Chapter 8

Drifting Houses, Shifting Anchors: A Case of Transnational Higher Education in Korea

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ABSTRACT

Based on a new American college campus in Korea’s Incheon Free Economic Zone, the authors in this chapter examine the experience of a set of students who challenge the traditional categorizations of “international” students and are often not counted in standard statistics on transnational student mobility. The authors discuss the changing nature and value of English-language education in this international setting, the increasing number of these students who already have international experience, and how these students themselves navigate a range of national and international identities. The authors also identify challenges these new international students pose for academic faculty and staff, particularly how to reconcile the different claims that students, staff, and faculty make about the meaning of being international.

INTRODUCTION

As scholars seek ways to describe the complexity of international student mobility, metaphors proliferate – “push-pull,” “brain drain, gain, or circulation,” “talent circulation,” “moving out to move up” (e.g., Bhandari and Blumenthal, 2011; Goodman and Gutierrez, 2011; Oleksiyenko, 2013). Students similarly search for metaphors appropriate to their experience. In the case we will describe, a student once described her cohort as “drifting houses” in the new global world, referencing the title of Lee’s (2012) short story collection, Drifting House.

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Lee’s stories offer an image of Koreans who are themselves in motion, becoming the drifting houses for others in motion, thus producing a kind of double transitoriness – an evocative image that seems suited to the students we consider here. As we will see, for these students “drifting” involved migration of various kinds, including to traditional destination countries like the U.S. as secondary-school students, but also a move back to their “home” country, Korea, to attend the branch campus of an American university. With that return, these students were yet again “foreign” and “international.” In this configuration, Korea also changed, becoming neither simply an origin nor destination country, but rather a place that students and parents could consider an anchor, likely temporary, for a higher education experience that was global in orientation, English-based in practice, and conceptualized through the lens of individual and familial “mobility.” Thus, “drifting” seemed an apt metaphor for the experience of these students, as it moved beyond the ideas of linearity and progress that have often driven approaches to international education. In this paper we will use the experience of the students at Mason Korea, George Mason University’s new campus in Incheon, South Korea, as a cipher for considering new variants of international education, which include new student origins, destinies, and aspirations in transnational higher education.

Mason Korea is a brick-and-mortar American institution on the Incheon Global Campus, a campus built by Korean national and municipal governments to house several, invited, American and European universities. With its first class matriculating in Spring 2014, Mason Korea is of interest for several reasons. First, its location in Korea connects it to one of the most complex and pervasive cases of international education in the contemporary world. Many Korean children are targeted by their parents for international education very early in life. A belief that early exposure to English is crucial has resulted not only in an emphasis on English in public schools and in private after-school “cram” schools (hagwon), but also in life-changing decisions to educate children abroad whether by sending them away, often for many years, to live with relatives, or to split parental residence typically with a father remaining at work in Korea (the so-called “wild goose” father, because he flies back and forth) and a custodial mother with the children in another country. Many of these split “wild goose” (gireogi) families have located in the suburbs of Northern Virginia – home both to George Mason University and a public school system with a high reputation in Korea.

A second major value of the Mason Korea case lies with the fact that the Incheon Global Campus is itself a Korean-government initiative; it is a multi-university, “global campus” in the middle of the designated Incheon Free Economic Zone. The Incheon Global Campus provides an option for students whose experience and goals locate them between the two major international education paradigms in Korea and elsewhere. That is, they are neither typical “going overseas” Korean students nor typical “staying at home” students who seek an internationally-oriented program within a Korean university. There are already many Korean students in both categories. These students we describe, however, are generally already international in their educational experience and background. For them, international education is not simply a goal for the future, but rather an already existing part of their past. These students are an exceptionally good example of what international education may come to mean for the increasing numbers of college-entering students who are already international in their personal and educational experience.

Last, higher education in Korea is a particularly good example of the many ways in which international education can be understood. The definitions of international education are varied, with a “great deal of confusion” (Knight, 2004, p. 5) and with changes over time that may reflect more the viewpoints of those writing the definitions than the nature of international education itself (Whitsed & Green, 2014). Institutional goals for international education can range from profit to national development (Gürüz, 2009); student goals can encompass increasing economic capital and broadening cultural horizons; the
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