

Ivy League above "SKY": Stranded Dream of Korean (Upper-) Middle-Class**Hong Jin Jo****University of Chicago****3/15/2019**

More than 180 countries now send their students to the United States, and the number of international students exceeded one million in 2015 and now accounts for 5.5% of all students enrolled in higher education in the U.S (Institute of International Education 2016; 2018). Despite both increasing number and heterogeneity of international students in the United States, their international post-secondary education choice has not been paid much attention and is often taken for granted in the era of globalization.

Therefore, it is often assumed that the transnational college admission is only an expanded version of the national level college choice of the able students choosing prestigious schools in the expectations of higher returns. The educational application of the World Society theory explains the institutional part of the phenomenon: accelerating global higher education expansion is based on the shared understanding of 1) the higher education as symbolizing progress (excellence) and justice (equity) and 2) the university as pillar of the international 'knowledge society' (Meyer et al. 1977, 1992, 2007; Schofer and Meyer 2005). The global convergence argument reflects the overall trend, but it neither considers possible aberrations, for instance, decreasing the popularity of the overseas education nor accommodates human agency in the international college choice.

Analyses of choices about educational investment have emphasized the motivations for individuals (students/families) in terms of the returns to education. There are at least two important versions of these arguments: 1) Human capital arguments which explain peoples' educational investment and their expectation of higher instrumental returns, such as jobs and wages (Becker 1962; 1994; Paulsen 1998); 2) Cultural capital arguments – also about instrumental returns to individuals, but rather than the presumption of high levels of upward mobility within systems of stratification, they presume that elites have an interest in preserving a system that allows for the reproduction of their elite status via cultural-capital-based distinctions (Bourdieu 1973; 1986; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977).

By introducing these motivational lenses, we can better understand global post-secondary education choices. Especially, the case of South Korea and its Ivy League boom among elite Korean students since 1990s is a very interesting locus where the intersection of the distinct theories contribute to understanding. South Korea, the third largest country sending its students to the United States, has firmly maintained its sending country position since the 1990s but the upward trend has begun to decline in the 2010s. The Ivy League boom, a misnomer to point out the popularity of the elite American colleges among Koreans, was a driving force of the up and down. Neither the global higher education convergence nor the human capital can explain the changing popularity of the American higher education among Koreans alone. Instead, understanding the abroad higher education as institutionalized cultural capital and its dynamic relationship with economic capital can help us to understand the changing dynamics of the global college choice.

Therefore, I examine a case of Korean Minjok Leadership Academy (KMLA; 민족사관고등학교) in this study to understand the changing trends of Koreans' choice of American higher education and the dynamic relationship of capitals behind the empirical puzzle. Despite its nationalist characters (Finch and Kim 2009), the new private boarding school rapidly became known with its "Ivy League" admission results to the public. However, in the 2010s, the proportion of KMLA graduates going to American colleges is decreasing while that of students getting into Seoul National University is increasing. Such a decreasing trend of international college admission corresponds with the national trend. Also, the case is appropriate as a representative case as it is the first Korean high school which started to send its graduates to elite American colleges at a mass level.

Qualitative research of the case enables the researcher to interpret findings in specific contexts by examining the perceptions, motivations, and behaviors of individuals and their interactions with their surrounding environments (Creswell 1998). In this study, historical analysis based on published materials as primary sources is used to illustrate contextual changes. In addition, interviews are employed to connect the voices of the people who participated in the boom to the cultural and social contexts of globalization. The connection addresses a deeper understanding of the changing dynamics of the motivations and behavioral rationale regarding the study abroad decisions from the participants' own perspective. Therefore, the qualitative approach is apt for understanding how these Korean students' appreciation of American higher education has changed and resulted in different educational choices.

The research finds that the Ivy League boom among Korean upper (middle) class is a locally motivated global project which targets higher local status via global education. In other words, the prestige of the United States and its higher education attracted the capable Korean students and their families as pathways to "high-status cultural signals (cultural capitals) (Lamont and Lareau 1988; Lareau and Weininger 2003)." Several presumptions worked behind the expectations: Koreans deem the United States as a much-advanced country than Korea; Koreans are used to the hierarchical order of post-secondary education institutions, starting from Seoul National University; American Ph.D. degrees have worked as guarantors of prestige and success in Korean academia (Kim 2015). Therefore, an American college education was understood as higher cultural capital than Korean post-secondary education and was expected to result in better outcomes. Only after about a decade, however, the cultural aspiration was swiftly replaced by economic calculations which led to the decline of Korean students studying in the United States. For instance, American college education as cultural capital was not easily converted into economic capital, e.g. prestigious jobs, or social status back in Korea. While such bleak prospect was spread into potential students aspiring the United States, the pathway to the Seoul National University (still the top domestic university) was widening to the KMLA students as the Korean university started to adopt American-style admission officer system. Therefore, the importance of tangible economic return ("Return on Investment") started to predominate the abstract cultural aspiration ("prestige") in the 2010s.

Finding of the crossing trends in college choice supports the argument that the Ivy League boom among Koreans is a locally motivated global project. Also, the finding suggests that the dynamic relationship between the diverse types of capitals becomes more remarkable in the era of globalization where the local-global link becomes tighter and more concurrent. Therefore, additional attention should be paid to understanding transnationality as the new context to higher education and its role in stratification.

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