

# *A Hermeneutical Study of Older Korean Graduate Students' Experiences in American Higher Education: From Confucianism to Western Educational Values*

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*In this hermeneutical study, the authors focus on understanding the experiences of older Korean students who have come to the United States to pursue academic degrees at American universities. The purpose of this study is to describe the critical events related to their adjustment processes as well as to address some of the specific concerns of the students who returned to higher education after a long professional career in their home countries. In particular, the authors find it important to describe some of the adjustment problems from the Korean cultural perspective relating to Confucianism, loyalty, and respect. The authors conclude by arguing that without situational cultural understandings or without respect for the cultural historicity of international students, the quality of the educational experience in higher education will not be promoted.*

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**Keywords:** Korean; graduate student; U.S. higher education; values; hermeneutics

According to American higher education history, the number of foreign students was very limited during the early years. However, during the past few decades, international students are dramatically growing in number. In the late 1990s, foreign students accounted for one third of doctoral candidates in American higher education (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2001). Therefore, international students have become a significant part of the current student body in American educational institutions, which has led many researchers in the field of higher education to study cultural diversity embedded in American universities and campuses. Specifically, this interest in cultural diversity has not only created a favorable atmosphere to promote understanding and acceptance,

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but it has also attracted even more international students to consider American universities as a source of higher education.

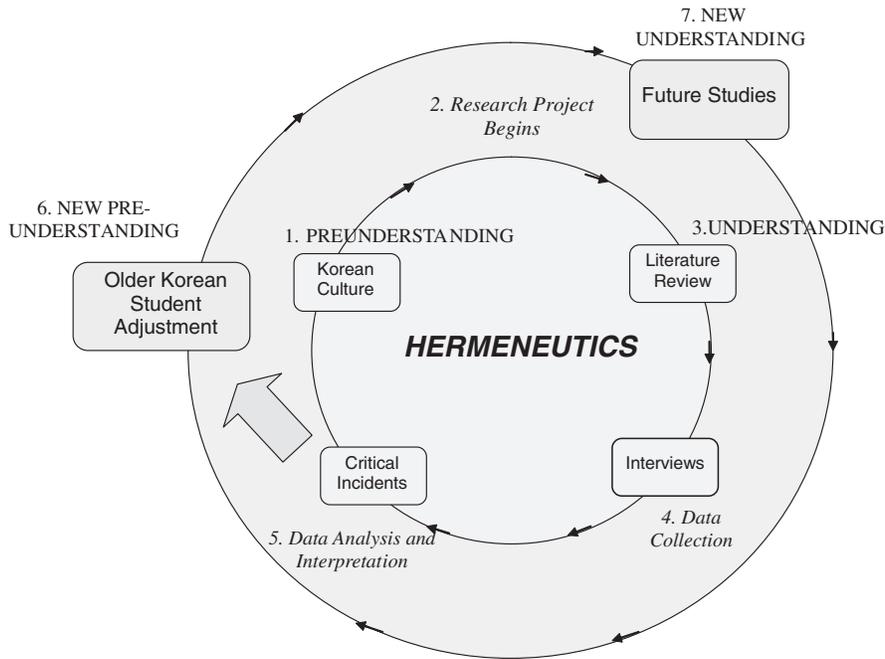
In particular, the number of Asian students has continuously increased in U.S. universities. As a result, these Asian students have outnumbered European students, who had previously composed the majority of the international student body in the United States (IIE, 2001). According to the University of Florida (UF) International Center (2002), 6 out of 10 foreign countries with the most students enrolled at UF were in Asia. Among the East Asian students, the number of South Korean students, in particular, has increased dramatically (IIE, 2001). This phenomenon might be partly because of the fact that Korean society struggled with serious unemployment and a financial crisis during the past decade (i.e., received financial aid from the International Monetary Fund). Many Koreans wanted to further educate themselves instead of seeking hard-to-find jobs (Chang, Yum, & Baik, 1998). However, even now, when Korea's economic crisis has disappeared, the influx of Korean students is continuously increasing.

According to existing literature, many studies related to Asian students' adjustment in American universities have been conducted (Fatima, 2001; Huang, 1997; Huntley, 1993; Nicholson, 2001; Parker, 1999; Wan, 1996). So far, however, research on East Asian students' adaptation processes has been confined to Chinese, Taiwanese, and Japanese students (Huang, 1997; Parker, 1999; Zhang & Rentz, 1996). Asian students, in particular, have seriously struggled with the adjustment (Abe, Talbot, & Geelhoed, 1998; Arthur, 1997; Chen, 1999; Zhang & Rentz, 1996), partly because of the considerable differences between the Eastern world and the Western world and because of fundamentally different cultural values (dignity vs. pragmatism).

Therefore, we believe that to prepare international students for possible adjustment difficulties, foreign values and different cultures should be understood in their own terms. Consequently, we argue that it becomes inappropriate to use Chinese or Japanese values and traditions to understand Korean students' lives, national identities, and their culture. Furthermore, specific attention to Korean students' adaptation processes that reflect their national identities and particular cultural heritage must be given. We acknowledge that older Korean students might have similar adjustment difficulties as other international students (e.g., language difficulties and financial and personal problems), yet these problems are framed in situational cultural understandings.

## **HERMENEUTICAL UNDERSTANDING**

The theoretical perspective of hermeneutics guided this study and data analysis and shaped how we structured this article. The hermeneutical circle and the cyclic process of understanding (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2000; Crotty, 1998;



**Figure 1. Hermeneutical Cycle of Understanding**  
 Source: Adapted from Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2000) and Crotty (1998).

Gadamer, 1966/1976; Heidegger, 1953/1996; Schwandt, 1998) became the essential theoretical element of our work.

To illustrate the complex process of understanding from the hermeneutical perspective, we constructed a figure of the hermeneutical cycle that illustrates the expansion of our understandings about older Korean student adjustment during the research process (see Figure 1). We began with our previous and existing understanding about Korean culture, values, and heritage. Next, our understanding grew through the review of international students' adjustment literature, the interviews of older Korean students at American universities, and the discovery of critical incidents in the students' adjustment processes through analyzing and interpreting the interviews. These processes of reading, learning, and analysis enhanced our new preunderstanding, which will guide the direction for future studies.

### **Historical Preunderstanding of Korean Culture**

Korean society's philosophical values have been combined with Buddhism and Confucianism, which was created by the Song Chinese Philosopher Confucius (552 B.C. to 479 B.C.). Historically speaking, Korean society developed its values and practices based on both Buddhist values (i.e., mercy, salvation, and *samsara*, that is, the cycle of reincarnation) and Confucian principles (i.e., fidelity, loyalty, and authority; Korean Information Services [KIS], n.d.). Furthermore, Confucianism highlights the values of filial piety, loyalty to the king, sincerity to friends, veneration of elders, respect for patrimonial rights, benevolence, self-cultivation, and the inviolability of tradition about decorum, ceremony and rites, and deference to age. These legacies are summarized both as the hierarchy of power and prestige and as the universal ethos of humanistic values (U. Kim, n.d.; Suh, 2000). These two groups of ideas seem entirely different, but they have worked together harmoniously.

In Confucianism, holding higher and prestigious positions is the way to gain privileges and social respect. Korean people believe that the only way a person can achieve the highest respect in Confucianism is by taking up a government position or holding an important position in a company, school, or one's social group. Historically speaking, persons who wanted to hold higher positions had to pass the *Kwa-go*, the old state examination (KIS, n.d.). Because this examination required comprehensive as well as in-depth knowledge bases, only people who were erudite in their studies could pass the exam. Because of the dominance of power and prestige in Confucianism, there exists excessive valuing of academic background in Korean society (U. Kim, n.d.; Suh, 2000). Therefore, achievement in education can be one of the most important indicators to evaluate one's abilities and values.

In addition, many Koreans believe that age is one important criterion for life decisions. This belief is based on self-cultivation and the hierarchical background of Confucianism (U. Kim, n.d.). Koreans believe that there is a right age for education, marriage, and pursuing a successful career (Suh, 2000). For example, people in their 50s should have wisdom and insight about their world. In modern Korean society, this means that people who have this providence gain reputation and honor from their contemporaries. According to the same tradition, Koreans believe that there is a marriageable age (i.e., middle to late 20s for women and late 20s to early 30s for men). In terms of education, Koreans believe that successful lives develop in a linear manner, that education is a foundation for achieving successful lives, and that lack of educational achievement may inhibit a traditionally defined successful life. In addition, competitive and high-stakes entrance exams to universities make people feel pressured about school-

ing (U. Kim, 1999), and the return to school after a successful career is considered unacceptable.

### **GAINING UNDERSTANDING OF KOREAN STUDENTS' ADJUSTMENT PROCESSES THROUGH PREVIOUS LITERATURE**

Existing research describing international students' experiences in higher education indicates that these foreign students have a variety of difficulties in adjusting to unfamiliar societies and new academic cultures. According to the literature, these difficulties can be categorized into four themes: communication difficulties, social isolation, financial concerns, and academic adjustment problems. Next, we will briefly describe each of the themes and how they can be applied to older Korean graduate students.

#### **Communication Difficulties**

Many international students have reported difficulties in communicating with people in their host countries (Abe et al., 1998; Chen, 1999; Fatima, 2001; Huntley, 1993; Wan, 1996). The differences between spoken and written English confuse many foreign students, including Koreans. The English language differs from Korean in terms of grammatical, structural, phonological, and cultural characteristics, and many Korean students report difficulties in understanding idioms and culture-based expressions (Arthur, 1997; Byeon, Chan, & Thomas, 1999; Fatima, 2001). In detail, spoken English is very cultural as well as regional in terms of expressions and pronunciation. Moreover, this limited English proficiency can lead to low self-esteem for international students and a fear of speaking English in front of others (Huntley, 1993; Wan, 1996). Furthermore, in academia, written English and technical writing are very important tools in delivering research findings and thoughts to others (Swales & Feak, 2001). Although international students often have academic knowledge and expertise, it is hard for them to deliver information in a clear and confident way and to interact with peers and instructors (Arthur, 1997).

In particular, some East Asian students' shyness and passivity, which are recognized as courtesy in their cultures, may aggravate communication difficulties (Ladd & Ruby, 1999) and result in hesitations to speak up in public (Charles & Stewart, 1991). In Asian culture, hierarchical systems (e.g., father and son, king and retainer, and teacher and student) are embedded in every aspect of society. For example, individuals included in low ranks are expected to show respect to persons in higher positions, and these lower positioned people are expected to act in a modest way. For instance, they should accept instructions without any

criticism. Similarly, many Asian students feel uncomfortable when American students call their professor by his or her first name. In Asian countries, this custom is considered to be ill mannered, bizarre and odd, and even unacceptable.

### **Social Isolation**

Partly because of language difficulties and cultural differences, many international students feel isolated from the host people and host culture (Abe et al., 1998; Chen, 1999; Cho, 1988; Fatima, 2001; Nicholson, 2001; Schram & Lauver, 1988; Zhang & Rentz, 1996). For example, Asian students, including Korean students, reported that host students often had little or no interest in their classmates who came from other countries (Abe et al., 1998; Arthur, 1997). Furthermore, foreign students' housing conditions (e.g., family housing) may contribute to further isolation from other graduate students (Huntley, 1993). Stable family lives, on one hand, make students feel more comfortable and then lead them to successful academic achievement (Ruetrakul, 1987). But on the other hand, their lifestyle, which is concentrated on family activities instead of other community participation, may cause problems in interactions with the host people and culture (Rainsay, Barker, & Jones, 1999).

### **Financial Concerns**

International studies lead to unexpected or relatively high expenditures. The extra expenses include higher tuition, rent and utilities, and health and car insurance payments. These differential living costs overseas and high tuition fees are considered to be a big burden to international students. Specifically, in public universities, international students' tuition fees are nearly four or five times more than those of their American counterparts. For example, in a public university in the southeastern United States, the in-state resident tuition for two semesters is \$3,348, and the nonresident tuition costs \$14,392 (for 2003-2004 school year). Although the international students' perceptions toward these disbursements depend on whether these students had similar lifestyles in their homelands, foreign students generally feel that financial factors are very critical for their personal lives as well as academic success (Arthur, 1997; Chen, 1999; Rainsay et al., 1999; Ruetrakul, 1987). Although many international students are supported by a scholarship or family funds (68% of all international students; IIE, 2001), this support may not cover all of their expenses. In addition, because of their visa status, international students have restricted job prospects and limited chances to apply for jobs on campus as well as off campus (Huntley, 1993).

### **Academic Adjustment Problems**

Most foreign students were academically excellent in their home countries and were devoted to their studies. However, changing academic circumstances and different sets of academic expectations often results in internal or external conflicts among graduate students (Huntley, 1993; Raimsay et al., 1999). For example, many East Asian students are taught that talking in class without the teacher's permission is an inappropriate behavior, and class discussions or criticism about the lessons are not encouraged by educators, which is somewhat contrary to the liberal and active pedagogies in U.S. schools. Thus, such large differences between the learning styles make it difficult for many Korean students to adapt to and meet all of the expectations (e.g., critical thinking and active participation in class discussions) in the American higher education system (Chen, 1999; Raimsay et al., 1999). To sum up, the perceptions of academic struggles of older Korean students are partly explained by fear and concerns about the unknown world, students' culturally situated expectations for themselves and others, and lack of social and academic support (Huntley, 1993; Richardson, 1995).

## **METHOD**

### **Research Questions**

To seek the hidden meanings of the experiences older Korean students have had in adjusting to a U.S. university, the following questions guided us during the process of this study:

1. How do older Korean graduate students in an American university perceive their experiences of adjustment in their current university?
2. What factors contribute to the older Korean students' difficulties adjusting to new lives as students?
3. How does their own culture influence the older Korean students' decision to study abroad?

### **Research Site and Participants**

In this study, a public university in the southeastern United States was selected as a research site. This university has international students who compose 5% of the student population, and the number of foreign students in this university has increased dramatically every year since 1989. Specifically, in graduate enrollment, foreign students accounted for 25% of the total graduate student population in 2002.

Our 5 participants were all Korean students who returned to school later in their lives and who had at least 2 years of career experience before their graduate studies in the United States. Students were selected using a purposeful sampling procedure to increase quality assurance (Kuzel, 1999). With the help of the Korean Students Association, we selected research participants according to the following recruitment criteria: All the participants must (a) be Korean students who completed their undergraduate programs in South Korea, (b) have studied at least 1.5 years at a U.S. university, (c) have at least 2 years of job experience prior to higher education, and (d) be older than 30 years of age. Research participant information is presented in Table 1.

### **Data Collection**

After we recruited the participants, they were interviewed using semistructured questions. The interview questions were related to Korean students' decision to study in the United States and their experiences in graduate school (e.g., "How did you come to the decision that you would pursue further degree(s) in graduate school?" "Were there times during your program when you began to wonder if you wanted to continue your graduate studies?"). The multiple interviews occurred during two semesters. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. In addition, the researchers took notes about the settings; the participants' reactions, including their facial expressions and gestures; and the researchers' reflections about the interview process.

According to the participants' preferences, the interviews were conducted both in Korean and English. Most participants chose to speak Korean during the interviews, except for 1 participant, who preferred English. After the preliminary data analysis was conducted by the Korean author, relevant parts of our interview data were translated into English. After the interviews, the researchers conducted peer reviews and member checks with the participants to verify the accuracy of translation, the interview data, and preliminary data interpretation. In addition, all the translations were reviewed by the participants during the member checks. When concerns and needs for clarification related to the translation occurred, the participants and researcher revised the text and translation together.

### **Data Analysis: Critical Incident Method**

At first, all data were open coded (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Open codes helped us find common themes across participants, which highlighted shared experiences as well as individual critical events. Next, we developed stories based on individual critical events. After these procedures, we

**Table 1 Research Participants**

Name	Age	Gender	Major	Years in		Pursuing Degree	Earlier Professional Career	Years in Career	Marital Status
				Current University	University				
Jamie	38	Female	Elementary education	2.5	2.5	Ph.D.	Software engineer	8	Single
Kevin	33	Male	Electrical engineering	2.5	2.5	Ph.D.	Researcher	6	Single
Helen	35	Female	Educational psychology	1.5	1.5	Ph.D.	Elementary school teacher	3	Single
Tom	35	Male	Sociology	1.5	1.5	Ph.D.	Businessman	4	Married
Dick	30	Male	Biomedical engineering	1.5	1.5	Master's	Researcher	2	Single

asked the participants to review the proposed critical incidents and constructed stories to determine whether they correctly represented these participants' experiences. During this review process, the participants were actively involved in revising their stories.

More specifically, we used critical incidents and events to interpret and understand the lives of older Korean students by structuring the major themes of their life stories around critical incidents. In general, a critical incident method is capable of "producing an ongoing and discontinuous account of fragments of the past" (Tripp, 1994, p. 65). Flanagan (1953) was among the first to use the critical incident method as a technique to analyze human behavior. He emphasized the situational nature of the critical incident method applied to defined empirical situations. In addition, critical events have also been used in the analysis of narrative and life stories to study how lives are constructed through critical events (Denzin, 1989; Richardson, 1995).

In this study, we subtracted and analyzed events that were "critical, influential, or decisive" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 115) to the students' adjustment processes. We discovered the critical incidents (see Table 2) during the analysis of the interviews. Critical incidents were used as a tool to reduce the amount of life history data, focusing only on those events and sections of the interviews that had the strongest influence on the adaptation process or that described the development of cultural identity. Incidents were identified in two different ways. Either the participants mentioned a specific incident as influential for their adaptation, or the researchers recognized the importance based on their interpretation of the data.

## **CRITICAL INCIDENTS FORMING OUR NEW PREUNDERSTANDING**

In this section, we will illustrate how our understanding has changed and how it continues to form as we read and reread the critical incidents of our participants. The following subheadings are composed from the shared themes of students' critical events. Identified critical events will be presented in bold or brackets in the text.

### **Critical Incidents Related to Students' Decision to Study in Foreign Countries**

The life-turning decision to place successful careers in the home country aside and start graduate studies in a foreign country was guided by the students' personal and social values as well as by the image of successful life in the home country. The students in this study highly valued social mobility, power, aca-

*(text continues on p. 178)*

**Table 2 Critical Incidents of Older Korean Students**

<b>Student</b>	<b>Critical Incidents</b>	<b>Interpretation</b>	<b>Quotes From Interviews</b>
Jamie	Seminar	Discussion fear	"I feel very stressed whenever I go to seminar class. I know I have to participate in class discussions, but I feel uncomfortable or even scared speaking up in class. . . . I looked like a fool."
	Menial chores	No respect	"I was very upset when my boss asked me to move her books and journals from her old office to her new one. I was not young enough to carry heavy books."
	Team project	Disregard because of communication difficulties	"She seemed very surprised when she saw me using computers well. She asked me how to operate a function. But I just mumbled and gave her an unclear explanation. Then she said nothing about my explanation and went away. I was so embarrassed. After that incident, she suggested that other teammates change the group project plan which I had proposed."
	Department party	No friends at party	"At the party, I tried to be involved in their [her colleagues] conversations, but I couldn't. I didn't work with them, and I just saw them in class. I couldn't find any common dialogue topics except class work. I wanted to have some friends who could share something."
Kevin	Public relations (PR) video	Good impression	"While I was working on the department PR video, I had to go to the computer lab to use some software. Thus, I met and talked with my colleagues more frequently than before. They saw what I made and gave me compliments. This experience gave me lots of confidence."
	Colleague's cheating	Misunderstanding	"I didn't know he [his colleague] lied to my advisor. He took advantage of me when he wanted to know about the project of which I was in charge. He was a member of my group. Although he did not work hard, he debriefed the advisor of the progress as if he did something. . . . My advisor thought that my supervision was not sufficient for conducting experiments because my colleague gave him wrong information and blamed me for that incorrect information."

	Finding a spouse	Marriage pressure	<p>"Every time I visited Korea, my family arranged for me to meet ladies. During the last visit, I had to meet girls almost every day. My parents thought I needed to get married before I grew much older."</p> <p>"After the first two sessions of that class, she [her professor] suggested that I drop that class. She could not accept me not participating in class discussion. That was my first semester. I asked her to give me another chance, but she kept urging me to drop the class because she thought I could not succeed."</p> <p>"When I told my family about studying in the U.S., my brother opposed my decision. He gave me harsh comments about my ability and my studies. He was worried about my status as a single woman and kept telling me to find a man instead of studying. Also, he emphasized that my family could not give any financial support for my studies."</p> <p>"I have almost run out of my money after my first semester. I am so afraid that I cannot pay my rent, bills, and even my tuition for the next semester. I tried every chance to get assistantships, but I was not eligible for financial support because of my status as an international student."</p> <p>"She [her presentation partner] seemed to understand my ideas in our prep meetings... I was so disappointed in her presentation... she didn't present what we had discussed... I was just afraid to talk in front of our class because of my limited English proficiency. I should have made our presentation along with my partner... After the class, I asked my partner if she understood my ideas. But she simply said that she forgot to talk about them."</p> <p>"Maybe I didn't know the rules of school visitation. I know I made a mistake to take notes. But I think they [principal and teachers] should not have treated me like that. I felt humiliated. They should not have banned me from their school."</p> <p>"When I decided to study in the U.S., my parents protested this decision because they thought that starting my doctoral program at my age seemed too late. Also, they pushed me to marry. I am the oldest son in my family, my parents wanted me to get married before my brothers."</p>
Helen	Dropping out of class	Lack of understanding	
	Fight with brother	No family support	
	Assistantship	No hope for assistantship	
	Classroom presentation	Communication difficulties	
	School visit	Hostility	
Tom	Protest	Disagreement with parents	

Table 2 (continued)

Student	Critical Incidents	Interpretation	Quotes From Interviews
	Wife	Troubles with wife	"Right after we got married, my second semester started. I was very busy to do my school work even though I knew I had to spend more time with my wife. I knew she felt lonely. But I believed that she should have understood my challenges as a graduate student."
	Job interview	Limited opportunities for employment	"When I got admitted, I got verbal approval for financial support from my department. . . . Unfortunately, it was cancelled. So I needed to find employment in order to pay my tuition and living expenses. I applied for everything I could do, but I didn't get any answers. When I interviewed, people were concerned about my language skills and my status [as an foreign student]."
	Practicum	Stress related to limited language proficiency	"Every week, I needed to practice therapy methods with my classmates in front of others. When a student gave a session, the professor gave his comments about what was good or bad about the performance. I felt very stressed when my turn came up. Due to my limited English proficiency, I felt that it was very difficult to build a rapport with my clients. Also, I was not comfortable with understanding my clients in session."
Dick	Environmental organizations	Worldwide perspective	"When my professor introduced some issues about environmental problems in the world and the role of some organizations in solving these issues, I felt like I got a light. . . . I believed that studying abroad in America have given me a special chance to consider a new vision about my studies and the world in which I live."
	Publication party	Total stranger	"I tried to be involved in conversations with others, but I had insufficient knowledge about the topics of conversation. . . . I realized that it was very hard for me to participate in the conversation because I had never heard about some of the topics and/or people before. I felt that I was a total stranger in these conversation groups."

Material science class	Academic challenges	<p>"I just followed the recommendation of other Korean students from my department when I chose my classes. . . . I was the only student who has never taken material science in the undergraduate program. . . . At the end of that semester, I got unsatisfactory grades and was warned by my advisor. . . . The next semester, I studied very hard and got excellent grades."</p>
Taking care of parents	Responsibility toward parents	<p>"I am the only son in my family. . . . While I study in the U.S., I have cared about my family, especially my parents. I felt more responsibility to take care of my parents, as both they and I grew older. In Korea, people my age have already built their own families and are currently looking after their parents. Although my parents understand my situation, I feel guilty."</p>

demics, and professional achievement. All of them had visions about successful lives in their home countries on their return. The aspirations to seek higher positions, such as professorships, in academia were supported by Korean society and Confucianism. The students believed that having higher degrees would be the most powerful way to fulfill their academic expectations as well as gain prestige, respect, and a higher salary. They explained how a Ph.D. in Korean society earns not only significant respect from students but also from other members of Korean society because of the fact that society recognizes and prioritizes the authority of scholarship (KIS, n.d.).

In addition, all of the participating students reported that they wanted to begin their teaching careers at universities. Even though students knew that they would face serious and fierce competition to become a professor in Korea, all students had dreamed about being faculty members in higher education institutions. Some of these dreams originated from early childhood. As Helen explained,

My childhood dream was always to become a professor. My mom continuously told me that a teacher was a really good job for women, you know, everyone in our society thinks about that teaching job in the same way. . . . At that time [childhood], I believed that I wanted to be a professor because a professor not only seemed the highest level of teacher in the education system but also was socially recognized as one of the most highly respected jobs in our culture. . . . My view of professorship has changed since my childhood, but I bet that Korean people including me are likely to think of teaching at the university level as fascinating.

In addition, our Korean students reported that their graduate studies, particularly in America, could be beneficial for them in terms of having better opportunities to get higher positions in their field when they return to their home countries. In Korea, individuals who earn higher degrees from universities in foreign countries are usually thought of as having up-to-date knowledge and skills. Thus, many schools and companies are eager to hire employees with international degrees. It is believed that employees' competence is equivalent to their level of education and to the reputation of universities in which they have been enrolled (K. Kim, 1999). As Dick described,

My school was not that good, just OK. I was a good student, but I thought I might have some difficulties finding better jobs. . . . After I served in the army [Note from author: Military service is mandatory for all men in Korea], I thought I'd better study in the United States because there are lots of benefits I can get, for instance, learning English and gaining access to better positions, etcetera. When one has a Ph.D. [earned from an American university], he or she is recognized as a higher quality scholar [compared to people who have earned degrees in Korea], and then, people show their respect for him or her.

As we discussed above, older Korean students reported that societal and cultural values were influential and decisive factors in deciding to pursue higher degrees in the United States instead of Korea. Despite the strong aspiration of getting higher degrees to fulfill their hopes and personal goals, students confronted serious challenges in getting support from their families and from significant others. Helen and Tom reported that they had a hard time convincing their families to accept their decision to study abroad instead of continuing with their professional careers. For example, Tom's parents **protested** his choice to study abroad and disagreed with his decision to begin his doctoral studies in America after his successful career in Korea. Similarly, Helen's brother made harsh comments about her graduate studies and financial incapability [**a fight with brother**] to support her studies. Helen's brother believed that she would be better off marrying at that point in her life. It is interesting that both students' families urged them to marry before their departure to the United States or they suggested marriage instead of studying abroad.

### **Critical Incident Related to Adjustment Difficulties**

Prior to the students' arrival in the United States, the participants anticipated having successful studies, building good relationships with the host people, and practicing their language skills. However, all students in this sample had considerable difficulties adjusting to the new learning and living environment. Although the extent of these students' difficulties varied from one participant to another, all students had faced communication difficulties (e.g., **seminar, colleague's cheating, dropping out of class, classroom presentation, practicum, and publication party**), financial concerns (e.g., **assistantship and job interview**), and age-related concerns (e.g., **finding a spouse, menial chores, protest, and taking care of parents**; see Table 2 for further details about the complete list of critical events).

*Critical incidents related to communication difficulties.* In this study, we found that communication difficulties contributed most to the adjustment problems older Korean students experienced. All the participants pointed out that they had a hard time communicating their ideas and thoughts with the host people. Students believed that expressing themselves efficiently in English has been not only an essential element but also the biggest barrier to achieve the goals of their graduate studies in the United States. Additionally, students reported high levels of stress related to language problems. For example, Kevin, a 33-year-old engineering student, described the following:

Everything, especially learning English, is very disappointing. I didn't expect these difficulties I have faced. I feel sorry about my decision to study in the U.S. I could have done a more successful job in graduate school if I were in my country.

Many students reported that they had difficulties understanding lectures and discussions because of insufficient English listening and speaking skills. In addition, they explained how language barriers prevented them from adequately developing their professional knowledge. For example, Helen finally **dropped out from her class** because her professor doubted her capability to successfully complete the course just because Helen did not participate in classroom discussions.

Since Jamie started her doctoral program, she has felt uncomfortable talking with Americans because of her limited English proficiency. During her interviews, Jamie often stated her frustration about speaking English appropriately. Frustration was also present in her critical incident labeled **seminar**:

It is still difficult for me to speak clearly because of my awful English and related communication problems. I felt pressured in class because I cannot participate in class discussions. Whenever I go to class, I feel very nervous and stressed due to class participation. And there are lots of things I need to discuss with my advisor about my program. But I had hardly talked with him about that.

While Jamie expressed her internal feelings related to communication difficulties, Helen described the ignorance and lack of understanding expressed by other classmates:

I thought they [classmates] looked down at me because of my language difficulties. . . . They had little or no patience for listening to what I said. . . . I had my opinion about the topics, but the only problem I had was that I had to speak English slowly in order to translate my ideas from Korean to English. . . . Some of my classmates ignored me, and they did not allow me to get involved in the **classroom presentations** and discussions. Thus, I was feeling bad about those people who ignored me, and I was also feeling bad about me because I could not speak English well.

Communication difficulties with respect to others (self-silencing) contributed to students' decreased self-confidence as well as added to the lack of understanding expressed by others. Additionally, feelings of being an outsider and incapable of following conversations were discussed in some of the interviews. For example, Dick said that during the **publication party**, he experienced insufficient knowledge about the topics of conversation that contributed to his feelings of loneliness and being a stranger.

*Critical incidents related to financial concerns.* Participants Jamie, Helen, and Tom reported that they had very limited opportunities to get funds or graduate assistantships. They believed that their chances to earn financial support were restricted because of their poor English and their international student status. All

of them had applied for several assistantships without luck. Tom expressed his concerns:

I applied for every single job available to students. My advisor helped me to find employment, including a graduate assistantship, but it didn't work out. Also, he could not hire me because of my status as an international student. Research assistantships in my department are only available for U.S. citizens. Teaching assistantship . . . right now, my English is not good enough to teach a class. I applied for other openings offered by some university offices. But they didn't want me. [job interview]

Helen had the similar experience of failing to receive financial support as an international student. In particular, Helen was afraid that after her first semester, she could not pay her living expenses without any **assistantship**. She had applied for several assistantships, but it was very hard for her to receive positive responses from her departments. Helen revealed her frustration in finding a graduate assistantship and a fear of relinquishing her doctoral program because of her insecure fiscal situation.

From our participants' experiences with financial problems, we found that they reported some serious concerns regarding their current inability to support themselves financially. Before they moved to the United States for their graduate studies, these students were successful in their careers and had little or no difficulties managing their financial matters. However, the sudden loss of the financial independence caused by full-time graduate study at American universities resulted in degrading these students' self-esteem and self-image as high achievers and professionally successful individuals. Such feelings and concerns not only were reflected in their comments about themselves and their current lives as international graduate students but were also interrelated to the students' age-related concerns, which emphasized their financial independence and family-related and societal responsibilities after reaching adulthood (i.e., usually after college graduation).

*Critical incidents related to age-related concerns.* All of our older students faced different types of age-related concerns, such as marriage, a need to support their parents, and gaining respect from young classmates, while studying in the United States. For example, Jamie, Helen, and Kevin, who were considered to be persons who had passed the right age for marriage from the Korean perspective, felt pressured to find a spouse as soon as possible. Students reported that they felt lonely, and they believed that marriage and having their own family would be required to become a complete member in Korean society. However, they expressed difficulties in finding their life-long partner. They had very few opportunities to meet someone in the United States. According to Helen, 35 years old,

Korean people, including me, think that marriage is the biggest thing in our lives. I know I have to get married soon. I am trying to find the one for me, but it is hard because I am too old for other Korean men here who want to marry. I have to find a nice man around my age.

Similarly, Kevin, a 33-year-old engineering student, described the following:

I visited Korea every break in order to find a spouse. I wanted to stay there for a while so I would have an opportunity to meet a girl at least couple of times. I should make a marital decision without dating someone on a constant basis because I have to come back to America. [Authors' note: He worked for this advisor during the break, so he could visit his family for a limited time.] Up until now, I failed to **find a perfect lady [spouse]** for me.

In addition to the marriage concern, these students felt guilty that they could not support their parents. Specifically, Dick felt sorry for his parents because he could not take care of them: "In Korea, people of my age have already established their own families and are currently looking after their parents." **Taking care of one's parents** and responsibility toward older family members are duties for Korean people according to Confucian values (i.e., reverence to parents).

Although the students we interviewed were very conscious about age-related concerns, some of them struggled with integrating cultural values with their professional goals and aspirations. For example, Helen reported that

in my mind, age 40 means that I should build a foundation for success in my career. Now, I'm worried about my status when I go back to my country. Other people of my age in Korea usually have stable and successful lives. I feel lots of pressure because of my age and my future. I have to finish it [Ph.D.] as fast as I can.

Jamie, a 38-year-old doctoral student, also revealed her feelings about the age milestone:

I am almost 40 years old. In my country, there is an age limit to become a candidate for an assistant professorship. That age is 40. I want to be a qualified doctor who has comprehensive knowledge about my area, but I feel like I don't have time to learn everything I need. I just want to finish my program as soon as possible.

## CONCLUSION

Confucianism forms the spiritual foundation and fiscal ideology that older Korean students operate from while studying abroad. Additionally, the possibility of advancement through effort and schooling remains one of the guiding

principles in older Korean students' lives. Furthermore, Korean students often perceive and interpret their American peers' thoughts and actions through the lens of Confucianism instead of considering the situated and local features of the American culture. Rather than engaging in negotiations with American cultural values, older Korean students prefer to preserve their own cultural values, which cause serious value conflicts while staying in the United States.

Furthermore, Confucian values and standards provide older Korean students currently studying in America with a framework related to their roles and responsibilities as members of Korean society. Although these students live outside their own country, they still believe that their cultural and societal responsibilities should be fulfilled as though they were currently living in Korea. When fulfilling such responsibilities becomes impossible to accomplish for a variety of reasons, Korean students encounter internal conflicts and external pressures from their families and friends in their home country. These internal and external burdens largely influence these students' graduate studies and their adaptation to the culture in the United States.

It is interesting that older Korean graduate students have somewhat contradictory and conflicting viewpoints toward the influence of Confucian values and milestones. As we discussed earlier, older Korean students exhibited a strong tendency to follow the Confucian values and beliefs while living in the United States, but at the same time, they distanced themselves from Korean cultural values and customs when they decided to leave their careers to study abroad. With the hope of obtaining advanced degrees in the United States, which would in turn promise a brighter future back in Korea, these older Korean students left all their privileges as high achievers and overachievers in Korean society, although Korean culture and most of their families discouraged them from doing so. In this way, students made conscious decisions to depart from Korean cultural expectations, but they were not capable or willing to replace them with U.S. cultural values.

Based on our data, we propose that the cultural transfer from Confucianism to American values (i.e., to both capitalism and individualism) would require Korean students to approach their everyday lives (including social, cultural, and financial aspects) in the United States differently, and also, they would have to establish alternative and very different relationships with their teachers and other students compared to the relationships they experienced in their home country. All this, in turn, would change how students position themselves and how they would view achievement and educational diversity.

We also recognize that not all older Korean students who study in the United States have the same difficulties as those of our study participants. However, it is very important to note that many older students who return to school overseas to

continue their studies display greater enthusiasm about the future possibilities resulting from the completion of their degrees than those of their younger counterparts, and they also have valuable career experiences. In addition, they exhibit strong professionalism that should be taken into consideration and viewed as beneficial in their doctoral programs.

Instead of allowing these students to struggle with adjustment problems alone, it would be of prominent importance for all of the higher-education-related personnel (e.g., university policy makers, faculty, staff, and students) to understand the fundamental characteristics of their concerns and difficulties and then help these students not only expand their professional and scholastic knowledge but also share their knowledge and experience with their peer students. Educators could, for example, consider how they can support international students who have had successful careers in their home country and who have been recognized as experts in their fields. Also, how can older Korean students maintain an image of professionalism in the new culture and new academic environment? How can it be or is it even possible for those students to overcome the fact that they have had to set their successful careers aside to complete higher degrees at international universities? How can these students' earlier work experience be used more effectively in higher education? How can teachers and counselors benefit from and maintain the students' high motivation despite the difference in teaching and learning cultures or despite changing academic expectations?

Understanding the influence of Confucianism means that researchers, teachers, and administrators must acknowledge the historical tradition as well as the dialogical openness of the interpretation of that tradition. Cultural prejudices have to be challenged, and educational horizons have to be broadened. According to Woolf (2002), "one measure of the efficacy of [international] education must, therefore, be the degree to which it brings tolerance, respect, and an appreciation of diversity" (p. 6). Without understanding the role of cultural identity and heritage embedded in a particular cultural framework, higher education cannot achieve one of its most important goals: to provide quality education for all.

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