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Review – 50 Years of US Study Abroad Students: Japan as the Gateway to Asia and Beyond

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ERIKS VARPAHOVSKIS, MAR 27 2021

50 Years of US Study Abroad Students: Japan as the Gateway to Asia and Beyond

By Sarah R. Asada

Routledge, 2019

The phenomenon of student exchanges has been a longstanding practice for many countries, and it has attracted the attention of researchers from a wide variety of fields, prompting the development of an interdisciplinary perspective. Exchange programs, which can include students, academics, policymakers and professionals, are the focus of exchange diplomacy and is often referred to as a subtype or sibling concept to public diplomacy (Cull 2008). Student exchange programs, whether they are short-term (one-two semesters) or long-term (more than a year), encompass not only the personal and professional development of participating individuals and mutual cultural enrichment but also play a role in national policy and security goals. Among typically desired outcomes are the establishment of personal ties and networks, the improvement of the host country's image and the strengthening of bilateral relations between countries. In her book, Dr. Asada investigates the Study Japan program operated by the US and Japan, in an attempt to find "the impacts of study abroad on semester/year abroad participants' academic, professional, and personal development, as perceived by the participants themselves" and inquire how the study abroad experience impacts "these subsequent behaviors and attitudes binationally, regionally, and globally" (p.2). To do so, she employs the quite young interdisciplinary concept of knowledge diplomacy, which is utilized by International Education scholars (e.g., Knight 2020) as well as by researchers in Public Diplomacy and International Relations (e.g., Kim, 2012).

Exploration of student exchange programs is a complex task because the simply quantifiable outputs (e.g., number of students or changes in attitude) do not represent impact, which remains hard to measure due to the interference of innumerable contextual factors, including changes over time. Asada's work is worth a special mention because it is among rare research pieces that cover 50 years of student exchanges between Japan and the US. Asada employed a sequential mixed-method explanatory design that at first entailed the collection of quantitative data by surveying Study Japan participants and qualitative data gained through in-depth interviews. On the one hand, qualitative data analysis and interpretation may incur biases. On the other hand, by using such a mixed approach, Asada has responded to the call of Bachner, Zeuschel, and Shannon (1993) for more in-depth studies of exchange programs in order to better understand the exchange phenomenon. Despite the constraints of this approach (a time-machine has not yet been invented, so retrospective data was used), Asada was able to document several important findings that social science scholars, as well as policymakers in charge of public diplomacy and exchange programs, might find useful.

The analysis of survey results through the prism of US-Japan student exchange dynamics is presented in chapter 3 and describes the impact of external contextual factors on students' decisions to participate in the program and their futures after the experience. Specifically, Asada defined some of the contextual factors that determine someone's decision to visit another country and depicted the evolving influence on their lives. Asada compared the US participants' awareness and perceptions of Japan. She concluded that these perceptions and awareness, as well as the availability of information about Japan, influenced students' decision to join the Study Japan program. By

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comparing and analyzing the answers of alumni representing different generations she found that Japan attracted exchange participants in the pre-globalization era due to its mysterious and adventurous image. From the mid-1980s it was perceived to present a “unique international experience” (p.58). Two other major factors were professional post-graduation expectations and the lack of other available destinations – up until 1990s, American students could not really choose to go to other countries in the region because reputable exchange programs had not been established. This chapter, by picturing how exchange programs worked from the 1960s to 2000s, served as excellent food for thought on what future exchange programs might look like, how future students will come to a decision to enroll on an exchange program, and what their life and professional trajectories will look like after completion of these projects.

The following three chapters (4-6) are the heart of the book. Here the author presents data from surveys and in-depth interviews. The fourth chapter deals with the impact of participation in the program on the further academic development of the participants. Exchange experiences inspired alumni of the program to investigate Japan in more depth, through language study, specific academic courses, and even by taking advanced academic Japan-related degrees. At the same time, some participants were encouraged to study not only Japan but the region, so Japan became a gateway to exploring other Asian countries (p.76). The message that the study experience in Japan can be a path to learning and strengthening ties with other Asian countries or being ‘gateway’ to other Asian states seems like a leitmotif of the book.

In chapter five, Asada examines the impact of the experience of living in Japan on the professional trajectories of program participants over the 50 year period. On the one hand, retrospective methods have limited effectiveness in identifying the determinants of behavior, and some memories may be blurred or (re-)constructed. On the other hand, unique information about people’s experiences and their life and professional trajectories is still discovered. It is not possible to quantify all the factors that shaped the professional trajectories of the alumni, but as Asada reported with some descriptive statistics and in-depth interviews, the experience of living in Japan during the exchange program had a certain impact on further professional development. She cites several examples from in-depth interviews in which respondents emphasized that their Japanese language skills and cultural comprehension made them build their careers either in Japan (for those who returned to Japan after graduation) (p.88), or in Japanese or Japan-related corporations in the United States (p.92). Again, for some respondents, Japan served as a conduit to other countries in the region, so respondents noted that the Japanese experience allowed them to pursue careers related to other Asian countries (p.94).

While reading the book, I felt that the author tried to convey the impression that the Study Japan program was almost an undeniable good for personal, academic, and professional development, which can contribute to improved relationships for both the countries involved in the exchange and the individual participants. As observed by Wilson (2014), negative aspects are often omitted when analyzing the effectiveness of exchange programs and therefore the picture may be incomplete. Asada has placed great importance on the program design as a possible determining factor for the personal, professional, and academic transformations of participants. As her research shows, staying with a host family, as well as involvement in extracurricular activities in student clubs, really extends students’ connections that can be recultivated for decades. That said, the author says little about how the program’s alumni connections developed with their classmates in Japan as well as with their professors. It is not clear whether connections were made or whether they were recultivated after graduation. Asada’s book, in a quite limited fashion, provides information on what the negative experiences and consequences of the exchanges might be. When talking about difficulties experienced by students, Asada very briefly mentions the unwillingness of some study clubs to accept foreign students and issues with host-families. As for the consequences, she mentions the perceived cultural and societal differences that prevented alumni from return to Japan for work. The issue of omitting cases of poor exchange experience and unsuccessful knowledge diplomacy might stem from the research methodology, given the known issue of bias when using retrospective data (Bachner, Zeuschel and Shannon 1993). For example, over time respondents could feel nostalgic about their experiences abroad (Werkman, 1980), rather than taking a more objective view. Further studies could elucidate both positive and negative experiences in relationship-making with classmates and their influence on knowledge diplomacy.

These criticisms should not discourage readers from acquainting themselves with this work because it is an excellent

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book that contributes to a better understanding of the mechanisms of exchange programs as ‘knowledge diplomacy’ (or even public diplomacy) instruments. The book would be useful for both policymakers in charge of exchange programs who would find some insights into what components should be included in programs, as well as students of Higher Education Internationalization and Public Diplomacy due to the book’s depiction of the evolution of exchange programs and some of its mechanisms.

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About the author:

Eriks Varpahovskis is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the School of International Regional Studies at the National Research University Higher School of Economics (Russia). He works on several public diplomacy-related research projects, including an exploration of the impact of perceptions of a country’s image on the behavior of international students in South Korea and transnational higher education institutions’ functions as instruments of public diplomacy. He recently published an article in *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*.