Statement of Purpose

In my nomadic life as a Japan-raised America-educated China-loving Thai-schoolteacher, I have often found myself contemplating over Japan’s position within global cultural dynamics, especially in relation to the ‘West’ and ‘Asia.’ My senior honors thesis observed that Japanese mass cultures, such as popular TV series, pop songs and idols, have become widely popular in Taiwan, while weird and wacky subcultures from Japan have been celebrated as ‘cool’ in America\(^1\). I am interested in further examining this contrast between Japan’s mainstream popularity in Asia and countercultural celebration in the West through theoretical frameworks of cultural hegemony, Orientalism, and transnational media.

The dichotomy between mainstream and subculture parallels the discourse regarding modernity and the past. Many scholars have debated whether modern culture is equivalent to Western culture, or modernity occurs on a global scale without entailing any cultural association. Orientalism and nostalgia result from such entanglements of spatiality with temporality. Edward Said argued that the Orient was imagined as the “antithesis of the Occident,” and associating the modern with the West resulted in non-Western countries labeled as the nostalgic past. In Thailand, backpackers were desperate to protect the pristine ‘noble savage’ paradise from the corrupt hands of Western modernization, often reluctant to admit the local modernity; middle school students I teach in Surin province, considered among the most rustic of all Thailand, actually lead an incredibly urban and cosmopolitan lifestyle, listening to Lady

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\(^1\) Please refer to the writing sample I submitted for excerpt from my honors thesis.
Gaga on their iPhones as they prepare PowerPoint presentations. ‘Mainstream’ culture, the capitalistic and systematic mass-distribution of popular culture, can be considered a part of modernity. Similar to nostalgia, the celebration of Japanese subcultures in America indicates the association of mainstream with the West, which subsequently aligned the images of anti-mainstream with the non-West.

I hope to approach this topic by studying how the ‘Others’ are represented and consumed through media and travel. My interest in this matter developed as I grew up watching my father, who is a documentary TV producer for a Japanese broadcasting station, colorfully delineate the lives of people around the world from village schools in rural China to tribal parties in Micronesia. While the issue of exoticization in such a typical National Geographic form of representation is indeed a part of my interests, what I really wish to focus on is online media and backpacking. The young, liberal, or elite consumers, dissatisfied with TV and tourism as secular and unadventurous, often prefer such new modes of consumption in hopes for a more organic encounter with the ‘Others.’ It is through YouTube clips that American college students find their ways to the subcultural Japan, and backpackers’ nostalgic desire for a ‘simple life’ in Southeast Asia shares a similar countercultural attitude with the hippie subculture: rejecting technological luxury, surviving in a crude hut and dreaming for a life in sync with nature. As the West has come to represent negative images of corrupt modernity and insipid mass culture, consumers rely on countercultural modes of representation to seek salvage in non-Western countries onto which they impose the images of the beautiful and the cool.
Online media is also interesting from a visual anthropological point of view. My extracurricular passion in video editing led me to a strong interest in visual ethnography, yet I have been somewhat concerned by the voyeuristic nature of a camera lens which reinforces the one-way gaze from filmmaker-traveler to the filmed-locals. In traditional media, images of the ‘Others’ were distributed top-down with a clear distinction between the subject, filmmaker/distributor, and the consumer. The emergence of YouTube blurred such distinction by allowing travelers and locals to film and distribute by themselves. I am interested in how these personal videos could play an important role in reversing the voyeuristic eye/I, providing a bottom-up perspective from those individuals who, in the past, were merely gazed upon with exoticizing eyes. Eventually, I hope to engage in the production of films that edit together such personal gazes around the world.

One potential project that could incorporate various themes of my interest is to conduct a fieldwork at a guesthouse in Tokyo where backpackers from the ‘West’ to ‘Asia’ all gather to encounter Japan. I am interested in their travel itinerary itself, as well as how they have encountered Japan prior to the visit, and how the pictures or videos of the trip will be circulated after their return. This might be an appropriate site to observe the dynamism of cultural encounter and transnational media, and gain further insights on how Japanese culture is defined around the world.

One of my strengths to become a successful anthropologist is my extensive international background. Exposure to a variety of cross-cultural moments prepared me to delve into broader theories
that are essential to my interests. I have an interdisciplinary academic history, which trained me to adopt concepts from various sources and synthesize into an original theory. Additionally, my fluency in language, expertise in film production and familiarity with the technical aspects of media are skills immediately applicable in various projects.

I wish to pursue a career in academia where I can participate in research, creative projects, publication, and education. Globalization in the digital era remains one of the hottest topics today, yet these debates tend to be caught up in either capitalistic excitement for market expansion or simplistic celebration of multiculturalism. Amidst this global hype, I hope to observe with anthropological understandings in perspective and keep society aware of the overshadowed cultural hegemony underlying such transnational encounters.