

## Globalization, Mobility and Education Migrants: *Education Exodus in South Korea*

*South Korea's Education Exodus: The Life and Times of Study Abroad*, by Adrienne Lo, Nancy Abelmann, Soo Ah Kwon, and Sumie Okazaki. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015. 362 pages. ISBN: 9780295994918.

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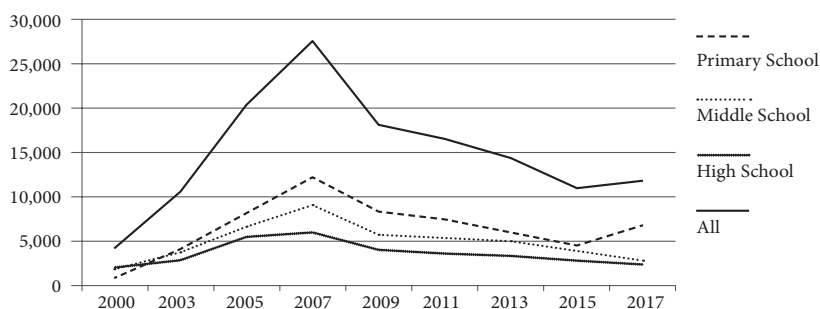
As part of a general trend of celebrating English in neoliberal societies, English has become a “must-have” language in contemporary South Korea (J. Park 2009; J. Park and Lo 2012). On the one hand, a good command of English demonstrates one’s ability to participate in global communications and become a competitive member of the globalized world. Equally important, mastery of English shows one’s constant effort to develop his/her skills and meet the needs of neoliberal logics. Joseph Sung-Yul Park (2011) claims that South Korean people hold a strong belief in the “promise of English,” which promulgates the idea that good English skills can improve one’s chance of obtaining a good job and a socioeconomically secure life. Many South Korean companies require their job applicants to demonstrate a high score on certified English tests such as TOEFL and TOEIC, and that English is used as a major tool to decide one’s academic and professional achievement on various occasions including school entrance exams and job promotions. In this context, the “promise” of English does not simply result from people’s imaginations, but rather from their own experiences of being authenticated or marginalized based on their English proficiency in the precarious market. In addition, they have already seen how people with high English proficiency and possibly overseas education

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have positioned themselves in socio-politically desirable positions such as a minister, a CEO and even a president. They have also been widely exposed to fairytale-like success stories where people claim their English and/or overseas study have helped them become rich and famous. Their prior observations combined with their “fear of falling” (Besnier 2009) have generated an overwhelming emphasis on English and English education, resulting in a large number of education migrants in South Korea since the late 1990s.

Since the late 1990s, the number of South Korean education migrants has rapidly increased. In particular, the number of pre-university young people who travel to English-speaking countries for educational purposes has multiplied by more than five times from 2,259 students in 1995 to 11,754 in 2017. This has resulted in the social phenomenon known as *jogiyuhak* which translates to “pre-college-aged study abroad” or “early study abroad” (ESA, hereafter). The increasing popularity of ESA is generally understood as South Korean parents’ cosmopolitan striving (S. Park and Abelman 2004) and their investment strategy to raise their children a competent English speaker (Bae 2013; Song 2010), driven by their strong belief in the “promise of English.” As shown in figure 1, the popularity of ESA has resulted in a rise in participation by young students and families from different socioeconomic strata as well as the diversification of ESA trajectories in terms of the length of the stay and the types of destinations.



**Figure 1.** The Number of ESA Students  
Source: Korean Educational Statistics Service (2019).

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This volume is the first collection that brings together the efforts of scholars and experts from different disciplines whose work broadens our collective understanding of the recent education exodus from South Korea. The 13 contributors investigate multiple aspects of ESA, such as tracing the change of its discourses, and the negotiation and navigation of ESA students and their families while studying and living abroad. The volume brings together a collection of new and original works by leading scholars and practitioners that highlight the dynamics of the education exodus in contemporary South Korean society. The contributed chapters cover a variety of issues related to how to understand the newly emerging phenomenon of ESA from a broader historical, sociopolitical, and economic context as well as how to understand the day-to-day experiences of ESA students and their families abroad.

The book is divided into five parts, beginning with Part I as it traces the emergence and development of ESA in contemporary South Korea. Part II examines the goals and aspirations of students and their families who participated in the ESA. Part III explores how these students and their families negotiate different tensions and dynamics surrounding the practice of ESA, especially focusing on their struggle to position themselves as a legitimate global citizen. Part IV then introduces the students and their families and their day-to-day experiences and challenges regarding their long-term involvement in ESA. Finally, in Part V, the book closes with two chapters that include firsthand accounts of an educator and a former ESA student who have witnessed the rapid increase of ESA students in their school.

The volume begins with an overview of South Korea's education exodus. As editors, Adrienne Lo, Nancy Abelman, Soo Ah Kwon, and Sumie Okazaki offer a dynamic perspective of ESA in South Korea. They position it within a comparative East Asian perspective, a Korean historical perspective, and a perspective on the recent sociopolitical and economic changes in South Korea. While they cover the historical presence of the exodus and its social meaning on the Korean Peninsula, they additionally provide a historical outline of how ESA has been developed in contemporary South Korean society in relation to the process of neoliberal globalization, education reform, and the economic crisis. Importantly, they highlight the fact that

the maturation of ESA starting from the beginning of the 2000s requires a more dynamic and complex understanding of educational migration in South Korea. These revelations could open a dialogue among scholars and practitioners from different disciplines.

In Part I, titled “*The lay of the land*,” two chapters explore how the trend and pattern of ESA has changed over time. Based on the analysis of demographic and survey data, Chon Sun Ihm and Hee Jung Choi (ch. 1) illustrate the demographic and social characteristics of ESA students and their parents since 2000. Their analysis reveals that the ESA system has been diversified in terms of the age of the participating students, their destinations, and the socioeconomic backgrounds of their families. Jiyeon Kang and Nancy Abelman (ch. 2) examine how the media’s portrayal of both successful and failed ESA has changed over time. They claim that the ESA discourse has been largely domesticated, reflecting the anxious sociopolitical and economic climate of South Korea. They further point out the second phase of ESA starting from the 2000s needs to be understood as an extension of the education fever in South Korea.

Part II, “*Navigating class and the global*,” comprises three chapters addressing the goals and lives of ESA students in their host countries, which include New Zealand, Singapore, Canada, and the United States. In Chapter 3, Bon Giu Koo describes transitional experiences of South Korean migrants in New Zealand, and also focuses on how the South Korean middle class perceive and understand the transnational social field in New Zealand. Based on the life histories of 21 current and former ESA students and their parents in New Zealand, he shows how their transnational experiences and aspirations are largely shaped by, and in respond to social class discourses in South Korea. The next two chapters examine the ways in which Korean education migrants in Singapore deal with different challenges and make sense of their ESA practice. Joseph Sung-Yul Park and So Hee Bae (ch. 4) investigate the complexities of the ESA market in Singapore and contesting means of “success” among ESA families. They highlight the constant negotiation and navigation of ESA families within the local constraints and resources. Jeehun Kim (ch. 5) documents the story of lower middle-class Korean education migrant families

in Singapore who found themselves being “stuck” there without achieving academic success nor being able to return to South Korea. He demonstrates how the experiences of ESA students and their families are largely shaped and influenced by their financial resources, which could potentially limit their choices and actions.

Part III, “*The dilemmas of global citizenship*,” builds on this information and examines the issue of how ESA students and their families perceive global citizenship, and claim their legitimacy as a global citizen with a successful ESA experience. Three chapters which make up Part III include Yoonhee Kang’s study of the construction of “global yet Asian” identities among Korean migrants in Singapore (ch. 6), Hyunjung Shin’s description of everyday stylization and positioning of cosmopolitan “cools” among ESA students in Canada (ch. 7), and Adrienne Lo and Jenna Kim’s investigation of the complicated positioning of returnees in South Korea (ch. 8). These three contributions reveal the very complex dynamics and ideologies associated with the promise of ESA, local tensions and discourses, and the socially recognizable meaning of a global citizen in South Korea. Such complexities are well illustrated by Lo and Kim in chapter 8: “Being an ESA student often meant years of thinking strategically about one’s future, calculating and planning where to go next, restlessly evaluating what opportunities to pursue that would pay off down the road. In the end, returnees continued to orient to this distant future even after their return” (p. 184).

The focus in Part IV, titled “*Managing early study abroad*,” documents the day-to-day life and experience of ESA students and their families; the contested ethno-cultural, legal and religious identities of Korean transnational mother in the United States (ch. 9); the everyday experience of ESA students in the United States who need to constantly deal with American racial ideologies and negative stereotypes (ch. 10); and the psychological effects of the ESA experience on parental bonding, parent and peer attachment, cultural orientation and acculturative stress (ch. 11). These contributions remind us that the ESA experience is not only about studying abroad and learning a new language but also about being exposed to different tensions, discourses, and identity options, and sometime resulting in living apart from one’s family and

friends for a long period of time.

Part V, “*The field speaks*,” closes it all out with two chapters that offer personal narratives by the educator Rick Williams (ch. 12) and the education migrant Joshua (Namkyu) Kang (ch. 13). In Chapter 12, Williams shares his experiences and observations of having a rapidly growing number of Korean education migrants in his school. The following chapter by Kang provides a first-person narrative where he reflects as a former ESA student on his educational journey from a lonesome pupil to a confident university student in the United States. These final contributions provide a vivid picture of how the recent South Korean education exodus has changed the lives of teachers and students alike.

The strength of this book is the diversity of its content, as each chapter helps the reader to better understand the diversity of ESA and broaden our scope on education migration in a range of interdisciplinary perspectives. The contributors come from a wide range of disciplines, all of which are attempting to understand and explain South Korea’s educational exodus: applied linguistics, anthropology, communication, education, psychology and sociology. As editors point out, many authors featured in this volume have extensive experience as educators, researchers and/or former ESA students and their families who “care deeply about the phenomenon not merely as an academic topic of inquiry but as individuals whose lives have been personally impacted by this educational exodus” (p. 18). They thus draw from a wide variety of backgrounds and experiences, which greatly enriches this volume’s content.

Another strength lies in the breadth of the presented methodological and geographical approaches. The approaches include detailed case study analysis, ethnography, media discourse analysis, and analysis of quantitative survey data. Additionally, their research sites include both the home country (South Korea) and foreign destination countries (e.g., the United States, Canada, Singapore and New Zealand). While a range of methodological and geographical approaches allow readers to explore the dynamics of ESA and its related discourses from both macro and micro perspectives, a diverse geographical scope offers them the opportunity to develop their own views

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on the given topic.

The volume provides an in-depth overview of the phenomenon of ESA, which serves as a guide to future research on education migration in contemporary South Korean society. As suggested by the editors and contributors, future research on ESA needs to look at its changing dynamics which include the sudden decrease of its students starting from the late 2000s, the diversification of ESA practice in terms of ESA destinations, ESA programs and the length of stay abroad, the socially constructed meaning of ESA, and the emergence of the damaging media discourses regarding its students and returnees in South Korea. Future research also needs to pay greater attention to the day-to-day experiences of ESA students and returnee students in our education system. The focus should be on practical issues such as the (re)adjustment of these students to both their host and home countries and their identity (re)negotiation both at home and abroad.

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