

International Graduate Student Seminar: Plenary Session July 28, 2008

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The plenary session was divided into three parts. In the first part, we discussed differences and similarities of doctoral programs in the United States, Japan, and other Asia-Pacific countries. In the second part, three keynote speakers and students discussed about how to successfully complete doctoral dissertation. In the last part, students have discussion on question previously given by the keynote speakers.

First, we asked Rachel Guberman, Yoko Mizuguchi, Kathryn Slattery, and Shin Han to explain the doctoral education systems in the U. S., Japan, Australia, and Republic of Korea, respectively. Being limited to only a few minutes, each could not explain in detail, but we understood the basic differences among the countries. First, Rachel explained how students achieved the ABD (all-but-dissertation) stage in the United States. Second, Yoko explained how in the Japanese system graduate students could “finish doctoral program” without actually receiving the doctoral degree. Third, Kathryn pointed out that the Australian system was based on the European system, noting that doctoral students have no course requirements, but rather work towards completing the dissertation. Finally, Shin explained that the Korean system was something like between the Japanese system and the American system.

After grasping doctoral programs in the countries where the graduate student participants come from, the second part of the plenary session discussed how to successfully finish the doctoral dissertation. We asked the three keynote speakers to give talks based on the following questions: why and how you picked your dissertation topic; how you did dissertation writing; why you chose your current topic; what is trend of study in your discipline; what are any other experiences you would like to share with grad students.

Each speaker talked for about 10 minutes about their experiences; then we had Q&A session for about 50 minutes. The questions mostly focused on the dissertation and job hunting. The keynote speakers emphasized that finding a good question for doctoral dissertation would be a key for its success. Professor Michael Mastanduno told his own experience that it took 9 months for him to come up with a good question for his doctoral dissertation. Professor Rey Chow noted that the dissertation question had to be something students could passionately work on. Professor Jennifer Lee mentioned that it was important to

pursue networking and have many publications for landing a good job.

Toward the end of the plenary session, we had one hour and half for the discussion on questions previously given by the three keynote speakers. Students actively engaged in the discussion. The question included:

Professor Chow: In what ways has the term “American” in American Studies evolved in meaning and significance over the years, and why? What are the cross-disciplinary intellectual issues springing uniquely from the Asia Pacific region that should be made part of American Studies?

Professor Lee: Based on the evidence presented, where do you think that the future of America’s color line will be drawn? What major changes need to occur to rid the United States of black exceptionalism, and do you think that this is possible? What parallel could you draw from inter-group relations in Japan, and where would you draw the color line in 21st century Japan?

Professor Mastanduno: What do you consider to be the most important factors influencing American foreign policy? Some possible factors include business interests, American ideals, American military and economic power, the influence of various ethnic and racial groups, and the personalities of political leaders.

We believe that the graduate student plenary session was very successful. Unlike the regular academic conferences, students and teachers actively interacted. Students were able to ask the visiting scholars about their “behind-the-scene” stories. Finally, this session allowed students (and also teachers) to recognize there were many different doctoral program systems in each country. These experiences, we believe, contributed students’ professional and development and career planning.