

Educational Fever and South Korean Higher Education 1

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Abstract

This paper examines the influence of educational fever on the development of the Republic of Korea education and economy in the context of the cultural history of this country. In order to examine this study, the author explains the concept of educational fever and discusses the relation between Confucianism and education zeal. Educational fever and human capitalization in South Korean higher education are analyzed from a comparative viewpoint. The study evaluates the effects and problems of education fever this country's current higher education, and it concludes that Koreans' educational fever has been a core factor by which to achieve the development of the national economy as well as the rapid expansion of higher education.

Key words: *Higher education, Republic of Korea, Confucianism, human resources.*

Introduction

Koreans who have followed the tradition of Confucianism have had a respect for learning since early times. Confucianism traditionally provided a proper way of training gentlemen, involving constant self-cultivation through education. This cultural influence made it difficult for the Republic of Korea² to modernize industrial organizations and to evolve a modern system of education that enhanced scientific inquiry and utilitarian methodology in a modern sense.

Nonetheless, South Korea has experienced an economic boom, due to the successful execution of the national economic development plans, and education fever (enthusiasm or zeal) which was based on Confucian social values. Ironically, Confucianism was generally viewed as an obstacle to industrialization (Weber, 1962), but Confucianism, especially the positive social values such as the adoration of learning and sincerity, has been considered as a powerful motivating force behind the South Korean economy and

higher education (de Bary, 1996; Berger & Hsiao, 1988; Hart, 1993; Hofstede, 1980; Hofstede and Bond, 1988; Janelli, 1993; Psacharopoulos, 1984; Tu, 1996). Since the execution of the 1st National Economic Development Plan in the early 1960s, the South Korean government has regarded higher education as a prime motivator for the extension of national power as well as for the promotion of national industrialization. On the other hand, the South Korean people have viewed higher education as a valuable means for the enhancement of their social position and for the improvement of their economic benefit. Between 1965 and 1996, the average annual growth rate of gross national income (GNI) reached about 8%, and GNI per capita increased from 105 to 11,380 us dollars (National Statistical Office, 1999).

In addition to this economic development, South Korean higher education has also remarkably expanded. After initiating the current educational system in the late 1940s, a number of phenomenal changes in size, structure, and function have occurred. Between 1945 and 2002, South Korean higher education increased from 19 schools, 1,490 teachers, and 7,819 students to 376 schools, 59,750 teachers, and 3,577,447 students (Ministry of Education, 1999; Ministry of Education & Human Resources Development [MEHRD] and Korean Educational Development Institute [KEDI], 2002). The total student population of higher education expanded by approximately 460 times. The enrollment rate of higher education to population at typical age recorded over 70% in 2002 (MEHRD and KEDI).

The majority of high school graduates (81%) wanted to pursue higher schooling (MEHRD and KEDI, 2002). This zealous demand for higher education has resulted in an explosive growth for the past five decades in South Korea. In 1994, the amount of private expenditures on education was already much higher than that of public expenditures,³ indicating that parents spent much money on private tutors for their sons and daughters who were proceeding to colleges or universities. The Condition of Education (National Center for Education Statistics, 1999) shows that the rate of the population who completed higher education by 25-34 years-old group was 30.1%, the highest recorded rate among other countries. Owing to this enormous education fever, the number of enrollment in higher education institutes totaled over 3.5 million, which is equivalent to 7.3% of the total population (48 million) in 2002.

The examination of education fever in South Korea may provide both Eastern and Western peoples with valuable ideas. I attempt to explore the influence of educational enthusiasm on the development of South Korean education and economy from the perspective of South Korean cultural history. Although several Korean scholars (Kim, Lee & Park, 1993; Lee & Park, 1993; Choi, 1994; Lee, 2001; Lee, 2002; Lee, 2003) have analyzed education fever as a key variable in explaining the economic and educational performance of South Korea, they did not clearly illustrate the relation between educational fever and human capitalization, as well as between Confucianism and education fever.

In order to examine these relations, I will use both theoretical and comparative analyses. The procedures of this study are the following. I will first explain the context of

educational fever from a perspective of South Korean cultural history, and discuss the relation between Confucianism and education fever. Next, educational fever and human capitalization in South Korean higher education will be analyzed from a comparative viewpoint. Finally, I will evaluate the effects and problems of education fever in current South Korean higher education.

Educational fever: Context of South Korean cultural history

South Koreans' educational fever has its origin in Confucianism, which was transmitted from China in the Three Kingdoms period (57 bc-ad 935). From the Three Kingdoms to the Koryo Kingdom (918-1392) eras, Buddhism, as a major spiritual or cultural belief which supports the states and societies, controlled the entirety of South Korean society and culture, whereas Confucianism, as a secondary key institution, played mainly an educational and ethico-political role in the lives of the privileged-class. In other words, along with Buddhism, Confucianism was not only the means to the maintenance of power and privilege to governing class, but also a core ideology for the upper class to sustain collectivistic familism and to establish the fundamental principle of the state. However, with the opening of the Choson dynasty in 1392, Confucianism, as a national ideology and religion, largely determined politics, economy, society, culture, and education.

During the Choson Kingdom period (1392-1910), the rulers established Confucian elite education in the National Confucian Academy (Seongkyunkwan) in the tradition of previous Confucian elite institutions, thus sustaining a hierarchically authoritative bureaucratic society, through the state examination system (kwa-keo). The Seongkyunkwan was not only a national Confucian institution which provided the upper class with the educational opportunity to learn Confucian classics as well as Chinese history and literature, but was also an utmost Confucian shrine which celebrated ancestral worship for Confucius and the great Chinese and Korean Confucian scholars.

The kwa-keo system was a gateway to success in life for the young yangbans.⁴ In an epoch of Choson, the two main pillars of Confucian elite education were Seongkyunkwan, an academy fostering the Confucian elite, and the kwa-keo system, examinations recruiting the national bureaucrats. Thus, Confucian elite education and the kwa-keo system were inseparable. In Brief, the Seongkyunkwan was a matrix of Confucian institutions, and the kwa-keo was a spine of Confucian education.

During the Choson times (1392-1910), the yangbans generally sought after fame through public or private Confucian education and then formed the governing class centering on a clan. From this viewpoint, the yangbans monopolized Confucian elite education in order to sustain their socio-political positions and family-centered coalitions. Thus, the education fever in the traditional era was viewed as a desire to maintain the yangbans' socio-political privileges and to open their clans' honors.

This educational enthusiasm contributed much to the pursuit of the yangbans' socio-political interest and power through Confucian elite education and the kwa-keo system,

while maximizing the instrumental values of education. In the later nineteenth century, however, Confucian elite education declined in traditional functions and began to convert the yangbans' monopoly to the commoners' concerns, with having been rushed foreign power and introduced the western educational system.

During the Japanese colonial period (1910-1945), owing to the Japanese colonial educational policy laying emphasis on japanization, it was possible for Japanese and a small minority of Koreans to access higher education. The greater portion of Koreans able to participate in higher education were pro-Japanese Koreans or the former yangbans. Although a few common people could access higher education due to the abolition of a social position system, most Koreans, on the other hand, did not easily abandon traditional Confucian values and education. For this reason, it was still difficult for the Korean populace to access higher education.

After liberation from Japanese rule in 1945, democratic education initiated by the United States of America military government⁵ eventually afforded the populace an opportunity to access higher education. From this result, South Korean higher education belonging to the privileged minority provided a momentum for the development of popular education. The common people who were able to access elite or higher education not only witnessed the granting of special socio-political rights to the yangbans, but also recognized the instrumental values of education that endowed the upper class with socio-economic interests.

Although the commoners were rarely allowed access to higher education on account of a rigid stratified social system being divided into four classes,⁶ they earnestly desired to participate in traditional elite education or colonial higher education.

Under the stratified social system, the ruling class, who were able to access higher education, was separated from the subordinate class, who were unable to access higher education. In spite of this divided system, education zeal was different between social statuses. Moreover, the rapid change of politics, economy, and society from the traditional bureaucratic Confucian society into the modern industrial democratic society brought on the necessity of human capital, thus promoting an academically-based oriented society.

From the perspective of Korean cultural history, the contemporary educational fever of the Korean people is determined by two significant factors: the accessibility of higher education which changed a privileged minority into all the classes according to the change of political, economic, and social circumstances; in addition, the potential desire of education was erupted toward rising a socio-economic condition and getting a successful career.

Confucianism and educational fever

There is no ancient Korean traditional historical record about when Confucianism was

transmitted to Korea. According to a significant historical record, *Samguk-saki* (Historical Record of Three Kingdoms), the first institution of the elite Confucian education in Korea was known as *Taehak*, built by King Sosurim of Koguryo in AD 372 (Iryon, 1285/1972; Kim, 1145). In the Three Kingdoms period, Confucianism was a secondary key institution of governmental and educational systems. During the Koryo Kingdom era, Confucianism contributed to the establishment of social and political principles for the privileged class through formal institutions.

In the late Koryo era, Neo-Confucianism was transmitted from China to Korea. Unlike traditional Confucianism, which emphasized moral practice regarding socio-political principles and ethical values, Neo-Confucianism, amalgamated into the traditional Confucian principles with the fundamentals of Buddhist philosophy and Taoist metaphysics, stressed both formal and theoretical sides. The formal side developed idiosyncratic Korean Confucianism which centered on rigid formalism and ritualism, whereas the theoretical side was integrated into education and evolved into the ideology of respect for human science.

From the beginning of the Choson Kingdom, Confucianism was regarded not only as a national religion and ideology, which cultivated bureaucrats who lead the people but also as a measure by which to judge socio-political affairs and individual ethics and values. Under the Confucian Choson dynasty, religion was inseparable from politics. Thus, as western theology was a religious dogma as well as a socio-ethical norm in the medieval times, so Confucian education harmonized with religion and politics during the Choson period.

During the Choson era, Confucian education, which was in accord with politics, quickened scholastic bureaucratism and elitism that centered on the Confucian meritocratic elite. In addition, Confucian education was connected with the social status system based on animated familism or collectivism, which emphasized on a family or clan. In this vein, the national Confucian academy, *Seongkyunkwan*, was a nursery for the state bureaucrats, whereas collectivism was a matrix of egoistic familism for the sustenance of familial fame and the enhancement of social status. Because of this egoistic familism, Confucian learning was viewed as an educational means for the cultivation of moral character and as a tool for the success of career through the Confucian elite institution and the *kwa-keo* (the national examinations) system.

With the change from an agricultural-centered society to an industrial-oriented society, values in Confucian education were viewed as having greater importance than purposive values focusing on moral character and harmonious society. Through Confucian elite education, both elitism and educational values emphasizing the establishment of oneself in life became two significant factors to increase the Koreans' educational zeal bolstering up an academic attainment oriented society, according to the change of politics, economy, society, and culture. In particular, the tradition of Confucian elitism was important to accelerate educational fever shaping a competition-oriented doctrine in contemporary South Korean society.

In practice, the tradition of Confucian elite education is the root of the present doctrines or isms: An academically-oriented doctrine based on Confucian elitism, educational instrumentalism on the grounds of the yangbans' education values seeking for social success, a doctrine of occupational discrimination on the basis of a respect for Confucian literae humaniores, academic toadyism originated in the Chinese learning oriented education, factionalism rooted in school, family, and region, and a human capitalization doctrine through education. In addition, the state examinations for the recruitment of public officials (kwa-keo) are regarded as the matrices of the present civil service examinations and college entrance examinations.

Synthesizing the above discussion, the excessive educational zeal in the present South Korean society mainly derives its origin from academic attainments oriented doctrines and elitism based on the tradition of Confucian education.

South Korean higher education: From the perspective of human capital related theories

South Korean higher education was actively expanded in order to support human resources as a part of several national economic development plans from the 1960s to the 1970s. In particular, vocational education was encouraged to foster skilled workers and technical manpower in the labor market. The demand of high-tech manpower has increased because of the diversity of industrial structure and the change of social structure.

With the rapid progress of industrialization, the access of higher education has gradually increased because of the necessity of skillful workers in the labor market. Between the mid-1960s and the late 1970s, economic growth in South Korea was supported by economic developmentalists who suggested a model of national modernization or industrialization through the national economic development plans led by the government. Up to now, South Korean higher education has rapidly expanded by means of the national economic development plans and South Koreans' educational fever.

As discussed in the previous sections, the education zeal of the South Korean people has increased due to the policy of respect for learning and the doctrine of seeking for social success. The tradition of Confucian education, which is the pursuit for the enhancement of socio-economic position limited to the privileged class, after liberation from the Japanese, however, awakened the latent educational fever with the current of democratization in higher education.

Furthermore, during the 1980s, moral cultivation and social success-oriented thought, which were regarded as the purpose of Confucian education in the traditional times, were upsidе toward an emphasis on the instrumental values of education, the pursuit of socio-economic progress, along with the current of western pragmatic materialism. In other words, the view of educational investment highlighted utilitarian and economic sides rather than spiritual and moral sides with industrialization.

In addition to the socio-cultural change, colleges and universities in South Korea fostered human resources in need of South Korean society and contributed to the national economic development. Besides, they met the requirements of educational zeal for individuals' access to higher education. After the mid-1980s, however, in a socio-economic aspect, not only did industrial structure and manpower systems deepen economic imbalance between classes and among regions, but also the imbalance of manpower supply and demand among occupations and industrial organizations, with the rapid expansion of higher education and economic growth. In an educational aspect, on the other hand, the expansion of higher education diminished academic quality as well as increased the supply of college graduates.

Moreover, since the beginning of the 1990s, South Korean society has strongly felt the necessity for the change of industrial structure as well as the security of high-quality human resources owing to the influx of information technology and knowledge-based society. From this point of view, academic excellence in higher education was required in order to provide a smooth manpower supply for industrial organizations and to promote the academic quality of tertiary education.

In light of a human capital approach, investment in education brought about higher productivity of workers that in return caused higher earnings with economic development during the process of industrialization in South Korea.

On the other hand, from an individual viewpoint, the effect of educational investment assumed a different phase according to personal deviation. In practice, as the type of occupation required was not high-quality human resources was substituted with expert manpower, it led to the waste of human resources. Generally, however, individual's higher earnings and national economic growth in South Korea were caused by the expansion of higher education.

In spite of this support, there are several unexplained reasons with only a human capital approach. An academic background-oriented doctrine in South Korean society supports a screening assumption or credentialism hypothesis.⁷ Unlike the assertions of human capitalists, higher earnings are not related to higher productivity of workers, but related to external factors such as higher academic attainments and cliques. In current South Korean society, academic attainments and cliques are usually more powerful determinants rather than individual ability when choosing an occupation or obtaining a promotion. In addition, colleges or universities graduates normally earn higher incomes than secondary school graduates regardless of their abilities.

From a viewpoint of a job competition model,⁸ no matter how those who completed the lower education level have distinctively productive abilities, it is not easy for them to access job opportunities. Thus, manpower supply and demand in South Korea did not allot high-quality manpower appropriate to the labor market on account of oversupplying college graduates with the expansion of demand for higher education.

Furthermore, in terms of a dual labor market hypothesis,⁹ the trend in the present South Korean society shows the bisection of labor market structure after the economic crisis of 1997. Experiencing an economic crisis, the gap between socio-economic classes, the privileged and the unprivileged, was deepened. The privileged class generally acquires safe jobs or regularly higher earnings, while the unprivileged class usually holds temporary jobs or irregularly lower incomes.

From this point of view, a radical approach of Neo-Marxists may be appropriate in the present South Korean labor market. Radicalists claim that the core explanatory factor of income inequality is a family background or a social class. The reasons are that the former class transmits its wealth through higher academic attainment, whereas the latter class hands over its poverty on account of not achieving of higher schooling. Thus, education is regarded as a means to providing wealthy for the privileged class.

Summing up this section, in the period of economic development plans between the 1960s and the 1970s, a modernization doctrine and a human capital theory, as a link of policy for manpower demand and supply, were accepted by policy makers of the government and brought about the national economic development as well as individual's income. From the early 1980s until the present time, South Korean higher education was drastically increased in the aspects of manpower requirement and social demand, due to the diversity of industrial and social structure, as well as South Koreans' educational fever.

Within a half century, the popularization of higher education was achieved an excessive advancement rate for higher schooling. Therefore, I suggest that the rapid growth of economy and higher education in contemporary South Korea has supported a human capital theory at large.

Education fever and current South Korean higher education

As discussed in the previous sections, education fever in South Korea had a great impact on educational systems, administration, and organizational culture. Of course, on the positive side, this educational zeal led to the rapid expansion of higher education and the development of national economy. On the negative side, it brought about many problems: an academically-oriented society, elitism on the basis of academic factionalism, a principle of instrumental education values, egoistic familism, a competitive education system, excessive education expenditures and social disharmony owing to the increase of out-of-school tutoring, and mass-production of unemployed workers who graduated from colleges or universities.

The present South Korean society takes a serious view of academic attainments and cliques when being recruited and promoted in public or private organizations. Also, academic attainment is a significant factor not merely to choose occupation but also to determine social position, income, and marriage. In other words, it is an essential means by which to obtain a socio-economic position in contemporary South Korean society.

Despite the abolishment of the traditional four social classes according to occupations, no matter how those who have lower academic attainments have powerful abilities, they cannot avoid limitations in choosing jobs. In addition, there is a tendency to be treated undesirably in human relations.

According to a survey regarding the evil of an academic attainment-oriented doctrine on lower school level graduates, 41.7% of the graduates responded that they did not receive a desirable treatment in South Korean society (Korean Educational Development Institute [KEDI], 1992). This research result proves the existence of the serious evil within an academic attainment oriented principle in contemporary South Korean society.

Furthermore, elitism in current South Korean society creates personal ties on the basis of academic attainments and cliques, resulting in their leading of a considerable part of contemporary South Korean politics, economy, society, culture, and education. Especially, the elitism centering on school connections in the field of education acts upon an important factor for college teachers' recruitment, appointment, and promotion. It also creates factionalism. In addition, elitism promotes the over-competition within education, making the ranking of colleges and universities, fosters private tutoring, and promotes egoistic familism. Besides, elitism on the basis of *literae humaniores* still does not get rid of a doctrine of the job discrimination.

Moreover, an academic attainment doctrine and elitism have bolstered educational instrumentalism and human capitalization. Thus, university advancement has become a gateway of social success, while primary and secondary education has become a preparatory course for college entrance examinations which focus on a cramming method that emphasizes memorization learning.

The system of college entrance examinations, urging a drastic competition between or among schools, parents, and students, leads to private tutoring and impedes the normalization of school education. Now that the college entrance examinations are comprised of questions centering on South Korean, English, and mathematics, obtaining satisfactory grades in these subjects have been a short cut for the college entrance.

In particular, various problems were derived from college examination oriented education. First, school education became impoverished due to the practice of abnormal school teaching. Second, excessive competition among students was bolstered by a selective examination way of the relative standard. Third, unitary thinking was fostered owing to the objective evaluation of examination methods. Fourth, social disharmony between the classes was promoted on account of excessive private tutoring. Fifth, students' personalities were ignored because of the uniformity of school education. Finally, repeaters who take the college entrance examinations after one or more failures were mass-produced.

Furthermore, educational fever has greatly influenced educational policies and systems, in particular quota policies for college entrants and college entrance examination systems.

Since 1945, the demand for higher education has always exceeded the supply. In order to control and manage this phenomenon, the South Korean government has controlled the number of college entrants and has continually improved the college entrance examinations. In spite of these efforts, the policies and systems did not adjust the demand and supply of higher education nor reduce the advancement of high school graduates. These situations were caused by a zeal for education that has been formed from the traditional practice of Confucian education and the socio-economic factors of modern society. Although educational zeal differs from the social classes, the South Korean people still demonstrate an extremely higher education fever.

In the 1960s and 1970s, education zeal was heated gradually under the national economic development plans, and was blown out with the rapid economic growth in the 1980s. This heated education fever accelerated the demand for higher education, and the advancement rate of high school graduates was nearly 70% in 2000. This rate was higher than those of France, England, and Germany (The World Bank, 2000).

In spite of the oversupply of higher education, both the South Korean government and higher education institutions have but a weak hold on of the demand and supply for manpower. Also, they did not plan appropriately to put high-quality human resources in a right labor market. South Korean higher education has already stepped in popular education, and the certificates of college graduates have no longer guaranteed a high income. Despite the fact that the demand for South Korean higher education continually increases, individual education zeal is still hot. What shall we do? This is a fatal problem for this country's higher education to be resolved in the present and future.

Conclusions

As reviewed in this study, the educational fever of the South Korea people was a major factor by which to achieve the wondrous development of the national economy as well as the rapid expansion of higher education. In particular, it is not too much to say that the economic growth in the 1960s and 1970s was the result of the expansion of higher education. From this point of view, the author evaluates that the rapid growth of higher education, the improvement of higher productivity, and the increment of higher earnings in contemporary South Korea support a human capital theory at large.

On the contrary, education fever has brought about many social and educational problems: excessive private education expenditures, social disharmony between the rich and the poor, promotion of an academic attainment-oriented society, and "an examination hell" for college entrants.

In spite of these negative aspects, the rapid growth of higher education that led to the economic development was regarded as a model for educational success to the developed-countries as well as to the developing countries. I clearly point out that the core factor of the economic and educational success was the education fever of the South Korean people, although the national economic development policy played an important

role too.

As discussed in this paper, South Koreans' educational fever originated in the traditional Confucian education, and has been promoted by a doctrine of academic attainment-oriented society and a principle of academic sectarianism in this country's contemporary society. These characteristics are also found in other East Asian countries which follow the tradition of Confucianism. However, South Korea's unique historical and cultural background resulted in the Korean people's adherence to Confucianism as the state religion for over five hundred years until the early twentieth century.

Without the correct understanding of educational fever, it is meaningless to discuss the expansion of higher education and the rapid economic development in contemporary South Korea. Grasping the negative side of educational fever is no less necessary than understanding the positive side. Finally, future studies should focus on how we can minimize the negative side. Minimizing the negative side of educational fever in South Korean society, education zeal will be able to become a valuable theme for the development of higher education and national economy.

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1 This article largely depended on the author's book, *Korean higher education: A Confucian perspective* (2002), Chapter 9 "The Korean thirst for higher education", and was partly revised and extended.

2 From now on called South Korea.

3 Private expenditures, amount to 6.03% of the GNP, were assessed more than public expenditures (5.79%) (Ministry of Education, 1996).

4 The yangbans were the ruling class in the Choson society of Korea.

5 The U.S. military government controlled the South Korean people from 1945 to 1948.

6 Choson society was classified into three classes: the ruling class (yangban), the common people (pyungmin), and the lower people (sangnom). Generally, the professional group (chungin) belonged to the common people. In addition, social classes were divided into four strata according to occupations: scholar, farmer, manufacturer, and merchant. Following these social strata, the Choson people respected scholars but despised manufactures and merchants. For this reason, the yangbans and the pyungmins ignored the two occupational groups (Lee, 1997, p. 40).

7 In the screening approach, education is viewed as a means to obtain a diploma or a credential. Thus, education becomes only a selection or signaling device.

8 The job competition model "is based on the idea that entrants to the labor market do not

compete for wages, but rather for entry-level positions which provide the basis for promotion and a career” (Cohn & Geske, 1990, p. 63).

9 The dual labor market theory is in its simplest form of the segmentation hypothesis. The labor market is divided into two parts: the primary and the secondary. The former consists of individuals who are admitted to training slots and job ladders holding promise of economic and job mobility; the latter composes workers who are hired, usually on a temporary basis, for whom good training slots are not open and who are not likely to receive good ladder type positions no matter what their stock of education and training happens to be (Cohn & Geske, 1990, pp. 64-65).

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