Growing up, I also associated elites more with intellect than wealth and expected the participants’ responses to be more similar to mine. However, the participants provided a much more comprehensive understanding of elites than mine, with seven out of eight participants denoting the socioeconomic aspect of elites such as “holding large amounts of power such as wealth” and “superior to others in terms of wealth”. Six participants also included mentions of intellect and knowledge using phrases such as “superior intellectual status” and “academically astounding”. Based on their definitions of elite, it is safe to use the popular definition of elite that addresses both the socioeconomic and educational aspects throughout the study.

Globalization In Education For Transnational Elites

The long-standing relationship between education and economic mobility has been an ongoing discussion in the studies of sociology, economics, and education (S. Lee & Brinton,

1996). With the rise of globalization, however, education is no longer limited to local contexts; the demand for international education has significantly increased and local elites started seeking education credentials for their children that are more marketable at a global level (Keßler et al., 2015; Maxwell & Aggleton, 2015). The parents' meticulous choices made for their children and the desire of global education, or an education that is recognized in the global marketplace, were evident in my interviews.

More than half of the interviewees attended private international schools located in Asia (Korea, Hong Kong, Mainland China) from middle school, if not earlier. Tina, a fourth-year student at NYU, moved to New Jersey three months after she was born because of her parents' job. Her family relocated to Korea where Tina enrolled in a public local elementary school as a first grade. In the beginning of middle school, her family moved to Hong Kong where she attended a private international school in Hong Kong. Similarly, David went to two local elementary schools, both private and public, and attended a private international school in China since middle school.

Abby, Cindy, and Megan stayed in Korea for most of their lives. Abby, a current third-year student at Columbia, moved to the United States at the age of 3 with her family and went to local school. When she turned third grade, Abby and her family moved back to Korea where she attended a private international school (International School A in the table below) until college. Cindy and Megan, who were born and raised in Korea until college, transferred from Korean local schools to a private international school (International School B in the table below) located in Korea.

Three other participants did not attend international schools. However, there existed some elements of globalization and internationalization in their education. In the case of Laura, a fourth-year student at Columbia University, went to a private elementary school in Korea that

had a bilingual curriculum that taught half the elementary curriculum in English and the other half in Korean and continued on with her pre-college education in the United States at a private boarding school (Boarding School A in the table below).

Although Jasmine, a current second-year student at New York University, attended Korean public schools from elementary to middle school, she stated nonchalantly, “for some reason, my mom and I, we always knew that I would be studying in the States at some point.” Whether it was planned or not, she did go to a private boarding school in the United States (Boarding School B in the table below) for high school. Lastly, Brandon, a fourth-year student at Cooper Union, lived in America very briefly during his elementary school years, and attended a private Korean boarding school for high school that offered Advanced Placement courses, commonly referred to as AP, and other classes in English.

High School (in order of appearance)	College-level Course Offered	Yearly Tuition (USD)
International School (Hong Kong)	Advanced Placement (AP)	\$31,937
International School (Mainland China)	Advanced Placement (AP)	\$42,423
International School A (Korea)	Advanced Placement (AP)	\$28,246
International School B (Korea)	International Baccalaureate (IB)	\$39,405
Boarding School A (US)	Advanced Placement (AP)	\$63,250
Boarding School B (US)	Advanced Placement (AP)	\$63,250
Boarding School C (Korea)	Advanced Placement (AP)	\$9,077

Figure 2. High Schools Attended by the Interviewees, College-level Courses Offered, and Tuition Fee

In the sample of the study, there was not a single student who stayed in the public Korean educational system from kindergarten to high school. Considering that the number of outbound students in higher education per thousand people in Korea is 2.17 (Kwon, 2013), the chance of Korean domestic students receiving education outside Korea before college also seems quite unlikely. However, every interviewee in the sample was exposed to an American or

western academic curricula early in their schooling lives. While some students grew up in a non-Korean educational system as early as elementary school, high school was the level of education when all interviewees were immersed in educational systems that are developed and largely used across America and in the Western hemisphere.

The most common college-level courses that were offered in the high schools the interviewees attended was the Advanced Placement (AP), with seven out of eight schools offering AP classes. First developed by private high school faculty members, three elite American universities (Harvard, Princeton, and Yale) in collaboration with the College Board, AP is an American academic program for high school students and especially gifted students that offers college-level courses to better prepare them for college-level study (Nugent & Karnes, 2002).

The International Baccalaureate (IB) is an international academic curriculum designed specifically for geographically mobile students with the intention to develop academic credentials accepted worldwide. Unlike AP, IB is governed by the International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO) headquartered in Switzerland, but the IB credentials are accepted at American universities as well (Nugent & Karnes, 2002). Another difference between AP and IB is that IB offers its subjects and exams in different languages whereas all AP exams are administered in English except AP Foreign Language exams.

It is noteworthy that both programs that are believed to offer global academic credentials are developed in the western countries. This finding lends itself to the very question about the definition of global in an educational context. While the word global does not refer to specific regions or countries, it is a well-established fact that the flow of overseas students come from the developing nations to the industrialized nations; while only 15 percent of the students from Europe come to the United States, 55 percent of international students in the U.S.

come from Asia (Altbach, 2002). Drawing from World Systems Theory, I contend that the unequal flow of international students between the Western and Eastern countries is not only the result of the immense global power the core nations such as the United States and the European nations hold in the capitalist society but also the imperialist narrative embedded in the world societies and politics. Despite economic growth and increasing global power of some Asian countries, Asia has so long been positioned as Third World or developing countries that the recent shift in perspective and power are not fully accepted within the already-established global power nations. Indoctrinated by the imperialistic narratives and the histories of power dynamics around the world, Asian families, those who belong in the upper socioeconomic strata, have a tendency to look up and pursue the western way, one of which is shown through the attainment of 'global' education. When asked why she transferred from a Korean local school to International School B (Korea), Megan answered that an international school has a better education and offers "more diverse experiences and meeting new people from different countries". As such, what "the academic credentials more marketable at a global level" actually signify is the academic credentials that are created and developed in the west.

Wealth as a Prerequisite to Access Global Elite Education

The increasing demand and desirability for global education and academic credentials calls for a question of access. The table above lists the yearly tuition fee based on the academic year of 2021 to 2022 of each high school the interviewees attended. The tuition of the schools had a wide range from \$9,007 to \$63,250, with the median value of \$39,405 and the average of \$39,665. These numbers are particularly striking when compared to the national median household income in Korea, which approximates to \$25,641 in U.S. dollars (Statista Research Department, 2021). The national median household income amounted to 64 percent of the

average tuition fee of the interviewee's high schools, and around 40 percent of that of American private boarding schools. Although this finding does not represent neither the full demographics nor economic statuses of all Korean international students in NYC or the United States, it is important to keep in mind that the attainment of global education is not accessible to everyone who wants it and often times, the tuition fee of the private schools that offer global academic credentials function as a gatekeeper to enter the global elite education market.

Accumulation of Capital through Western Education

Bourdieu and Capital

After wealth or economical capital passed down from generation to generation is mobilized, the interviewees slowly become part of the elite community through accumulation of other capitals such as education, cultures, and social networks. The theory of capital accumulation introduced by Bourdieu (1986) argues that capital accumulates over time "as a potential capacity to produce profits and to reproduce itself in identical or expanded form" (Bourdieu, 1986). In this study, I echo the findings of Bass (2014) that once access to elite education is secured through mobilization of economic capital, selected educational institutions serve as a center to attain and accumulate capitals such as educational, cultural, and social in both objectified and embodied forms (Bass, 2014), ultimately contributing to perpetuation of social stratification and socioeconomic inequality in the Korean society.

Definitions of Capitals. Educational capital refers to "educational attainment and academic achievement acquired in school" (Bass, 2014). It is important to note that educational

institutions function as a place for knowledge production as well as social group formation, meaning that the choice of educational institutions could bestow social capital, that is, the social networks of friends and connections. Lastly, cultural capital is an asset that is either embodied in the form of behaviors and dispositions or objectified in the form of physical cultures such as books, movies, instruments, etc (Bourdieu, 1986).

The War Of Prestige: the Ivy League Brand, Educational Capitals, and Family Ties

The interviewees reported the heightened competition and anxiety in their school environments as the college application season approached. Abby shared her experience of applying to colleges.

Students [they] all had this inner desire to attain prestige by going to an Ivy League college or any like, top 20 or 30... it's also expectations put on by us by like our parents, like our relatives, like people around us, even your friends... the more competitive the environment you're raised in is I think people tend to compare them to themselves or assess their self worth, relative to other people.

Megan also recalled a similar experience, "honestly all Koreans wanted to go to like, Ivy League, like they look for name values. So we all applied to like Ivy League schools." David also confessed that he was "pressured to choose more of an Ivy League school because of expectations he's [I've] been getting from his [my] parents and friends." Although they did not explicitly state the prestige Ivy League holds, Laura who is at Columbia University and Brandon who is a student at Cooper Union also applied to Ivy League schools for their early decision. Both Laura and Brandon talked about their early decision schools casually without any particular resignation or excitement, or mention of the pressure from their family members.

The Ivy League, the international powerhouses of elite higher education (Khan, 2016), hold an immense power and privilege; it is a widely accepted narrative that an acceptance and diploma from an Ivy League school opens doors to incredible opportunities that may not be available to the graduates of other schools (Lindsay, 2021). There exist multiple studies that attest to the validity of this popular narrative. Bourdieu (1996) claims that the degrees from extremely elitist higher education institutions in France called *grandes écoles* are equivalent to an entry pass in large companies (Maxwell & Aggleton, 2015). Similarly, a recent research study revealed that the recruiters at the top law firms and management consulting and investment banking companies rely heavily on the applicants' college names and credentials in their hiring processes (Rivera, 2012; Tough, 2019). As such, the Ivy League brand becomes increasingly desirable to the soon-to-be elites who are eager to increase their opportunities for the future through accumulation of educational capitals.

What was particularly interesting about this finding was that the choice of higher educational institutions was not solely based on personal judgment but closely tied into the expectations of family members. This hints at the family-oriented practices and decision making in Korea, a culture embedded in the Confucian teachings and particularly the filial duty that serves as "the backbone of social relationships and guided children in the care of parents in Korean society" (Fan, 2015). Not only do parents feel the obligation to be part of the important decision making processes, the children or younger generations also feel the same amount of moral responsibility to include them as key decision makers (I. Lee, 2015). Despite the western educational backgrounds of the interviewees, their college decision making processes offer an insight into their family-oriented thinking that is more often associated with Korean and eastern cultures than that of the west, deeply ingrained in their subconsciousness.

Formation of social circles

The most frequently mentioned aspect of the interviewee's college experiences was the people they came to interact with in college. Abby shared her fascination with the people she met in college.

"Once you go to college, you realize that there are people with genuine career interests... There are people who are genuinely passionate about, like, what they want to do later, or like, their beliefs. And to me, it was just like, very respectful, like very respectable to see those kinds of characteristics and people. Talking to people who do have specific, like drives in their life, really open your eyes up and like make you motivated. And I think that's what also allowed me to really open myself up to different perspectives.... It also kind of inspired me to, to actually go out of my comfort zone and pursue interests that I want to pursue.

Abby highlights the ways in which her interactions with other students at Columbia University opened her eyes to multiple perspectives and motivated her to pursue her passions. These incredibly positive experiences and the networks of highly driven and talented people she built in college align with the findings from the literature in regards to the relationship between elitist higher education institutions, especially Ivy League schools, and the subsequent accumulation of social capital. Abby also joined a school newspaper club's web development team to further develop her skills and gain more practical experience in computer science, which ended up "being a huge boost to her [my] resume and getting her [me] future job opportunities."

The similar narratives and experiences emerged in the interviews with other participants as well. The following excerpt is Laura's response to the question 'How did your college experience influence your perception of future trajectories?'.

“I think it was less about the classes I took, and the major, but more about the people that I affiliated with, because especially being in a business fraternity... being surrounded by people who are so motivated in general, not just that club, but like every other club, there were people who are so motivated and like, coming up with their like, own projects, own companies and attending everything that they can, like, going to every contests motivated me a lot, and definitely having a lot of people who did all these different stuff around me and getting to chat with them and join in on their projects and doing them together.”

Similar to Abby, Laura also emphasized the positive impact her college friends left on her personal and professional growth. It is important to note that Laura and Abby go to the same college and although the findings cannot be generalized to all Ivy Leagues and other elitist institutions, it seems fair to argue that high motivation tends to be a prevalent trait in the student body of an Ivy League institution.

Although more toned down, this narrative did not just pertain to an Ivy League school; David at the NYU Stern School of Business stated that having alumni friends who are already working has been incredibly helpful during the recruitment process. In addition, Tina expressed gratitude for having come to NYU College of Dentistry which gave her the opportunity to connect with different people working in the field through the school-owned medical center. Brandon who finished his undergraduate program in the winter is currently working on a start-up project related to hydroponics with his college friends in different disciplines such as art, design, and engineering, whom he met by spending time at the school's design studios.

Through the active use of resources and clubs each school offers to its students, such as a business fraternity, a mandatory externship built in the nursing program, and the design studio open to the students of all disciplines, they found ways to build their social networks that could potentially give them future career opportunities but also psychological motivation and inspiration. Laura's response and her emphasis on the social connections over her academic

experience underlines the increasing importance of social capital as life after college approaches.

New York as a prime destination for opportunities and cultures

Another factor that largely contributed to accumulation of social and cultural capitals was the location of their schools, with six out of eight participants reporting location as one of the most determining factors that influenced their college decisions. There were several reasons for choosing NYC as their college destination, one of which being the networks and job opportunities. Four of the participants were drawn to the wealth of career and networking opportunities NYC could provide to the college students, helping them set foot in particular industries or build their network for their future careers.

David learned as early as middle school that NYC was the biggest city for finance by investing in stocks. Since then, he was firm on studying and landing a job in the finance industry. He spoke very highly of his college experiences in NYC, especially the relevant internship and networking opportunities NYC offers, and added that NYC set him on the right path to finance and business. Similarly, Tina was naturally attracted to a school in NYC as a nursing student because “there were a lot of connections she [I] could always make, and there are a lot of big hospitals.” Laura and Abby also reported that various job opportunities of the city made it a very attractive and desirable destination for college. Laura, who was a student at a U.S. boarding school located in the suburbs of a southern state, explained her decision to apply to Columbia through early decision as below:

“[When] I was thinking about college.... I tend to think 10 steps ahead and kind of like, imagine everything although it’s not going to happen. I just like, think about all the possibilities.... After I graduate and find where to look for

jobs, it would be nice to be in a big city like NYC, because there will be more opportunities.”

It was also interesting to hear that some students placed a heavier emphasis on the post-graduate opportunities than the academics as high school students applying to colleges. Abby was one of the students who emphasized her interest in the opportunities after graduation.

“I didn’t really focus on colleges for how good their academic program is for my major specifically because I knew that my major was flexible and that I could never be certain. Because of that, I just kind of focus on which college experience would give me the most beneficial experience once I graduate.”

The three participants who expressed their preference of NYC as a college destination due to social capital such as resources for career and network development are all upperclassmen and have utilized the location of their school to build a professional network and increase their chance of career development. As a result, all of them landed either highly competitive internships and full-time employment, a successful result of the accumulation of capitals over time.

While the plethora of job and networking opportunities allured the participants to choose colleges in NYC, it is also noteworthy that their reasonings were not purely academic or career-oriented. In fact, half of the participants shared that they desired to go to college in NYC largely because of their preconceived notions about the city based on the movies and TV shows that they watched. During the interview, Abby spoke about her childhood experiences of visiting NYC when living in the United States, but she indicated that her visits to NYC did not factor into her decision but rather it was “the fantasies and the things [I’ve] seen in movies.” Similarly,

Jasmine recalled watching American TV shows set in NYC in her teenage years which created a glamorous image of the city as a “mecca of fashion, film, and TV shows.”

Whether it was for the job and networking opportunities or the desire to live in the glamour of NYC that they have seen in movies, it seemed as though the choice of NYC as a college destination was not arbitrary but in fact very well thought-out and carefully calculated.

Chapter 5: STRUGGLES

Racialization and Ethnic Categorization in Social Spaces

Although racial and ethnic classification underlies the founding of the United States (Allen et al., 2019), race and ethnicity are rather unfamiliar concepts in a historically homogenous nation like Korea. Upon their arrival in the United States, many of them came to notice racial segregation and discrimination that took place in social spaces. Another dimension that played an integral role in their socialization and identity formation was their Korean ethnicity; while some students mainly interacted with their Korean international peers, others felt confused between the fine lines that divided Korean American and Korean Internationals. This section focuses on the processes of identity formation through race and ethnicity and how such processes place Korean international students in a liminal space where they continue to switch back and forth between Korean and American identities and cultures.

Navigating Racial Dynamics and Struggles

The interviewees who came to the United States for high school were more explicit about racial discrimination and power dynamics they experienced at their boarding schools. In the case of Jasmine, she recalled feeling pressured to hang out with white peers instead of Asian peers to avoid negative stereotypes of international students.

"I had no Korean friends from high school. So I really didn't know where I belonged. And then I think being the only Asian kid in the social friend group in high school really made me almost envy white people. Like I had this feeling that I'm a failure. If I have many Asian friends, I'm a failure... that was like engraved in my brain, because everyone's white and they always make

fun of the international students for being cliquy. And I was supposed to be the different one.”

Jasmine was not alone in this experience. Laura who also attended a private boarding school in the United States before college expressed her frustration with the lack of diversity and racial discrimination during her high school years. Laura did not speak of any expectations, whether positive or negative, she had about the schools in the United States; all she shared was that she envied her older brother’s boarding school experience which seemed much more fun and freeing compared to hers. She said that her high school just had one multicultural club because if they had clubs for different ethnicity groups, it would be one or two people per group. Having gone to school in a rural area in the South, Laura shared her experiences of being catcalled because of her identity as an Asian female. Through racial microaggressions and discrimination, Jasmine and Laura have come to understand the social positions Asians hold in the racialized American society.

If the racial experiences of Jasmine and Laura were targeted towards them, the experiences of other interviewees who came to the United States for college were more nuanced and based upon mutual discomfort rather than one-way oppression. Both Megan and Cindy were placed in a triple dorm room with one Asian female and one white female, and they both confessed that they did not get along with the white roommate in particular. They did not attribute their reasons for not getting along to racial differences but rather the differences in personalities and habits such as unfriendliness, extreme extraversion or introversion, or different sleep cycles.

While most female participants recalled experiences of racism, none of the male participants spoke about the experiences of racism or struggles related to racial dynamics. In fact, one of them negated my question about racial segregation and responded that he was able

to interact with people of different races through sports. Another male interviewee said that he didn't feel alienated because his school had a big Asian student population.

As they navigate racial tensions and divide at their colleges, some of the interviewees found themselves in predominantly Asian social circles. Laura speaks about the racial make-up of her social group in college.

"I don't think I deliberately looked for Asians, like, it just happens. And I feel like because we can make, not like racial jokes, but we would celebrate Lunar New Year's together and small stuff, like vibe. It's not that I don't chat with other people, but it's kind of home away from home."

In contrast, there was an interviewee who intentionally branched out from the naturally formed Asian social circles. Tina who grew up in Hong Kong and had a diverse group of friends in high school joined a panhellenic sorority group at school to make more friends that are non-Asian. Based on the interviews, Tina and David, two of the interviewees who studied outside Korea and were exposed to more diverse races since middle school, seemed to be more comfortable when interacting with people of different races. On the flip side, Cindy and Megan who have never been abroad before college were more cautious or uncomfortable talking about or interacting with people of different races, particularly white people.

Every student has different ways to understand and socialize within the system of race. Most interviewees found an Asian students' communities to be comforting and socially fulfilling and naturally grew closer to those who are of the same race, if not same ethnicity. These findings that point to homophily and comfort within the affinity spaces are in line with what was found earlier in literature on Asian and Korean Americans on American college campuses and a more recent study on Korean internationals. There was an exceptional case who made an intentional choice to branch out and socialize with people of different races, but this was rather

an additional friend group she made as she described herself as “someone who bounces back and forth between friend groups.”

Bonding or Distancing: Korean Students' Co-ethnic Affinity and Divide

There are multiple sides to the identities of Korean international students; one was their Asian race, and the other major identity was their Korean ethnicity. Five of the eight interviewees reported that they have met Korean international students who were going to the same colleges with them through official bonding events that took place in Korea. Abby met Korean internationals in Korea before even going to Columbia with alumni and at certain school-organized events. Jasmine had similar experiences to Abby; she joined a group chat of the incoming Korean freshmen and has gotten close to a couple of the students from the chat, who remain as her best friends to this day. In the case of Cindy, she got close to Korean international students at another school located in NYC and confessed that she is much closer to them than her college friends. For half of the participants, Korean students at their colleges found ways to connect with one another both online and in person before going to school. Throughout their college years, many of them stayed close to Korean friends that they met before college, and some continued to make efforts to keep ties to their Korean communities and cultures. Abby was a board member of two affinity groups that are specifically for Koreans in college to “be in touch with her [my] Korean culture.” Jasmine also decided to join an affinity organization for Korean students to stay connected with other Korean peers at her school.

What stood out was the co-ethnic divide that occurred between Korean American students and Korean international students. When Jasmine described her friend group, she said, “we have a mini friend group of Korean Americans and I am the only Korean Korean there.” Despite being a Korean international student, Jasmine shared that she had difficulty getting

along with Korean international students primarily due to their financial backgrounds and spending habits. That's when she first realized that money was an important element that determines friendships. Brandon said he gets along with both Korean Americans and Korean international students, but he noticed negative stereotyping of Korean international students by Korean American students such as name calling them "fob" , a term short of "fresh off the boat" which in fact refers to "an immigrant who hasn't yet grasped the customs, the language, or culture of the country they're immigrating to" (Abad-Santos, 2014)). In this context, however, it is used to describe mostly international students who are not assimilated to American culture.

The co-ethnic divide resonated with my college experiences as well. Being a Korean international student, I often found it difficult to relate to some Korean American friends who have been assimilated into American culture and political landscape. It is worth noting that even within subgroups such as ethnicity in the big category of race exists segregation, which further complicates and poses another challenge in the processes of identity formation for Korean international students.

Hovering Between Korean and American Identities

Asian. Korean International. Non-US Citizen. FOB. Korean international students juggle with different parts of their identities. In the interviews, there was a handful of evidence that indicated feelings of confusion KI students had about their identities. Having lived in America the past six years, Jasmine thinks that she cannot identify herself as fully Korean anymore. Instead, she said she would identify herself as Korean American because she spent her childhood there and her "identity developed significantly in the States." She feels more connected to American culture. What was striking about Jasmine's response was that she truly believes to have spent more time in America than she actually did. From what she shared in the

interview, she moved to America in the beginning of high school, which means she spent more than twice as much time in Korea than in America. Similar to Jasmine, Laura also found it somewhat difficult to relate to Korean culture.

“It is funny to say this as a Korean myself, but I think Korean culture, like, obviously, I am Korean. And I've been there like, for like, most of my life. So I am, like, pretty used to it. And I sometimes hate the culture here [in America]. But like, obviously, you just have to put up with it.”

She was not able to fully articulate her thoughts about her identity and perception of Korean and American cultures. However, what is noticeable is that while Laura admitted that she sometimes hates both cultures, she has to put up with the parts of American culture she hates. She was placed in a position where she disagrees with both cultures but has to make a decision to stick with one and just “put up with it,” which offers an insight into a dimension of identity struggle Korean international students may face.

When asked to share any experiences of cultural shocks, David said, “I think I was pretty used to American culture since childhood, because I went to summer school in the States when I was in middle school for a little bit, and I went to English speaking kindergarten.” Instead, he confessed that he faced more culture shocks when he was back in Korea for the military than in America. The military experience further distanced David from associating with Korean culture and in fact served as a motivation to stay longer in the United States.

The interviewees who were exposed to both Korean and American cultures seem to associate themselves more with the American culture in general, but many of them also expressed discomfort and frustration with racialization and ethnic categorization in an American society. Placed between their ties to American culture and the othering experiences

based upon their race and ethnicity, Korean international students struggled to fully identify the communities they belong to.

Employment and Legal Status of International Students

During four years in college, college students not only face struggles in the present moment but are also pressured to think forward. When the participants were asked to speak about their plans after college, seven out of eight participants either wanted to or had plans to stay in the United States instead of going back to Korea or exploring options in other countries. The participants' post graduate plans included working as a data scientist at a bank, a software engineer at a big tech company, an analyst in investment banking or private equity, a mechanical engineer, pursuing pre-professional tracks to become certified health workers such as nurse and dentist, or working in the entertainment industry. One participant who did not have plans to stay in the United States after college was Cindy whose father wanted her to come back to Korea and help him with his business.

America as a more desirable destination for career

According to the study mentioned earlier in the literature review, international students reported to prefer the United States to their home countries as a career destination for the reasons including higher political and public safety, access to recreational activities, cultural diversity, a higher standard of living, and better gender equality (Musumba et al., 2009). However, most of the reasons above were not brought by the participants. Although impossible to identify accurate reasons for this disparity in findings, one of the possible reasons could be that the sample of the study conducted by Musumba consisted of international students from India, mainland China, Korea, Mexico, Turkey, with the largest number of students from India.

Reasons such as higher political and public safety, access to recreational activities, and a higher standard of living did not seem to resonate with the current Korean international students as Korea has shown an outstanding economic performance and developed as a high-income economy with stable economic and political activities (Gurría, 2006; World Bank, 2021). Instead, the participants' responses engendered new insights and explanations for the desirability of the United States as a career destination from the perspective of KI students.

One factor that was commonly found both in the Musumba study and the interviews was gender inequality in the home countries. Laura, a graduating senior at Columbia University as well as a soon-to-be data scientist at a bank in NYC, criticized the work culture in Korea she experienced during her internship two summers ago.

“The work culture in Korea was just such a big factor [for not choosing to work in Korea after college] because especially as a woman in Korea, to navigate disparity at work... even though they say ‘Oh, this company is so progressive, and they’re so good about this stuff’, honestly, compared to the worst companies in the States, it’s still much worse than what’s worst here, I feel like as a woman, in Korea, I didn’t want to go through that.”

Laura recalled that at the company where she interned at, one of the biggest Korean conglomerates, her team's lead was the only woman team lead among at least 50 teams in that company. She did not go into detail to explain how she was discriminated against because of her gender identity other than the fact that the leadership team was heavily dominated by men. Instead, she had a lot more to say about the rigid hierarchical system of the Korean work environment.

“Even the chilliest startups still have that sort of like [hierarchy], it’s not horizontal. I will work at a bank. So they will have hierarchies but it’s hits different. Here [in America], they would still listen to you and be like ‘oh, let’s just hear what you have to say’. There [in Korea], it’s more like

commands instead of you actually like coming up with stuff and working. [That] kind of kills your creativity. So that was such a big factor.”

One year after she finished her internship at the Korean conglomerate, she did an internship in the United States for the summer and came back to Korea during the fall semester to work at a startup company which is deemed to have a more flexible and less hierarchical work environment. Although she enjoyed her work experience more than her previous internship, she was still able to notice subtle hierarchical forces in play at the startup she worked at. As Laura briefly described in the interview, the Korean companies she worked at did not give her enough agency to contribute to making important suggestions or decisions and her role was limited to listening to her managers and bosses and doing small tasks she was told to complete. In contrast, she had a very positive internship experience in the United States where she was given an opportunity to do several coding projects that culminated into a final presentation in front of the managers. At an American company, she felt more respected as well as challenged to push her boundaries and develop her hard skills.

Another theme that emerged in the interviews was the market size and influence of the United States in particular industries such as finance and entertainment. David made clear from the beginning of the interview that he came to NYC for college because of its leading finance market in the world; the same logic followed when it came to career. David was certain that he wanted to stay in NYC even after he graduates and work in Wall Street, which has been his dream and goal since he started buying stocks in middle school. For Jasmine, a third-year student at NYU, she expressed a strong interest in working in the entertainment and film industry after college.

“Because I want to stay in the big market, I don't want to go back to Korea. I don't want to work for the Korean television networks, you know? I really want to stay in the States or maybe in London and produce

movies and be in the film industry, like the entertainment industry... Ideally, I would stay in the States, or maybe go to Europe... If visa thing works out, I would probably work under a film director or like some sort of big creatives in Hollywood, or in like, NBC or something like Netflix.”

According to Statista, the United States ranked the largest film entertainment industry in 2018, producing revenue of 32.23 billion U.S. dollars. The measurement of size of the film industry was a composite value of box office revenue, advertising, physical and TV programming revenue (PwC, British Film Institute, 2018). Korea was ranked 8th after countries such as China, Japan, the United Kingdom, Germany, and France. As a student whose studies are focused on the representation of women in American media, Jasmine was eager to work in the American film industry where she is able to make use of the knowledge and skills she developed in college. Jasmine also added London as an alternative destination for career if her career search does not go as planned in America. She did not explain the reasons for her second choice, but it did not seem like an odd choice as it was the second largest english-speaking film industry in the world after the United States.

Megan and Laura, two students attending Columbia University, reported feelings of pressure and entitlement in relation to career and career destination choices. Megan, a second-year student majoring in Operations Research at Columbia University, confessed that she feels pressured to take advantage of the three-year work permit period she is granted with because of her STEM major.

“I do want to stay in the States because I'm a STEM major. I have a three-year OPT. So I feel like I have this advantage of staying longer in the States and I want to take advantage of it. But what am I going to do after that? What am I going to do after I'm done with my job? [Even] if I do get a good job in the States, I feel like it's hard for me to get another job in Korea. Because I feel like I'm not gonna get a really high position [in the United States]. Yeah. And it's really hard to be in a high position in the

company. Like it's hard because I'm Asian, and because I have no green card..”

What motivated Megan to stay in the United States after college was neither specific to her career aspirations nor in response to social issues in the workplace in Korea. Rather, she did not want to forgo the advantage she was given as a STEM major, the three years of work permit instead of one year, the length of work permit period for non-US citizens who did not major in STEM. At the same time, however, she was well aware that her career in the United States is unlikely to go any further than the three years of experience because of her race and foreign citizenship. It was striking to hear that Megan felt obliged to make use of the three-year work permit despite her understanding of limitations and oppression she may face in America. Similarly, Laura also acknowledged the privilege of having a right to work in the U.S. as an international student while positioning Korea as an option that is always available to her.

“I could go back to Korea later if I wanted to. And that's always an option. But if I started working in Korea, it would be much harder to come back here because even when I was a student here, it [getting a job] was hard. It's gonna be harder to just come directly from another country.”

Laura’s response really tapped into the consciousness of the international students without U.S. citizenship or green card, including myself. That the right to work in the United States is considered a coveted privilege only available to a small subset of Korean population who had access to American college education makes America more valuable and desirable of a choice than Korea where the KI students have no legal barriers to employment. The excerpts from Megan and Laura’s interviews suggest that the exclusivity and limited supply of work permit given to international students serve as a potential psychological factor that makes America a more attractive career destination.

Legal Barriers in Employment for International Students

When it came to discussions on career, there was a clear divide between international students who were Korean nationals and those with green cards. The most prominent concern among the international students without green cards was OPT and H-1B sponsorship. As introduced in the literature review, OPT is a temporary employment which allows F-1 international students to gain work experience in the United States for one year minimum, and three years maximum if the students have college degrees in the STEM field. The H-1B is a type of visa for high-skill non-U.S. citizens who wish to perform services in a “specialty occupation” temporarily. According to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, a specialty occupation requires specialized knowledge along with at least a bachelor’s degree or its equivalent (USCIS, 2021). Although the U.S. employers are not required to sponsor international students during their OPT period, most job applications ask all applicants if they eventually need sponsorship, typically phrased as “Do you require sponsorship now or in the future?”. For this question, all international students are required to answer “yes” as they will need sponsorship for a work visa after their OPT period. Laura discovered the limitations that are posed by her international student status while recruiting for internships and full-time jobs.

““My visa status was not helpful at all. Like it hurt more. First of all, just filtering out all the companies at once sponsor me but then even if they said they would sponsor like OPTs, not all companies are going to take me and that’s like, mostly bigger companies. So I didn’t really even have the choice to explore, like smaller companies or startups, because they don’t have the funds to sponsor an immigrant so my choices were very limited.” ”

As Laura reflected upon her job recruitment process during her junior year, she expressed frustration and the struggles she had to face throughout the recruitment process. Based on my personal observation, I noticed a pattern that the vast majority of the Asian international students who went to college in the United States and stayed in the United States for jobs were employed by big technology companies, consulting firms, or banks. The lack of representation of Asian international students in the non-STEM fields in America seemed to not only perpetuate the notion that Asians are able to achieve bigger academic and occupational successes but also reproduce the definition of success shaped by the elitist (in that international students from historically prestigious and elitist universities are more likely to make through the tough recruitment process at the big, well-known companies) and capitalist (in that these companies are known to have higher pays than smaller companies) forces. However, based on Laura's account of the international student recruitment process in the United States, I am inclined to argue that the strong preference for the international STEM forces exists and is in fact foundational to the law and system of the U.S. immigration law. In addition to the preference for the STEM workforce including medical and health professionals, Tina's experience hints at potential compromises international students may face in employment.

"First of all, because of my visa status, I am going to work under an agency that's going to sponsor me for a year straight after graduation because like OPT only lasts like a year... It's just kind of like a trade off. It's like, I work for you for like a year with like, less pay. And then we'll sponsor you, and then we'll sign you off for the green card deal.."

As an aspiring nursing practitioner, Tina had to find a hospital to work at. However, her status as a non-U.S. citizen limited her options even before she started looking for a job. Tina

lamented that her school failed to provide a CPT, Curricular Practical Training, that gives F-1 visa students an opportunity to take an internship to gain work experience in the United States as a student, and limited her opportunities to gain work experience prior to finding a full-time job. Due to her school's failure to provide CPT to international students, Tina and her classmates with green cards or citizenships were not on the level playing field even before they entered the job market. Not only did she not gain enough work experience compared to her peers, she also had to find a hospital that would sponsor her and settle for lower pay than her peers'.

Based on the stories Laura and Tina shared, I argue that the systemic and legal barriers such as OPT time limit and a 24-month extension for the STEM majors encourage international students who hope to stay in the U.S. to study certain disciplines that could potentially fill in the gaps within the American workforce in STEM, a repeated pattern since the 1965 Immigration Act which granted skilled workers, especially in STEM, entry and acceptance into the United States for immigration.

Chapter 6: CONCLUSION

This study on the educational experiences of KI students at U.S. colleges located in NYC has covered a wide range of themes that are divided into four big categories: Globalization and Class in Elite Education, Accumulation of Capital through Western Education, Racialization and Ethnic Categorization in Social Spaces, and lastly, Employment and Legal Status of International Students. Despite categorization, none of these stand alone; these categories are in fact a complex interplay of various factors such as wealth, race, legal citizenship in the sphere of education.

The first section, Globalization and Class in Elite Education, examines the international flow of the college students and the educational systems of the participants' high schools, all of which offered western college-level academic courses taught in English, and challenges the definition of global by suggesting that what is widely accepted as global academic credentials are in fact originated and produced in the West, mostly in the United States. I apply World-systems theory to explain the highly concentrated number of international students in the United States by situating the United States as not only the core nation economically but also the center of knowledge production worldwide. This section also discusses how one's financial ability and class are considered as an important factor to enter the global elite education market, emphasizing that access to global education and academic credentials is not open to everyone.

The second section, Accumulation of Capital through Western Education, focuses on the processes of applying to colleges and the participants' college lives with the focus on the formation of social circles. My research has revealed that these KI students made intentional choices in terms of the location and type of schools that they applied to, and the extracurricular activities that they joined. I argue that their meticulous planning is an unconscious act of

accumulating educational and social capitals which will prepare them to become elites in both Korea and the United States.

The third section, Racialization and Ethnic Categorization in Social Spaces, attempts to unpack the complex racial dynamics through the participants' social experiences in college which explore different approaches to making friends, the natural tendency to grow close to and form groups with the peers of same race or ethnicity, the divide between Korean Americans and Korean Internationals, and their struggles with juggling racial and cultural identities, especially for those who stayed in the United States for a longer period of time.

The final section, Employment and Legal Status of International Students, presents the participants' reasons for preferring to work in the U.S. instead of Korea, and some of the legal and systemic barriers for international students to break into the U.S. job market. This section also expands on the previous literature on conditional inclusion of Asians and the favoring of the STEM workforce by comparing it to the special OPT extension policy for STEM majors.

From the beginning, this study was largely driven by my personal curiosity around my identity and life: the questions I carried ever since I was considered an "international student" or *yuhaksaeng*. The act of documenting and listening to the experiences of the other *yuhaksaengs* that had similar educational backgrounds was therefore somewhat comforting; though everyone's experiences were unique in their own ways, I could not help but notice the shared essences and experiences of our adolescent and college lives. Our predetermined educational paths before college, the influence of family members and friends in college decisions, and the processes of forming social circles and grappling with one's sense of identity at the intersection of class, race, and citizenship had more similarities than differences, which helped me realize that I was not alone in this confusion, that this study is worth pursuing and has great potential to

deepen our collective understanding of the lives of KI students in the U.S. and increase support to help KI students navigate their U.S. college experiences.

Limitations and potential improvements for study

First, this study is by no means fully representative of the KI students in NYC or the United States at large. It is important to acknowledge that every individual has had unique experiences building up to and during college. In addition, the sample was not only small in size but was collected through snowball sampling which does not guarantee the diversity of the characteristics within the sample; some were my close friends and others were my acquaintances connected on social media platforms. This study further reinforced the notion that there is also a divide within the same ethnicity or the group of KI students based on subtle differences in backgrounds and financial status, and this sample was overrepresented by the children of elites who had the privileges and financial resources to send their children to the most expensive private international and boarding schools in Korea, China, and the United States. A bigger sample size and a sampling method assisted by Korean student organizations at different schools in NYC would have helped expand the scope of the sample and increase the robustness of this research.

Second, the research questions could have been more direct. Going into research, I was aware that the topics of research interest required a deeper investigation into the complex systems of class, race, and legal systems. However, my judgement was obstructed by fear and concerns about causing discomfort during the interviews, and I phrased the questions in a way that it is neither too intrusive nor direct. I was not entirely satisfied with the responses garnered from the interviews because they seemed to touch upon the experiences of the KI students only at surface level. Oftentimes, it felt as though the connections I made between the participants'

experiences and underpinning theories of research were not concrete enough to build strong arguments.

Another thing that could have been done alongside revising research and interview questions is conducting more rounds of interviews. Due to time constraints and what was stated in the agreement form, I was unable to conduct more than one round of interviews. With more direct questions about the systemic forces and a couple more rounds of interviews, the study would have provided more insight into the educational and legal systems that these students have direct experience with.

Lastly, the geographical focus limited the scope of the study. With everything turning online, I could have taken advantage of recruiting participants from all across the U.S. which would have drawn more varied and richer narratives from the KI students in the U.S.. Research on KI students is highly lacking in literature about Asian American or Asian international students, and therefore widening the region from NYC to the United States as a whole may have been helpful to increase an understanding of the KI students' experiences.

Last words

Throughout this research, I continued to ask myself the same question over and over again: *Why did we, or our parents, want to leave Korea so bad for the educational purposes?* I had a hypothesis largely based upon my empirical experiences and understanding of both educational systems, but I always disregarded the question as too personal and irrelevant, that I just needed to stay silent and be content with the privileges I was given with. However, when I came to realize that this is not a phenomenon unique to me but in fact a shared and repeated one among many KI friends, I became more confident in the academic approach I hoped to take for this research.

The stories about the children of the richest Korean families attending high schools and universities in the United States are no longer surprising but rather expected and naturally accepted in Korean society. *If you have money, you leave, preferably to the United States. The land of opportunities, innovation, and liberal thinking.* More than sixty years has passed since the Korean War and Korea has now developed into one of the industrial nations, and yet the rich still go searching for the better in America. My family and I were also a part of the system that perpetuated this notion about America, which I found to be flawed only after I came to America. Faced by racial power dynamics and legal barriers against international students, my long-preserved vision of America shattered into pieces.

While I cannot deny the immense power, knowledge, and social capitals I have gained through my education in the United States, I am just as much critical of this phenomenon of study abroad preserved for the richest, the glorified vision of America in Korean society, and the subsequent reproduction of wealth, class, and elites. It is a highly complex situation that I struggle to balance pros and cons of and to judge whether pros outweigh cons or vice versa. Getting close to anything proximate to answers or a conclusion for this complex situation will require a constant evaluation and reflection upon my racial and ethnic identity as well as the educational and social experiences in both countries.

Another critical dimension of this research that calls for attention is the indoctrination of elitist values in Korean society. The section on accumulation of capital through western education paints a bleak reality of the internal and external pressures of the students to “make it to the top” and to earn prestige in the educational landscape. This reality that I was working to make sense of building off of my participants’ narratives was further confirmed by the recent incident in which my high school college counselor referred to me as “an alumna who attended a small liberal arts college, a college which many people in South Korea are not familiar... was

accepted into Harvard University for graduate school” in a mass email sent out to all parents of Grade 12 students. This incident was defeating and infuriating to say the least. However, an incident like this gives me even more reasons to fight to tackle the systemic injustice and perpetuation of the values that are detrimental to personal growth of this particular group I belong to, the group essentially defines the core of my identity.

There is still so much to be discovered and unpacked in this research, but I will allow my future endeavors to continue to not only grapple with the flaws in the system and society but to fight for the values I believe in. I'd like to finish my thesis with my response to the email sent by the college counselor, my first attempt to work towards increasing awareness about the existing problems within the educational culture and dismantling the blinding faith in elitism.

Dear CI College Counseling Team,

I am a CI alumni from Class of 2017 who will be graduating from Vassar College this June.

It has come to my attention that the email sent out to the parents of the current G12 students at CI on behalf of the college counseling team included a story about me, “a CI alumna who attended a small liberal arts college, a college which many people in South Korea are not familiar... was accepted into Harvard University for graduate school.”

Although I am well aware that the email was targeted towards the parents, I do want to express my discomfort with the way my story was described in this email and address the ways in which the message the team is trying to convey through my example is not only misleading but harmful for the students as well as the parents of the CI community.

I want to begin by clarifying that I went to Vassar College by choice.

I have always wanted small classes, opportunities to build relationships with professors, and a tight-knit community from college, and a liberal arts college was an option that I wanted, not an alternative to an Ivy League or a “better known” undergraduate college.

In addition to all the great resources Vassar has offered, the school funded half of my tuition and made my college education more affordable despite my status as a non U.S. citizen, setting an example for other higher education institutions that do not grant financial support to international students.

The fact that the school that has given me so much is merely reduced to a small liberal arts college that Koreans are not familiar with or a stepping stone to get to Harvard is not only offensive but in fact hurtful, not to mention that the Vassar name was not even mentioned in the email whereas Harvard was noted as Harvard instead of the term “an Ivy League school” or “a big research university.”

Though I agree that life does not end with the college decisions of high school students, I am not entirely convinced that my acceptance to Harvard graduate school serves as a testament to the argument.

In fact, I do want to emphasize that college decisions are quite important because it does determine to an extent the groups of people the students come to interact with, the opportunities for learning and jobs, and the community they reside in for four years, which is probably the reason why college consulting services such as the one mentioned in Operation Varsity Blues were created in the first place, and for that matter, college consulting teams exist in high schools worldwide.

Vassar and other small liberal arts colleges that people in Korea may not know well are great institutions in and of themselves that do not need a Harvard or an Ivy League badge to validate their value.

An email like this that relegates a liberal arts college to a “small, lesser known undergraduate college in which Koreans are not familiar with” only contributes to the ever-increasing obsession with the name value and so-called elitist institutions, and I believe that everyone on this team is fully aware of the repercussions of the collective toxic mentality of the parents and students who become overly obsessed with the glamour of the elitist U.S. colleges.

Lastly, I would have much appreciated it if I was asked for consent to use my story in the email.

My four years at Vassar have been incredibly fulfilling and satisfying both intellectually and personally.

As a graduating senior, I do believe more firmly than ever that what the students gain out of their college experiences are really up to them - if they make use of the resources and stay open to various opportunities and experiences, they will be able to make the most out of their time in college. Based on my experience and observation, the vast majority of colleges that the CI students apply to are already quite prestigious and resourceful, so it really comes down to what they make of it.

This is the message that is far more valuable and healthier than a mere example of an alumni going from a small and unknown liberal arts college to Harvard graduate school; at least that is not what I hope to convey through my experience.

Me going to Harvard is not a success story of a small liberal arts college student who worked her way up to land a place at an Ivy League school.

It is a part of my learning journey that is just as valuable as my Vassar education.

Best,

Alex Kim

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Appendices

Appendix A. Higher Education Destinations of Top 10 Korean Conglomerates' CEOs (2017)

Business name (in the order of the highest financial assets)	The business leaders' education attainment		
Samsung Group	Lee Kun-hee (Chairman):		U.S.
	M.A. George Washington University		
	Lee Jae-Yong (Vice Chairman):		Korea
	Ph.D. Harvard Business School		
LG Group	Koo Bon moo (Chairman):		Japan
	M.S. Cleveland State University		
	Ha Hyun Hwoi (President):		
	M.A. Waseda University		
Hyundai Kia Automotive Group	Chung Mong-koo (Chairman):		
	B.S. Hanyang University		
	Chung Eui-sun (Vice Chairman)		
	M.B.A. University of San Francisco		
SK Group	Chey Tae-won (Chairman):		
	M.S. University of Chicago		
	Chey Jae-won (Vice Chairman):		
	M.B.A. Harvard University		
GS Group	Huh Chang-soo (Chairman):		
	M.B.A. Saint Louis University		
	Huh Jin-soo (Vice Chairman):		
	M.S. The George Washington University		
Lotte	Shin Dong-bin (CEO):		
Hanwha	M.B.A. Columbia University		
Hanjin	Kim Seung-yeon (CEO):		
Hanjin	M.A. DePaul University		
	Cho Yang-ho (Chairman):		
	Ph.D. Inha University		
Kumho Asiana Group	Park Sam-koo (Chairman):		
	B.A. Yonsei University		
	Park Se-chang (President):		
	M.B.A. Massachusetts Institute of Technology		
Doosan	Park Yong-man (CEO):		
	M.B.A. Boston University		
	Park Seo-won (CCO):		
	School of Visual Arts		

Appendix B. Research Study Informed Consent Form

A Phenomenological Study on Korean International Students (*yuhaksaengs*), Pre-college Educational Backgrounds, and New York City College Experiences

Ji Won (Alex) Kim '21 Vassar College | B.A. Education, Asian Studies

You are invited to participate in a research study about Korean International students in New York City and the study abroad phenomenon. You are selected as a potential participant because you identify as a Korean international student enrolled in college in New York City. Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to take part in the study.

Brief description of the study: The purpose of this study is to document and gain a better understanding of the lived experiences of Korean International students in New York City. Having grown up as an international student herself, the researcher attempts to identify the essences of the shared and distinct experiences of Korean International students. The study will focus on the following topics: K-12 educational experiences, motivations behind attending college in New York City, college experiences and challenges faced as an Asian/Korean International student, and future trajectories.

What you will be asked to do: If you agree to participate in this study, you will fill out a short google form and take part in an interview with the researcher. The form has four questions about your basic information (name, age, school) and it will take less than two minutes to complete. The interview will take between 30 minutes to one hour and will be done digitally over Zoom. The researcher will ask a set of questions about your educational background, academic and social experiences and challenges faced as an Asian/Korean international student both in college and New York City, and potential post-graduate plans if there are any. With your permission, the interview will be videotaped and you may choose to turn off your camera if you wish.

Data Collection and Confidentiality: The video recordings are for transcription purposes only and will not be shared with anyone other than the researcher. Your identities (name, sex, age) will be kept confidential and you will be assigned a pseudonym in the study. However, the name of your college will be revealed in the research.

Participating in this study is voluntary: Your participation is completely voluntary. Even if you decide to participate now, you will be able to change your mind and stop any time. You may choose to withdraw or not answer some questions during the interview for any reason.

If you have any questions about this research study, please contact Ji Won (Alex) Kim at jiwonkim@vassar.edu or (010)-3002-4838.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

**Vassar College Institutional Review Board has determined that this study is no more than minimal risk and exempt from IRB review under section §46.104 (d)(2)(ii)* of the governing regulations.*

Statement of Consent: I have read the above information, and have received answers to any questions I asked. I consent to take part in the study and have my interview videotaped.

Your Signature _____ Date _____ Your Name

(printed) _____

This consent form will be kept by the researcher for at least three years beyond the end of the study.

Appendix C. Video Recording Release Form**Audio/Video Recording Release Form**

Title: A Phenomenological Study of Korean International College Students in New York City

Thesis Advisor: Ah-young Song, Hua Hsu Student Researcher: Ji Won (Alex) Kim' 21

As part of this project, I will be making audio and video recordings of you during your participation in the research. Please indicate you are willing to permit the use of these recordings by signing the form at the end. This choice is completely up to you. I will only use the videotapes for internal use in the research project and the videos will not be released anywhere and viewed by anyone else. The audio files may be shared with an external transcription service but all data will be "securely stored and transmitted using TLS 1.2 encryption, the highest level of security available" and transcribed by machines. If you agree, please sign below.

I have read the above descriptions and give my consent for the use of the audio and video recordings of me as indicated by my initials above (You must be at least 18 years old to sign this form for yourself).

Printed Name _____

Address _____

Signature _____ **Date** _____

Appendix D. Interview Questionnaire

Interview Questions

RQ1: What factors determine the Korean International (KI) students' decisions to study abroad in NYC?

pre-college

- Walk me through your education journey! Where did you go to elementary, middle, and high school? In which country? Public, private, charter schools?
- When and how did you decide you want to apply to schools in the US?
 - Did you have any pressure to choose a certain school? If so, why? To what degree did college name / elitist status play into your decision?
- Did you know you wanted to come to NYC for undergraduate? If so, why?
- What were the appeals of NYC?

RQ2: In what ways are the Korean International (KI) students' college, both academic and social, experiences in NYC similar to or different from their expectations?

Academics

- Why did you choose your major? Did you know what you wanted to study going into college or did you figure out in college? Did it change from your original plan? If so, how and why did it change?
- Any academic challenges? What's similar to & different from your expectations?
- What kinds of classes did you take? (ex. Major-related, liberal arts, classes about one's heritage and background)
- What types of classes did you take? (ex. Big lectures, small discussions, etc.)

Social

- To whom do you feel most connected when you are in college? (ex. High school friends, college friends, family members, etc.)
- Did you have any significant challenges in your social life in college? (ex. Making friends, adjusting to a new environment, etc.)
- Did you experience any culture shocks coming to a 1) US college and 2) NYC?
- What was your experience like managing finances 1) at a college and 2) living in a city?

RQ3: How have their college experiences in NYC influenced future trajectories of Korean International (KI) students?

Post grad

- What are your post-grad plans? (ex. staying in NYC? Korea? Or other countries?) Why?
- What has influenced your plan/decision?
 - Is a sense of financial security their determining factor?
 - Is your visa status a determining factor?
- Has your college experience influenced your perception of future career/trajectory? If so, how?