Pre-college Study Abroad and Its New Impact on Korean Mothers

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ABSTRACT

This study examines pre-college study abroad (PSA, *Chogi yuhak*), which is one of the fastest growing phenomena among the various efforts for Koreans to learn English. The discussion includes the reasons why PSA has become so popular in the last decade under the name of globalization, the problems it has caused, and its new impact that this phenomenon has on Korean mothers. This study argues that PSA boom provides Korean mothers with an opportunity to pursue their own self-realization by studying abroad with their school aged children. These "new wild geese" mothers, who make double investments in their own education as well as in their children's in the U.S. represent important aspects of the contemporary Korean society regarding education, gender and neoliberal social atmosphere.

Key Words
pre-college study abroad, wild geese mother, English education, family, Korean society

I. Introduction

"The Republic of English" is a nickname for Korea, where English language mastery is believed to be one of the most important keys to a successful career, from entering and graduating from prestigious universities to getting a job and surviving in the job market longer than competitors. This competition starts as early as kindergarten. English-language kindergartens are very popular nowadays, despite the cost being several times as expensive as ordinary kindergartens. Interest in private English institutes and tutoring has only increased nationwide, despite the enormous expense involved. Chun and Choi (2006) reported that Koreans spent 15 trillion *won* (approximately 15 billion dollars) for English education in 2005 alone. Moreover, several cities and provinces have competitively built English-language "villages" where Korean learners of English can experience "America" in their home country. Some politicians in Korea have proposed huge investments in public English education in order to gain the popular vote, and various private English education markets keep thriving while taking advantage of this English-language fever (Shim and Park 2008).

Moreover, many Korean families, if they can afford to, have been jumping on the Pre-college study abroad (PSA) (*Chogi yuhak*) bandwagon by sending their young children to English-speaking countries since the mid-1990s. The term, PSA, can be defined as the study abroad of first through twelfth grade students who have not yet graduated from a high school, which lasts more than six months (Kim 2005). Usually the students' mothers go with their children to a foreign country and take care of them while their fathers stay in Korea and work to support their family overseas. If the students are older, around high school age, they are often sent by themselves where they stay with a host family or attend a boarding school. Among the various efforts for Koreans to learn English, it is PSA which is one of the fastest growing and the most unique phenomena in Korea. It also clearly represents the interwoven factors of English

education in Korea with different levels of society and scholarship such as the national government's emphasis on English education, correlation between economic wealth and English proficiency, parents' zeal for English education even when it sacrifices traditional roles of family, and academic support for early English education at least in the linguistic aspects.

Therefore, this paper focuses on PSA and examines the reasons why PSA has become so popular in the last decade under the name of globalization, the problems it has caused, and its new impact that this phenomenon has on Korean mothers. This study argues that PSA boom provides Korean mothers with an opportunity to pursue their own self-realization by studying abroad with their school age children. The researcher calls these mothers "new wild geese" mothers, who are different from traditional "wild geese" mothers in that they are pursuing their own academic degrees while raising their children in the U.S. These women make double investments in their own education as well as in their children's, and they represent two important aspects of the contemporary Korean society: the popularity of sending children overseas for the sake of their English education and the competitive social atmosphere in Korea, where individuals require endless self-development for upward class mobility.

II. Literature review

Pre-college study abroad (PSA)

In the past, PSA students had mostly upper-class family backgrounds, but the trend has spread to less well-off classes, resulting in dramatic increases in the number of these students in the 2000s, as shown in Figure 1. It was not until the mid-1990s when PSA programs started attracting the general public's attention with the increase of globalization, in general, manifested by Kim Young Sam's government and with the introduction of English language as a required subject in elementary school in 1997, in particular. The number of PSA students declined in 1998 because of

the Asian Debt Crisis[1] that occurred in 1997. Since then, the number of these students increased drastically up to 2006, when nearly four out of every one-thousand Korean students (29,511) traveled overseas for study, fifteen times the figure in 1999 and 0.38 percent of the total first through twelfth grade students in Korea.

However, it should be noted that these statistics calculated the number of only "illegal" PSA students. In fact, technically, most cases of PSA are illegal in Korea since only high school students who have completed middle school are allowed to study abroad. For 1-9th grade students, it is legal only when both parents go abroad together in case of work abroad or immigration. In 2002, among the PSA students, 94% of the elementary students and 96% of the middle school students were categorized as illegal PSA (Kim 2005*)*. However, most parents and school teachers are not aware of this regulation. From the survey on Korean people's consciousness of PSA, almost 80% of the parents and 70% of school teachers answered that they did not know if there is a regulation about PSA (Kim 2005). Moreover, there is no penalty for violations. In other words, there is no legal deterrent to stop people from sending their children away.

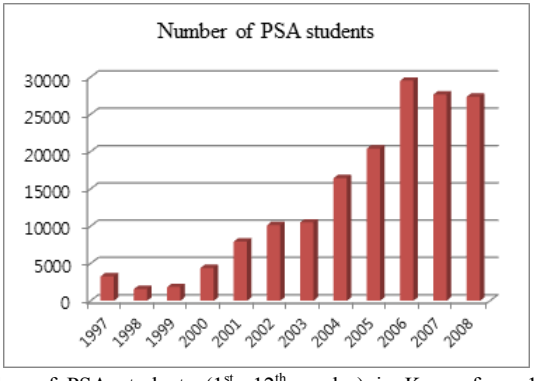

Fig. 1. Number of PSA students (1st -12th grades) in Korea from 1997 to 2008 (Based on the information from Kim 2005and KEDI 2010).

1) Koreans are more familiar with the term, IMF (International Monetary Fund) crisis, than Asian Debt Crisis.

When we add "legal" PSA students, who study abroad with both parents due to their parent(s)' work abroad or immigration, to the number of "illegal" PSA students discussed above, the number of PSA students, for example, in 2008 increases to 40,961. That is, as many as 112 Korean 1-12th grade students flew out of country every day to study abroad in that year. In addition, Park (2010) estimates approximately 10,000 pre-K children also went to English speaking countries every year. Even though it is hard to know the exact number of PSA pre-K children, Park's estimation is not surprising given that the youngest group, elementary school students, is the biggest group among PSA students followed by middle school and high school students in order (KEDI 2010).

1.1. More than learning English

The question that remains to be answered is why that many Koreans travel abroad for study. Obviously, the first reason is to learn English more intensely and earlier than others and the best way to learn a foreign language is believed to study it in an immersion environment. Research supports the benefits of early exposure to foreign languages – the earlier, the better. For example, according to the Critical Period Hypothesis, once one passes puberty, it is very hard, if not impossible, to attain a native like fluency in a target language (Lenneberg, 1967).

Moreover, people learn from their own experience that younger children learn a foreign language better than older ones or adults. Especially when they witness good proficiency of PSA students returning to Korea, they confirm their belief. Sending young children to English-speaking countries for schooling is thus regarded as the best option for parents to secure their children's success in English language proficiency, ideally well before puberty. This view also supports the concept that English language should be taught earlier than the middle school level. Indeed, in Korea, in 1997 English became a required subject starting from the third grade (Lee 2008).

English education in public schools, however, is very limited in terms

of class hours. Only three to four hours per week is not enough for students to acquire English skills at the level they need for competitive college and work requirements. Because students need more exposure to an English-speaking environment, students seek private English education. It can be extremely expensive to study English with native speakers of English in Korea. Studying abroad in English-speaking countries is therefore not a bad option at all because it provides students with a cultural experience as well, which is hard to get in Korea.

In response to this problem, there was a boom in the construction of English Villages, where people can experience a simulated western environment with restaurants, houses, post offices, shops, and even immigration offices, without leaving Korea. This project seems to be financially and politically motivated as much as linguistic in nature, because their inception was targeted to address the dilemma faced by parents who could not afford their children's PSA (Shim & Park 2008), and to reduce the investment of these citizens in overseas schools. For example, in 2002, Son Hakgyu, a candidate for the *Kyŏnggi* province governor, captured many parents' dilemma by saying, "Sending your child overseas is too costly, and not sending your child breaks your heart," and proposed to "build an English village where one can live with foreigners speaking only English, so that your children can receive an English education that is as practical as sending them overseas" (Son 2002, cited in Shim & Park 2008:151).

It turns out, however, that such English villages have not been successful. Due to the enormous cost of construction and maintenance and low usage by citizens, many English villages have been suffering from a huge deficit. For example, among the three English villages run by the *Kyonggi* province, two have already been taken over by private companies and the last one is very likely to be in the same situation soon because the government cannot afford to deal with the continuous deficits of as much as 4.1 million dollars in 2008, 6.3 million dollars in 2009, and 2.9 million dollars

in 2010 (Kim 2011). Shim and Park (2008) claimed that the low usage of English Village by citizens indicated that, through learning English, Koreans are seeking not linguistic competence itself, but the socio-economic and cultural advantages that can be earned through "the symbolic capital of English" (152). Therefore, Koreans do not consider English villages as a workable alternative to PSA because the villages do not provide the prestige of studying overseas. Foreign cultural experience is a key component of study abroad, as is the prestige associated with this level of sophistication and ambition in pursuing an education overseas.

1.2. No pain, no gain?

As discussed above, there are benefits that PSA can provide to visiting students, largely English proficiency, global experience, and sometimes improved chances of entering good American universities. On the other hand, it causes some problems. For one thing, it is very expensive. According to Kim (2005), 49.25 percent of survey respondents said that they spent 10,000 to 20,000 dollars per year for PSA and 23.1 percent said they spent 20,000 to 30,000 dollars per year. In addition, 26.2 percent of the respondents replied that their PSA expense is 21 to 30 percent of their annual income. Only those children whose parents can pay these expenses are able to join the PSA programs, whereas other children rely on less-expensive ways of learning English, such as English institutes, worksheets (Park and Abelmann 2004) or on-line tutorials. This phenomenon has led to the intensification of the class divide in Korean society. By sending their children abroad with PSA programs, upper-middle class families secure their children's English proficiency, essential to entering respectable universities and getting a good job, while the students from lower socio-economic family backgrounds are likely to have lower English proficiency, and, as a result, it is very difficult for them to find a way to move up from their parents' social class.

Another problem is the enormous difficulties that young students go through in adjusting to the new environment without someone who can

adequately take care of their needs. From the analysis of extensive interviews with PSA students, parents, guardians, and teachers in Canada, Cho (2011) found that Korean international students who are doing PSA without parents were suffering from emotional difficulties. She pointed out the main sources of these problems include parents' ignorance about PSA life and unrealistic expectations on their children's performance, lack of quality care by guardians or host families, and the absence of communication between teachers and parents. It should be also noted that PSA students' difficulties do not just disappear when they return to Korea and to their parents' care. They face the challenge of adjusting themselves back to the highly competitive and intensive Korean school system, which also exhibits a strict attitude about teacher-student relations. In addition, especially for younger students, it is a big problem for these returning students to catch up on their Korean language skills (Park 2010).

These PSA students are not the sole "victims" of this extreme pressure to succeed. Their parents and family members also suffer. For example, after mothers move to English-speaking countries with their children, the fathers are left alone in Korea working to support PSA expenses. It is estimated that there are 500,000 wild geese fathers in 2010 according to *Statistics Korea*. (Kim 2013). Due to the loneliness and stress involved in managing one's life without a wife, some wild geese fathers have health problems or extramarital affairs, and some in extreme circumstances even commit suicide. It is thus not uncommon in Korea to witness family breakdown caused by the PSA programs. Cho (2005) described emotional toll they take:

> A central paradox in the maintenance of Korean gireogi [wild geese] families is the fact that the achievement of security for the sake of the children goes hand-in-hand with an increase in emotional insecurity between couples, as well as between fathers and children. As such, parents discuss the sacrifices they make for their children, they eventually

> reveal their anxiety over the highly volatile Korean economy, as well as the uncertain future of their family relations (25).

These Korean families are seen to willingly embrace hardship for the sake of their children's education, regarding it as insurance or a worthy investment for their future in the unstable Korean economy. This reveals the extent to which neoliberalism is prevalent in the Korean society nowadays. Song (2009) defined neoliberalism as "an advanced liberal mode of governing that idealizes efficiency and productivity by promoting people's free will and self-sufficiency" (2009: x)[2]. Under this prevailing neoliberal ethos, in which one should assume the responsibility of being a capable citizen in order to secure one's well-being under less government control and support, some Korean "wild geese" families live apart and send their children and mothers overseas to pursue not only the children's education, but also the mothers' advanced education, as is the case with the four women introduced below in this study. The researcher calls these women "new wild geese" mothers, who pursue their own academic degree while also supporting their children's English education in an English speaking country.

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2) By examining the emergence and practice of the neoliberal welfare state in Korea at the time of the Asian Debt Crisis (1997-2001) and the Kim Dae Jung presidency (1998-2003), she argued that the neoliberal regime divided people into those individuals who were "deserving" and "undeserving" of welfare benefits: the former are those who could become self-sufficient and independent citizens, usually males and youths (who can work for the high technology-information fields, for example), and the latter are those who have been already marginalized, mostly homeless women, who are not surprisingly regarded as irresponsible wives or mothers. That is, even the public assistance system is designed mainly for the people who can quickly rehabilitate and become independent and self-sufficient, not for all citizens who are in need of help to achieve minimally decent standard of living.

III. Methods

Among the possible candidates (Korean female graduate students at a mid-western university in the U.S. A. who are married with children while their husbands stay in Korea), the researcher chose four women based on how well their lives and backgrounds represent the characteristics of "new wild geese" mothers and how willing they were to share their stories with the researcher. We can classify these four subjects into two groups: one with M.A. students who have full time jobs as English language teachers in Korea and took two years of study leave to come here with their school-aged children and the other with Ph.D students with preschool-aged children whose husbands have finished their degrees earlier and returned to Korea for work.

The two primary data collection methods for this ethnographic research are participant observation and in-depth interviews. (Kottak 2007) Because the four women in this study and the researcher attended the same university (and even majoring in the same subject in the case of three of them), resided in the same on-campus housing, sent children to the same elementary or preschools, and (in case of all but one) went to the only Korean church in town, the researcher was able to observe many of their life events from the first day they arrived until their last day here, when they left for Korea or another state. The researcher had a relatively close relationship with them and built a rapport which allowed her to interview them about their personal stories in a candid manner. All interviews were semi-structured, conducted in Korean and translated into English by the researcher. Thematic analysis method was used to analyze the data and find the major themes (Braun and Clarke 2006.)

IV. Analysis & Discussion

"New Wild Geese" Mothers

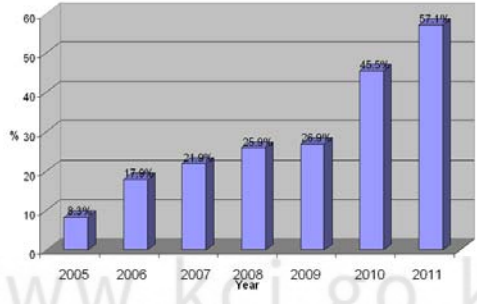
The trend of "wild geese" families (or Korean transnational families in which the mother and the children live overseas while the father stays in Korea to provide financial support for the family abroad) began to attract Korea's mass media's attention and it has been widely covered as an important social and cultural issue since the late 1990s. As Cho (2004) described, most wild geese mothers are full-time housewives who stay with their children overseas.[3] They generally have middle- or upper-middle class family backgrounds with stable sources of income from their husbands, and most of them are college graduates. Unlike these mothers, the subjects in this study are much more serious about their own education and personal development. The primary purpose for these mothers to come to the U.S. is to pursue their own academic degree while also supporting their children's English education. As a study-abroad student in the U.S., the researcher noticed that the number of this type of student has increased significantly over the last eight years at this institution, where in 2005, the majority of Korean married women were

3) Based on motivation and backgrounds of the families, Cho (2004) divided wild geese families into five types: (1) The parents have no experience living abroad, but the mother is able to get her own admission in a U.S. school and the father is able to provide financial support for the family living abroad; (2) The fathers and/or mothers have studied or lived abroad previously, where the fathers typically come to the U.S. as overseas branch managers or visiting scholars with their families, and then return home, leaving their family in the U.S; (3) The children come to the U.S. first to study English, and their mothers visit them with a traveler's visa and stay with them in the U.S. until the end of their study; (4) The fathers have a business/branch office in the U.S. while living in Korea, and send their wives and children to the U.S., allowing them frequent visits to the family; and (5) The mothers hold permanent residency status and/or the children were born in the U.S., granting them U.S. citizenship.

full-time housewives, whose sole mission was supporting their student-husbands and/or their children. Since then, the percentage of this kind of family has continuously grown among the Korean student-families on campus (Lee 2011).[4] These student-mothers are aware of the difference between themselves and the more typical "wild geese" mothers. For instance, one of the interviewees shared her experience of encountering one of these mothers, who enrolled in college yet only worked enough to avoid failing grades and subsequent expulsion:

> My family is not a typical wild geese [family].When we say wild geese [family], that means men work alone to provide financial support and they send the rest of the family overseas. Usually mothers enroll in a school so that the children get a F2 visa and they don't have to pay tuition, you know. I heard that that's why there are many mothers who enroll in community college to learn English. … Here in Kansas, we have only a few of those mothers because it's not a popular place [for wild geese families, compared to East or West coast regions], but when I traveled to the NASA Museum in Houston, Texas last summer, I met some Korean women. While we were chatting, they told me about how many times they can miss their classes without getting a failing grade. Since I am in an M.A. program, I didn't know about that. A little bit later, they said "Ah-ha! It is you [not your

4) The percentage of Korean wild geese mother-students among Korean students with family living on campus.



> children] who came here to study." They were just trying to keep their [student] visa status by carefully and strategically monitoring the number of absences [to avoid failure]. Paying the mothers' tuition at a community college seems to be cheaper than paying the children's. (Interview with Ms. B)

In sharing her experience, Ms. B clearly distinguishes her own case from the case of "name- only student" mothers. The surprised reaction of the "name only-students" toward Ms. B's atypical dual purpose in coming to the U.S. indicates that they too perceive the difference between their motivations and that of Ms. B and others like her.

It is understandable that regional differences in the U.S. are related to the various populations of "wild geese" mothers. Typical "wild geese" families prefer to stay in East or West coast regions, largely because of the large Korean communities present on the coasts. This makes it easier for newly arrived mothers to get information, help, and support while living abroad, and to find a community of friends. In addition, many of these established communities are near prestigious universities. The children of these families also benefit because areas near prestigious universities generally have high-quality K-12 schools and test prep schools. But the subjects in this study prefer the benefits of attending a reputable public university in small Midwestern college towns, such as relatively low living expenses as well as a safer environment.

The four interviewees of this study are divided into two types, mothers with school-aged children and mothers with preschool-aged children. As summarized in Table 1, the mothers with school-aged children are students in M. A. programs who took a two-year study-leave from their jobs as English language teachers in Korean public schools. They both won a very competitive national scholarship to support their study and expenses abroad, where they use these funds not only for their own study, but also to support the living costs of their school-aged children. The two

mothers with preschool-aged children are doctoral students whose husbands were also students in this same institution. Their husbands finished their doctoral degrees earlier than the interviewees either because their program required fewer years to finish than that of their wives (Ms. C), or because they started the program earlier than their wives (Ms. D) and thus returned to Korea for employment.

Type	Mothers with school-aged children		Mothers with preschool-aged children	
Subject	Ms. A	Ms. B	Ms. C	Ms. D
Pursing degree	M.A.		Ph.D.	
Age	42	43	36	39
Children's age	9,12	7,11	1,4	3, 7
Job	Elementary school English teacher	Middle school English teacher	Ministry of education (in the past)	Private institutes (in the past)
Work period	15 years	16 years	6 years	A few years
Major reason for parents-in-law's support	Children's English study abroad		Not favorable situation for study abroad but expect to get a good job	

Table 1. Two types of Korean mother-students in this study and their characteristics (The information regarding age and the years is as of the time of interviews)

The importance of examining these mothers is closely related to the understanding of changes in Korean society in recent decades, many of which reflect worldwide trends regarding women's roles and rights. Was it possible in the 1960s or the 1970s for Korean wives to leave their husbands alone and travel with their children to the other side of the world to advance their own academic degrees? The chances were indeed very slim, if not impossible, given that the demarcation between traditional women's roles as housewives and men's roles as breadwinners was very clear. The most popular ideology of an ideal womanhood in society was

presented as being a "wise mother and good wife," a concept promoted at the turn of the twentieth century through what has been identified as a "convergence of Chosŏn Korea's Confucian notion of *pudŏk* ("womanly virtue"), Japan's Meiji gender ideology of *ryōsai kenbo* ("good wife and wise mother"), and American Protestant missionary women's ideology of domesticity in mission schools" (Choi 2009).

This emphasis in Korea on women's obedience to the head of the family and confinement within the domestic sphere was challenged in 1990s during the blossoming of Korean feminism, as more and more women pursued their own professional jobs and expanded their boundaries to opportunities outside of the home. But this blossoming of women's rights ended shortly after it began, when the International Monetary Fund's economic crisis struck Korean society in late 1990s. As Song (2009) argued, "The feminist discourse on women's independence was severely contested … in the face of the national emergency" and "[women were] forced to retreat to private domains" (51). Even though many more women than men were laid off during the national crisis, the loss of the fathers' jobs and, in turn, the loss of their economic power was considered more serious while the traditional women's role as subservient and obedient individuals promoted in Confucian patriarchal ideology was emphasized (Song 2009).

So what made it possible for more mothers to study abroad than before at the expense of their roles as wives? How did they get "permission" from their husbands, parents, and even parents-in-law, who could not even imagine their sons cooking for themselves after marriage? One of the most important factors that enabled women to travel abroad was the increased importance of their children's English education. Other family members thus came to support these women's education in English-speaking countries because it provides their children or grandchildren with a PSA opportunity, and a chance to learn English in an immersion setting. Moreover, it is agreed among family members that the mothers' advanced

education would greatly benefit the family by enhancing her value in the job market, and in turn, the family's upward class mobility.

Mothers with School-aged Children: Killing two birds with one stone

From interviews with mothers who have school-aged children, the researcher sees PSA as an important factor for their emotional support from family members. They secure their extended family members' endorsements more than mothers with preschool-aged children. The mothers with school-aged children thus take advantage of the PSA boom in order to benefit their own study-abroad experience. In the case of Ms. A, who worked as an elementary school teacher in Korea for fifteen years, her husband had been present during the first year of her two-year study here. At the time of the interview, she lived with their ten year-old son and seven year-old daughter, as her husband, a university professor on sabbatical leave, returned to his job in Korea. Ms. A's study abroad was funded by the Korean government. She described how fortunate she was because she could study abroad with her family, especially with her two school-aged children:

> I was lucky because my husband took his sabbatical year at the same time I started my study abroad. He helped a lot in the first year when I needed to adapt to the new environment. And my children's ages were just perfect [for PSA]. So many people were envious and jealous of me . . . Any objections from my parents-in-law? Why would they disagree with this great opportunity? Most of all, this is good for my children. They can improve their English. (Interview with Ms. A)

Regarding the ideal age for PSA, Ms. A noted that it is widely believed that elementary school children benefit the most. If a child is younger, he or she may not retain his or her English language after returning to Korea, but it is much more difficult for an older student to acquire

a foreign language.[5] More importantly, it would be very hard for them to prepare for the very high standards of the Korean college entrance exams if they studied abroad during middle or high school. Right after mentioning the benefits of her children's English education in the U.S., Ms. A clearly addressed another reason for her study abroad: personal and intellectual development in understanding more about her field:

> Also, this opportunity is a good stepping stone for self-realization. I have studied English on my own for a long time, but it was not effective. Therefore, I really wanted to have an academic and theoretical foundation for studying and teaching English. I wanted to find out what the professors here are thinking about English education. (Interview with Ms. A)

According to Cho (2002), this generation of women is well educated and has a strong desire for personal development as scholars and professionals in their own right, while their grandmother's generation is described as "motherly women" and their mother's generation as "modern wives."

Like Ms. A, Ms. B is also pursuing her M.A. and has been teaching English in Korean middle schools for sixteen years. She came here in the summer of 2010 with her nine- and five year-old sons while her husband was working in Korea. She won the same kind of scholarship as Ms. A, where her tuition and living expenses were covered by the Korean government. She explained that other family members agreed that she should study abroad, but only because of the strict two-year time limit granted by the government scholarship policy, and the importance of her children's English education:

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5) According to the Critical Period Hypothesis and studies in brain development, older learners of a second language rarely achieve native-like fluency.

> It seems that I am a little bit different from other wild geese families. Usually they said that they planned to stay for one or two years when they came here, but as time goes on they think that if they stay a little longer their children's English will be a lot better, so they extend their period. One year becomes two years and two years becomes three years, like that. And sometimes this causes social problems, such as deterioration of the family. But in my case, I *have to* go back to Korea in two years, and am required to work at least two more years in the same institution where I used to work. If not, I will have to reimburse all the money I received from the government. Therefore, my husband said that he would be okay with me going as long as it was only two years. My parents-in-law also allowed me to study abroad because I brought the kids, I guess. If I had said I wanted to study abroad by myself, they would have opposed it. (Interview with Ms. B)

It is not uncommon for wild goose families to extend their stay in the U.S. for a year or more than they planned (Cho 2004). As Ms. B distinguished herself from a "name-only student," she also differentiated herself from other wild geese families who extend their stay overseas for the sake of their children's English language improvement. Regarding her own self-development, Ms. B expressed her aspiration of "cosmopolitan striving" (Park and Ablemann 2004) or acculturalization, whereas Ms. A showed her strong desire to study English educational theory and practice in the U.S. in addition to advancing her children's English language skills:

> Personally, my first purpose for studying abroad was not studying [per se], but living in a different culture. … I have always wanted to live in a culture other than Korea before I die. That's why I came here, and plus, English training for my kids. (Interview with Ms. B)

These mothers clearly show their double desire during their study abroad: their children's English training and personal advancement. As an English

teacher, Ms. A wants to build a firm academic foundation about English education, and Ms. B mentioned that she always dreamt of living in another country.

Mothers with Preschool-aged Children: Struggling under patriarchy

Ms. C is a doctoral student whose four-year-old daughter is living with her in the U.S. and her eight month-old son, at the time of the interview, was living with her husband and parents-in-law in Korea. She came here in 2009 with her daughter and her husband, a doctoral student in law school. Her husband went back to his job in Korea with their infant son in the summer of 2011 after finishing his degree. Her two sisters-in-law had been doing PSA in a boarding high school, which is located one hour from her residence. Ms. C started her study abroad because her husband encouraged her to study and, importantly, she won a scholarship to cover her tuition and living expenses. But unlike others interviewed, she did not gain her parents-in-law's approval to study abroad. If she had a school-aged child, it would have been easier for her to gain their support:

> My parents-in-laws do not understand why I want to study abroad. In fact, they did not know that I was also studying here [as well as her husband] in America for the past two years until my mother-in-law visited here [last year]…Because she did not know I was studying, she sent my sisters-in-law as PSA…Now my parents-in-law are raising my baby boy and it's very hard, you know. So they don't like me. They said that I'm cold-blooded and I have no maternal instinct. (Interview with Ms. C)

Without school-aged children who can benefit from PSA, Ms. C is struggling with the traditional patriarchal system that is revered by older generations and influences younger generations. Her parents-in-law expected that she

would work hard as a housewife in order to take care of her husband, children, and even her two sisters-in-law, who visit her home every weekend. Even though her parents-in-law sent their daughters as PSA students, it seems that they did not think that their four year-old granddaughter's English training is a good enough reason to support Ms. C's study abroad. Ms. C also seems to be skeptical about the effectiveness of her daughter's English learning:

> I think she is too young. People say that she will quickly forget English when she goes back to Korea because she is only four years old. At least one should be able to *read* or be an elementary school-aged student [in order for their English learning here to be effective]. (Interview with Ms. C)

Ms. C explained how she started to study abroad and emphasized that it is not easy for Korean women to do so:

> I came here to study abroad because my husband came to study abroad. Even though what I am majoring in now is not what I studied for my M.A. degree, which is adult education, I had no choice. This school is the only university that both my husband and I have been accepted to. I earned my M.A. degree in 2001 and worked for the Ministry of Education for six years until I quit the job because of delivering and raising my daughter. So I have longed for my own self-development. Other single friends keep building up their careers, but I couldn't. Of course, it was not easy to decide to study abroad. But fortunately, I got a tuition waiver and scholarship, so I started. If I had to pay all the money, only my husband would have studied because, you know, men's study is more important than women's. After all, it is men who need to get a better job. That is what Koreans believe. Men are breadwinners. No man would follow his wife and come here just to support her study. (Interview with Ms. C)

Ms. C's narration clearly describes the reality of patriarchal Korean society. Without the PSA premium, it is difficult for a married Korean woman to study abroad. Unlike their female predecessors, whose two primary functions were to produce sons and to provide domestic labor under Neo-Confucian patriarchy, modern Korean women, along with others outside of Europe and the U.S., have been influenced by the "Western model of courtship, marriage, and gender relations" such as "the ideology of gender egalitarianism and of romantic love as a basis for a marriage" (Chong 2008:63). It does not take long, however, for them to realize that changes in ancient and embedded traditions do not come easily, and the Neo-Confucian patriarchal family system still remains in place. And there are many burdens placed on their shoulders as soon as they get married.

Ms. C's story presents two patriarchal thoughts prevalent in Korea. First, the family structure is male-centered and their success is prioritized over women's. Secondly, women's primary role is to take care of the family inside the confines of the home, where parents-in-law often exercise more authority than in Western cultures. For example, Ms. C quit her job after marrying in order to raise a family. She had no choice of universities except the one her husband attended, because she is expected to remain with her husband so she can take care of the family. It is due to these traditional social norms that there is no male counterpart to the wild geese mothers. Usually no fathers are expected or supposed to study abroad with their children while their wives stay in Korea to work in order to support the family financially. It is taken for granted that mothers, not fathers, should stay with and care for their children. There have been a few "wild geese" father-students study abroad at this institution, but in these cases, their school-aged children stay in Korea with their working mothers. It is the same structure in which one spouse is pursuing an academic degree abroad while the other is working in Korea for financial support, but the children still always stay with their mothers. Thus even

though PSA is a critical factor for married women's study abroad, it does not override the typical gender norms in Korea.

Ms. D had been a full time housewife who took care of her husband and her children until she resumed studying in America in 2009. Several years ago she and her husband were in the same M. A. program at another university in the Midwest, but the family could not afford to continue financing Ms. D's study along with that of her husband and their two children. Only her husband continued to pursue his Ph. D degree. A few years later, however, when her husband had almost finished his degree, he encouraged her to begin studying again. In fact, he was "more actively pushing her to return to school than she was herself." For example, he babysat their daughters for a month and a half in order to give her time to study for the GRE. Yet despite her husband's unusual level of support, Ms. D did not feel comfortable enough with the arrangement to inform her parents-in-law:

> I did not tell my parents-in-law that I was going to begin studying again because I knew they wanted us to come back to Korea as soon as possible. My husband is the only son, so, you know. Moreover, like most Korean parents [of study abroad students], they had been worried a lot about him securing a job in Korea after he finished his degree. But he got a job, so now they think something good will happen for me when I finish my study, too. [Without his success] I could have not told them that I planned on continuing my studies. (Interview with Ms. D)

Like Ms. C, Ms. D's study abroad after marriage was initiated by her husband. Yet this wasn't considered until his degree was almost finished. Her case confirms Ms. C's remarks that men's studies are prioritized over women's. In addition, Ms. D also was reluctant to let her parents-in-law know about her plan to continue her studies. Most parents-in-law would not be pleased if their daughter-in-law spent time, energy, and money

on her own studies that could be used for caring for their son, grandchildren, or themselves. This is particularly potent in Ms. D's situation, as her husband is the only son in his family. In this context, Chong (2008) stated that "the traditional ties and mutual obligations between parents and sons still remain quite strong" (78) in contemporary Korean society— particularly the obligation for sons to take care of their aging parents. Being a wild goose mother-student, it is even more difficult for Ms. D to meet her parents-in-law's expectations as the wife of their only son. But they did not oppose her studying abroad after her husband secured a job, hoping that the investment in her studies will also bring a worthwhile reward. This aging generation in Korea is therefore adapting to the idea that it is the family, not a society or government, who is responsible for maintaining or upgrading its own socio-economic circumstances. All family members of course try to maximize their commodity values, even though sometimes that means sacrificing a traditional gender role.

IV. Conclusion

English has obtained a dominant position in the process of modernization in Korea and English hegemony is deeply rooted and practiced in Korean society (Lee, Han and McKeroow 2010; Shim and Park 2008). Korean students need to earn high scores in English in order to enter privileged special high schools (e.g. Foreign language high schools or Science high schools, which lead to prestigious universities), to attend top universities (which is critical to finding a good job and to creating necessary social networks), and to get the jobs they want (which is necessary to maintain / move up in their social class). Based on this close relationship between English and one's survival in Korean society, PSA has become very popular in the last decade. This study discussed that PSA is more than learning English by examining why English Villages were not successful. Among

the problems that PSA caused, we looked at excessive costs, students' adaptation to the new environment (and to the old environment upon their return), and family breakdown.

It is also argued that PSA created a more favorable environment than before for mothers with school- aged children to study abroad as shown from the interviews with "new wild geese" mothers, who are serious about their own education as well as their children's. Two of them are M. A. students taking a two-year leave from their jobs as English teachers. With school-aged children, they take advantage of PSA by "killing two birds [their children's English education and their own self-realization] with one stone." The other two mothers are doctoral students whose husbands encouraged their wives to obtain degrees at the same time, or after finishing their own degree. Because they do not have school-aged children, they do not get benefits from PSA. These mothers are even more struggling with the pressures of traditional patriarchal norms without much "approval" of their parents-in-law, but their studying abroad is not necessarily opposed by their families. Even if their pursuit of a graduate degree is not supported by their parents-in-law, the hope of upward class mobility is enough for their parents-in-law to accept their study abroad, which represents how prevalent the neoliberal ethos is in the Korean society.

In other words, the emergence of this trend of " new wild geese" mothers can be examined on three levels: social atmosphere, familial support, and individual effort. The desire and necessity to learn English has led people to send their children to English-speaking countries to advance their educational and career opportunities. As more and more Koreans have their children join the PSA programs, more mothers fly overseas to accompany their children, leaving their husbands behind, or remain in the U.S. after their husbands finish their U.S. stay. This practice has created a more favorable social environment for study abroad than before for mothers with school-aged children.

Even though these women's parents-in-law do not welcome the fact

that their sons cook and care for themselves for years for the sake of their daughter-in-law's education, they endorse this situation because they think that it provides a great opportunity for their grandchildren to learn English, and that these mothers' advanced degree in the U.S. will bring more income and prospects for the family. In the same way, the husbands of "wild geese" mothers allow, or sometimes encourage, their wives to study abroad with their children in spite of their own hardships, including loneliness. Finally, these women's own efforts also contribute to this trend of the Korean transnational family, in which women's roles and international experience have become more important. These "wild geese" mothers worked hard to gain admission to a renowned U.S. graduate school in their academic field and to earn highly competitive scholarships to support the costs of their education overseas.

How these "new wild geese" mothers' lives played out as mothers and students in the U.S. is not within the scope of this study, but a follow-up on these women is definitely worth pursuing. What are their achievements, challenges, and coping strategies? Korea is surely a dynamic, fast-changing society, where education is highly regarded and academic discipline is unusually intense from an early age. Thus, it remains to be seen sooner or later as to how this new phenomenon of "wild geese" motherhood affects the status of women in Korea. In addition, if or how the story will be changed in their daughters' generation will be an interesting topic for future research.

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