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Book Review

Early Study-Abroad and Identities: Korean Early Study-Abroad Undergraduates, by Mun Woo Lee, Singapore, Springer, 2016, 99 pp., \$54.99 (US), ISBN 978-981-287-908-0

Lee's *Early Study-Abroad and Identities: Korean Early Study-Abroad Undergraduates* is a thoughtful explication of the links between the perceptions about English language and Korean ethnicity. Laid out in six chapters, the book advances our understanding of a group of partly American-bred South Korean individuals in an important way. Lee accomplishes this through her refreshing illustration of how the reshaping of and tensions in their identities take root in their transnational experiences. As a whole, Lee's book represents a serious effort in overcoming the tendency to essentialize Korean Americans.

Lee situates her study within a migration trend in South Korea associated with a historical desire to learn English in America. Inevitably, this trend has left a sizable group of young migrants caught between Korean and American societal norms, regardless of the successes in acquiring the language. Lee's theoretical approach foregrounds how identities are negotiated through language, ideology, power and social discourses beyond classrooms. Instead of portraying ethnic minorities as underprivileged, Lee discusses how her participants take up different ideologies in identifying themselves not merely as Koreans, Americans, or Korean Americans, but at times as quasi-cosmopolitans.

The book features 22 university students of Korean descent, also referred to as 1.5 generation Korean Americans, who mostly moved to the U.S. in their teenage years. The identities that are so embedded within the social discourses of the participants are made tangible by Lee's unique methodological approach. The individual and focus group interviews, complemented by elicitation techniques and participant-produced drawings, enrich the interview data and depiction of different identity positions.

As Lee journeys us to her participants' accounts and drawings, it is apparent that English language skills connote privilege. By the same token, not attaining a certain standard of English shuts them out from being on par with native English speakers. Lee's findings also hint that this issue is not simply about whether or not Korean early study-abroad students could successfully acquire English. This is because English is embedded in what Lee's participants thought to be a powerful country—America. Such a stance points to how America's cultural diversity and capitalistic tendencies subjugate Korea in terms of geographical and economic prowess, at least in the minds of many Korean early study-abroad individuals. In tracing the roots of these beliefs, Lee underscores the prevalence of a Korean ideology resulting from the Korean War in that English is connected to money and power.

At this point, readers would perhaps be interested in knowing whether the same belief about America holds true among Korean individuals with similar migration backgrounds in other English-speaking nations. Although the thought that Korean early-study abroad individuals cannot become native English speakers prevents them from asserting a more American identity position, English is still invoked upon as an

instrumental tool that opens “the door to the world” (p. 52), placing them in an advantageous position as bilinguals that promotes career and social status. Yet, this view is not uncontested, such as when English is regarded by some participants only as a means of communication.

Lee then moves on to discuss how the ethnicity of early study-abroad students is complexly situated within the continuum of Korean and American positions. Fitting neither extreme, Lee details how her participants dissociate themselves from Koreans who grew up entirely in Korea and second generation Koreans who were born and raised in America. For example, Lee highlights how “pure” Korean students are described as more conservative and how second generation Korean-Americans are seen as ignorant of their Korean roots. These accounts convey a form of othering, uniquely positioning Korean early study-abroad students in a world that constantly borders on Korean and American identities, yet not fully being attached to either.

If the ideas in this book are to be taken further, one would ponder upon how the identities are tied to the cultivation of social activism. The book seems to have truncated social activism to developing the self-awareness of being privileged individuals (stemming from the study abroad experience) who should cherish what they have and take pity on those who are less privileged. If so, one could ask what identities or sociocultural environments are conducive to developing social activism. More importantly, why does the upbringing of Korean early study-abroad students limit the cultivation of social activism? These points certainly indicate room for further discussion.

Nevertheless, in skillfully combining rich data with rigorous analysis, Lee’s writing is accessible and keeps jargon to a minimum. Collectively, the book testifies to how traversing two distinct cultures can result in multiplex and shifting identities, representing positions that neither fully alienate nor immerse 1.5 generation individuals in their ethnic origins and host societies. Because of the malleability of power and identity in those contexts, as Lee demonstrates, we are reminded of how developing global citizenship is enmeshed in contested cultural ideologies despite having both legs in two different cultures.

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