Illegitimate Elites and the Politics of Belonging at a Korean University

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Scholars frequently argue that universities are undergoing a transformation in which higher learning intersects with a class of cosmopolitan elites as they position themselves as providers of global knowledge that produce and reproduce flexible citizens. Certainly within South Korea, universities are launching international colleges as a way to position themselves as a choice institution that caters to elite students seeking global opportunities. Yet little work has been done to examine what happens to the students within these spaces of globality and privilege. This article reveals the interconnections between globalizing higher education and the global aspirations of Korean youth by focusing on the students who enter into an international learning space of a Korean university that itself desires global status. Not quite accepted by the other students but still considered an elite group, these individuals have to negotiate complex campus-based norms where the risk of marginalization from key social networks is magnified by the university’s pursuit of global status. Meanwhile, the university transforms into an ideological battleground and a critical site in the construction of social membership in South Korea.

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