

Divergent Paths toward Militarized Citizenship: The “Unending” Cold War, Transnational Space of Citizenship, and International Korean Male Students

Hee Jung CHOI and Ga Young CHUNG

Abstract

This article examines how international Korean male students (de)stabilize their mobility and citizenship by strategically navigating their options and duties for military service in South Korea and/or the United States. Their stories reveal how the “unending” Cold War and the vestiges of US imperialism and militarism continue to impact Korean young adults and their transnational life projects. In particular, this research compares two groups: one composed of upper middle-class and upper-class male students who graduated from boarding schools and attend prestigious colleges in the United States and who are required to return to complete their military service in South Korea; and the other composed of lower middle-class and lower-class male students who moved to the United States and are seeking to serve in the US military to secure an expedited path to American citizenship after failing to enter prestigious colleges in South Korea. In so doing, we show how two seemingly divergent paths toward militarized citizenship are highly classed. Although the two groups examined come from different class backgrounds and make different choices, they are alike in their decision to undertake military service—and to use that service to secure valuable citizenship. By showing how both groups remain tied to a militarized regime of citizenship during their respective transnational trajectories as international students, this research demonstrates the ongoing effects of the Cold War, not just on the Korean Peninsula but also in the transnational space of citizenship.

Keywords: Cold War, militarized citizenship, transnational space of citizenship, International Korean male student, study abroad, mass conscription, MAVNI (Military Accessions Vital to the National Interest) Program

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Hee Jung CHOI is a research associate at the Migration and Social Integration Research Center, Konkuk University. E-mail: chj9884@gmail.com

Ga Young CHUNG (corresponding author) is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Education Policy, Organization, and Leadership and the Department of Asian American Studies, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. E-mail: gchung6@illinois.edu

Introduction

This article examines how international Korean male students navigate their life options with respect to military service in South Korea and the United States. The ethnographic stories introduced below reveal the ongoing impact of the Cold War and US militarism on the Korean Peninsula and the lives of Korea's younger generation. We argue that the ongoing impact of both legacies extends to the transnational space of citizenship, which the Korean international male students enter to pursue their life projects. This paper is drawn from two ethnographic projects. The first is Choi's research on upper middle- and upper-class male students who graduated from boarding schools and attend prestigious colleges in the United States. Their narratives reveal the ways in which they understand and impart meanings to their compulsory military service in South Korea. First, they see the value of completing their compulsory military service in South Korea as a way of securing both legal and cultural citizenship. Second, they consider their service in the South Korean military as a necessary step to finding a job and settling in South Korea as globalized elites after their lengthy period of study abroad.

Chung's research focuses on lower middle- and lower-class male students who, after failing to enter prestigious colleges in South Korea, moved to the United States as an alternative path to earning a bachelor's degree. Their stories feature the following characteristics. They join MAVNI (Military Accessions Vital to the National Interest), a US military program designed to recruit noncitizens with in-demand "language and cultural" skills, in order to overcome their limited options in South Korea and earn an expedited path to US citizenship. They also view their participation in MAVNI as a way of resolving the liminality of their betwixt and between residency in the United States.

Through a comparative discussion of these two groups, we show how the two divergent paths toward militarized citizenship are highly classed, though the logic behind their choices is the same—serving in the military to secure citizenship. That is, despite their relatively privileged status as study abroad students, both groups are still tied to the militarized regime

of citizenship. Their respective cases also highlight how their negotiations of military service and militarized citizenship occur within the context of transnational life trajectories, rather than in the fixed territory of the nation. In so doing, this paper argues for the continuing relevance of “transnational Cold War compositions” (Kim 2010) that become constantly re-assembled and restructured even as many people believe the Cold War has ended.

Theoretical Background

This paper builds on previous scholarship concerning the new possibilities and meanings of citizenship in transnational spaces, what Kirsi Paulina Kallio and Katharyne Mitchell (2016, 261) have termed “transnational lived citizenship.” As they have argued, “the inside/outside dichotomy between the national and the global” needs to be challenged and the actual lived experiences of transnational citizenship practices needs to be studied in order to better understand the transformation of meanings attached to citizenship in the context of ever-increasing global flows of markets, technologies, and people. Scholars of globalization have hoped for and anticipated the development of transnational citizenship, which can overcome some of the incapacities and problems of the liberal citizenship bounded by one nation-state (Appadurai 1996; Beck 2000; Soysal 1994). By examining the stories of international Korean male students enrolled in US colleges in pursuit of a better future, as well as the citizenship that will secure it, we also join this interdisciplinary discussion on transnational citizenship. The students’ hopes for transnational citizenship can be realized only through a very national military service still governed by the nation-state. Thus, this paper complicates our understanding of transnational citizenship and challenges the binary understanding of the global and national in terms of citizenship by exploring one of the most mobile and educated people on the move—international students—and their attainment of the rights and benefits of citizenship through national military service.

The stories presented here show that these individuals made decisions regarding their military service and citizenship based on a taken-for-granted militarized citizenship regime (Moon 2005b) that is still the exclusive domain of the nation-state. This suggests that militarism, in the specific form of men's military service, undermines the individual's navigation of the transnational space of citizenship. This paper contributes to our understanding of the continuous effects of militarization on citizenship, particularly among men who cross borders. Recent scholarship on study-abroad issues in South Korea and beyond has noted its potential to produce cosmopolitan citizens through global education (Abelmann, Newendorp, and Lee-Chung 2014; Lee-Chung 2014; Park and Abelmann 2004; Rizvi 2005) as well as its instrumentalities in a globalized capitalist economy (Lee and Koo 2006; Kang and Abelmann 2011; Waters 2005, 2006). While appreciating the previous scholarship on the study-abroad phenomenon as a possibly cosmopolitan project, or at least as a project to produce globalized elites, we point out the irony that in order to settle down and secure citizenship, students who receive a global education take for granted military service in either or both country(ies) where citizenship has been deeply entangled with militarism.

The stories presented here also complicate Aihwa Ong's notion of "flexible citizenship." According to Ong (1992, 112), individuals seek "to both circumvent and benefit from different nation-state regimes by selecting different sites for investments, work, and family relocation." The notion of flexible citizenship explains understandings of citizenship as relative to concrete individual benefits across borders. While the individuals introduced here attached meanings to their military service in South Korea and/or the United States in terms of their own practical benefits, they took for granted that service was necessary to secure valuable citizenship. While other scholars have emphasized that the meanings and practices of citizenship have been re-articulated with "universalizing criteria of neoliberalism and human rights" (Ong 2006, 499; Mitchell 2016; Häkli and Kallio 2016), this study complicates our understanding of flexible citizenship by showing that the transnational space of citizenship the students navigate has still been structured by the particular history

of the Cold War and US militarism on the Korean Peninsula. In short, while international Korean students seek valuable citizenship for their own concrete benefits, they are able to claim such rights and benefits of citizenship only through the very national military service.

In addition, this paper attends to the spatial and temporal dimensions of transnational citizenship. Although individual male students must draw on state-based militarized citizenship to claim the rights and benefits of citizenship, we highlight that those negotiations should be understood in the context of their lived experiences rather than in the traditional nexus of citizenship and fixed national space. In this way, we learn how male students regard their military service and consider citizenship decisions in the transnational space of citizenship. Building on Kirsten Younghee Song's (2015) emphasis on temporality in understanding the impact of conscription duty, we show that students from different class backgrounds have different temporal options in their transnational trajectories, such as departure for study abroad and then return to South Korea or remaining in the United States, that lead to different decisions regarding military service and citizenship.

Our research is grounded in a comparative study of international Korean male students. As aforementioned, the ethnographic data is drawn from the respective projects of each author.¹ In 2011, Choi travelled to South Korea to investigate how individuals from upper middle- and upper-class backgrounds, who had studied abroad for their precollege education and then attended American colleges, imparted meanings to and experienced their military service obligations in South Korea after their long period of study abroad. In total, she interviewed 60 men over a period of two years. From 2013, Chung also spent four years conducting an ethnography of the first generation of (im)migrant Korean young adults to discern how they navigated the path to American citizenship through education, activism, and military service in the United States. Through snowball sampling, she interviewed a total of 122 young adults with various legal status, including undocumented Korean immigrants, international

1. The authors conducted each of their research projects in conjunction with their doctoral dissertations.

Korean students, and Koreans who had recently acquired US permanent residency. Her research was conducted in major cities with sizable Korean communities across the United States, such as Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, and Washington, D.C./northern Virginia. For this research, she pays particular attention to 24 international Korean male students among her total interviewees.²

We center *class* in comparing how these two groups navigate their respective life conditions through military participation. Their class backgrounds follow their own subjective evaluation of class membership. According to Nancy Abelmann (2003, 20), class is “not a thing to be catalogued and charted but is, rather, a project that happens partly through narrative.” Even if narrative is “not the whole truth, it is nonetheless truth making,” it provides “moments of research” (Bourdieu 1989, 127, as cited in Abelmann 2003, 18) in studying class. Throughout the interviews, we found that many research participants defined their class status not as fixed but fluid. They saw that their class status as in process of becoming higher or lower and something they needed to either maintain or improve through their own efforts. Indeed, they all viewed their military service in South Korea or the United States as a means of either securing their present class status or propelling their upward mobility.

Before introducing the detailed narratives of the international Korean male students in US institutions, we discuss the relevant context of the relationship between military service and citizenship in South Korea and the United States.

Military Service and Citizenship in the Context of Korea’s Globalization

The first Military Service Law was enacted in August 1949 following the establishment of the Republic of Korea (South Korea). Less than a year later, the Korean War (1950–1953) broke out, requiring South Korea’s Military Manpower Administration (MMA) to develop its administrative

2. A separate table is provided at the end of the paper with basic demographic information.

capacities to recruit soldiers. After the Korean War armistice, the modern conscription system was implemented in South Korea. Under South Korea's current Military Service Law, all able-bodied adult males are required to serve in the military for a minimum of 21 months.³ In the context of the continuing war with North Korea and the historical memory of the Korean War, the equality of *universal* military service in South Korea has been strongly emphasized (Choi and Kim 2017). Except in the case of a compelling medical condition, it is almost impossible for a male South Korean citizen to live and work in South Korea without completing military service.

The strict enforcement of compulsory military service has not changed even amidst South Korea's globalization policies and changes in all sectors of society beginning in the late 1990s. Globalization has become a natural aspect of contemporary life, and with this, as Park and Abelmann noted, "the idea of what it means to be South Korean is transforming: increasingly, to be South Korean means to be South Korean 'in the world'" (2004, 650). In light of the effects of globalization in South Korea, mastery of English in the pursuit of global citizenship or an aspiring cosmopolitanism has often been described as the purpose of precollege study abroad (Park 2009; Park and Lo 2012; Park and Abelmann 2004). While the internationalization of Koreans has been promoted through the South Korean state's "globalization" (*seggyehwa*) policy, the state has also tried to secure these transnational men as national beings who have an obligation to military service.

Under current South Korean law, international Korean male students in the United States face different conditions regarding military service, according to their status: (a) holders of permanent overseas residency; (b) dual citizenship holders; and (c) international Korean male students who have no legal status in the United States but hold a student visa (F1). In the case of (a), those with permanent residency abroad can legally postpone

3. The duration of one's military service varies depending on the service branch: 21 months for the army, 23 months for the navy, and 24 months for the air force. In the case of serving as commissioned officers after completing a four-year college education, the required length of service is three years. Duration of alternative routes of military service is approximately three years, and the duration for public service workers is 24 months.

their conscription until age 37 if they continue to reside abroad, at which point they are released from military duty due to age limits. However, if they plan, before the age of 37, to reside in South Korea for more than six months per year or work for profit in South Korea, they must complete their military service. In the case of (b), dual citizenship holders in the case of this study are primarily composed of those born in the United States during their South Korean father's graduate training in the United States.

Compared to typical Korean Americans who were born and grew up in the United States with their families, this type of student usually grew up in South Korea after their father's graduation and their family's return to South Korea. Because the Korean Nationality Law does not allow for dual citizenship holders—those born abroad while their parents temporarily resided overseas (instead of for overseas residency)—to renounce their Korean nationality before the completion of military service, dual citizenship holders cannot avoid their military duty unless they do not visit South Korea until they are 37, even though they socially and culturally identify themselves as Koreans; finally, there is the case of (c), Korean male students holding a student visa (F1) for study in the United States. These constitute the majority of the international student population from South Korea. Other than securing foreign citizenship or permanent residency and thus taking up the paths of (a) or (b) described above, there is no legal way for these male students to evade their military obligation in South Korea. If a Korean male student attending a US college does not return to South Korea for his military service, he is unable to postpone his military service in South Korea after his graduation or after age 24 (the maximum age limit for four-year college students to postpone conscription). Should he fail to complete his service, he will be unable to renew his South Korean passport once it expires, preventing him from visiting his family in South Korea (or any other country) until he has secured US citizenship.

With South Korea's implementation and legitimization of conscription for more than a half-century, military service has also come to be recognized as a necessary rite of passage for achieving cultural citizenship as a South Korean male (Moon 1998, 2002, 2005a, 2005b; Kim 2001; Kwon 2001). That is, military service is understood as a necessary step toward

achieving *normal* male adulthood, and the shared and imagined common military experiences among men have a powerful impact on *normal* male subjectivity and gendered culture in wider South Korean society (Lee 2001; Moon 2005a, 2005b; Kim 2001; Kwon 2001, 2005).

In light of the importance of military service as a necessary condition for full male citizenship in South Korea, upper-class South Korean students imparted meaning to their return to Korea to complete that military service; while lower-class South Korean students, many of whom already served in the Korean military, considered joining the US military an ideal means of securing citizenship in the United States, reflecting the taken-for-granted military as a rite passage for normal male adulthood, as we introduce in later sections.

Militarism, Citizenship, and Immigration in the United States, and the Birth of MAVNI

Militarism and citizenship have been inextricably linked in the United States. In the expansion of its political and economic power through a series of wars, the United States has utilized the labor and services of non-citizen aliens in the US military at home and abroad (Okihiro 2015; Le Espiritu 2003, 2014). By an Act of July 17, 1862, the US Congress legalized the naturalization of aliens who had served in the US military; yet courts repeatedly dismissed the military naturalization of Asian aliens during and after World Wars I and II, contrary to the cases of European descendants, thus revealing the “racialized conceptions of citizenship” inherent in such policies (Sohoni and Vafa 2010, 147). This phenomenon continued until the McCarran-Walter Act of 1952 and the Immigration and Nationality Act Amendments of 1965 dissolved the explicit legal exclusion of Asian aliens (Lee 2015; Okihiro 2015).⁴

4. Many scholars point out that both laws still selectively include or exclude certain groups of aliens in terms of their education levels, skills, or ethnic backgrounds (Lee 2015; Okihiro 2015).

Through the Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944, widely known as the G. I. Bill, the US government provided financial support for tuition and living expenses for higher education, healthcare, housing assistance, and family and caregiver benefits, among other things.⁵ These advantages played a pivotal role in recruiting new soldiers, including new immigrants who needed resources to settle in their adopted country.⁶ However, after the 9/11 attacks of 2001 and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the US military faced personnel shortages, as many were reluctant to face the risk of injury, trauma, or death in those war zones.⁷

MAVNI (Military Accessions Vital to the National Interest) was a military program designed to make up this recruitment shortfall. The purpose of MAVNI was to recruit noncitizens (aged 17–34) with foreign “language and culture” or medical skills for military service in exchange for expedited US citizenship.⁸ The program was initiated by the Bush Administration in 2008 as a pilot program and fully implemented in 2009. Although the program required an active duty service commitment of four years, which could include dispatch to war zones for up to a year, the program found immediate popularity as it provided an extreme shortcut to citizenship by skipping the green card process. The US Army announced that MAVNI participants would be naturalized as soon as they completed ten weeks of Basic Combat Training (BCT). Considering it usually took about eight to nine years, and often longer, for immigrants to acquire US

5. US Department of Veterans Affairs, “GI Bill,” <https://www.vets.gov/education/gi-bill/> (accessed March 26, 2018). The effects and limitations of the G. I. Bill have been widely examined by scholars. For instance, looking at its racialized inequalities in the American South (Turner and Bound 2003).

6. For instance, military training in professional competencies, skills, and foreign languages could then be utilized in career searches after leaving the military (Elder 1991; Simon et al. 2010).

7. “Who Will Fight the Next War?; Civil-Military Relations,” *Economist*, October 24, 2015, <https://www.economist.com/news/united-states/21676778-failures-iraq-and-afghanistan-have-widened-gulf-between-most-americans-and-armed>.

8. US Army, “Military Accessions Vital to the National Interest (MAVNI)—MAVNI Information Sheet for language Recruits,” https://www.goarmy.com/content/dam/goarmy/downloaded_assets/mavni/mavni-language.pdf (accessed November 21, 2016).

citizenship, including the period for processing their permanent residents status, the MAVNI program granting US citizenship within three to six months from the time of the soldier's completion of BCT and dispensing with the green card process, was an unprecedented option that provided an extremely rapid path to citizenship. As soon as it was announced, this *sans pareil* offer attracted the attention of the public. According to the *Washington Post*, as of June 2017 about 10,400 soldiers had enlisted through the MAVNI program since its inception.⁹

As the Korean Peninsula has remained in a quasi-state of war since the end of active hostilities in the Korean War, the program has also drafted native Korean speakers every year since it was initiated. The enactment of MAVNI created a frenzy among Korean residents in the United States struggling to acquire American citizenship. For many Korean males resident in the United States, whether they had already completed their two years of military service in South Korea or would be expected to return to South Korea to complete that compulsory military service if they did not become naturalized in the United States, serving in the American military in exchange for US citizenship and the related financial, educational, and healthcare benefits was considered an attractive opportunity. Responding to this phenomenon, a 2009 *Wall Street Journal* article entitled, "A Korean Invasion Blindsides the US Army—but in a Good Way," addressed South Koreans' strong interest in enlisting in MAVNI.¹⁰ It indicated that Korean nationals numbered the largest among the 8,000 applicants for the program to date and that "almost all" of them had already completed South Korea's compulsory military service. According to Joshua Cannon, a US Army recruiter introduced in the article, some Korean applicants

9. Alex Horton, "The Pentagon Promised Citizenship to Immigrants Who Served. Now It Might Help Deport Them," *Washington Post*, June 26, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2017/06/26/the-pentagon-promised-citizenship-to-immigrants-who-served-now-it-might-help-deport-them/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.a0adfd44f193.

10. Miriam Jordan, "A Korean Invasion Blindsides the U.S. Army—but in a Good Way: Immigrants from the Peninsula Swamp Program Offering Citizenship; Other Groups Squeezed," *Wall Street Journal*, May 29, 2009, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB124355542084664647>.

had even learned of the program before it became official and had made numerous calls and visits to recruiting offices across the United States. One of the interviewees, Mr. Yang, a 30-year-old vocational student in the United States, said he wanted to join the military program because it would otherwise be very difficult for him to acquire US citizenship. The narratives featured in the news article claimed the MAVNI program was a reliable choice for South Koreans who did not possess the economic, social, or cultural capital to secure legal status in the United States and found military service in exchange for citizenship reasonable. In the following sections, we will show through ethnographic stories how citizenship for young South Korean males is deeply intertwined with military service.

Militarism, Citizenship, and the Birth of MAVNI in the United States

In the context of military service and the citizenship regime in both South Korea and the United States, we now turn to the stories—the ways in which individual men make sense of and navigate their military service. First, we introduce the stories of Ji-hun and Cheol-gi.¹¹ They come from affluent backgrounds and began their education abroad by attending boarding schools for their secondary education before returning to Korea for their military service in their twenties.

After I graduated from high school and began college in the United States, I thought it would be better to join the US Army instead of the Korean Army, considering I had to serve anyway. But compared to the South Korean army, the US Army promised to provide financial support for my college education, financial and health benefits, and possibly US citizenship. After some thought, I made up my mind to join the US army and I looked into the ROTC (Reserve Officers' Training Corps) programs

11. The name of interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement. Interviews were mainly conducted in Korean, but interviewees used some words in English. Translations from the Korean were done by the authors.

in US colleges. I even visited the ROTC office on campus to ask whether I qualified and how I could sign up. But because I am not an American citizen, I was not eligible to serve in the US Army. I thought I had a chance because the army has a program to provide green cards to those who serve when there is a shortage of recruits. However, my parents were strongly against my idea to join the US military because of the risk of being deployed to active war zones. In addition, my father did not understand why I would want to join the US military since I am Korean. Critical to my [ultimate] decision not to join the US military was the highly complicated process because of my non-American nationality. It is not easy for a foreign national to join the US Army.¹²

Ji-hun, who received his precollege education at a private boarding school in Boston and graduated from a prestigious private university on the East Coast, contemplated his two options for military service—compulsory military service in South Korea or joining the US Army through the ROTC program. As he explained above, he decided it was too complicated to join the US Army as a foreign national,¹³ so he served in the Korean military for 21 months. In the summer of 2013 when I interviewed him in Seoul, he was enjoying his summer vacation after his military discharge and before entering a well-known East Coast law school in the fall.

Ji-hun valued his military service in South Korea for its potential to expand future possibilities in his transnational trajectory. Responding to a question about his dreams after graduating from law school, he replied:

I am not sure yet. My current interest is something in international trade. I am closely following the discussions on the Free Trade Agreement. If I have a chance, I am hoping to work as a South Korean government officer for the public sector related to international trade. That is one benefit of my military service in Korea. It would not matter [whether I served in the

12. Ji-hun (pseudonym), interviewed by Hee Jung Choi, Seoul, June 12, 2013.

13. Ji-hun's decision was made before the launch of the MAVNI program, which as noted made it easier for foreign nationals to join the American military from 2008.

South Korean military] if I became a businessman. However, people say if you wish to become a high government official in the future, it would be a huge obstacle if you did not serve. As I think about my decision to serve in the Korean military in retrospect, I feel that completion of military duty in Korea was a necessity. Nowadays [before leaving for law school in the United States] I am meeting with senior alumni lawyers [who graduated from US law schools] and other established adults to seek advice. Whenever I meet with them, the question about my military service always comes up. They always ask me if I have solved the military issue. As a result, I now feel that military service is really important.¹⁴

While Ji-hun had considered the option to serve in the US Army in exchange for financial benefits and possibly legal status in the United States, ultimately, he valued his military service in South Korea as a way of opening up an opportunity to become a government officer in the field of international trade. He also added, “While I am interested in global issues and want to work on the global stage, in the end, I am a Korean. I am particularly interested in global issues related to Korea.” He was not necessarily planning to settle down in South Korea, but he wanted to open up the possibility of becoming a public figure, such as a high government official. To attain that status, he felt military service in South Korea was imperative.

Compared to Ji-hun, who was more ambitious about securing a life on the global stage, Cheol-gi considered serving in the Korean military part of the due course of life since graduating from an American high school. After finishing boarding school in the United States, he attended a well-known private American college. When I met him in Seoul during his summer vacation in 2013, he was working there as an intern, like many other study-abroad students, to prepare for future job possibilities in South Korea. Cheol-gi had completed his military service after his freshman year in college, and after his graduation, he planned to go to a law school in the United States as a way of securing a professional job in South Korea. Regarding his desire to

14. Ji-hun, interviewed by Hee Jung Choi, Seoul, June 12, 2013.

settle down in Korea after his education in the United States, Cheol-gi said:

Although I have lived in America since an early age, I have never thought of myself as an American. After I graduate, I want to come back to South Korea as soon as possible because America cannot be my home country. When I am in the US, I always feel like I am a minority. I hate that feeling of being a minority. . . . I have thought that I will come back to South Korea as soon as I finish school. It has been too long since I lived with my parents. . . . I hope in the future I can live near my parents in South Korea after I get married.¹⁵

After law school, Cheol-gi wanted to get a job utilizing his US law degree in South Korea. Among the study-abroad students that Choi met during her field research, it was common to hear of plans to return to South Korea right after graduation to begin their careers. Although many wanted to garner some work experience abroad, they tended to want to return to South Korea someday. Furthermore, regardless of their desire to have work experience abroad, many study-abroad students tended to find their first jobs in South Korea because it was not easy to secure *good enough* jobs in countries like the United States where they studied as foreigners. To both—those like Cheol-gi who wanted to go back to South Korea as soon as possible and those like Ji-hun who wanted to build his career on the global stage—the possibility of building a career and life in South Korea was an important, viable, and desirable option. It fulfilled a sense of belonging and comfort, to include the presence of family and friends as well as the legal right to work and live in South Korea as Korean citizens. Moreover, they felt they would be able to enjoy life as members of the ethnic majority in comparison to a lack of belonging in the United States, where many of study abroad students “feel like a minority,” in Cheol-gi’s words. With their fluent English skills and credentials from prestigious US colleges, attendance at which owes something to their upper-class family backgrounds, they also calculated they would succeed as globalized elites in South Korea, possibly as a government

15. Cheol-gi (pseudonym), interviewed by Hee Jung Choi, Seoul, June 18, 2013.

official as in Ji-hun's case or as an international lawyer in the case of Cheol-gi. Thus, to make viable this future in South Korea, these international Korean male students consider military service in Korea a necessary price to pay.

The MAVNI Program as a Way of Not Returning to Korea

In this section, we introduce the stories of Sang-jin and Min-jun. They come from lower middle- to lower-class backgrounds and both migrated from South Korea to the United States in their twenties seeking a better future. Focusing on how they came to participate in the MAVNI program in exchange for US citizenship, we analyze how their transnational displacement and settlement through the military program have been shaped by class and the on-going Cold War regime.

Sang-jin, a 28-year-old Korean male, was preparing for the qualification exam to join the MAVNI program when Chung met him in Manhattan in 2016. The exam, called the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB), was a multiple-choice test for evaluating the applicant's intelligence and capability in ten fields, including general science, mechanics, and literacy. Sang-jin related how he decided to leave South Korea to earn a bachelor's degree in the United States when he was 22. Although he had already registered at a university in South Korea, it was a noncompetitive school and he was not confident he would be able to find a stable job after graduation. In South Korean society, where one's place in the hierarchy of higher education institutions influences one's fate in the job market, his concern was quite reasonable. Despite the financial burden, Sang-jin's parents decided to support his studying abroad, believing it a sound investment to secure Sang-jin's future. He chose to enter a college in New York where he had extended family members, yet navigating higher education in the United States was not easy for him either. It took him six years to transfer to a four-year university, which was another not well-known school. He despaired when he realized he would be 30 when he finished college.

I think eventually I will have to settle down in the United States [rather than return to South Korea] because my situation has become tricky. Although I came in my early twenties, I have spent the past six years attending an ESL Institute, a community college, and then transferred to my current school. And now, I am older, did not attend an Ivy League school, nor is my English fluent so it's obvious there won't be a place for me in Korea if I return. . . . I was interested in earning a master's degree in physical therapy after I graduated from college, but when I told my parents about it, they said, "Sorry, we don't think we can keep supporting you for those additional years." Although they are my parents, I empathize with their decision because up until now they've already sacrificed all their savings on my tuition fees and living expenses. So in the end, I decided to join the US Army. Not only will it resolve my [legal] status, but it will cover the tuition for graduate school in addition to a monthly salary once I complete my service obligation. It's the best option for me.¹⁶

Sang-jin found himself trapped in the status of betwixt due to his inability to fit in successfully, either in the United States or South Korea, because of his age, educational background, and credentials. He believed he could improve his future prospects by completing a graduate program, but this turned out to be impossible without his parents' financial support. According to Sang-jin, when he learned that joining the MAVNI program would provide not only tuition fees and expenses for graduate school but also grant him US citizenship, he did not think twice about his decision. For Min-jun, a 31-year-old male working at an overseas branch of a Korean company in New York City, returning to South Korea was also not a favorable option. He had graduated from a small nontraditional high school in South Korea. Then he spent his early twenties not attending college or university, which is relatively rare in South Korea where the college entrance rate surpasses 80 percent among high school graduates.¹⁷ By not

16. Sang-jin (pseudonym), interviewed by Ga Young Chung, New York, March 13, 2016.

17. "Hanguk daehak jinhangnyul 84% . . . segye choego sujun" (At 84%, Korea Holds the Highest College Enrollment Rate in the World), *Joongang ilbo* (Korea Daily), September 4, 2008, http://www.koreadaily.com/news/read.asp?art_id=685947.

following the usual trajectory into higher education, Min-jun realized he would be dismissed as odd or even discriminated against. Furthermore, unable to access the necessary cultural capital, resources, and networks associated with higher education and one's alma mater, he realized his future would be dim if he continued to reside in South Korea. After much thought, he purchased a flight to the United States with all the savings he had earned over years as a part-time worker and left South Korea, hoping to find a better life in a new country.

I studied hard when I entered a US community college in hopes of transferring to a prestigious public university. And I made it. But after graduating university, I couldn't find a job because companies didn't welcome F-1 student visa holders [international students] like myself. I ended up getting a job at a small accounting firm in Korea town, Los Angeles with the Optional Practical Training visa that allows three years of temporary employment. My working experience there was worse than I could have imagined. They promised to provide me with an H1-B visa and sponsorship for a green card in the future, but my employer and boss exploited me terribly. Between the endless hours of work, lies, and the verbal abuse, I felt like a slave. I'm not exaggerating. I can't tell you how many times I thought about leaving. But once you get through the difficult process of getting a job, you can't quit that easily. You might hear similar situations if you ask other Korean international students who work at offices in the Korean community. At some point, I grew sick of the exploitation, so I moved to New York, but as you see, I just ended up working at a Korean company again. Nothing's better here. That's why I decided to join the US Army. Whether I work for an ethnic company or serve in the army, it's the same as being a slave—you have no freedom, you must follow orders from your boss . . . but, if I'm going to be a slave either way, why not do it in the army? It will give you US citizenship right away along with a package of benefits, including a salary, insurance, and support for buying a home...¹⁸

18. Min-jun (pseudonym), interviewed by Ga Young Chung, New York, April 2, 2016.

In spite of Min-jun's strong desire to improve his chances for success by moving to the United States, he found it was not easy to navigate the new country by himself. Even after graduating from a well-known public university, with his legal status as a foreigner he was discriminated against in the workplace. Tired of being exploited, he decided to join the MAVNI program. He did not expect that serving in the US military would be easy. He was well aware of the heavy demands he would encounter as a soldier, but he was attracted by what the program guaranteed—a fast path to citizenship along with financial, educational, and healthcare benefits. Like Sang-jin, Min-jun considered the MAVNI program an opportunity to overcome the legal, financial, and social precarity that he had faced in the United States.

Interestingly, both men said they had completed their compulsory South Korean military service in their early twenties. Far from the old Korean joke that “the worst nightmare a Korean man can experience is one where he is re-enlisted for military service,” Sang-jin and Min-jun voluntarily joined the MAVNI program, committing to four years of active duty army service. Throughout their interviews, both subjects were confident that serving in the US military would not be as intense as their experiences in the Korean armed forces. When they were asked to elaborate on why for them “the US military is a better choice,” they both mentioned that the US military with its long history and reputation as the strongest in the world would be more “reasonable” and “humane,” compared to the Korean military with its notorious reputation for abuse, harassment, intimidation, and soldier suicide. That is, the negative reputation of conscript service in the Korean army, together with their perception of the United States as a more egalitarian country, led them to imagine service in the US Army more positively.

At the end of the interview, Chung asked Min-jun about what it meant for him to become a US citizen through the MAVNI program. He replied,

Once I read a Korean news article that included an interview with a Korean MAVNI applicant who compared citizenship to a telecommunications conglomerate. And I thought it was similar to my perspective. People chose companies such as AT&T, Verizon, or T-Mobile

depending on their preference. You sign a contract with a particular company, pay money, get membership, and then receive service, right? It's the same for one's country. You work and pay taxes to your country, expecting corresponding benefits. Different countries provide different services and different benefits. There is nothing like "once you are born in a country, you should live there [forever] as a member of that country." Everybody has a right to choose what will bring the best value for one's happiness and future. No one should be bothered by something like "patriotism." I think nationality is an object I can choose.¹⁹

Suggesting that a nation-state is analogous to a commercial conglomerate, Min-jun's answer confirms that the conventional definition of a nation-state and nationality is fluctuating among South Korean young adults. By positioning himself as a subject who can choose his nationality rather than be restricted to a given one, he interpreted his participation in the MAVNI program as a rational choice in his search for benefits that matched his needs. However, we should be cautious to call these South Korean young adults subversive subjects who freely cross the traditional boundary of citizenship. As introduced earlier, Min-jun's desire to settle down in the United States was shaped by the restrictive life conditions he encountered in South Korea. Unfortunately, his precarious living situation was not resolved in the United States and thus the benefits that the MAVNI program promised became immediately attractive. This is in stark contrast to Cheol-gi, whom we introduced previously. Cheol-gi preferred to return to South Korea where he might position himself not as a minority but as a privileged member of Korean society with abundant economic, social, and cultural capital. In this regard, the narrative of Min-jun, as those of the other subjects examined here, reveals how class and military service inform and influence the paths towards transnational citizenship among Korean young adult males living abroad. All this leads us to question what values are reproduced or strengthened and whose benefits are being served through this exchange between these international Korean male students and the militaries of the United States and South Korea.

19. Min-jun (pseudonym), interviewed by Ga Young Chung, New York, April 2, 2016.

Conclusion: Contesting Meanings of Citizenship and the Continuation of Military Service Practice

In this study, we examined the divergent paths of military service for South Korean male young adults living in the United States. The narratives elaborating why one path was chosen over the other reveal how the students' socioeconomic background shaped their desires and anxieties about the future and impacted their decisions regarding their post-college future. Specifically, the stories of the upper middle- and upper-class students indicated how they viewed (or came to view) their two-year compulsory military service in South Korea as a means to gain full citizenship—that is, the legal right to work in South Korea and their recognition as normative South Korean males, an invaluable asset for job procurement and settlement in South Korea. On the other hand, the lower-class male students participating in the MAVNI program considered their military service in the US Army as a means to rectify their limited resources and options in South Korea and their interminable liminality and betwixt and between residency in the United States. Among this group, serving in the US military was considered one of the most viable paths to acquire legal and cultural citizenship and secure a better future.

While the two groups took divergent paths towards militarized citizenship, we argue that the logic behind their choices regarding military service and citizenship is not only the same but indicates the shifting meaning of citizenship and military service. We have shown how these young men rationalized their military service, whether in the United States or South Korea, in terms of its personal and concrete benefits, or lack thereof. In doing so, they render meaning to their citizenship and military service in individualized and practical ways in light of their particular transnational life trajectories; thus, their calculations and imaginings regarding citizenship should be understood in the context of the transnational space of citizenship, rather than the traditional nexus of citizenship and the state as a space of fixed territorial boundaries. In this way, the four stories introduced here provide the potential for a transnational citizenship that challenges the fixed, state-based notions

of citizenship and the dichotomy between the global and the national. Moreover, we argue that the potential for transnational citizenship is classed. The upper middle- and upper-class young adults males understood their military service in South Korea as the necessary step in order to return to and settle in Korea and there to enjoy their class privileges, whereas the lower middle- and lower-class subjects opted to join the US military as a means of not returning to Korea, where they lacked the potential for class mobility.

However, what are the values and whose benefits are ultimately reproduced or strengthened through this exchange between these young South Korean adult males and military service? We must note that these individuals made their choices based on the taken-for-granted militarized citizenship regime that is still exclusively governed by nation-states. Namely, in South Korea, military service is required to achieve full national citizenship. While these men strategically cruise the transnational space of citizenship through military service, their narratives and the underlying logic of their choices unintentionally condone and reproduce the deep connection between military service and nation-state bounded citizenship. Thus, we point out the irony that militarism, in the specific form of men's military service, simultaneously serves as both a strategic means of exploring the transnational space of citizenship and as a critical limit to stymie the potential for transnational citizenship, which might dismantle the traditional notion of citizenship.

The continuing significance of military service for the citizenship of these young Korean males is based on the particular history of the transnational space of citizenship they attempt to navigate. The stories here reveal how the legacy of the unfinished Cold War on the Korean Peninsula, and the consequent political and military relationship between the United States and South Korea, continue to play a critical role in South Korea, especially among its young generation. In other words, it reflects how the "transnational Cold War compositions" (Kim 2010) are constantly re-assembled, restructured, and continued even when we are deluded into thinking that the Cold War has ended. By unpacking the practices for (de)stabilizing legal and cultural citizenship through military service, this

study shows how the vestiges of US imperialism and militarism in South Korea and the United States continue to impact young adults and their transnational life status. The legacy of militarism is operating not only on the Korean Peninsula but also in the transnational space of citizenship.

Table 1. Interviewees' Demographic Information

	Age	Education	Military Service	Family background/class
Choi's research	20 to 34 years old	Graduated from a private boarding school in the US/ international schools in a third country and attended prestigious US universities.	Completed/planned to complete military duty in Korea, usually after their freshmen/ sophomore year; some served/planned to serve immediately after college graduation.	Usually described their family background/class as upper middle or upper class; parents paid all costs for studying abroad, including tuition fees for private boarding schools/ international schools and private universities.
Chung's research	24 to 33 years old	Graduated from a noncompetitive university or did not attend university in South Korea; studied at a community college then transferred to a US university.	Completed military duty in Korea in their early 20s, before moving to the United States.	Most had parents who ran small businesses, such as grocery stores and restaurants; some had parents who were retired or had been laid off but started a small business; received financial support from parents at the beginning of studying abroad but soon had to earn money for their living expenses and tuition fees through employment.

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