East to West: International Educational Migration of East Asian Undergraduates to the United States

By

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April 19th 2024
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Jacob Seiji Foster, *East to West*

**Acknowledgments**

Thank you to: my friends, for encouraging me, laughing with me, and talking with me; to my advisors, for inspiring me and being patient with me; to my parents, for checking up on me and praying for me; and to my brother, for being an example of resilience and determination for me.

**Abstract**

Annual international tertiary educational migration has tripled over the past few decades. These millions of contemporary educational migrants represent enormous flows of people, goods, culture, knowledge, and money moving around the world. A large part of this growth is due to the immense quantity of students from Asia coming to popular anglophone destinations such as the US, the UK, and Australia. Conducting interviews with 12 East Asian international students, I explore how international students decide and understand whether to pursue a tertiary degree at an undergraduate institution in the US or in their home country. I challenge extant frameworks in the burgeoning international student migration literature by arguing that predominant approaches erroneously reduce the phenomenon of international educational migration to oversimplified macrohistorical analysis that disregards the holistic, micro-individual judgments part of choosing where to pursue a degree. Through analyzing qualitative data from interviews, I find that those who came to the US all shared a background of past international experiences that influenced them in pursuing a degree overseas. Interviewees all claimed personal ownership over the decision to go abroad, expressing that they were not compelled, but many also explained that it was almost expected of them given their current trajectory. This has significant implications for the literature, as opposed to how it is commonly posited, the decision to go abroad is not of a moment—or even a period of time—but is formulated through other earlier choices. These choices are nebulously made by or for them by interested parties, often parents, and are compounded by various social influences and contextual factors. One significant inclination I highlight is a commonly-expressed intrinsic, high value placed on abstract, future freedom that they would receive as a product of going abroad as opposed to staying at home.
Introduction

Even compared to other forms of international migration, the phenomenon of educational migration has experienced remarkable growth. The worldwide number of students pursuing a degree outside of their home country has increased from two million in 2000 to just under six million in 2020 (Bista 2019, as cited in Lipura and Collins 2020:343; UNESCO 2022). Traditionally, 90% of international students have selected OECD host countries for their destination (Verbik and Veronica 2007:3). Of these, the United States is the premier destination, taking in both the greatest absolute number and highest percentage of international tertiary students (Kondakci, Bedenlier, and Zawacki-Richter 2018:524; Lipura and Collins, 2020:343).

In the growing population of international students worldwide, the absolute number of East Asian international students coming to the US for tertiary education has risen from 572 thousand in 2003

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1 In this study, East Asia refers to The People’s Republic of China (China), Japan, and The Republic of Korea (South Korea). The three East Asian states were selected because they comprise the majority of East Asian international students to the United States (IIE Open Doors 2023) and because they represent a population of interest, which I will elaborate upon later in the paper.
to 1.08 million in 2019. This trend speaks to the international allure of American institutions, renowned worldwide for their academic excellence and diverse learning environments (Kondakci et al. 2018:529; Verbik and Veronica 2007:5). This growth in the number of East Asian international students is primarily due to the influx of Chinese students which has risen from 50 thousand to over 285 thousand over the past two decades (UNESCO 2022; Choudaha and Chang 2012:2; Kirloskar and Inamdar 2021:164). At lower absolute totals, Japanese, Korean, and Taiwanese students have maintained relatively stable numbers with a sudden increase in students of these origins in 2022 (UNESCO 2022; IIE Open Doors 2023).

In this paper, I examine the microlevel context of international student mobility, with a particular focus on East Asian students pursuing higher education in the United States. First establishing a commonality in the characteristics of East Asian national education systems, particularly China, Japan, and South Korea, I interview East Asian students to investigate values and factors contributing to their educational migration decision, especially pertaining to the selection of a US undergraduate institution.

This paper is divided into five sections. First, I provide a brief background of the East Asian historical education context from which my study of international student decisions is drawn from and motivated by. Second, I present a broad overview of existing international student mobility literature, introducing dominant scholarly frameworks. I argue that past empirical work on international student mobility suffers from: (i) conceptual limitations resulting from the dominance of particular narratives, (ii) fragmentation in the utilization of disparate disciplinary approaches, and (iii) a limited perspective driven by the demand-side motivations of investigation into international higher education research. Third, I explain the methodology and objectives of a 2023-2024 study which interviewed East Asian undergraduate students at tertiary institutions in Northeastern Pennsylvania, USA, and East Asia. Fourth, I present an analysis of interview respondents. I articulate three common themes among the interviewees who chose to matriculate to a US institution: (i) a background of international experiences before going to study abroad, (ii) an intrinsic value of abstract, future freedom, and (iii) an understanding of young adulthood as a time to. Following this, I provide a profile of each respondent, highlighting connections to themes. Fifth, and finally, I conclude by summarizing significant findings, discussing implications for theoretical shortcomings in the ISM literature, addressing limitations, and proposing directions of future research in ISM.

**Background**

East Asian international students in the US are an important and relevant group because not only are they large in number, they share similarities in the organization and format of their home education systems. East Asian national education systems have a common history of robust education reforms. China, Japan, and Korea all have undergone periods of remarkable economic growth in the late 20th century. During the post-war period, these nations made sweeping changes to their respective national education systems, massively widening access to education for the entire population and shaping national perceptions of the aims and benefits of an education (Hannum et al. 2019:628; Yonezawa 2023:222; Ashton et al. 1999:25). Since the turn of the millennium, China, South Korea, and Japan have undergone limited neoliberal organizational reforms (Abelmann, Park, and Kim 2013:101) but in their contemporary incarnation, many enduring, similar characteristics remain.

The common traits of East Asian education systems include: an overwhelming importance on test scores, (in)famous national exam systems, centralized national curriculums, and a high prevalence of shadow education (Hannum et al. 2019:626; Park 2013:75; Bjork and Tsuneyoshi 2005:620). East Asian

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2 There were several waves of reforms from the 1950s to the 1970s.
education is known for centralized, specialized, and meritocratic systems with an emphasis on academics over extracurriculars (Chiang 2022:7; Rappleye and Komatsu 2023:281). East Asian higher education builds upon this by requiring early specialization as students apply to specific fields and are set on distinct disciplinary tracks (Hannum et al. 2019:625; Chang and Zhang 2021:2). The majority of the top ranked East Asian national institutions are public rather than private (Times Higher Education 2023; US News and World Report 2022), which has a powerful centralizing and standardizing effect on the education system and its goalposts due to government involvement.

As stated previously, the US national education system is known for its majority English-language instruction, great variety in school quality, privately or locally determined curriculums, emphasis on extracurricular involvement, and excellent research and publishing opportunities (Kondakci et al. 2018:518; Shanka et al. 2006:32; Kirloskar and Inamdar 2021:32; Nicholls 2018:616). For higher education, there are a significant number of liberal arts institutions which boast an attractive combination of academic exploration, emphasis on holistic development, and easy access to experts and opportunities (Verbik and Veronica 2007:5).

There are significant organizational and educational differences between Chinese, Japanese, and Korean universities versus US universities. Chinese, Japanese, and Korean universities tend to be centralized, standardized, exam-based, require early specialization, and at the highest echelons are public institutions. The US secondary and tertiary education systems both tend to be decentralized, have diverse curriculums, application-based, feature liberal arts-style electives and exploration, and at the highest echelons are overwhelmingly private.

International students are an incredibly diverse group by nature. This makes it challenging to study international students because there is no ‘average’ international student, but instead just selections from a kaleidoscope of different backgrounds and identities. Isolating the demographic to purely East Asian international students in the United States allows me to work with a group of common educational background at least in terms of (i) the structure of their home nation’s education system and (ii) expectations of higher education if they were to not go abroad but instead matriculate to a national university.

Keeping this in mind, my scholarly interest is not in the substantive impact of similarities in East Asian education. I want to examine how, in the commonality of educational characteristics dissimilar to the US education system, how they make and understand their decision whether or not to come to the US. This makes them a fascinating and useful demographic. I ask why do East Asian students, with their common characteristics of their home education system, leave their home nations to come to a US education system that is unfamiliar both in language of instruction and institutional format?

My interest is piqued by the individual judgments and evaluations by international students. In studying this, I emphasize that, from the get-go, going abroad for education is a decision filled with uncertainty and—if pursued—spirals into a complex, challenging process that is affected by multitudinous personal, institutional, and national factors (Luo 2023:703). The decision that international students make to leave their home and come to popular anglophone states like the US is notable because they are leaving behind an accustomed educational system to pursue uncertain and unfamiliar opportunities elsewhere (Lipura and Collins 2020:345). International students necessarily make their decisions in situations with limited knowledge, fraught hopes, and unknowns ahead. Keeping this in

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3 Students from three different nations were included instead of reducing it to a single national background. This was in order to guarantee an even lower common denominator, was that national differences may be taken for granted if I were just to isolate one country and study the students of that origin.
mind, I seek to not only examine their decision to leave their home countries (and systems), but why in particular they select the US as a destination country.

**Past Research**

Just like the growth of educational migration, the literature on international student mobility (ISM) has massively expanded since the turn of the millennium and grown and proliferated across diverse fields. This is expected given ISM’s economic benefits, connections to business and industry, and significant growth over the past two decades. This review of past research will not be able to cover all works and developments, but is instead limited to a high-level, broad overview of themes in ISM scholarship. It will focus on dominant theoretical approaches and seminal work with the aim of laying out specific shortcomings in conceptual approaches.

To start, the ISM scholarship can be described as being broadly concerned with the dynamics between places and people’s cross-border movements. The field is not restricted to any particular scope but considers macro-scale internationalization and state behavior, meso-scale institutional and intermediary student cultivation, and micro-scale student desires and pursuits (Lipura and Collins 2020:344). In simple terms: because ISM is, in the broadest sense, considered with the movement of students across borders, there are many interested parties. States may or may not be interested in those who would seek an education within their borders, institutions seek to attract promising applicants to fill their ranks, and the individuals themselves make future-deciding choices about where to go for an education.

Especially in the past decade, most work on ISM has been quantitative empirical macro-scale research, dealing with state-level data, institution-level social surveys, or other proprietary datasets (Luo 2023:708). They deal with terms such as ‘drivers,’ ‘motivations,’ and/or ‘determinants’ in terms of influence on mobility, or deal with ‘antecedents,’ ‘decisions,’ and/or ‘results’ in terms of chronology (Luo 2023:709; Lipura and Collins 2020:344). To simplify the jargon, they are trying to categorize the variables that are part of an individual ISM experience in order to understand the greater phenomenon.

Common topics in ISM include:

1. Historical overviews (Choudaha and De Wit 2014; Choudaha 2017; Verbik and Veronica 2007; Kirloskar and Inamdar 2021)
2. Choice of destination (Nicholls 2018; Shankar, Quintal, and Taylor 2006; María Cubillo, Sánchez, and Cerviño 2006; Eder, Smith, and Pitts 2010; Mazzarol and Soutar 2002)
3. Patterns of acculturation and interaction (Li et al. 2017; Geary 2016; Koehne 2006; Rice et al. 2012)
4. Social and academic challenges (Lee and Rice 2007; Wu, Garza, and Guzman 2015; Lee and Opio 2011; Zhou et al. 2008)

Among these areas, there are three conceptual frameworks that dominate explanations for educational migration. I briefly discuss each below so that you can gain a better understanding of how these approaches operationalize educational migration and aggregate micro-individual contexts.

Push-pull Theory (aka International Migrations Theory) explains ISM through a set of factors that encourage international study abroad. Push factors emerge from the origin country to encourage the student to go abroad. Pull factors are from the host country to encourage students to come for education.
Crucially, these factors may not only be inherent to origin or host country but also present as preferences in the students themselves (Mazzarol and Soutar 2002:82). Common push-pull factors include: knowledge of destination and awareness of host, proximity to home and social links, friend and relative recommendations, cost, environment, and a variety of institutional characteristics (reputation, programs, enrollment, willingness to recognize applicant ability, etc.) (Mazzarol and Soutar 2002; Kirloskar and Inamdar 2021; Nicholls 2018; (Wen and Hu 2019). Push-pull Theory seeks to clarify the complexity of study abroad by quantifying the weight of various factors in students’ decisions.

Social Network & Knowledge Theory explains ISM through the links of information, ideas and imaginations in networks that influence judgements about mobility. This theory situates the decision to study abroad as being woven by interplay and interactions between actors and institutions across borders (Liputa and Collins 2020:346). Infrastructure and networks such as friends and family recommendations (Shanka et al. 2006), pre-existing enabling policies and institutional hubs (Kondakci et al. 2018), and/or the availability of commercial application assistance services (Collins et al. 2017) are posited to have a significant influence on student decisions.

Capital Theory utilizes Bourdieu’s (1986) theories of economic, cultural and social capital to explain ISM as a strategy for improving national or individual competitiveness through the accumulation of capital. Educational migration is known to provide various capital gains—human capital, in particular—which in turn generates a social advantage for reproducing status or achieving upwards socioeconomic mobility. Host countries may also experience capital gains through a ‘brain gain’-esque process. Capital theory empirical work focus on the decision to study abroad, determinants of stay abroad, and the consequences of capital development in students and effects on the host country (Findlay et al. 2012; Kondakci, Bedenlier, and Zawacki-Richter 2018; Maria Cubillo et al. 2006; Lipura and Collins 2020:347; Waters, 2008 as cited in Collins et al. 2017:1). Conceptually, it is similar to Push-Pull Theory but organizes factors in terms of capital gains for entities. The accumulation of capital is the driving force behind those who go abroad.

These frameworks are a means to structure approaches to ISM. Many of the papers on ISM that I read operated under them, or at least established the foundations of their argument in them. This is not intrinsically wrong but these frameworks can also become a flawed yet tempting foundation from which to base their work. By settling themselves in these frameworks, scholars can feel emboldened to proceed, having taken care of the theoretical concerns. They can expend their energy on making keen insights into ISM, as the assumptions have been taken care of.

I believe this is an approach that begs unintentional oversights. It is understandable how focusing on one of the aforementioned frameworks can make the subject more digestible. However, in doing so, we lose touch with the complexity that is fundamentally characteristic of ISM.

ISM is simultaneously more intricate and bigger than any select or combination of human capital development, sets of weighted preferences, migration patterns, inculturation techniques, or institutional processes. International students are people trying to make big choices about their life while also bombarded with influences from their lifeworld. Students try to scrounge information from their networks, trying to figure out what materials are required for the app, what is the school like, what programs are offered, what’s the visa situation, how much does it cost, etc. They worry about homesickness, cultural adaptation, making new friends, learning in another language, finding jobs, and other unknowns. All the while, guardians think about the future for their child, peers frenzy over college admissions rumors, friends discuss where they’re applying to, companies try to exploit ambitious kids,
and institutions seek to nab talent. And this is not where it ends—international students have more identities than just their status as a foreign student. Excellently stated by Hari et al. (2023),

“They also have multiple identities as students, workers (present or nascent), family members and political actors, among others. Their lives play out at the intersection of multiple spheres, identities and roles.”

While it is admirable to try to concretize the study of international students, overreliance on frameworks distances us from studying the essential, holistic experience. This is not to say that I believe people should not build their ideas upon others in the scholarly tradition—far from it. Rigorous engagement with other scholars is central to the scientific process and the pursuit of knowledge. However, I believe that, in the burgeoning literature, there is too much thinking without seeing.

In a term, the study of ISM suffers from restrictive narratives. These dominant narratives used to understand the subject err in their tendency to characterize international students as unflinching self-interested actors with carefully measured considerations. These frameworks are often set up to make it easier to quantify variables but end up being overly limiting.

To envision the consequences from a lack of diversity in studies, consider how the majority of ISM articles emerge from western institutions studying the movement into their countries, leading to overly Western-centric, neoliberal economic models. In these, international students are presented as calculating, rational outside actors who are reduced to a simple characterization of migrants to developed countries (Wu et al. 2015; Choudaha and Chang 2012; Maria Cubillo 2006). The narrative emphasizes their differences and vulnerabilities without regard to how they are purposeful actors who choose where to go (Shanka et al. 2006). In reality, international students also leave their marks on the places they go and weigh far more than market forces when making decisions of how and why they will travel (Han and Appelbaum 2016; Kondakci 2017 and Sin 2013 as cited in Lipura and Collins 2020:343).

These narratives provide a backdrop which is reductionist and not helpful for understanding how and why international students undertake international educational migration. They shape thinking in a way that prohibits finding conclusions such as the development of individual capital AND personal preferences AND social networks AND more. This is despite the fact that we can easily acknowledge that in reality, all of these are necessary components of ISM. In sum, ISM literature therefore suffers from: (i) a dominance of West-centric viewpoints, (ii) a bias towards cross-sectional studies, (iii) a lack of opposing perspectives, and (iv) a myopic adherence to certain frameworks.

Though it is a cliche to declare that all theories have a piece of the puzzle, in this case I believe it is true. Extant ISM work is overwhelmingly cross-sectional, tends to focus at the macro-level, and isolates the decision to study abroad to a particular set of variables. While this refines and simplifies our perspective, this is a problem because it is divorced from the reality of how international students make decisions. Lipura and Collins (2020) phrase it excellently, stating,

“[T]heoretical insights remain confined within disciplinary boundaries and fixed on narratives that restrict rather than enlarge our understanding of the growing multiplicity and stratification of contemporary student mobilities.”

The literature tends to view students as supremely calculating actors maneuvering to improve their future prospects, or places them in overly rigid frameworks that disregard the multifaceted nature of the decision to go abroad. Research must look beyond the truism that international students are in pursuit
of prestige, jobs, migration west, or success. While these are easy to package in conventional frameworks, they do a disservice to truly understanding the phenomenon of ISM. ISM as a field necessitates an approach that does not dismiss ideas just because they don’t conform cleanly to frameworks, but should reconcile frameworks with reality. International students are now increasingly key participants in the global knowledge economy. Their educational migration has significant consequences for economic exchanges between countries, to intercultural and international understandings, their own life trajectories, and more.

Thus, in this study I try to avoid restrictive adherence to any framework. In this study, I examine the educational preferences of East Asian international students in the United States as they make decisions of where to pursue higher education. Through 12 interviews with East Asian undergraduates, 8 international students in the U.S. and 4 in East Asia, I argue that (i) a preference for academic exploration and (ii) an assumed universally high regard for US degrees are two significant factors in the decision to study abroad.

**Methodology**

This paper’s study breaks new ground through its unassuming presentation of a holistic understanding of East Asian international student migration decisions. Consequently, I emphasize the influence of considerations other than the higher education institution destination loyalty that is predominant in the literature. I instead emphasize how the selection of a host country fits into an individual’s broader life trajectory expectations in regards to economic opportunities and individual capital development.

This study interviews two groups of East Asian students. The first group, interviewed in the fall of 2023, focused on students within the Quaker Consortium, a set of four US tertiary institutions in Southeastern Pennsylvania. The consortium consists of Bryn Mawr College, Haverford College, Swarthmore College, and the University of Pennsylvania (Penn). These colleges have a strong international student presence, as reported on each institution’s home webpage: Bryn Mawr is 17% international students; Haverford is 15% international students; Swarthmore is 16% international students; and Penn is 19% international students. International students are included under these totals as either self-identified in their application to the institution or assigned by their citizenship status (non-US citizen).

From November to December 2023, 8 East Asian international students in US undergraduate programs participated in semi-structured, English-language interviews (Figure 2.3). Interviewees were gathered using the interviewer’s network and snowball sampling and were compensated for their time. All interviewees consented to participation in the study contingent upon being introduced under a pseudonym and limiting identifying information. In order to be eligible for the study, interviewees had to fit the following criteria:

- Must be of a monoracial Asian background and possess Chinese, Japanese, or Korean citizenship.
- Language of schooling must have been an official national language.
- Must have attended the majority of primary school in China, Japan, or South Korea.

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4 The University of Pennsylvania webpage does not list undergraduate and graduate demographics separately.
5 Primary and secondary school are defined under the respective national definition of secondary schooling. For China, Japan, and Korea, both primary school and secondary school are 6 years long (6+3+3).
6 It was important to limit this to only a majority of years and not exclusively because many students I interviewed experienced periods of travel and/or schooling outside of their home country.
Must have attended the majority of secondary school in China, Japan, or South Korea.
Must be currently attending or have graduated in the last two years from a US undergraduate institution.

The second group, interviewed in February to March of 2024, focused on East Asian students who considered studying abroad in the US but ultimately chose to matriculate to a domestic institution. As the complementary perspective of domestic students is severely underreported in past research, by interviewing students who decided against going abroad, I seek to fill a key gap in ISM conceptual frameworks. This study is set up in a manner that lays the groundwork for continued qualitative research on East Asian international student educational preferences.

From November to December 2023, four East Asian students participated in semi-structured, English-language interviews (Figure 2). The same as the first group, interviewees were gathered using the interviewer’s network and snowball sampling, compensated for their time, and consented to participate in the study contingent upon pseudonymization. In order to be eligible for the study, interviewees had to fit the following criteria:

Must be of a monoracial Asian background and possess Chinese, Japanese, or Korean citizenship.
Language of schooling must have been an official national language.
Must have attended the majority of primary school in China, Japan, or South Korea.
Must have attended the majority of secondary school in China, Japan, or South Korea.
Must be currently attending or have graduated within the last two years from an undergraduate institution in China, Japan, or South Korea.

In both interview groups, interviewees were asked questions constructed around the research objectives introduced above. Interview questions were derived from research objectives in consultation with the ISM literature and were pretested on one international interviewee. Initial questions sought to capture a broad, holistic understanding of the individual’s international mobility background while follow-up questions would clarify or narrow down the subject matter.

Distinct from other past qualitative work, I seek to do more than canvass a group. A common shortcoming of past studies has been their research objectives, which aim to interview international students in order to extrapolate their preferences as a datapoint to generalize to broader international student motivations. This comes from the demand-side bias, where researchers are motivated by understanding the draw of the institutions and programs, rather than the students. Their macrostructural analysis, however detailed in its setup, is dismissive of the fact of how ISM is fundamentally about the individual level as it speaks to bigger ideas.

Instead of this inordinately wide approach, I begin from the ground up with general inquiries into students’ own understandings of their migration decision. In the meantime, I remain cognizant of how this decision takes place while influenced by many contextual factors and is part of a larger set of decisions that will determine their future. This is achieved through questions that seek to place the holistic understanding of the individual’s international journey in the global flow of students across borders.

I intentionally remain open to other themes that emerge from these interviews. Crucially, this study remains cognizant of the dominant theoretical approaches in ISM but will not be outright testing their fit in terms of finding answers that conform to the framework or expected conclusions. Ultimately, by studying the desires and expectations of East Asian domestic and international students—particularly

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7 In their respective China, Japan, or Korea.
in comparison to their home education system—I hope that this work will ultimately contribute to understanding international student mobility and worldwide education trends.

Analysis

My analysis covers interview data from 12 interviewed East Asian undergraduate students: 8 attending US institutions and 4 attending institutions in their home countries (Japan, China). In this section, I begin by presenting summarized profiles of the students I interviewed, first students in the US and then students in their home countries. I follow up by then analyzing emergent themes, drawing evidence from their responses.

Figure 2.1: East Asian International Student Interviewees in U.S. Institutions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PSEUDONYM</th>
<th>GENDER</th>
<th>NATIONALITY</th>
<th>INSTITUTION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Private Liberal Arts College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackie</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Private Liberal Arts College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zixuān</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Private Liberal Arts College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fāng</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Private University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shintarō</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>Private Liberal Arts College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elliot</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>Private Liberal Arts College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hyun-jae</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Korean</td>
<td>Private Liberal Arts College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Korean</td>
<td>Private Liberal Arts College</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2.2: East Asian International Student Interviewees in Domestic Institutions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PSEUDONYM</th>
<th>GENDER</th>
<th>NATIONALITY</th>
<th>INSTITUTION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>Private Japanese University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minami</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>Private Japanese University</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ken</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>National Chinese University</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mei</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>National Chinese University</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Part 1: Profiles - East Asian Students in the U.S.

Transferring to the International Track

Growing up in Zhuhai, Amy said that it seemed like her mother always expected Amy to go abroad for university. From the start, Amy attended a primary school that had a strong foreign language program and she was in class with many children from well-to-do, internationally-minded parents. With her proximity to Hong Kong and Southeast Asia, Amy got to do a lot of regional travel during these early years, which cast a positive tint to how she thought of international travel. When the talk of international education came up as family friends’ children matriculated to foreign institutions, her lawyer parents always discussed it in a positive way. From these influences, during the second year of middle school, when her parents brought up the topic of plans for the future and potentially going abroad, it was an easy decision as, in her words, “the Chinese system did not fit how I grew up and [did not fit] my personality.” It was straightforward from that point on, as Amy enrolled in a Chinese boarding school renowned specifically for its international track preparation, setting her firmly on an international trajectory.

When it came time to choose a destination for undergrad, she was torn between the US, UK, Hong Kong, or Singapore. Though she received acceptances from all locations, she chose the US because she thought it would give her more options to maneuver. She knew that she would have the freedom to explore while working towards a US degree, and that that degree would be valued in many places around the world. Amy does not yet know where she wants to go after university, but is interested in law school. She noted that with her US degree, for sure, “there are more options if she does not stay in China.”

From an early age, James’ mentality did not fit his public Korean primary school. Academically, he disliked how it was too rote, especially emphasizing all the information that the young students had to rapidly take in and then disgorge in tests. Socially, his hobbies and interests didn’t really match up with other boys his age. During the interview, he confessed that he spent far more time hanging out with international students he would meet at hagwon as he enjoyed talking with them a lot more. His parents knew he wasn’t enjoying school, so his mother brought up the idea of transferring to an international school with his father. As he put it,

James: “They were also really worried because my older brother was [for us] a guinea pig for Korean education [sic] higher education, and they figured out that [James] definitely wouldn’t enjoy any of it. It was basically the same as public school I’d attended, but multiplied by ten.”

James’ father was resistant because he knew that sending James to an international school would be “committing [James] to study abroad for university in the future,” but in the end he was willing to try it for his son. In eighth grade, James transferred over to a nearby international school for a trial period. He did ‘decent enough,’ so his parents were satisfied. James would stay at that international school until graduation, matriculating to a US institution like many of his classmates. When asked what he planned to do after university, James said he “came with the intention of staying.” He noted that there is a lot about the US that is romanticized which is obviously not true, but it is still a leading place to get access to opportunities and connections, particularly in pharmaceuticals, his primary area of interest.

Amy and James were initially part of their home national education systems but they chose to transfer to an international track due. They shared that they felt the national curriculums of their primary schools were a poor fit to how they felt they did their learning and socializing. With this in mind, early on in their academic careers and in consultation with their parents, they felt attracted to the offerings of the
international track. When asked to narrow down a specific time period in which they made the decision to study abroad, both Amy and James voiced that it was during their second year of middle school. This mirrors what James’ father pointed out in how his son entering the international track essentially guaranteed his later study abroad. In my appraisal, their matriculation to a US institution was just a natural continuation of the school infrastructure (the international track) that they were already on. Though they were five or more years away from applying to any foreign institutions, their international trajectory had already begun with these first steps. Now in college, they have affirmed this path, stating that they expect to be outside of their home countries because of the opportunities that their education in the US has given them.

*My Education, My Future*

Elliot grew up primarily in Japan, but spent three scattered primary school years in Malaysia. She noted that this definitely influenced her view of school in general as she had these two distinct systems to compare. Elliot came back to stay in Japan from fifth grade onwards and matriculated to a private junior high school in Fukuoka. However, she did not like this system. The Japanese system “focused more on memorization and regurgitating things during exams” which was very different from her international school. In her first year of Japanese high school, Elliot had to enroll in either a ‘humanities’ or a ‘STEM’ track. At the time, Elliot had a passion for biology, so she asked her dean about entering the STEM track. Instead, he actively discouraged her because her scores for sciences were lower than humanities, and so she was slotted into the humanities program. This was devastating to her, as she explained,

**Elliot:** “It made me rethink this whole school system. It’s supposed to be a place where you can pursue your interests. Even though I really wanted to study it, they were really limiting my opportunity to do that. [...] How I want to shape my future should not be up to them, it should be up to me.”

Frustrated, Elliot began doing research on international programs and fell in love with what she learned about the IB. Desperate, she talked to her parents, who, seeing her frustration, agreed with her and helped her apply to an IB program in New Zealand. Elliot was able to get in and stayed there for the rest of high school. Going abroad to the US for higher education was a reasonably straightforward decision from there. While Elliot never once considered Japanese institutions, she did briefly look at some UK schools but was repelled by how they required her to declare an early disciplinary specialization. After university, Elliot is not sure she’ll return to Japan but is also not sure whether she’ll stay in the US: “My life has just been moving from place to place and I think I’m just used to that and I really like that—being able to experience different places and different people.”

Like Elliot, Hyun-jae grew up moving around, but she spent her first few years at a public Korean elementary school. In her recollection it was very textbook intensive and she did not like it, leading her to falling behind her other classmates even in primary school. In fifth grade, her family moved to the Dominican Republic because of her father’s work. She attended an international school there for two years before returning to Korean public secondary school. It was during this time in middle school that she realized how she “wasn’t able to follow along with the Korean education system but abroad I was doing fine.” She noted that this was likely due to her splintered educational background, but nevertheless stressed the sense of misfit during those years, as,
Hyun-jae: “My parents always knew that I struggled to fit in the Korean education system. [...] The way they teach just wasn’t working for me.”

Hyun-jae would stay in Korea for three years, after which her family moved to Brazil where she would remain until the end of high school. In Brazil, she attended an international school, which was “definitely my favorite.” When it came time to think about higher education, her parents expressed that they wanted her to apply to Korean universities like they themselves had graduated from. However, she refused to apply to any Korean institutions, justifying this with how “the teaching environment is very limited in Korea since there are no liberal arts colleges there.” From both her international background and uncertainty of what she wanted to study, she said much prefers the US system. This was not only for its academics, but also how she saw her attending a Korean institution would lead to her certainly being in Korea for the future, which she did not like the thought of. Her parents relented and Hyun-jae applied exclusively to liberal arts colleges in the US, which she notes her parents are still a bit unhappy about, but they have accepted her decision. Hyun-jae still has no idea what she wants to do after university, but is “probably not going back to Korea” since her US degree opens doors for opportunities besides the home system she dislikes.

Elliot and Hyun-jae possess similar international education experiences. Having experienced both their national education system and international education, they preferred the latter to the point where they took it into their own hands to ensure their matriculation into a system outside of their country. They were attracted to the US for its academic freedom as much as they were repelled by their home system’s rigidity. Encouraged by their international experiences before, they had to seek out information and reach into networks on their own. When asked about future plans, they were unsure, which is understandable given the undergraduate perspective. What is intriguing is that they noted the flexibility that their US degree would give them, implicitly suggesting that the ‘default’ expectation would have been for them to return to their home country but the valuation of a US education has opened up other possibilities. To them, the US was not only a better fit for their educational preferences but also kept their future open. It is not that they absolutely refuse to return home, but they did not want to be constrained to that in education and, critically, their future.

Domestic Limits, Overseas Opportunities

Jackie, a Chinese student, felt that it was always determined that she was going to go abroad for university, though it remained unspoken. In primary school, Jackie attended a “very international” school that surrounded her with children from a lot of upper-class, internationally-minded families. For middle school, though, she transferred to a “more normal public school” that placed her on the gaokao track. It was only in her eighth grade that her mother, hearing about a friend’s daughter who was applying to the US, had a sudden epiphany that now in eighth grade, Jackie was at a key transition point and now was the opportunity for Jackie to go abroad. Jackie’s mother brought the idea to Jackie’s father and Jackie’s aunt who lived in the US, and both of them thought it was a good idea and so they immediately went to tell Jackie. Jackie said she was not surprised by the idea and accepted it very quickly. Jackie strongly connects this to her family history of building back up from the chaos of the Cultural Revolution. Now living in Beijing, she reflected they had “sort of” exhausted the possibility for improvement of their domestic situation since, in her appraisal, their current situation in Beijing is the best it can be. Therefore, she must go outside the country and among destinations, the US was the best option. After graduation, Jackie plans to get a PhD in the US. She remains amenable to moving after this, particularly considering offers from
institutions in other countries—including China—because, worldwide, “if you have a US education you are seen as the secret ingredient to getting published.” Jackie’s US degree, for her, opens doors.

Fāng attended Chinese public school until high school, for which she successfully tested into a Shanghai school that had a strong history of sending students abroad. Fāng was very upfront in her assessment of US higher education versus that in China, stating plainly that “[people] think that a Western education is somehow better, or at least catered towards students’ individual and personality development.” She described the intense competition and overcrowding in the Chinese exam system, bluntly expressing her dissatisfaction with it, stating,

Fāng: “I was not a winner in that system: of course I did not like it.”

However, despite all her cynicism, Fāng expressed her strong preference for the academic freedoms and future opportunities in the US over China. For university, she didn’t have a set idea of what she wanted to study, so she found herself applying to a liberal arts program. Now in college, Fāng says she is not sure she’ll go back to China. She took my question of opportunities very literally, stating that she prefers the US partly due to the economic downturn (in China) and the work culture being better in the US. Her expectation is because of the prestige of her school and degree, she thought it would be relatively straightforward to get a good job. In the long term, she “doesn’t really know since whatever her stuff lines up to be” and so she wants to remain open to a variety of options.

Jackie and Fāng both attended internationally-minded schools, Jackie in primary and Fāng in secondary. They expressed that they felt limited by the prospect of remaining in China and that the US was a better option for their future.

Under the Wire

Shintarō, a Japanese student, credits an international experience which influenced his decision to come to the US. He attended Japanese public school for all of primary and one year of middle school, but for three years attended a Viennese boarding school. He returned to Japan to complete his final two years of high school, and was faced with the sudden decision of what to do for higher education. He confessed that at that point, he did not know what he wanted to study for four years of university. He did not have a very high opinion of Japanese universities, as in his appraisal, Japanese universities seemed more social than study. Remembering what people had said about the rigorous US liberal arts system, he quickly shifted his sights towards applying to US institutions. Completely independent of his parents, who each had graduated from Japanese institutions and seemed to expect him to do the same, in the span of a few months he completed his research, applications, and was accepted to several US liberal arts colleges. When asked what he wants to do after university, Shintarō said that he was unsure, but realistically, he will return to Japan. He does not at all regret his decision to come to a US institution, though, as he believes this experience in the US will be beneficial for the exploratory opportunity and the connections he was able to make through his school.

Zīxuān went through the quintessential Chinese school pipeline, going from a public primary school to a public high school to on the gaokao track. She was on track to take the gaokao, but in her second year of high school she began to have misgivings. Put simply, she “didn’t like the idea of staying.” When asked exactly why, she explained that given her progress so far in high school, it would of course be safer to go for gaokao, but her future would be ‘determined’ if she were to remain in China. She objected to this. She felt restricted by the prospect of staying, in part because she didn’t know what she wanted to study. In all her time in the Chinese system, she reflected, she felt it was unhelpfully strict,
overly intense, and did not prepare people for life. Given these negative, nebulous feelings, Zixuān stressed that her sudden turn to go abroad was “not an informed decision” as she didn’t know the full picture of what the higher education system looked like in the US. She only knew that some part of her was “looking for adventure.” With the help of commercial programs that advertised US colleges, she successfully applied to several US liberal arts colleges. Now in university, shared that she sometimes has moments of frustration and regret, but it has been “one of the best decisions” to come to the US and it is hard to imagine herself receiving a “comparable education back home even with the best system.” She is unsure of what to do in the future, but is thinking about grad schools in anglophone countries.

Zixuān and Shintarō made sudden decisions towards the end of their secondary school years that officially put them on an international track. In my appraisal, however, these choices were influenced by a latent preference that activated when confronted with the decision of what they were going to do in the future. Unwilling to be tied down, they applied to US institutions as a way to avoid what they saw as a limitation on their future.

Part 2: Profiles - East Asian Students in Asia

The Fast Lane

Mei described herself as having a “very normal education in China.” She did all of her pre-college schooling in Beijing. Same as Rachel, she was lucky enough to only have to take the zhongkao (middle school entrance exam) and matriculated directly into the attached, specialized high school through a 2+4 program. The one cost of this was that she had to board as early as sixth grade, meaning she would only visit home once a week. When she would come home, she and her parents would talk for hours about “all sorts of topics,” which kept them close to her. Meanwhile, Mei loved her high school, emphasizing that there were a lot of courses to choose from that allowed students to explore themselves. They didn’t have standardized tests because they had their own textbooks so teachers would create tests. Since the students didn’t have to do the zhongkao, students had more free time to both try out subjects and delve deeper into established interests. Mei remarks that there was no specific point she decided to go to undergrad in China, just that it was very standard to do so. Though 2/3 official subdivisions of her clearly internationally-minded school prepped for university in foreign countries, she selected the gaokao track. The decision of where to go covered, she focused instead on what to do. In high school “I had a lot of time to think,” and so found herself drawn to genetic engineering and then psychology and then law. However, none of these would come to pass, as she ultimately would settle in finance. She quite bluntly stated that this was because she didn’t do well enough in the gaokao. She got an okay score and tried to find a school that matched her using historical data. Her teachers tried to help her find a place that would allow some more curricular freedom, but she didn’t have this luxury due to her lower score. When asked about what she ended up studying, she said,

Mei: “Even though I loved law, but I chose finance [sic] because I’m a very logical person and I can make money and use money to help people. I also don’t like to take risk[s], though finance is all about risks, so if I can study finance I can conquer these risks. I can learn that risk means opportunity and take the challenge.”

She ended up enrolling in a slightly lower-tier university that nevertheless had a nationally-renowned finance program. When asked about what her parents thought of her decision, Mei shared that they have always been very supportive of her decisions and independence, offering advice but generally wanting to
leave her life to her. In a single sentence of reflection, she summarized that her journey has been “a pretty typical path” for Chinese students who must work through the university admissions gauntlet.

Rachel is from Miyagi, Japan. She entered into her integrated junior and senior high school in sixth grade, which is notable because Japanese schools, especially those in smaller prefectures, overwhelmingly require entrance exams. Being able to get into this middle school would spare her the ordeal of the competition to enter high school. Rachel described her as smaller than many other public schools in Japan, but relative to the average secondary institution, she felt she received an excellent education. The school followed a standard government-determined curriculum for the most part, but was innovative in its practices. For example, to train students’ English, they built in significant speaking practice compared to other schools’ programs. When it was time for English class, they would have periods of time up to one hour in which they weren’t allowed to use any Japanese and were encouraged to just chat with each other in English. The standard curriculum for public school English is notorious for its focus on grammar drills and lack of speaking and listening practice. When it came time to consider tertiary education, Rachel described it as almost ‘nature’ or ‘mandatory’ that she matriculate to a Japanese institution. Her school was innovative, but everyone was subtly discouraged from taking the ‘risk’ of studying abroad, especially not for four years. Though she noted that though many students had expressed an ambitious idealism to attend foreign universities, when it came to thinking in real terms of things such as tuition or rent, it’s almost impossible because,

Rachel: “It’s so expensive to learn in America. [...] [Japanese] students can just go to a high level university in Japan and participate in an exchange program, which is more realistic. People who have the privilege go abroad.”

Going abroad is a big risk compared to learning in Japan, which she saw as a safer choice. She emphasized that her parents always encouraged her to make her own decisions as to where to go, but they, like her, recognized the importance of getting into a high ranked school in order to succeed. Their vision of success was entrance into a top school, recognized by a big Tokyo company at which Rachel would work, as,

Rachel: “In Japan, most of the people [sic], when thinking about your university, your future career is associated with it, so it was natural for me to think about it.”

To enable this future, Rachel emphasized how she spent countless hours in supplementary education—cram school—to practice for the university exam. When she got into her first choice university through the daigaku nyūshii (national university exam) she was ecstatic. She really wanted to do international relations, and really wanted to improve her English, so she applied to the English program of her school. Rachel described her situation as being the product of thinking long and hard about what she wants to do, so she is happy she can pursue her passions, but she tempered this with an acknowledgement that not all students have the same luck to find what they want and get into a program of choice.

Rachel and Mei both only considered going abroad for the briefest of times, instead focusing on their progress towards domestic institution matriculation, thanks to their admission to ‘fast track’ integrated middle and high school systems. With their decision on where to go settled pretty early on, they turned instead to working through school rankings and programs that they would benefit the most from. Though I did not dwell upon it much in their profiles, this of course involved extreme commitment to
academic excellence, expressed through countless hours preparing for their respective national exams. Rachel is a case of a success in this system, while Mei encountered a few more obstacles, but both represent the paths of many Chinese and Japanese students in their respective national university systems.

**Rankings and Costs**

Ken began the interview by rapidly listing off his pre-college education in China. He went to a private kindergarten, followed by a private primary school in Guangdong. Still in Guangdong, he matriculated to a well-respected public middle school. For high school, he passed an exam to enter one of the best secondary schools in the Special Administrative Region (SAR) of Macau. In terms of curriculum, the school had the standard government-mandated topics to cover. However, it differed significantly in its means of sending students off to university. Due to its status as an institution of the SAR, students would be recommended to universities by the headmaster instead of participating in the gaokao gauntlet. Because of this, the school placed a premium on activities and community engagement over just test scores. Ken laughed when I asked if he preferred this, stating, “Of course I liked it—it was less stressful than the mainland [schools],” as he then explained that his friends literally studied their days and nights away prepping for the gaokao.

Ken quickly settled on where he would go for undergrad when he entered high school. Though his school also offered programs that focused on sending people abroad, Ken’s parents offered some suggestions as to why he should stay in China, and he agreed with their logic. In simple terms, US institutions were astronomically more expensive than China and given his high school, he had a good chance of getting into a top Chinese institution. His parents were not insistent, though, which led him to feel that he still had ownership of his decision and experiences. When it came time to apply to universities, he reflected that “I thought a lot about ranking.” He had to apply for a specific discipline, and after some deliberation, he settled upon law because he felt he was skilled in that area and could get into an excellent college with that choice. Ultimately, it ended up paying off as his headmaster recommended him to one of the top three institutions in China. Passing their interview, comparatively laughable against the gaokao admission rate, he is now part of their law program. In a moment of reflection, he shared that he sometimes wishes he could study some other subjects but feels comfortable with what he has and is grateful that his university continues to improve in ranking and reputation.

Minami was born and raised in Japan. She attended a private middle school in Chiba and was able to get into the attached private high school, though not without completing the required entrance exam, she duly noted. She was careful to detail how the organization of her school was unusual because it had two different levels for students, one for “more motivated” students and one for “more craft/sports activities”-motivated students. On top of this, the school featured the usual STEM/humanities specialization divide of many Japanese schools that prepared students for the university exam. She herself was in the more motivated section on the humanities track. She really liked her school and what it offered. Especially relevant to international education, she was planning to go to Canada for a year as part of an exchange program facilitated by her school. However, COVID in 2020 shut this down. Minami focused back on her schooling. When it came time to think about undergrad, she, like many in her school, considered going abroad, as she shared,

**Minami:** “I wanted to go outside of Japan because Japan is an island, people just tend to be stuck in Japan, but I didn’t want to be stuck there for my entire life. I wanted to experience many things from different people and cultures.”
Regardless of where she went, Minami described an intense pressure because she was a well-known top student and her teachers were strongly encouraging her to look abroad. She felt an immense pressure to go to an outstanding university. Yet she ended up deciding against going abroad because she felt she didn’t have the necessary test scores (TOEFL, SAT). When pressed further, Minami shared that tuition fees were also a major concern, despite her interest in going abroad. Rankings were one of her primary concerns. Whichever school she would get into would be announced to everyone at school, and she was particularly concerned with what her kouhai (juniors) would think. Especially important to her, however, was that her chosen university would have an international program, as she still harbored hopes of future foreign exchange, if not just an internationally-minded curriculum. With her performance on the national exam, Minami ended up getting into a top five university, especially known for its international affiliations and English program.

Ken and Minami are both cases where they had clear opportunities to go to a foreign institution but chose otherwise. Both cited the extreme cost of foreign education (especially the US) as a primary deterrent, but convenience and risk also played a role. Notably, consistent with Mei and Rachel, ranking was a major factor when it came down to determining domestic institutions. They ultimately chose not to come to the US expressing that they felt satisfied with staying in a home institution, particularly with the tier of school they were able to matriculate to.

Part 3: Themes

Bigger Than One Moment

The responses that interviewees shared with me revealed values and their understanding of their international educational migration experiences. Drawing particularly from the first group of East Asian international students attending US undergraduate institutions, I identified three major themes in interviewee narratives of their decision to go abroad, or not.

First, interviewee statements about their ‘decision’ to go abroad made it clear that this choice was not made in the final stages of their secondary education, but was something in progress from early on in their lives. The decision for international students to study abroad is often misunderstood by trying to query motivations affecting the decision. The question has the assumption that this is something that takes place at a single juncture. Even the word ‘decision’ suggests a moment in time in which a path is chosen. In reality, educational migration is more likely the result of various forces and experiences over an extended period and it may not even feature individuals consciously recognizing this commitment to going abroad.

Every interviewee provided a general time in which they first made the decision that they were going abroad. However, when asked clarifying questions, they often explained that though there was a moment they realized it, they had a bias towards studying abroad or their process of going abroad was already in progress. Consider Elliot’s narrative, as though she specified the first year of high school as the point where she decided to go abroad, she explains her background had great import, stating,

Elliot: “Otherwise, my life has just been moving from place to place and I think I’m just used to that and I really like that, being able to experience different places and different people.”

Elliot: “I had kind of escaped from the system I didn’t agree with. I had so far liked the experience studying abroad. And I had lived in Japan for just over half of my life [...] I
wanted to explore something else. [...] It’s really important to explore different areas, which is something I realized during my IB study. I wanted to continue that. Also my high school was very small, especially because of COVID [she laughs].”

Elliot specified that growing up moving back and forth between Malaysia and Japan, in her view, influenced her later preference toward moving between places and getting to know people from diverse backgrounds. Elliot felt constrained by the rigid system and culture around her, and wanted something else. Her educational migration is more pivotal than most, as she sought to leave her Japanese school, but even then she notes how this was driven by her past.

Jackie’s situation is different from Elliot, as she attended only Chinese schools, albeit with a bit of an international student population. She specified the time of her decision to go abroad as her second year of middle school, but she acknowledges that this may just have been a realization, as,

Jackie: "It felt like it was my decision. But at the time it really was nobody's decision. I think that since I was little my parents and my aunt just assumed that [Jackie] would go abroad."

Jackie said that this expectation comes from her parent’s hopes for future prospects, especially given her family’s background in the cultural revolution. Jackie followed a normal track in public Chinese schools right up until her family realized it was time to take the plunge for her to go abroad. As she noted, this didn’t mean immediately moving to the US, but just picking up preparation in areas such as intensified English language practice and research on US boarding schools. Jackie accepted this quickly, noting that “I didn’t have much attitude about it” except for how she was annoyed by the tests of the Chinese public school system, so she was excited for the prospect of not taking those. Her lack of reaction, she says, came from always working under the assumption that this was a probable outcome.

Jackie: "It felt like such a natural decision. It was like, if you can, then do it. But why? Why that?"

She offered that her parents probably thought that a US education is seen as a jumping board for a more healthy and happy life, but she didn’t really know their motivations at the time.

For all of the interviewees, though they were able to point to a specific time when they made the decision to go abroad, they shared that they were on that track to begin with or had influences upon their preferences that made them amenable to such an idea. Amy had early exposure to internationalization due to her proximity to Hong Kong and regional travel, so her enrollment in a secondary school for eventual study abroad was a natural decision. James, as a child, spent a lot of time with international students, which influenced his decision to attend an international school. He marks middle school as the period in which he decided to go abroad, but notes that his motivations for coming to the US only later became more concrete in high school, when it became apparent that this was his trajectory. Shintarō had experience at a boarding school in middle school, and though he came back to Japan to enroll in the national education system, he expressed,

Shintarō: “I always wanted to go outside of Japan for uni, but it was during COVID pandemic times so I was very uncertain. I decided to apply US college, like, on September. [I ask a clarifying question.] Of senior year, high school, yeah. Yeah, but, like I didn’t prepare that long, but, yeah.”
Shintarō experienced one of the most drastic turning points. The Japanese school year runs from April–March, so doing his college applications in September represented an extremely sudden shift, which he notes. Nevertheless, he expresses that he “had always wanted” to go outside of Japan. His case is emblematic of how the decision to go abroad is not so much a decision but a commitment perhaps years in the making.

**Freedom**

Interviewees also shared that they felt a mismatch to their native national education systems, whether in terms of disciplinary restrictions or method of instruction. Despite none of the interview questions (Table 1.1) explicitly asking about it, interviewees invariably professed that educational exploration was an important ideal that influenced their choice of attending a US institution. They spoke about how they did not have high expectations for matriculation to a national university in their country. Consequently, all of them expressed that freedom, especially the academic freedom to explore, was an important part of their interest in a US institution.

In Amy’s case, coming to the US was directly caused by her uncertainty about what subject to study. Though she currently expects to go further into the law field in the future, Amy was not always so sure of what she wanted to study, explaining,

Amy: “Mostly, I think, I kinda want[ed] to go to the US because I don’t have a really specific field of interest. During that time, I know I’m interested in political science a little bit, but I think that’s a pretty shallow understanding. If I think back from what I am right now, I chose political science as the major I was applying to for most universities basically because of the extracurricular themes and activities that was needed for college applications is connected to political science. But, I don’t have a solid understanding of political science, and, during that time I am thinking of having other majors in which I can try out different stuff. But the UK is not a good place for me to do that, to experience different majors, because you know when you choose different majors in universities in the UK you need to study that for three years. I think it’s difficult to change my mind if I go to any universities in the UK.”

Amy, because she was in an international prep program, did not consider going to a Chinese university. When considering options such as the UK, she used her knowledge that she would have to declare a field of study to narrow her view, such that she ended up applying mostly to US institutions. This emphasis on academic freedoms, particularly compared to sometimes stifling home system requirements, mirrored other responses to the question of “*Why the US, in particular?*”

Shintarō: “I think what stands out to me, what stands out to me, is the educational system the US has. At the time, I wasn’t super sure of what I wanted to study for four years. The US, obviously, has a liberal arts education that allows me to study lot of cool subjects. So I was very interested in that. I’d say that’s the biggest reason I chose here.”

James: “[referring to other Korean students] They too, to some extent, find their education suffocating. A lot of people definitely want to go abroad, I think. But I also feel that, besides finance, they’re really unaware of what kind of challenges await them when it comes to how to take their own initiative in their own education.”
Shintarō and James both felt the constraints of their home systems and did not like it. James went earlier, enrolling in an international middle school to get that academic freedom. Shintarō took until late high school to act upon his opposition to the early specialization of the Japanese system. Like Shintarō, Zixuān, Fāng, Elliot were all part of their national education systems and did not appreciate the early specialization. They each took their own steps to gain academic freedom by coming to the US in contrast to the students who stayed in domestic East Asian institutions. While some who stayed, like Minami and Mei, felt the sting of restrictions, they did not voice that going abroad would be better, as there were uncertainties.

After following-up with their responses, it additionally became clear that across all interviewees who came to the US, this exploration was a freedom that was not restricted to purely an educational context, but also extended to hopes for their life trajectory. Though the US was the destination of choice for their tertiary education, they did not necessarily reflect an attachment to the US because it is the US, but because of its positionality as a ‘springboard for the world.’ This means that, in coming to the US, these students expressed that their future is open as opposed to expected future restrictions if they were to stay in their home system.

**Zixuān:** “I feel like some, a part of me, was looking for adventure. And I just felt that like it would be more traditional, like, I don’t know, more safe path to do the gaokao track. But it seems my future would be pretty, like, there still would be uncertainties, but my future would be more obvious in that sense. And, uh, I don’t know why, but I didn’t quite like the idea. That might be one of the main thing motivating me potentially studying abroad.”

Students did not necessarily come to the US because they desire to set themselves long-term for a life in the US, but instead shared that going to school in the US is a stepping stone from which they can build a future that offers freedom. Academic freedom is but one component of a broader desire for an expected, abstract future freedom that is only obtainable by leaving home. The key point here is that they are not expressly choosing to leave their home country with the intention of turning this mobility into long-term—perhaps even generational—migration. Instead, they seek to keep their future free in what they see as a decision that enables their flexibility in the future.

**The Aims of Education & Young Adulthood**

Through the consistent mentions of the freedom that would come from studying abroad, interviewees also revealed how they define education and young adulthood as a period. In their mind, going to college and their future are directly related. Evidenced by their comments about making sure they aren’t stuck in a field they don’t like, they grasp the gravity of the trajectories that they are on. The degree that they seek to attain is not just an accreditation that gives opportunities, but also an experience that may restrict opportunities.

This restriction of opportunities, to them, is a bad thing, but they are thinking in the long-term. As they cite freedom as a major motivation for coming to the US, they articulate their value of education as something that opens doors. They think of the future, knowing there will be demands of them, as even in their primary and secondary school they feel pressures cutting into their lifeworld now. The decision and the experience of going abroad is not easy. Zixuān shared that she felt “daily frustrations with expressing

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8 Students in Japanese national universities apply to enter into specific degree programs, with significant administrative obstacles if they seek to change their major later on.
herself” and “was ashamed that language ability was an obstacle.” Amy explained that she felt greater difficulty with certain things because she was an international student, and that it took longer to adapt to the social life here on a US campus.

In coming to the US, they made sacrifices, closing opportunities in choosing to come to a new environment. For them, it is worth it, though, because of the expected future freedom. All of them expressed it in nearly these exact terms, leaving this ‘freedom’ highly abstract, instead of pointing toward keeping open jobs, locations, circles, etc. This differed from those that remained in domestic East Asian institutions, not in that the ‘stayers’ didn’t value freedom, but that freedom was not brought up as a primary concern when considering going abroad. My aim here is not to psychologize, but to point out the attunement to a common understanding of what the point of education is. Their invocation of freedom demonstrates the mechanism of education by which they adhere: it is meant to provide opportunity, and they maneuver based upon that, even if such opportunity is not directly concretized in the present moment or in an explicit idea.\(^9\)

**Conclusion**

This study delves into the burgeoning phenomenon of international education migration, focusing on international student mobility in context of the substantial growth of East Asian international students pursuing higher education in the United States. By examining the migration decisions of 8 East Asian internationals at institutions in eastern Pennsylvania and 4 East Asian internationals at institutions in Asia, this study challenges existing theoretical frameworks in the literature, I emphasize the need for a holistic understanding of the multifaceted factors influencing students' decisions to study abroad.

Through analyzing interviewee responses, one of the major themes was that nearly all of the students possessed backgrounds which set them on an international trajectory far before they made any distinct ‘decision’ to go abroad in secondary school. Determining that they would go abroad was not so much a decision in a moment but a confirmation of an international trajectory. Students’ matriculation to a US institution was not only for academic freedom but because of greater life freedom. Responses from the interviews indicated that freedom, specifically the academic freedom of the US higher education system, was a significant factor in students’ choice to come to the US for tertiary education. Students noted that the positionality of the US was highly attractive because it allowed them to keep their future open, as to a more fixed future if they were to remain in their own country. In addition to this, responses unexpectedly revealed the way that interviewees view education and the objectives of the time period of being a young adult. They expressed a willingness to undergo more immediate limitations for expected future freedoms, demonstrating a certainty that coming to the, in particular, US would be able to offer this.

For most of the interviewees, the decision to go international did not occur in a moment but was a culmination of earlier influences shaping their trajectories. They commonly stated that going abroad seemed to be obvious as part of the next step in their journey. This is not to say that they were simply going abroad because it was expected—as all of them shared that they felt a high degree of ownership over their migration decision—but as stated previously they outlined more abstract goalposts. The allure of the US is not merely tied to academic exploration but extends to a broader sense of life freedom, positioning the country as a springboard for future opportunities.

My analysis highlights that students have long-term influences upon their tendency to study abroad. Contrary to how ISM frameworks structure the decision, do not make these into discrete categories nor specify an concrete outcome of educational migration. Even if they are conscious of

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\(^9\) By this, I mean ideas such as thinking about job openings, developing skills, building a social network, etc.
influences upon their decision, they focus more on an abstract expected value of this decision. They place a high value on future gain from education abroad as opposed to the cost of high tuition or going to an unfamiliar place. Most commonly, interviewees state the importance of anticipated future freedoms that will come about from their decision to go abroad. When asked why, interviewees invariably responded that staying in their home system would have their become more set, limiting opportunities. This is a significant finding because in previous studies, educational preference has been commonly pushed to the wayside as more institutionally actionable qualities—such as program offerings, cost, and reputation—have been emphasized (Findlay 2011; Shanka et al. 2006; Nicholls 2018). While this finding requires more work to be generalized to ISM broadly, future research should consider educational preference as a relatively stronger factor.

However, I maintain that this study does not make the argument that educational preference is a universal ideal for all international students. Educational preference is merely one factor that has been largely ignored by the literature, which this paper seeks to prove is a mistake of past scholars. While acknowledging the limitations of this study, I hold that this research nevertheless contributes valuable insights to the broader discourse on international student mobility, advocating for a more nuanced and comprehensive approach in understanding the diverse motivations and aspirations of this global population.

This study suffers from two major limitations in the data, both of which are related to interviewee demographic diversity. First, all interviewees had similar levels of parental educational attainment, specifically, that all interviewees' parents possessed a bachelor’s degree or equivalent. While interviewees’ socioeconomic background was not recorded, there is reason to believe that the interviewees all came from backgrounds of above-average material and cultural resources. This is corroborated by the logic of survivorship, that if they didn’t have the resources to attend a tertiary institution, I would not be interviewing them in the first place. This is obviously a detriment to the socioeconomic diversity of the sampling and leads to concerns about the weight that interviewees assigned to factors such as cost and burden upon their families.

However, the impact of this is predictable and is detectable in the data. Those that went abroad did not mention financial cost as a significant obstacle, but simply a factor in their decision. To them, the financial cost was ‘worth it’ for the paths that would open up. Meanwhile, all of those who stayed at home cited financial cost, specifically the egregiously high tuition costs served to international students by US institutions, as a deterrent. This study was well-served by interviewing domestic students, as with such a clear dichotomy, we can avoid survivorship bias. We do not have the capacity to claim that financial costs are a dominating factor, but that is all right because that is not the aim of this study. For now, I acknowledge financial costs as an obstacle that helps to shape understanding of the decision-making process.

Second, the majority of interviewees attend liberal arts institutions (Figure 2.1). Given that the study was expressly examining educational preference, the selection of candidates may be significantly biased against those who did not value academic freedom but came to the US. All interviewees at US institutions expressed the importance of academic freedom which influenced their selection of institution. However, what about those who came to the US not to attend liberal arts institutions? Due to restrictions on extending work visas for recent graduates in non-STEM disciplines, there is an irregular distribution of
international students into different fields of study.\textsuperscript{10} Because this study does not examine this other population, it may unduly privilege educational freedoms as an influence on the decision to study abroad.

For future research in ISM, I recommend examining cases in which time is a more significant variable of interest. Given recency of both the mass ISM phenomenon and the literature, most scholarship on the subject tends to be cross-sectional. To see the evolution of influences on ISM, I recommend utilizing surveys of international students or seeking out interviews with As another option, in terms of the unexpected significant findings from this study, students shared that they were in pursuit of not only academic freedom but also future freedoms. Given the literature on the youth labor climate in East Asia (Ashton et al. 1999; Lukacs 2015; Abelmann et al. 2013; Hae-joang 2015) it would be interesting to pursue if these future freedoms are valuable because of their expectation of conditions for employment or some other reason.

\textsuperscript{10} The UNESCO Institute for Statistics reports that, in part due to laws surrounding post-grad work visas in the United States, international students are irregularly distributed with a majority in STEM fields.
Bibliography


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Appendix

Table 1: Interview Questions for East Asian International Students in U.S. Institutions

- Can you tell me a bit about your pre-college education?
  - What language were you schooled in? What kind of school were you in?
  - What sort of curriculum did you follow? Did you like the school system?
- How old were you when you decided to study abroad?
  - In your view, is it common for students in your country to go to university abroad?
  - Whose idea was it for you to go abroad? How did you feel about it at the time?
  - How involved was your family? Did they have certain expectations?
- What was the process like, preparing to come to the US?
  - What sort of system was there to facilitate this?
- Choosing where to go is an important decision. Were there specific motivations for why you chose to study in the US, as opposed to another country?
  - How did your consideration of future employment opportunities influence your decision?
  - How did your comparison of the US to a national university in your country influence your decision?
  - How much did global rankings influence your decision?
  - If you had not come to the US, what would you have done?
- How has language played a role in your academic and social experiences in the US?
  - Have you faced any communication challenges?
- What is the reputation of US universities in your home country?
  - Was there anything you were especially surprised by when you came here?
  - What sort of similarities or differences have you noticed between the US education system and your home education system?
- What do you think about the opportunities in the US as compared to your home country?
  - Do you think there are opportunities in the US?
- At this point, what do you think of your decision to come to the US?
- Looking ahead, how do you envision your future after completing your degree? Do you have a plan for more schooling or find a job in any particular place?
  - Why that place?

Table 2: Interview Questions for East Asian International Students in Domestic Institutions

- Can you tell me a bit about your pre-college education?
  - What language were you schooled in? What kind of school were you in?
  - What sort of curriculum did you follow? Did you like the school system?
- How old were you when you decided that you were going to do university in your home country?
  - In your view, is it common for students in your country to go to university abroad?
  - Whose idea was it for you to stay? How did you feel about it at the time?
  - How involved was your family in plans beyond secondary school?
- What was the process like to enter a domestic tertiary institution?
Jacob Seiji Foster, *East to West*

- What sort of system was there to facilitate this?
  - Choosing where to go is an important decision. Were there specific motivations for why you chose to study in your home country, as opposed to another country?
    - How did your consideration of future employment opportunities influence your decision?
    - How did the comparison of national universities in your country to other countries’ institutions influence your decision?
    - How much did global rankings influence your decision?
    - If you had not stayed home, what would you have done?
  - What is the reputation of domestic universities in your home country?
    - Was there anything you were especially surprised by in university?

- What do you think about the opportunities in your home country after graduation?
- At this point, what do you think of your decision to stay in your home country?
- Looking ahead, how do you envision your future after completing your degree? Do you have a plan for more schooling or find a job in any particular place?
  - Why that place?

**Figure 1.1:** Growth of international educational migration by world region

World region classification by UNESCO. International educational migration includes all outbound internationally mobile tertiary students studying abroad.

![Graph showing growth of international educational migration by world region](image-url)
Figure 1.2: International tertiary educational migration difference
Absolute difference of inbound and outbound student totals based upon the most recent year of collection. Nations without totals lacked an instance of both reports in the period 2020 to 2016.

Figure 2.1: East Asian International Student Interviewees in U.S. Institutions

<table>
<thead>
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Figure 2.2: East Asian International Student Interviewees in Domestic Institutions

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Figure 2.3: Sample Questions for Interviewees
Full question lists are included in the appendix, Table 1 & Table 2.

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<th>Sample questions for students who matriculated to US institutions</th>
<th>Sample questions for students who matriculated to East Asian institutions</th>
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<td>How old were you when it was decided that you were going to uni in your home country?</td>
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<td>Whose idea was it for you to go abroad for university?</td>
<td>Whose idea was it for you to go to university in your home country?</td>
</tr>
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<td>Were there specific motivations for why you chose to study in the US as opposed to another country?</td>
<td>Were there specific motivations for why you chose to study in your home country, as opposed to another country?</td>
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<td>How did your comparison of a US university to a national university in your country influence your decision?</td>
<td>How did the comparison of national universities in your country to other countries’ institutions influence your decision?</td>
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<td>Do you have a plan for more schooling or to find a job in any particular location?</td>
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