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“The Grass is Greener Further Away, Right?” Socio-Geographic Imaginaries and Psycho-Social Motivations of Short-Term Student Mobilities

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ABSTRACT: Singapore undergraduates prefer European destinations to Asian ones for semester-long exchanges, despite sustained efforts to enhance regional mobility within Asia. This research examines how ideological conditions, including socio-geographic imaginaries, sustain these preferences. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 63 local undergraduates from three universities in Singapore and used Causal Layered Analysis (CLA) to analyze emergent themes regarding worldviews, metaphors, and myths. We found that students' preferences are discursively sustained by interlocking perceptions of cosmopolitan normativity, Asian homogeneity, and essentialized Asianness of Singapore's identity. These worldviews are in turn stabilized by metaphors of distance (like “broadening horizons”) and the bildungsroman mythical journey of a fledgling leaving the nest, contextually salient to life stage experiences of Singaporean young adults. Our findings illustrate the importance of considering the interplay between socio-geographic imaginaries and the social meanings of specific mobility programs, extending limited research on the ideological factors shaping short-term student mobilities.

Keywords: Asia, Causal Layered Analysis, higher education regionalization, international student mobility, metaphors, myths, Singapore

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INTRODUCTION

Higher education regionalization (HER) has emerged as a strategic response to the globalization of higher education, allowing countries to remain globally competitive while retaining distinct epistemic identities and values (Robertson, 2010). This has spurred significant growth in international student mobility (ISM), broadly defined as the cross-border movement of students for higher education programs of varying lengths and types. However, ISM regionalization warrants more comprehensive examination. Existing research has tended to portray regionalization as being largely driven by top-down processes, such as the deliberate coordination of education policies, governance frameworks, and mobility circuits across geographically proximate states (Chou & Ravinet, 2017). Research has focused on regional education projects like Europe's Bologna Process and South America's MERCOSUR-Educativo, and how these tap on strategic potentials of the regional scale to facilitate cross-border coordination (Chou et al., 2024). Herein, we advance a bottom-up perspective focusing on contextualized ideological conditions shaping student-migrant subjectivities, thereby qualifying emerging research on student agency in ISM regionalization.

Using Singapore as an illustrative case study, this paper examines why Singaporean students exhibit a pronounced preference for European rather than Asian exchange destinations, despite Singapore's geographic proximity to regional education hubs and well-resourced institutional and financial infrastructures for regional integration. This incongruity between available regional pathways and student choices highlights the need for deeper inquiry into the subjective perceptions that motivate student decision-making. Through interviews with 63 Singaporean undergraduates, we explore internalized imaginaries associated with the global West and regional Asia specific to semester-long exchange programs. These (sometimes subconsciously held) worldviews, myths, and metaphors shape how students articulate ISM destination preferences.

We found that Singaporean students imagined Asia as homogeneous and their embeddedness within it as parochial. The salience of these worldviews is amplified and stabilized by metaphors of distance (like “broadening horizons”) and Singaporeans’ imagination of semester exchange as a once-in-a-lifetime quest of transient emancipation (a “fledgeling leaving the nest”). We use this illustrative case study to address two integrated research gaps: (i) the lack of bottom-up

perspectives that explore how ideologies shape subjective meaning-making tied to regional mobility, and (ii) the lack of research on short-term ISMs, despite their increasing prevalence.

Enriching existing literature on student agency in mobilities, our research illustrates that mobile students are neither simply rational consumers nor free agents; instead, they internalize and reproduce ideologically prescribed mobility dynamics that shape regionalization. Our findings illustrate how semester exchange (as one type of mobility program) corresponds to contextualized psycho-social motivations, extending limited research on the ideological factors shaping short-term student mobilities. This underscores the importance for future research to consider the interplay between socio-geographic imaginaries and the social meanings of specific mobility programs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Student Motivations and ISM Regionalization

Scholars have emphasized the importance of attending to unique regional dynamics that affect HER, eschewing a Eurocentric focus on ISM regionalization (Chou & Ravinet, 2017). The Bologna Process (BP)—a framework promoting student mobility, degree comparability, and quality assurance within Europe—is often seen as exemplary of ISM regionalization, and its successes assumed transposable to regional contexts worldwide (Amutuhaire, 2024). Yet, scholars have cautioned against the belief in a one-size-fits-all global diffusion of the Bologna model (Chou & Ravinet, 2017).

In contrast to Europe, East Asia's inherent heterogeneity and political-economic differences pose unique challenges, particularly in envisioning and implementing an East Asian Higher Education Area that encompasses diverse regional players such as China, Japan, South Korea, and Southeast Asian countries (Hou et al., 2017). Even within Southeast Asia, internal ISM remains comparatively sluggish. This disparity is especially apparent when juxtaposed against the growth of Southeast Asian outbound international students (Chao, 2020). This persists despite numerous initiatives aimed at facilitating ease of student transfer and credit exchange within Southeast Asia, and promoting regional identity formation (Hou et al., 2017).

Decentering the European focus in HER research, this paper emphasizes the complexities of regionalization dynamics by shifting attention to how regionalization is also shaped by the social meanings that mobile students internalize and reproduce. The dominant approach in HER literature has been largely top-down, supply-centric, and focused on ISM regionalization, emphasizing factors such as limited scope, uneven scale, and chronic underfunding in regional cooperation mechanisms (Chao, 2020). While these are important considerations, bottom-up factors (like students' perceptions) remain less thoroughly explored, and constitute a missed opportunity to understand how subjective ideational factors might shape regionalization dynamics. Further, recent research has shown that geographic patterns of political-economic

disparities are shifting—important ISM hubs have emerged beyond the West, and mobility patterns are increasingly diverse (Chao, 2020; Chou & Ravinet, 2017; Glass & Cruz, 2023). This makes it timely to investigate how ISM regionalization is not merely shaped through policies navigating political-economic considerations but imagined in varied and contextualized ways by student stakeholders.

Despite the proliferation of research on ISM, scholars point out that greater attention should be paid to the social and psychological motivations underlying students' mobility choices (Fakunle, 2021; Oldac, 2023; Tokas et al., 2022). In addition to economic and education-specific reasons for studying abroad, aspirational and experiential motivations (such as aspirations for leadership and self-achievement) can be equally compelling (Fakunle, 2021). One perspective on non-economic motivations is student agency. A systematic review of two decades of ISM literature found that agency has become an increasingly influential concept, yet its implications and complexities remain underexplored (Inouye et al., 2023). More recent research has discussed agency in relation to self-transformation and the navigating of structural constraints (Hou, 2024; Oldac, 2023).

Inouye and colleagues' (2023) systematic review found that the existing literature has discussed international students' agency as mediated by sociocultural factors; however, these factors were primarily examined in terms of cultural capital, personal values and aspirations, and communicative competence. Considering ideologies as shared social meanings (including ideas, worldviews, and stories) that prescribe and reinforce certain social practices and institutions (Freeden, 1998), this paper addresses the underexplored question of how agency expressed through mobility aspirations is itself conditioned by highly contextualized ideological meanings.

One powerful manifestation of ideological conditions involves the internalization of global imaginaries. The dominant “modern/colonial global imaginary” in higher education generally positions the West as the “geographic center and the apex of linear human progress” (Stein & Andreotti, 2017, p. 175). Yet, global imaginaries can be very complex and contextualized, involving “not some free-floating set of ideas but rather the meaningful content of one's relation to the world” (Kamola, 2014, p. 516). For example, Brooks and Waters (2022) found that the label “international” did not simply denote the global or the West but functioned as an identity and cultural capital deployed in ways highly specific to students' social positions and employment sectors. Imaginaries are often also regionally contextual; for instance, Birindelli (2024) explored how international students' cosmopolitan imaginaries are refracted by distinct narrative imaginaries of Europe: Italy as embodying the romantic past, and Finland the pragmatic future.

These complexities underscore the usefulness of understanding deeply personalized motivations in shaping regionalization from the ground up through the lens of socio-geographic imaginaries. We extend this line of research by situating this inquiry within the comparative imaginaries of Asia and Europe, as experienced by Singaporean students, with specific reference to short-term

exchange programs. We aim to reveal how students' narrative imagination of a specific type of ISM interplays with their imagination of Asia and their relationship to it.

Social Meanings of Semester Exchange in Singapore

Short-term ISM programs can vary in length, scope, and agenda. They include semester-long university exchange programs (the focus of this paper) but also programs of varying (often shorter) durations, like overseas internships, community service-learning, and cultural immersion programs. Presently, ISM research has largely focused on degree mobilities (pursuits of entire degrees abroad), especially within dominant flows to-and-from Western destinations (Lipura & Collins, 2020). Addressing this research gap is timely and pertinent, as short-term ISMs are in growing demand and are increasingly the predominant mobility provision model adopted by universities (Iskhakova & Bradly, 2021).

Research on short-term ISMs may reveal unique dynamics that challenge generalized assumptions about ISM. Given considerably shorter durations, students' considerations affecting their destination preferences for short-term ISMs may differ substantially from those affecting their destination preferences for degree mobilities. Without having to plan for and commit to longer-term futures, students may be more willing to explore diverse options. Subjective meanings may also be more powerful in shaping students' perceptions of value in short-term ISMs. For example, such programs are often perceived as transformative experiences that enhance intercultural competence, self-development, and global employability (Sisavath, 2021).

These complexities highlight that ISM regionalization is not a single phenomenon but an assemblage of distinct phenomena that reproduce converging trends. This means that addressing the lack of inter-Asian ISM may require highly contextualized solutions contingent upon the type and duration of mobilities, and the subjective dispositions of prospective student-migrants. By examining preference disparities between European and Asian destinations *in relation to* the semester exchange aspirations of Singaporean undergraduates, we demonstrate that ISM-program-specific subjective imaginaries can be highly influential in reproducing student mobility patterns.

As a nexus of global finance, knowledge production, and migration (Yeoh, 2004), Singapore exemplifies the hybridization of Western colonial legacies with Asian values reappropriated for national development (Ang & Stratton, 1995). Singapore students are encouraged to become "global citizens" fluent in Western codes of success but remain tethered to an "Asian" cultural ethos of rootedness, responsibility, and community (Alviar-Martin & Baildon, 2016). This hybrid character of the archetypal Singaporean's positionality renders Singaporean students' educational mobility decisions especially illuminating, offering a unique glimpse into how student-migrants negotiate competing logics of regional belonging and global becoming.

Extending and integrating the two under-researched areas of short-term ISMs and the ideological contours affecting ISM regionalization, this paper advances

the following research questions. First, how do Singaporean students' imaginaries of Europe and Asia as ISM destinations reflect ideological assumptions? Second, how do these imaginaries interplay with students' narrativization of the purpose and journey of semester exchange?

Notes on Theoretical Lens

We used Causal Layered Analysis (CLA) (Inayatullah, 2004) to organize the findings and achieve analytical depth. CLA attempts to explain social phenomena by organizing them into four distinct but interrelated layers: Litany, Systematic Layer, Worldviews, and Myths and Metaphors. Although successive layers represent more latent and deeply embedded structures that influence the way people think, feel, and act, CLA does not privilege any layer over the others as a more potent or primordial cause (Inayatullah, 2004).

At the surface of Litany: the domain of trends, headlines, and public discourse, where empirical realities like student preferences for Europe are treated as isolated and self-evident facts. Below this lies the Systemic layer, which uncovers institutional structures, economic frameworks, and policy mechanisms that generate these surface realities. These levels are most familiar to existing top-down-focused ISM research.

More relevant to our inquiry, CLA's examination of Worldviews interrogates the cultural, ideological, and epistemological assumptions that give coherence to systems and events. Finally, the deepest stratum constitutes Myths or Metaphors: the affective, often unconscious stories, archetypes, and emotional logic that drive social imagination. These are not merely residues of tradition or folklore, but potent narratives that organize collective desire and future orientation, shaping how individuals make sense of the world and their place within it (Inayatullah, 2004). To focus our analysis on the ideological dimensions of students' imaginaries, we limit our analyses to Worldviews and Myths/Metaphors.

METHOD

We used qualitative semi-structured interviews to explore undergraduates' destination preferences for short-term mobility programs and their rationale for these preferences. A total of 63 undergraduates were recruited from three Singaporean universities—the National University of Singapore (NUS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), and Singapore Management University (SMU)—selected for their established mobility programs and heterogeneous student bodies. Eligible participants included Singapore Citizens and Permanent Residents who had participated in or expressed interest in short-term mobility programs, including semester exchange. International students were excluded.

Participants were recruited from the respondent pool of a preliminary survey on ISM destination preferences and subsequently through snowball sampling via peer referrals. We used purposive sampling to include experiences from a variety of disciplines across the three universities, although representation was not intended to be proportional. The interviewees (aged 19 to 25) comprised 41

women and 22 men, with 35 from NTU, 15 from NUS, and 13 from SMU. Interviews were conducted in English between February and April 2024, either in person or online, and lasted 45 to 90 minutes each. Interviews explored students' reasons for their destination choices and their views on short-term programs. If interviewees had previously participated in mobility programs, they also recounted and reflected on these experiences. Ethics approval was obtained from Nanyang Technological University's Institutional Review Board, and written informed consent was obtained prior to each interview.

All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized. Interviews were conducted by a team of trained undergraduate student assistants, with help and supervision from the principal investigator (second author). The aim of involving undergraduate interviewers was to increase rapport and reduce the perception of hierarchy between interviewers and interviewees.

Data Analysis

In iterative consultation with co-authors, the first author, a Singaporean researcher deeply familiar with Singapore's ideological context, undertook coding and analysis. Interview transcripts were first coded using the grounded theory approach, allowing key themes to emerge inductively without preset categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1968). Broad themes identified included desires for global citizenship, authenticity, and novelty, perceptions of Asia as similar and familiar; and the idealization of freedom and independence. We also identified recurring catchphrases used by interviewees, such as "broadening horizons", and examined what this meant for each interviewee. We then integrated these themes into the CLA framework. Translating these themes into worldviews, metaphors, and myths required closely interrogating the conceptual assumptions behind students' perceptions by identifying and unpacking patterns of (potentially fallacious) analogical reasoning. Reconstructing a myth involved informed speculation that drew upon a deep understanding of Singapore's ideological and material landscape to posit archetypal psycho-social motivations.

FINDINGS

Worldviews

Uncovering worldviews involves analyzing how stakeholders (Singapore undergraduates) frame the experience of going for a semester exchange. Across interview responses, we observed recurrent "ideological, deeply held positions on how the world is and should be" (Inayatullah, 2004, p. 17)—such assumptions both motivate students to choose Europe over Asia and legitimate the socio-structural conditions that uphold this phenomenon (such as disparities in prestige and familiarity). We identified three latent discourses that undergird students' rationalization of their preferences: (i) the cruciality of semester exchange for cosmopolitan self-transformation, (ii) the positioning of a Singaporean identity as essentially Asian, and (iii) the perception of Asia as homogeneous and regional.

Cosmopolitan Normativity

You know how Singapore is so small. So, we really need a global perspective of things rather than just being confined in this small island. (Clifton, accountancy)

Interviewees tended to echo, often uncritically, the importance of cosmopolitan self-transformation, which they see as a key goal of the exchange experience. To justify this pursuit, they rhetorically cited the need to position themselves as a “global citizen” (Arnold, medicine) ready for a globalized world. In contrast to the “global” West, Singapore is described as a “small country” (Martha, law), with its issues having only local relevance. For example, Arnold said that he would be shocked if an American knew certain idiosyncrasies of Singapore politics. Going on exchange, especially to a European destination, is therefore ideologized as a rare chance to experience the global.

[I spent my exchange in] a very sweet spot between Belgium and Germany... the place that I live is very international. There [are] really different types of people... [that I] get to meet every day. (Melvin, business)

This global imaginary is easily juxtaposed against interviewees’ perceptions of Singapore as local and limited—despite, ironically, Singapore being a global nexus of financial, cultural, and migratory flows. That remaining within Singapore is framed as being unvirtuously parochial is unsurprising. Educated Singaporeans are encouraged to aspire toward ever-greater degrees of worldliness. As early as the 1990s, national narratives have conditioned Singaporeans to think of themselves as either “heartlanders” or “cosmopolitans” (Yeoh, 2004), with the latter being associated with wealthier and more highly educated strata of society. With undergraduates mostly set to attain this status, they find it easier—but also experience greater normative pressures—to perform a cosmopolitan subjectivity through their consumption and migratory practices.

This cosmopolitan normativity forms a keystone for Singapore undergraduates’ distaste for Asian destinations, as their impetus for going on exchange is to perform cosmopolitanism. Where students are driven by this worldview, they are likely not thinking of exchange destinations as unique (and uniquely limited) locales, but opportunities (or lack thereof) to experience the global. With Singapore being cast as antithetical to that which is truly “global”, Singapore students are motivated to seek out the greatest sense of novelty, rather than destinations perceived as being similar to Singapore.

Singapore as Essentially Asian

I just feel like Europe is a bit more novel... because I am Asian, I am in Singapore. (Arnold, medicine)

Interviewees extensively suggested that they perceive Asia to be highly similar to Singapore, which for many, makes Asian destinations less attractive.

They perceive Singapore—and their own cultural background and standpoint—to be essentially Asian. Geographically, Singapore is considered a part of Asia. Yet, the perception that Singapore is culturally closer to Asia overlooks how Singapore's culture is very much shaped by Western ideals—owing to its colonial past and neo-imperial present as a global hub—and that its “Asianness” is inextricable from state-led ideological positionings (Ang & Stratton, 1995).

The idea that Asian values (associated with Confucianism and communitarianism) are central to Singapore society originated in the late 1980s as a nation-building narrative conceived and disseminated top-down by the state to a significant extent, with an eye toward preserving the political hegemony of Singapore's ruling elite (Chua, 1995). Nonetheless, interviewees seem to treat this worldview as sacrosanct, uncritically reproducing the simplistic binary between Western and Asian values.

We are in Singapore... a conservative Asian society rooted in traditional Confucian values... Europe, America is more, it's more Western. So, the way that they perceive the world... will be very different from the way we do it because the values that they grew up on differ a lot compared to ours. (Daryl, history)

Such assumed civilizational dichotomies in turn erase perceptions of difference across Asian destinations, lumping Asia into a monolithic category in students' minds. Interviewees tended to overlook the commonalities that Singapore (as an urbanized global hub) likely has with metropolitan destinations in Europe, in contrast to some Asian destinations. Their perception of Europe as definitively distinct often seemed to boil down to commonsensical cultural stereotypes. For example, Cindy (education) said, “I think the cultural difference is still a bit steep for Denmark as compared to Asia... there are still some similarities [to Singapore] within the Asian countries [like Bangkok and India]. So, for example, the emphasis on grades. Or like how generally people are more reserved.” While such stereotypes may be animated by some degree of truth, interviewees did not appear to recognize that cultural idiosyncrasies in Singapore are not reducible to “Asianness”, but may be driven by other factors, like its neoliberal approach to manpower development.

Asian Homogeneity

Asia is less appealing because Europe has a whole different culture set. Even though I'm not saying that Asia cultures are the same, but like, it's a whole different setup. It's a whole different ball game in Europe. (Melvin, business)

Interviewees tended to echo the limited perspective that Asian destinations are painted with a single cultural brushstroke. This perception applies to East Asian destinations too but is particularly salient in students' perception of Southeast Asia. “You don't really get much exposure to global, to other countries’

culture,” said Clifton (accountancy), “because you get to see quite a lot of Singapore’s features in ASEAN countries.”

Likewise, Jay (computer engineering), said that he perceives Singapore’s cultural influences as, notwithstanding some differences, “very Southeast Asian”. Such perceptions illustrate students’ difficulties in recognizing that Southeast Asia is in fact a very culturally and linguistically heterogeneous region.

Undergraduates appear to defer to constructed geopolitical categories like ASEAN as heuristics to position their own identities and cultural standpoints as Singaporeans. This leads to a limited perception that degrees of cultural difference (and thereby, meaningfulness as an exchange destination) correspond simplistically to concentric circles of regionality that emanate from Singapore: Southeast Asia, then Asia, then Europe. Under this mental model, Asia is imagined as essentially regional and parochial, in contrast to the imagined universality of European concerns—which is seen as more aligned with the pursuit of “global” exposure and cosmopolitan self-transformation.

Asian countries, since they are geographically closer, they are more focused on... more on the ASEAN regional level of things... for Asia was more localized, right, focused on immediate and practical challenges rather than, perhaps, more broad and theoretical discussions [in Europe]. (Bruce, international relations)

Undergraduates’ inability to appreciate inter-Asian differences arguably limits their capacity to holistically assess the intangible benefits specific to each exchange destination, whether Asian or European. Under such dichotomous thinking, Europe is imagined as no less monolithic. For Vanessa (history), the romanticization of Europe as an ideal destination on social media led her to spend her exchange there—only after experiencing and reflecting on her time in Europe did she articulate regret for not having considered Asian destinations.

Although students generally articulate their conception of Europe as different through cultural stereotypes about values and institutions, this preconceived expectation of difference can create a confirmatory, worldbuilding lens through which some students enact their imaginaries of radical difference, from the trivial to the grand. As Manuel (education) recounted of his exchange in Copenhagen, “[how] cities are organized, the way trains are organized, the way buses and infrastructure are... these minor differences... made up that experience of the new, of the foreign, of the other, which I had expected to experience going into these places.” Immersion-oriented education modules may also contribute to shaping dichotomous thinking.

We think that culture is uniform throughout Asia. So maybe what I practice in Singapore could be the same as what Indians practice or what the Chinese practice or what Bruneians practice. And it is true because I did take an “Asian-ready” module before going for this [short immersion program to] Sikkim. And it's quite similar. (Amy, science/education)

While immersion-oriented classes may be useful for generating interest and readiness for a variety of exchange destinations, focusing predominantly on cultural differences could have the counterproductive effect of reinforcing limited heuristics that students have about exchange destinations. Arguably, this illustrates the limitations of using intercultural communication as a driving paradigm to structure global exposure programs. Emphasizing skills to bridge seemingly intrinsic cultural differences could create a caricatured imaginary of culture in students' minds as limited to specific traits and performances (e.g., food), instead of guiding them to understand that culture is often hybridized and produced holistically in relation to material and socio-structural conditions.

Metaphors and Myths

Through the worldviews uncovered, we have explored how Singapore undergraduates position themselves in relation to Asian identity through student mobility practices. Yet, the salience of their quest for novelty remains unexplored. What analogies and stories do they internalize that generate the impetus to go on semester exchange? We respectively analyze one key metaphor and myth that seem particularly powerful in generating Singaporeans' exchange imaginaries. Metaphors and myths go beyond strictly conceptual assumptions in that they manifest "the unconscious and often emotive dimensions" of the phenomenon, engendering "gut/emotional level experience to the worldview under inquiry" (Inayatullah, 2004, p. 17). They involve imaginaries that are analogical and allegorical, attempting to articulate non-rational and subconscious sources of motivation.

Metaphors of Distance

Through their comparative function, metaphors organize worldviews into structures of meaning. We observe that metaphors of distance recur in our interviewees' descriptions. Through distance metaphors, geographical distance becomes a metonym for cultural distance and possibilities of growth, even if these do not actually coincide. This linkage can be seen as a meta-assumption that stabilizes the predominant worldviews previously discussed.

I think really the biggest reason [why Southeast Asia is less appealing is that the grass is greener further away, right? (Justin, biology/education)

Eight interviewees independently offered the metaphor of "broadening horizons" to encapsulate their exchange aspirations. This catch-all metaphor was used to describe a variety of aspirations: to expand one's professional network, to develop intercultural and extra-academic skills, to transcend one's comfort zone, to experience different cultures, environments, and education styles. While this figure of speech may seem cliché, its deployment to discuss outcomes of student mobility is significant. It suggests that the distal is desirable.

In terms of identity transformation, I think [exchange] has broadened my horizons and made me more open-minded... it's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and I wanted to go [to Europe, which is] as far away from comfort as possible to test myself. (Carla, political science)

The sleight of hand embedded herein, however, is that distance is conflated with difference and growth. This organizing premise is also sustained in its converse formulation: that remaining in Singapore, because it is geographically a “small country”, is associated with being parochial. Given the prevalence of the “broadening horizons” metaphor (in its varying formulations) and its camouflage as innocuous idioms, its influence on students’ imaginaries of student mobilities is arguably subconscious and thereby even more pernicious. Distance metaphors condition us to feel that personal growth is necessarily stifled by feelings of proximity and familiarity.

Myth: The Fledgling Leaving the Nest

All these assumptions and meta-assumptions can be further situated within a more existential question: what’s at stake for Singaporean undergraduates? Why does the semester exchange experience seem to carry such weight? While this certainly does not capture the motivations of every Singaporean undergraduate, it is useful to analytically speculate on how the exchange journey mythically fits into the archetypal Singaporean psyche. We identify the myth of the fledgling leaving the nest as central to how the archetypal Singaporean existentially experiences semester exchange. Exchange is, up to that point of the youth’s life, a once-in-a-lifetime quest to leave the orbit of parental control, to seek independence and solitariness, and to chart one’s own path.

The idea of independence and freedom is very enticing... I'm free. I'm a bird. I can fly... I feel like I caught a glimpse, a possible future, the past four months of living independently and actually having the space... [to] figure out like, oh, I don't like this, oh, I like this. (Vanessa, history)

Singaporean undergraduates experience exchange as a rare opportunity for bildungsroman transformation. Interviewees describe the archetypal Singaporean life path with a great sense of automaticity that stifles any chance for self-exploration and deviation.

In Singapore, it's really like, okay, after university I must work, then I want to get a good job, then I want to get high pay... there's a fixed thing like you must do this this this, like what I deem as success is quite narrow. (Patricia, data science/economics)

Exchange therefore interrupts this prescribed life path, providing, however brief, a sense of respite. It engenders a sense of autonomy—a breath of fresh air for the archetypal Singaporean. For some, exchange felt like a chance to take ownership of their identity, rather than go through the motions.

When I'm in Singapore... over time we like create like such a routine for ourselves... Whether it be like, oh, I meet my friends at a particular time every week. [Or] I go to class every day... When I go exchange, it kind of feels like I've been like plucked out of an environment that I'm used to. [Initially] I felt a bit lost in terms of my identity... What am I supposed to do? Who am I? And I don't see the people that I'm so used to seeing every day. But I think when I went there, I [strengthened] how I see myself, remember who I am and stuff... [And I also developed] a much stronger sense of national identity... "I'm Singaporean" feels much stronger when I was [in London] versus in Singapore. (Wilma, communication studies)

This automaticity is also associated with a great sense of helplessness. Interviewees described themselves and Singaporeans more generally as being “spoiled” (Amy, science/education) and “sheltered” (Julia, business). Singaporeans are often afforded very comfortable lives by their parents and by the state. Yet, this can also feel like an umbilical cord of control, where societal and familial expectations to live out prescribed aspirations cannot be challenged. This might explain why interviewees seemed particularly eager to gain a sense of independence through self-efficacy in everyday tasks undertaken on exchange, like cooking, cleaning (Roland, social science; etc.), and navigating an unfamiliar land on their own (Manuel, literature/education).

This perceived difficulty of breaking away from both parental support and surveillance is in some ways unique to the archetypal Singaporean psyche. Singaporean young adults seldom leave their parental homes until they are much older or have formed their own nuclear families. This results from cultural norms, high property costs, public housing policies incentivizing multigenerational families, and the barring of singles below the age of 35 from buying public housing (Yeap, 2024). Consequently, living a semester abroad provides one of the few socially legitimate reasons to justify leaving the family home.

Contra the perceived situation where many Europeans move out when they are eighteen (Leona, business), exchange provides a surrogate for youth emancipation not otherwise enjoyed by Singaporeans. This motivates their preference for Europe, as its geographic and cultural distance represents a sense of escape. In contrast, at least emotively, Asia engenders feelings of familial familiarity. Heather (pharmacy) said, “My ideal preference [for exchange] would be probably a European country. Because I don't see myself traveling there like for family purposes, or like going on a trip with my friends.” Echoing this, Tracey (Chinese language/education) said:

When Singaporeans travel, they usually just do travels with family to like Asian regions. So, it feels more familiar... When students want to go on exchange, they want to step out their comfort zone and venture into unchartered regions... [so] Europe is probably the first choice to them.

Beyond actual parental influence, life in Singapore is narrativized as characterized by paternalism. Interviewees discuss their desire to break free from

Singapore's didactic and examination-focused educational environment (Marissa, software engineering, etc.). They also express surprise at the normalcy and legality of labor strikes in European countries (Dianne, civil engineering, etc.)—unthinkable under Singapore's strict legal regime. Such feelings are unsurprising. Through the Confucian national narratives, the Singapore state has commonly positioned itself as a father figure to Singaporeans (Heng & Devan, 1995). Singapore's approach to policymaking has been described as paternalistic, going to the extent of intervening in Singapore's intimate and romantic lives (Leong & Sriramesh, 2005). It makes sense then that the mythical image of flying the coop closely structures how Singapore undergraduates imagine Europe as distal enough—both geographically and in their perceptual maps of familiarity and familial association—from the strictures of unemancipated young adulthood in Singapore.

That interviewees perceive this as “once-in-a-lifetime” (Corey, education, etc.) adds a somber coda to the entire journey: that ultimately, necessity compels them to return to a scripted life in Singapore, rather than becoming true globetrotters. If exchange is associated with youth emancipation, then such emancipation is at best transient, bookended by a return to the nest. The (temporary) flight to Europe can therefore be seen as the consumption of a fantasy of autonomy and freedom. The perceived radical distinctiveness of Europe renders this fantasy concentrated enough to feel like a bite-sized experience consumable within six months. The transitory nature of such escapism parallels the temporary respite afforded by exchange in other respects, such as the grade waiver that students receive under Singapore's university policies.

[Exchange is] the highlight of university... Because once you graduate, you'll be working for long term. And it's very hard for you to go on a holiday [or overseas] for long term, like three weeks or even a few months. (Velma, math/education)

This myth of the fledgeling leaving (and returning to) the nest best explains why Europe remains particularly salient for semester exchange compared to other short-term ISM programs. Interviewees report that students appear more receptive to Asian destinations, both for shorter service-learning trips (e.g., Elsa, psychology) and for up to semester-long internships (e.g., Patricia, data science/economics). While exchange, overseas internships, and service-learning trips all fall under the umbrella of short-term ISM, the types of immersion they afford and the socio-psychological motivations for attending these programs are evidently very different. While internships and service-learning trips may also be associated with bildungsroman narratives, they do not express the archetypally Singaporean psychic craving for youth emancipation as strongly as semester exchange. This unique insight underscores the utility of unpacking myths. It illustrates that undergraduates do not only hold instrumental and pragmatic considerations in their calculus, but that mobility imaginaries draw their power by responding to deep-seated psycho-social motivations.

This paper examines how these ideologies function in context. By carefully situating these ideologies against the backdrop of Singapore's social context and

the allure of semester exchange, we reveal why these truisms appear so hard for students to resist. Nonetheless, while structural factors are not this paper's focus, it must be recognized that ideological and structural factors work in tandem to shape students' choices. Structural considerations, reflected in our interviews, include the elevated prestige of European institutions, the ease and lowered cost of multi-country tourism within the Schengen Area, and cost-benefit calculi affected by funding and subsidies. Importantly, these structural considerations remain intimately shaped by ideology-driven motivations, such as a desire to maximize the experience of difference, and the narrativization of exchange as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Unravelling Assumptions: Student-led Insights

Another important caveat is that despite the dominance of these ideologies, some students offered critical perspectives, revealing strategies for unpacking and resisting ideological assumptions. Interviewees who expressed greater interest in exploring Asian destinations commonly articulated a much stronger perception of Asian contexts as diverse and unique, in contrast to the stereotypes repeated by others. These interviewees underscored the utility of raising awareness of Asia's unique insights, through suggested programs like "sneak previews" (Eugene, science) and getting students who did their exchange in Asia to share insights and experiences (Monica, literature/education).

Beyond the informational level, Beatrice (education) also underscored the need to interrogate fundamental values associated with cosmopolitan self-transformation. Instead of emphasizing the abstract virtue of worldliness as the driving ethos of student mobilities, Beatrice suggested that emphasizing humility could serve as better grounds for preparing students to be receptive to intangible insights during the exchange experience.

This is where humility comes in also, [instead of having] a view that, "oh, I know all this really, so I no longer need it." So, it really boils down to putting [Asian] countries across as different and also really highlighting the differences and... the things that they are doing very well that we cannot, we have not achieved yet.

Meanwhile, Gerry (music/education) suggested that counteracting the association between cosmopolitanism and urban modernity could be a way to transform how students value exchange destinations.

We haven't stopped to think about what Southeast Asia has to offer... nowadays... [students] wouldn't go like "Oh ya this like person in the village, wow then it's like culture! I want to experience that." They probably just wanna go like "Wow Europe, so pretty." Ya, I think it's a difference in terms of what is there to be valued also.

Students also suggested that emphasizing dimensions of cultural difference that go beyond the civilizational can highlight the heterogeneity of Asian contexts, in turn dismantling dichotomous thinking. For example, many interviewees

expressed a desire to experience Europe for its slower pace of life. But, as Gerry pointed out, a slower pace of life can be experienced in some parts of Asia too, manifested through urban-rural rather than civilizational differences. “Bangkok is kind of still very city-like, Chiang Mai is a different vibe. I feel... So, with that kind of difference in pace of life and then you can kind of start to understand, oh, this is what they mean by ‘Singapore has a fast pace of life’” (Gerry).

Another recurrent reason that interviewees gave for wanting to do their exchange in Europe is to experience an educational environment vastly different from the focus on didactic learning, perceived to be characteristic of Singapore and Asia. Yet, Patricia’s (data science/economics) recount challenges this assumption, as her learning experience in Korea emphasized flexibility, student autonomy, and vocal participation. These dissenting perspectives of students, sometimes borne out of personal experience, illustrate that ideological resistance can begin with the foregrounding of counter-stereotypical opportunities that already exist in Asia, which can pluralize students’ imaginaries.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Unpacking worldviews, metaphors, and myths defamiliarizes the taken-for-granted, opening new avenues for innovating alternative futures (Inayatullah, 2004). Although the myth of the fledgling leaving the nest is contextually anchored to Singapore, it insightfully reveals how regional imaginaries are not singular, free-floating, and unchangeable structures of meaning. Rather, regional imaginaries are intricately tethered to psycho-social motivations *unique to the type of mobility program*. It also shows that socio-historical context matters in generating this unique link between ISM and socio-geographic imaginaries—ISM aspirations in other societies may not, for example, integrate the same desire for youth emancipation as in Singapore.

For example, our findings complicate what existing research has written about ISM regionalization in Asia. Collins’ (2013) research found that full-term outbound South Korean students in Asia see their choice to study at an Asian university as an agentic, self-actualizing decision to take the path less travelled (opposing the trite formula of West-bound pilgrimage). Students also favored the geographic proximity, perceived cultural familiarity, and availability of friendship and familial networks already in the region. Our Singaporean interviewees espouse *almost diametrically opposed* desires for semester exchange—to leave Asia because of its imagined associations with family and familiarity, idealizing the West as the true paragon of self-actualization. These divergences precisely underscore how contingent ISM preferences may be on sociohistorical context and ISM-type. It also illustrates that the same socio-geographic perceptions (e.g., familiarity and family) can have diverging effects depending on how they are mobilized within deeper psycho-social motivations.

We extend literature examining socio-geographic imaginaries shaping student mobilities (e.g., Birindelli, 2024; Brooks & Waters, 2022) in two under-researched directions: a focus on the unique meanings of semester exchange as a short-term mobility program, and how regional imaginaries are conditioned by a

home country's specific ideological landscape. Therefore, a key takeaway from this research is the importance of examining the link between destination preferences and the ideological meanings tied to *program type*, *regional imaginaries*, and *contextualized psycho-social motivations*. Examining how ideological conditions interplay to shape students' choices complements and qualifies emerging research on international student agency (Inouye et al., 2023), while also counterbalancing the outsized emphasis of rational choice theories in ISM scholarship (Fakunle, 2021; Oldac, 2023; Tokas et al., 2022).

For stakeholders invested in decolonizing students' subjectivities, a starting point could involve designing mobility programs that incorporate student-led narratives that center inter-Asian pluralisms and reconfigure regional mobility not as second-tier fallback, but as generative terrain for self-discovery. These ideological interventions must be deployed together with funding and logistical facilitation. Yet, since psycho-social motivations are often deep-seated, more substantive change would require not just policy changes, but the willingness of society to interrogate how these ideological landscapes have come to be internalized throughout students' life courses and education journeys. Since students themselves have articulated organic critiques of these dominant narratives, it is crucial to involve them in efforts to democratically shape ISM regionalization, as they are in the best position to understand how different ideologies interplay to shape their personal narratives.

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