



The Global Hegemony of Korean Universities under US Influence: *Examining the Experiences of Thai Students Studying at Korean Universities*

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Abstract

This study examines how Korean universities seek global hegemony among international students. Through in-depth interviews with twenty Thai students studying at Korean universities, this study finds that the universities establish hegemony with two elements: material resources and US influence. Firstly, Thai students are motivated to study in Korea due to the financial support offered by the Korean government, universities, and corporations. Similar to how the US attracted international students through the Fulbright scholarship after World War II, since its emergence as an economic powerhouse in Asia, Korea has drawn international students for its higher education through the GKS scholarship. Secondly, Thai students acknowledge the authority of Korean universities in terms of classes taught in English and the intellectual capital originally produced in the US. Korean universities deliver the knowledge, produced in the US and accumulated in Korea to Thai students, using the language of the US. Thus, Thai international students in Korea are transnational middleman intellectuals oscillating not only between Korea and Thailand, but between those countries and the US. If the US acts as an empire exerting significant influence over the global education system, Korea acts as a sub-empire within the sweep of US hegemony.

Keywords: Korean universities, Thai students, study abroad, global hegemony, cultural imperialism, sub-empire

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Korean Universities and the Global Education System

Traditionally, *study abroad* in South Korea¹ referred to a Korean student's sojourn in the West, particularly the United States, to attend university. In the wake of Korea's liberation from Japan, the US Military Government in Korea sent Korean students to the US for higher education under the pretext of cultivating a professional workforce that could be placed as teachers or technicians (J. Yoon 2021). In 1948, the newly appointed Korean government, in collaboration with the US Federal Government, launched a government-funded scholarship to offer full-scale support to Korean students attending US universities (J. Yoon 2021). As the US began to attract international students in earnest from all over the world through the Fulbright Program in the 1950s, the Korean government proactively displayed a cooperative attitude toward the program by signing an agreement regarding educational exchanges (Jeong 1991).

The number of Korean students studying abroad continued to rise as "education fever" drove Korea's rapid industrialization and economic growth. Notably, the government's implementation of measures to liberalize overseas education in the 1980s led to strong aspirations among Koreans to study overseas. Liberalization measures permitted self-funded study abroad, previously prohibited by the government, and allowed high school graduates and those with educational backgrounds beyond college to study abroad without foreign language tests (Kwon 1983). This move was made in line with Korea's accelerated economic growth, which allowed middle-class families to afford international education for their children.

The number of Korean students traveling abroad for education increased greatly as the government of South Korean president Kim Young-sam, established in the early 1990s, introduced *seggyehwa* (globalization) as a crucial agenda item, integrating Korea into neoliberal globalization (Chae 2019). Korea's Ministry of Education emphasized the importance of *global knowledge*, particularly proficiency in foreign languages, and especially English, and actively encouraged Korean students to study overseas (S. Kim

1. Hereafter, Korea.

1994). A series of events in the late 1990s spurred a new surge of Korean students leaving for study abroad and foreign-language training. Against the backdrop of the 1997 IMF Financial Crisis, the newly inaugurated government of Kim Dae-Jung championed the *knowledge-based economy* as a new national strategy to escape economic hardship (Cho 2008). The knowledge-based economy emphasized investment in education, which resulted in the expansion of *study abroad at an early age* and the emergence of so-called *gireogi* (wild geese) families. In *gireogi* families, mothers travel abroad with their young children for their education, while fathers stay behind in the home country to provide financial support (Cho 2008; Sujeong Kim 2007).

At that time, it was not only Korean students who experienced changes, but also Korean universities. The government of Kim Young-sam laid the groundwork for attracting international students by commercializing higher education (Byun and Kim 2010). The subsequent government of Kim Dae-jung went a step further, shifting the focus of higher education policies from outbound Korean students to inbound international students, and established *internationalization* as a key index of the university rating system (Byun and Kim 2010). In compliance with the knowledge-based economy, the government also drew up a project to have Korea act as a bridge between developed and developing countries in terms of higher education.

To be more specific, in 2004, the Ministry of Education launched the Study Korea Project (SKP) to attract international students as a way to advance the globalization of Korean higher education (Um and Byun 2012). The initial phase of the SKP, which aimed at the quantitative expansion of overseas students, established scholarships for them with the expectation that they would serve as cultural intermediaries between Korea and their home countries. In 2008, as it entered its second stage, which aimed at the qualitative management of international students, the SKP set goals to reduce the dropout rate and illegal employment of overseas students, as well as to attract outstanding students from foreign countries by awarding generous scholarships (H. Lee and M. Lee 2019). In its third phase, from 2013, the SKP established goals to expand international students in quantitative and qualitative terms and enhance their employment

opportunities. This action plan was pushed forward as Korea needed a larger workforce due to its rapidly aging population (Kim et al. 2016).

As part of the government's efforts, Korean universities signed partnership agreements with foreign universities to draw in exchange students and expanded English-medium instruction (EMI) to eliminate the language barrier for international students (Hong and Ryu 2013). As a result of these efforts, the number of inbound international students began to increase, and Korean universities crossed the threshold of the global education system.²

Considering the scenario outlined above, this study, through interviews with international students studying at Korean universities, examines how Korean universities establish their leadership in the global education system. This study focuses on Thai students, as they best represent the international students Korea has strived to attract. According to extant studies, Thai students tend to choose Korea as their study destination for two main reasons: scholarships and EMI programs prepared by the Korean government and universities to promote higher education and attract students from around the world (Pang 2022; Trongmaneeham 2021).³ Thus, this study attempts to show how Korean universities achieve hegemony among Thai international students by examining their experiences.

Based on in-depth interviews with twenty Thai students, this article argues that Korean universities establish their global hegemony under US influence. In the following sections, this paper first discusses the theoretical

2. The period from the 2020s is dubbed the era of 150,000 international students. Among the international students in Korea, Chinese students have accounted for the highest share (44.2%), followed by Vietnamese (23.5%), Uzbek (5.4%), Mongolian (4.0%), Japanese (2.5%), American (1.5%), and others (18.9%) (Ministry of Education 2021).

3. International students display distinct characteristics depending on their country of origin. For example, Chinese students, who comprise the largest portion of international students in Korea, tend to study in Korea at their own expense and take classes taught in Korean (Hwang and Hong 2018). To attract Chinese students, the Korean government and universities have also taken measures such as lowering the required score for the Korean language test and providing separate health insurance and dormitories (Sun and Pang 2022). Accordingly, a follow-up study is necessary to examine how Korean universities pursue global hegemony in terms of Chinese students.

notion of global hegemony, which can replace the concept of cultural imperialism having been applied to some aspects of the global education system. Next, this paper reviews the research methodology comprised of in-depth interviews and researching lived experiences. Following this, the paper explores the detailed experiences of Thai international students studying at Korean universities, organized in both temporal and spatial frameworks: their experiences in the sequential steps they take in Korea compared with their experiences at the universities they attended in Thailand. In conclusion, this paper completes the argument that Korea acts as a *sub-empire* within the sweep of US hegemony by revealing that Thai international students are transnational middleman intellectuals, oscillating not only between Korea and Thailand, but also between those countries and the US.

Theoretical Discussion

Students who study abroad are *transnational middleman intellectuals*, oscillating between their home country and their study destination. Traditionally in Korea, transnational middleman intellectuals were those who obtained higher education in the US, which was perceived by many as the leading country in the world. With American degrees, they could become elites and wield immense power in all areas of society. In practice, they dominated bureaucratic organizations such as the nation's administrative, military, and legal circles (Jeong 1991). Only after the liberation of study abroad in the 1980s did their political and economic influence become decentralized.

Still, a growing number of students turned themselves into transnational middleman intellectuals since the cultural capital obtained from study in the US, including academic degrees, language, and specialized knowledge, had a higher value in Korea than that obtained from Korean universities (J. Kim 2008). Transnational middleman intellectuals have shaped knowledge production and circulation in Korean academia in their own ways. Currently, almost all curricula taught in Korean universities are

based on American textbooks; most Korean university professors are graduates of US universities; the theories and methodologies they teach are similarly sourced from the US (J. Kim 2008). Publication in SCI or SSCI English-language journals is an important criterion in evaluating the research capabilities of scholars and universities and is generally viewed as having a higher worth compared to publication in a Korean journal. Journal articles published in English are also a prerequisite for faculty appointment, and professors must often demonstrate their English communication skills during job interviews at Korean universities (J. Kim 2008). When considering a faculty appointment, a Korean university evaluates one English-language journal publication as equivalent in score to two to six publications in a Korean-language journal.

Given such contradictory trends, some scholars in the humanities and social science have criticized the US centrism in Korean academia (e.g., Kang 2004; S. Yoon 2003; Yu 2002; Jang 2003; Y. Kim 2008; H. Kim 2006). With their views on conventional study abroad in Korea based on the theoretical notion of *cultural imperialism*, these critical scholars have distanced themselves from mainstream academia and sought social awareness. While *imperialism* is the use of physical force by a powerful nation to expand its political and economic authority across borders, *cultural imperialism* is the promotion of a country's ideology and culture in weaker countries to establish political and economic dominance over them. In other words, cultural imperialism refers to the infiltration of the ideologies and consciousness of the colonizer into the colonized, paralyzing the latter's subjectivities.

These critical scholars believed that the American empire influenced Korean academia and society through the transnational middleman intellectuals who studied abroad in the United States. One of these scholars, Yu Sunyoung (2002), redefined the transnational middleman intellectuals—whom mainstream academia admired for bringing advanced American culture and technology into Korea—as *colonized intellectuals* who propagated the colonizer's culture, civilization, knowledge, manners, and tastes. This is a persuasive assertion, considering how Korean academia's production and circulation of knowledge has depended on the US, as

expounded above.

However, the theoretical notion of cultural imperialism, which the critical Korean scholars utilized, is not adequately suited to describing all cases of study abroad. In employing the concept of cultural imperialism, the scholars presupposed the dichotomous frames of ruler versus ruled, colonizer versus colonized, and dominant versus subjugated. The scholars did not consider that Korean transnational middleman intellectuals studying in the US may resist the power of the supposed colonizer and that colonization through study abroad can occasionally fail.

To that extent, Kim Jongyoung's study (2010) employs the notion of *global hegemony* rather than cultural imperialism. Kim examines how US universities achieve global hegemony through international students, particularly Korean students. Through in-depth interviews with Korean students attending a research-centered university in the US, Kim's study revealed that Korean students approved of and reproduced the authority of US universities in their daily lives. That study showed that Korean students tend to be satisfied with the quantity and quality of intellectual capital offered by US faculty, acknowledge the excellence of US university infrastructure, and view the opportunity to interact with renowned scholars as a significant advantage of their study abroad experience in the US. They also aspire to adopt the ethos and norms of US education and academia, as shown by their positive outlook, respect, and admiration toward American universities and academia.

Kim's study (2010) further reveals that American academia does not continuously establish authority over transnational middleman intellectuals from Korea. His concept of *global hegemony* is based on the idea of cultural hegemony, advanced by Antonio Gramsci (1988), which goes beyond the dichotomous frameworks that underpin the aforementioned Korean scholars' critical view on study abroad. The concept of global hegemony denotes that a dominating group achieves and retains power and authority primarily through the subjugated's consent to be ruled. This implies that the ruler risks losing its governing power if it fails to win consent from those it seeks to subjugate. Even in Kim's 2010 study, Korean students refuse to consent to the hegemonic power of US universities when they deem it

unjustifiable. The interviewed Korean students, particularly those majoring in humanities and social sciences, criticized professors at American universities for their conservative attitudes and disinterest in participating in social justice movements. At the time of the interviews, students in Kim's study voiced their disappointment over the absence of protests or criticism in US universities and academia against problematic social issues and the ongoing US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The discrimination experienced by Korean students from professors, colleagues, and administrative staff also hindered the students' voluntary consent to the authority of American universities.

This study also employs *global hegemony* as a theoretical lens for examining how Korean universities seek authority in the global education system. Based on this notion, this study examines the politics of knowledge transfer, staying away from mainstream academia that revolves around functionalist and practical subjects, including students' motivations to study abroad and the process of their physical and mental adjustment to a new study environment. However, this study diverges somewhat from Kim Jongyoung's research on study abroad (2010, 2015). In his examination of the experiences of Korean students studying in the US (J. Kim 2015), he critiques the social conditions under which the (re)production of powerful elites in Korea relies on US universities. He also contends (J. Kim 2010) that the global hegemony of US universities is related to organizational and cultural contractions of Korean universities, where academic factionalism, gender inequality, authoritative atmospheres, and nepotism prevail. Put differently, Kim's studies argue that Korean universities' lack of leadership solidifies the global hegemony of US universities.

This study attempts to avoid evaluating or judging the intellectual and moral leadership of Thai universities. While the Thai interview participants were asked to compare Korean and Thai universities, and they mentioned the limited resources of Thai universities during the interviews, it should be noted that the hierarchy between the two universities is not concrete in that the curricula taught in Thai universities are not related to or subordinated to Korean universities and academia. In addition, Thai university professors are not graduates of Korean universities. Accordingly, instead of ranking

Korean and Thai universities based on their material and cultural resources, this study discusses how Korean universities obtain voluntary consent from Thai international students. How have Korean universities and academia, previously on the periphery of the global education system, moved closer to its center, obtaining hegemony from international students?

Methodology

This study investigates the experiences of Thai international students registered at Korean universities, using in-depth interviews as a methodology. The in-depth interview is a method of collecting data through one-on-one conversations with participants. This methodology is appropriate for revealing participants' complex thoughts on specific topics. In other words, an in-depth interview is a way of understanding how individuals in a society perceive the world they live in and how they produce, reproduce, and change their cultures in their everyday life (H. Rubin and I. Rubin 2005, as referenced in Kim Jongyoung [2008, 74]). With this methodology, this study attempts to capture vivid and complex narratives of Thai students who have adapted to their new life in Korea.

This study recruited participants through snowball sampling. Because one of the authors of this study is a Thai student studying in Korea, recruiting participants was not difficult. Although this study did not place any restrictions on interview participants based on age, gender, and other socio-economic factors, participants were restricted to those who had experienced both Thai and Korean universities in order to compare the experiences of the two countries. Interview participants were those who had completed their undergraduate studies at Thai universities and were currently or formerly enrolled in a graduate program in Korea. Because the intent of graduate school is to nurture academics and researchers, graduate students were expected to contribute relevant comments and pertinent observations regarding the global hegemony of Korean universities and academia. The sampling excluded students who had been in Korea for less than one year, since it was assumed these students would be limited in their

ability to compare Thai universities with Korean universities. Appendix 1 provides brief information about the participants.

Due to the outbreak of COVID-19, the interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom between July and October 2021. The interviews, each lasting between one and a half to two hours, were conducted primarily in Thai, the native language of the interviewees, and recorded with their prior consent. The recorded content was translated into English after the transcript had been drafted. The interview was semi-structured: questions were carefully prepared in advance but were flexibly changed and modified according to the participant responses. The questions were also open-ended to prevent researcher bias from influencing participant opinions.

The interview data were analyzed from the perspective of “researching lived experience,” advanced by the hermeneutic phenomenologist Max van Manen (2000). According to van Manen, the primary goal of researching lived experience is to gain a deep understanding of the nature or meaning of everyday experiences. To collect such a profound understanding, it is necessary to vividly depict human experiences in the world of life (van Manen 2000, 35; D. Lee 2012, 8). Therefore, instead of establishing standards for analytical coding, classification, and data organization in advance, this study employed a discovery-oriented method to determine “how the phenomenon is experienced” and “what it means” (D. Lee 2012, 8, citing van Manen [2000]).

Lived Experiences of Thai International Students

Even in Thailand, the traditional concept of study abroad implies a student’s sojourn to the West to obtain foreign knowledge and skills (Trongmaneeham 2021). During the pre-modern period in Thailand, the king sent students from royal and upper-class families to European countries—England in most cases—to nurture elite government bureaucrats (Bushell 2020). This indicates that study abroad at the time was a practice meant to serve national interests. During the modernization period, however, study abroad became an individual choice as middle-class families could afford an international

education for their children (Trongmaneetham 2021). Now, however, students largely chose the United States, which had newly emerged as the center of the global education system (Trongmaneetham 2021). Many Thai students left for the US, seeking academic degrees and modern lifestyle experiences that were more highly valued than the degrees and lifestyles offered by their home country. In other words, study abroad was a means for middle-class families to maintain class privileges, just as in Korea. Overseas-educated youth, called *dek inter* or *dek neok* in Thai, have been appointed to important posts in Thailand's political and economic sectors (Trongmaneetham 2021).

That Thai youth choose to study in Korea, a non-English speaking country, implies that study abroad trends in Thailand have once again changed. These youth differ from the traditional elite groups that built their privileges by earning higher education degrees from Western countries. How then did they come to choose Korea as their study destination? A certain circle of extant studies emphasize the significant impact of Korean pop culture on the decisions made by Thai students to pursue their studies in Korea (H. Kim and M. Lee 2017; Pang 2022). Thailand has been a hub for the growth of *Hallyu* in Southeast Asia, with Korean popular culture—including TV dramas, film, pop music, and games—causing a great sensation among Thai youth starting in the mid-2000s (Siriyuvasak and Shin 2007). Thai artists participating in the K-pop idol industry also strengthened Thai youth's sense of familiarity with Korea (Onsee 2021), and Korean popular culture has propagated favorable depictions of Korea as an economically developed country in Asia (Yang 2003; S. Kim 2012). The proliferation of Korean popular culture in Thailand also increased demand for Korean-language education; Korean became the second foreign language in university entrance exams. All the preceding trends associated with Korean popular culture have motivated Thai students to travel to Korea for their studies (H. Kim and M. Lee 2017; Pang 2022).

Besides Korean popular culture, what aspects of Korean universities have fascinated Thai students? This section attempts to find answers by exploring the lived experiences of Thai students at Korean universities. The experiences of Thai students are examined on the basis of temporal and

spatial frameworks. Under the temporal frame, Thai students were asked to portray their everyday life in the sequential steps they take at Korean universities. Under the spatial frame, the students were asked to compare their experiences at the universities they attended in Korea and Thailand.

Korean-Language Coursework

In the first stage of the in-depth interviews, when asked why they were motivated to study in Korea, the interview participants cited “scholarships,” which are difficult to obtain in their home country and the countries their predecessors tended to choose as study destinations. All interview participants were scholarship recipients funded by the Korean government, Korean universities, or Korean corporations. Fourteen out of twenty participants received the government-funded Global Korea Scholarship (GKS). GKS beneficiaries, particularly those who scored less than level 5 out of 6 in the Test of Proficiency in Korean (TOPIK), are required to attend a mandatory one-year-long Korean-language education course upon arrival in Korea.

Ironically, however, all the participants stated that a “language barrier” resulting from their poor Korean skills posed a significant challenge to living in Korea. As mentioned above, the interviews for this study were conducted primarily in Thai since the participants admitted that they lacked confidence in their Korean fluency. Both those who took the required language course and those exempted from the course by scoring level 5 or higher in the TOPIK stated that the one-year course does not equip them with strong enough language skills to complete a postgraduate course in Korean.

Several participants reported having participated in Korean-language education while living in Thailand. As mentioned above, public interest in the Korean language grew as Korean pop culture gained popularity. However, their Korean-language proficiency was not strong enough to overcome the language barrier. Interviewee #4, who majored in teaching Korean as a foreign language in Korea and was working as a Korean-language instructor at a Thai university, reported that her students, who are comprised of college students and office workers, learn Korean for fun or to

better enjoy Korean popular culture, rather than for practical purposes. This situation explains why a language barrier poses a significant challenge to Thai students having participated in Korean-language education in Thailand.

How then do Thai students pursue graduate studies in Korea without having proficiency in Korean? Typically, they enroll in English-medium instruction (EMI) courses. The interview participants stated that all classes, particularly in the domains of science and engineering, are taught in English. In the humanities and social sciences, some classes are offered in English. In classes conducted in Korean, class materials are frequently provided in English, which is also allowed to be used in assignments, presentations, exams, and thesis writing. The participants also reported conversing in English with their advisors and colleagues, who are often international students.

Meanwhile, it does not appear that all Korean universities offer classes taught in English at a proficient level. Interviewee #2 stated he was embarrassed when his professors used both English and Korean during EMI classes. With a few exceptions, most participants concurred that such incidents were frequent. Although most university professors in Korea hold degrees from the US, it does not seem easy for them to use a foreign language to teach international students who grew up during the era of globalization of education.

One surprising finding is that participants rarely reported that they struggled due to their English skills, even though neither Korean nor English is their native language. They stated that they began learning English at a young age due to their parents' emphasis on its importance for their education. Some participants attended English-language programs in the US or the UK during or after their undergraduate period and before they visited Korea.

The interview participants emphasized that English is significantly more valuable than Korean in advancing academic endeavors and increasing employment opportunities in global settings. Interviewee #14 stated that before coming to Korea for her doctoral degree, she had completed her undergraduate studies in Thailand, earned a master's degree in China, and

took English-language training in New Zealand. This participant stated that English is a universal language that can be used while traveling anywhere in the world. Interviewee #6 reported that she came to Korea to learn Korean in the hope it would enhance her employment prospects in her home country, where many people can speak English and even Japanese. Upon returning to her home country, however, she discovered it was difficult to land a job requiring fluency in Korean. At the time of the interview, she was working for an American company where the language used was primarily English.

Graduate Programs

After completing (or being exempted from) a Korean-language course, Thai students enroll in graduate coursework. The participants stated that when pursuing graduate courses, they recognized the academic prowess of Korean universities, particularly in science and engineering. They believe Korea embraced scientific and technological knowledge that originated in the West before Thailand and used it to achieve rapid economic development. In this regard, they perceive Korea as academically mature.

I genuinely consider this country [Korea] my top choice for my study abroad destination. I chose Korea since it is a pioneer in science and engineering and has several world-class corporations, such as Samsung, Hyundai, LG, and others. These large, well-known companies influenced my decision to pursue my education in Korea. (Interviewee #2)

Along the same lines, Interviewee #14, who had earned her Ph.D. degree in Korea and was currently working for the Thai government, stated that the intellectual capital gained from Korean universities enabled her to become a researcher in Thailand, producing both quantitative and qualitative professional knowledge.

The participants who majored in the humanities and social sciences did not express satisfaction with the intellectual capital they had acquired in Korea. They tended to express difficulties adjusting themselves to classes

conducted in Korean more frequently than science and technology students did. One participant, majoring in Korean linguistics, stated that she had trouble keeping up with the professors who spoke Korean quickly and that learning *hanja* (Chinese characters) was another challenge.

The professors spoke so fast that I was shocked. I did not even realize that one of my professors had assigned homework in the first class. I had to finish it quickly in hindsight. *Hanja* was another complex task. The professor had us look for modern Korean language books [in the library], but I could not even recognize them since the covers were all in *hanja*. That was a nightmare. (Interviewee #9)

The interview participants studying for master's degrees in the humanities and social sciences tended to state that they hoped to seek employment rather than move on to pursue a Ph.D. Most of their majors were practical academic disciplines such as marketing and consumer information, which have advantages in finding jobs. Many were attending master's programs at the Special Graduate School, which was founded to retrain workers rather than to produce academic researchers.

The atmosphere of the classroom at Korean universities is another noteworthy aspect. Some participants admitted that catching up with the class was difficult as it was taught in a lecture rather than a discussion format. Interviewee #2 stated that he would have a higher chance of understanding the material if he had opportunities to review the material presented in the lecture through discussion, but he had not been given such opportunities. He had expected that Korean students, who were more familiar with the Korean academic setting, would have taken the initiative in leading discussions by asking questions; instead, he discovered that Korean students were generally quiet in class. Therefore, he had no choice but to adapt to self-directed learning like Korean students. Another participant pointed out that the hierarchical relationship between professors and students at Korean universities and the authoritative social atmosphere prevent students from freely asking questions or participating in discussions.

There are multiple hierarchies in Thai society and universities. However, the atmosphere in Korea is more authoritative and solemn. In Thailand, reaching an agreement through compromise and patience is emphasized as a social value. I hope that Korean society will become more relaxed and less rigid [so that Korean students will have free discussions]. (Interviewee #4)

Similarly, the participants stated that it was difficult to get along with Korean students, who always appeared to have busy schedules and showed little interest in international students. The participants habitually hung out with other international students.

Most Korean students [in my program] were older than me [since it was a Special Graduate School program]. They appeared to have numerous personal obligations that required their attention [like childcare and others]. I did not feel connected to them; therefore, I have made many international friends from China, Cambodia, and America. (Interviewee #4)

School Infrastructure

Participants involved in science and engineering studies tended to perceive Korean school facilities as a vital factor in capturing the interest of international students. This underscores the prominent role of Korean educational institutions in providing a more conducive environment for learning and research, particularly when compared to Thai educational establishments. According to the participants, laboratory facilities and experiment equipment in Korean universities are superior to those in Thai universities. One of the participants shared that while he was an undergraduate student at a Thai university, he attended a Korean university as an exchange student and was impressed by the learning environment, especially the laboratory.

The learning environment, particularly the laboratory, at a Korean university impressed me. After returning to my school in Thailand, I

decided to visit a Korean university once more for a research internship program this time. After completing my undergraduate education in my home country, I returned to the same university in Korea for a third time to pursue a master's degree due to the exceptional qualities of the laboratory, experiment equipment, and devices at the university. (Interviewee #3)

According to this participant, the Thai university's method for making reservations to use laboratory equipment is more complicated and inconvenient. In his university in Thailand, students must obtain approval from their advisers before using the equipment.

Another participant asserted that the Thai government's lack of support and funding for education is responsible for the poor condition of laboratories and laboratory equipment at Thai universities.

Universities in Korea can provide high-quality laboratory equipment and supplies. However, Thai universities are currently falling behind...I think Korea is financially supportive of education. If any school needs research-related tools/instruments or mechanics, the government provides funds for purchasing them. However, it is challenging in Thailand to seek financial support from the government. (Interviewee #2)

In practice, the Korean government has actively supported education in science and engineering. Especially in the 1960s, when the military government of Park Chung-hee, focused on accelerating modernization and industrialization for economic development, emphasized the importance of science and engineering so much that its policies were described as "scientizing the whole nation" (H. Lee 2023). The government wholeheartedly supported universities as nurseries for specialists and technical scholars, and subsequent governments have followed in these footsteps. In a similar vein, Interviewee #14 expressed satisfaction with her study abroad experience in Korea, noting that she was able to secure research funding from the Korean government during her Ph.D. program, which is nearly impossible to do in Thailand.

However, it cannot be argued that Korean universities achieve

hegemony in other school facilities, such as libraries, classrooms, portal sites, cafeterias, and gymnasiums, which students in the humanities and social sciences also utilize. Some participants stated that university libraries in Korea are superior to those in Thailand. A Korean university library's advantages are that it is vast, is open 24 hours a day, offers superior data services, and has an online reservation system that allows students to easily secure seats (Interviewee #1). Other participants, however, stated that libraries at Thai universities have greatly improved and are now comparable to Korean university libraries in offering online reservation services and round-the-clock hours (Interviewee #6). These assertions indicate that there are few differences between Thai and Korean universities regarding school infrastructure. Participants who attended large universities in Thailand rated the facilities at Thai universities as superior, while those attending large universities in Korea deemed the facilities at Korean universities as excellent.

Thesis and Dissertation Writing

Graduate programs are designed to produce researchers who engage in academic activities; therefore, the programs require students to research and write a thesis to graduate. Accordingly, most participants were required to write theses and dissertations. They stated that they regarded selecting an advisor as the most crucial step in the thesis-writing process since they would consult their advisors whenever they encountered difficulties while writing the thesis. The participants stated they had specific criteria for choosing supervisors for their thesis. Although they value professional knowledge, they consider "personality" a more significant measure.

I chose my advisor myself. My criteria include personality, especially kindness, guidance methods, and the professor's field of expertise. I prefer those who are kind to their students. (Interviewee #5)

A preference for kindness over expertise may not be characteristic of only Thai students in Korea but all graduate students studying abroad. Kim Jongyoung's study (2010) also shows that Korean students studying in the

US tend to select advisors who are “kind” and “considerate.”

However, there are differences between the Korean students in Kim Jongyoung’s (2010) study and the Thai students in this study. Korean students studying at a research-oriented university in the United States⁴ expressed their pleasure at having the opportunity to encounter “real masters” of the academic world, whom they had admired even before they visited the US. The students added that by observing the research practices of these professors, they learned how seriously and meticulously the professors conducted research and advanced studies and wished to adopt their research secrets and ethos.

The Thai students in this study, however, never used the phrase “real master.” They made no mention of wanting to emulate their advisors’ research methods or academic attitudes. Therefore, Korean universities do not appear to have fully achieved intellectual hegemony over international students, particularly Thai students. Of course, this fact is open to various interpretations. Perhaps, Thai students studying at Korean universities are not interested in real masters with intellectual capital. Alternatively, Korean universities may lack real masters from whom Thai students want to learn. If this is not the case, the meaning and role of an advisor may have changed. Typically, professors and teachers have greater knowledge than students, and a hierarchical relationship undoubtedly exists between teacher and student. Only through education can students compete on an equal footing with their professors and teachers (Hong 2019). However, with neoliberal reforms, beginning in the 2000s in Korea, knowledge has been gradually transformed into a standardized information commodity. This new circumstance has profoundly impacted education; students can now search for information on the Internet as knowledge has been converted into standardized information (Hong 2019). As a result, the role of advisors and teachers has possibly become less critical than in the past.

On the other hand, it was revealed that not all graduate students are

4. It is worth noting that while universities in the US are categorized as either research-oriented or education-oriented, there is no such categorization in Korea—a university with a graduate program is regarded as research-oriented.

required to write a thesis, and they do not have an advisor in such a case. The students in the Special Graduate Program often stated that writing a thesis is optional and replaceable by taking three additional credits. It was also disclosed that some Korean universities have indiscreetly added graduate courses in the form of Special Graduate Programs in the pursuit of profit. Interviewee #20, who matriculated at a *gukje daehagwon* (international graduate school) as a sort of Special Graduate Program, revealed that although it was optional to write a thesis, her school discouraged her from doing so since her program did not have enough faculty members who might serve as her advisor. This implies that even if Korean universities could not adequately staff enough academics for a program, they still established a Special Graduate Program out of haste rather than with caution.

Earning a Degree

During the last stage of the interview, when asked to comprehensively evaluate their stay in Korea, the participants expressed that they were having a great time and were not experiencing any adverse scenarios, such as “discrimination.” However, this statement merits scrutiny for several reasons. First, Korean students’ indifference and subtle exclusion of them amounts to discrimination, even if the participants did not consciously recognize it as such. As mentioned above, they said it was uncommon for them to hang out with their fellow Korean students. As a result, they usually associated with international students, including other Thai students.

Second, the participants reported encountering injustice based on their poor Korean language skills rather than their physical appearance, both on and off campus.

I have never faced discrimination in school. However, once, I had to schedule a service via telephone. The staff spoke to me nicely at the beginning. But, as I struggled to speak Korean, the staff realized I was not a Korean. They suddenly became rude to me and used crude language. (Interviewee #3)

They frequently mistake me for a Korean because of my appearance, which is similar to a Korean. However, if I do not fully understand their Korean and respond slowly, they throw a tantrum. (Interviewee #19)

Third, the participants stated that they had not been subjected to racism due to their skin color, which is not much different from that of Koreans. This statement paradoxically indicates that discrimination based on appearance exists in Korean society; Thai internationals are vulnerable to such discrimination.

I have never faced discrimination, maybe because of my appearance, which seems similar to Koreans. (Interviewee #3)

Although I have never personally experienced discrimination, I have read that white people are more welcome in Korea than Asians and Middle Easterners. I believe discrimination still exists, although I have never personally witnessed it. (Interviewee #7)

Fourth, although the interview participants had not directly experienced discrimination, they were afraid of the possibility of such an experience. They were aware of stereotypes in Korea that characterized Thai immigrant workers as “illegal workers” and “masseurs.” Thus, one participant emphasized her identity as a “student” to distinguish herself from Thai workers, who are more vulnerable to such a stereotype and other discriminatory attitudes and behavior.

In a small village in Korea, my Thai friend and I visited a restaurant with a Thai-language sign. The restaurant owner, undoubtedly Thai, appeared genuinely surprised when we told him we were “students.” This is because his typical clients are “masseurs.” A similar incident occurred when my friend and I went to a massage parlor. A masseur asked if we were university students. We responded affirmatively, after which the masseur stated that she had known it because my group consisted solely of women. [a female masseur would be with a male customer]. It seems that people immediately come up with “masseurs” when they encounter Thai

internationals. (Interviewee #7)

These episodes show that Thai students are unfairly treated or encounter inconvenient situations while studying in Korea. Why then do they endure such difficulties and continue their studies in Korea? Participants responded that the degrees they are pursuing in Korea would enhance their job and promotion opportunities. One participant, a public officer in Thailand, stated that she would be promoted upon her return to Thailand after completing her studies in Korea (Interviewee #14). In Thailand, degrees obtained from higher education institutions in Korea are valued more than those obtained from Thai institutions. However, they are not valued as highly as degrees earned in the US, which would more possibly elevate them to the status of powerful elites. A degree from a Korean university, they supposed, would improve their employment prospects, especially in the “niche market” of their home country.

I preferred teaching English in Thailand because I had learned English literature, culture, etc., which I can use as class materials. But becoming an English teacher is not easy. In Thailand, many have excellent English ability. Some of them are graduates from the West with MA or Ph.D. degrees. However, becoming a Korean teacher is easier since only a few people can teach Korean proficiently. Therefore, I achieved an MA degree from Korea and became a Korean teacher. (Interviewee #4)

After having graduated with a bachelor's degree in Japanese, I worked as a freelance translator for a while. The work made me realize that there are many Thai people who are capable of working as Japanese interpreters, so I had to expand my career pathway to thrive in the job market. So, I decided to study Korean to become a skilled person who can use three languages: Thai, Japanese, and Korean. (Interviewee #5)

Whereas half of the participants stated they intended to return to Thailand after completing their studies, the other half stated that they would like to find employment in Korea. The latter believed that the cultural capital gained from Korean universities, including the degrees, Korean language,

and life experiences, would expand their job opportunities. These participants cited Korea's developed economy as the primary motivation for their desire to settle down in this country. They stated that it is hard to maintain or improve their social status and quality of life in their home country due to extreme social and economic polarization and the prevalence of nepotism. In their view, though the polarization of wealth and income has also widened in Korea, the minimum wage has proportionately increased with rising prices in this country. In addition, they view the competitive system that reigns in Korea as more equitable than the nepotism in Thailand. Thus, they believed that after securing employment in Korea, they would receive higher wages and become eligible for promotions more quickly than in Thailand.

Global Hegemony of Korean Universities under US Influence

During the expansion of neoliberal globalization, Korea shifted from a country that sends its students to overseas universities to a host destination that attracts international students. To that extent, this study aimed to examine how Korean universities establish their positions in the global education system and demonstrate their leadership. This study focused on Thai international students, whose number in Korea has steadily increased since the mid-2000s in tandem with the exploding popularity of Korean pop culture in Thailand (H. Kim and M. Lee 2017; Pang 2022). This study employed *global hegemony* as a theoretical framework, which prompted this study to examine the context in which Korean universities gain the voluntary consent of Thai students to their authority and leadership while simultaneously considering the students' agency.

Through in-depth interviews with twenty Thai students, this study found that Korean universities achieve hegemony over them for the following reasons: First, Thai international students are motivated to choose Korean universities as their study abroad destination due to the financial support offered by the Korean government, universities, or corporations. The Thai student-participants stated that it is not easy to obtain scholarships

even for graduate programs in their home country or in the other countries that their predecessors had chosen as their study destinations. After being attracted to Korean universities in this way, they further expressed satisfaction with their research grants and advanced school facilities such as laboratories and laboratory equipment, particularly in the science and engineering domains.

Second, Thai international students accept Korean universities' authority regarding English-mediated classes. English has been criticized by some in Korean academia for muddying Korea's national identity and diluting the academic and cultural significance of the Korean language. However, Thai students believe that the Korean language as cultural capital does not exert as much influence on the global academic community and research-oriented international students as English does. These transnational middleman intellectuals from Thailand believe that English facilitates communicative and cultural exchanges between international students and prepares them to work and study in any part of the world. They also feel that English enables them to compete fairly with Korean students in academia and the job market since English is neither their native language nor that of Korean students. It is worth noting that this is the case, even as some Thai international students had been inconvenienced by inadequately staffed EMI classes.

Third, these transnational middleman intellectuals tend to respect the expert knowledge they gain from Korean universities because it was originally produced in the West. Though they did not immediately point it out, they indirectly attributed Korea's rapid economic development to its openness toward science and technology advanced in Western countries. This indicates a desire to obtain knowledge in Korea due to the US's influence. Even in the humanities and social sciences sectors, Thai students are inclined to acquire knowledge mainly produced in practical disciplines of US academia, rather than the unique knowledge made in Korea. Thai students respect knowledge obtained from Korea, but not to the fullest extent. This also explains why Thai students did not report encountering any "real masters" of the academic world whose secrets and ethos they wished to adopt.

Fourth, Thai international students believed the MA or Ph.D. degrees they earn from Korea, “the economically developed country in Asia,” would increase their job-finding and promotion opportunities. Half of the Thai students who participated in the interviews expressed their desire to return to their home country after their studies, stating that the relatively higher value of the degree obtained in Korea would improve their employment prospects. Although a degree obtained from Korea does not hold equivalent value to a degree obtained in the West, they believe that it will still enhance their employment prospects in the niche market. The other half expressed their hope to settle in Korea after their studies, citing Korea’s developed economy as the primary reason. They believed that a degree achieved from a higher education institution in Korea would be necessary for securing employment in Korea.

Another noteworthy point is that the global hegemony Korean universities have achieved from Thai international students is neither constant nor stable. Thai students feel repulsed by the hierarchical relationship between professors and students, the solemn atmosphere created by such a relationship, the ostracism they face from Korean students, and the prejudice they face stemming from a lack of Korean proficiency. Subtle stereotypes about Thai internationals are also a factor that undermines the leadership of Korea and Korean universities. With their preference for a cheerful and democratic dispositions, and tendency to regard personality traits such as kindness and compassion as the most critical factors in selecting an advisor, Thai students feel pressured to become self-directed learners in an education environment of lecture-based lessons that lack discussions.

Ultimately, Korean universities establish global hegemony among Thai students with two main elements: material resources and US influence. Firstly, Korean universities have attracted overseas students by providing generous scholarships, research funds, and advanced school facilities based on financial support from the government and corporations. Similar to how the US attracted international students through the Fulbright scholarship as it emerged as the world’s economic superpower after World War II, Korea has drawn international students for its higher education through the GKS

scholarship since it emerged as an economic powerhouse in Asia.

Secondly, Thai students acknowledge the authority of Korean universities in terms of English-medium instruction and the intellectual capital originally produced in the US. Korean universities deliver the knowledge, produced in the US, to Thai students, using the language of the US. Thus, Thai international students in Korea are transnational middleman intellectuals oscillating not only between Korea and Thailand, but between those two countries and the United States. This implies that Korean universities demonstrate leadership under US influence. If the US acts as an empire, exerting significant influence over the global education system, Korea acts as a sub-empire within the sweep of US hegemony. This is ironic, considering that the US, which had been the center of global education and the primary study destination of Korean students, has experienced a significant decline in the proportion of international students with the expansion of neoliberal globalization.⁵

5. Regarding the number of international students at US universities, see J. Lee, et al. (2017).

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Appendix: Information on the In-depth Interview Participants

No.	Thai University (Major)	Korean University (Major)	Period of stay	Scholarship	Sex
1	Bachelor's: L University (Language & Culture)	Master's: N University (International Studies*)	1.5 years	GKS	female
2	Bachelor's: H University (Physics) Master's: H University (Applied Physics)	PhD: U University (Chemical Engineering) Post-Doc: G University (Chemical Engineering)	4 years	GKS	male
3	Bachelor's: G University (Food and nutrition)	Master's: I University (Smart Food and Drugs) PhD: O University (Biotechnology)	4 years	GKS	male
4	Bachelor's: L University (English, Faculty of Art)	Master's: A University (Teaching Korean as a Foreign Language*)	2 years	GKS	female
5	Bachelor's: L University (Japanese)	Master's: N University (Korean Linguistics and Literature)	2.5 years	GKS	female
6	Bachelor's: L University (Law)	Master's: W University (Law)	2.5 years	GKS	female
7	Bachelor's: L University (Computer Engineering)	PhD: T University (Knowledge Service Engineering)	2.5 years	University's scholarship	female
8	Bachelor's: L University (Law) Master's: University in US	PhD: O University (Law)	2 years	GKS	female
9	Bachelor's: L University (Thai Language)	Master's: W University (Korean Linguistics)	1 year	University's scholarship	female
10	Bachelor's: L University (Sociology)	Master's: J University (Sociology)	2 years	GKS	female
11	Bachelor's: L University (Computer Education and Non-formal Education, Faculty of Education)	Master's: O University (Educational Technology)	1.5 years	POSCO	male
12	Bachelor's: L University (History)	Master's: N University (Cultural Anthropology)	2.5 years	GKS	female
13	Bachelor's: L University (Psychology)	Master's: N University (Industrial & Organizational Psychology)	2 years	GKS	male

14	Bachelor's: G University (Forestry) Master's: University in China	PhD: U University (Forest Environmental Science)	4 years	AFoCO	female
15	Bachelor's: L University (Pharmaceutical Sciences)	Master's: U University (Pharmaceutics) PhD: U University (Pharmaceutics)	5.5 years	University's scholarship	female
16	Bachelor's: L University (French Language)	Master's: N University (International Cooperation Development and International Law and Organizations)	2 years	GKS	female
17	Bachelor's: T University (International Affairs)	Master's: U University (International Cooperation*)	1 year	POSCO	female
18	Bachelor's: S University (Asian Studies)	Master's: G University (Consumer Information)	1 year, 2 months	GKS	female
19	Bachelor's: L University (Public Relations)	Master's: P University (Marketing)	1.5 years	GKS	female
20	Bachelor's: L University (English)	Master's: A University (Graduate School of International Studies*)	2 years	GKS	female

Note: * indicates a *gukje daehagwon* (international graduate school). Each alphabetical letter in front of the name of the university represents a different university.