

What the Great Learning teaches,
is to illustrate illustrious virtue;
to renovate the people;
and to rest in the highest goodness.

-Da Xue (The Great Learning) 1-
(trans.) James Legge

Higher Education and Ethical Value

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<Abstract>

The purpose of this study is to explore the importance of ethical value in higher education as well as the relevance between ethical value and higher education. In order to examine the study logically, three research questions are addressed: First, what is value, ethical value, and Asiatic ethical value? Second, for whom and what is higher education? Last, what is the relevance between Asiatic ethical value and Korean higher education? To defend the research questions, the researcher uses a descriptive content analysis method, with a cross cultural approach. In addition, to review this study clearly and systematically, the study is defined as the following: higher education is limited to contemporary Korean higher education, and ethical value is confined within Asiatic value on the basis of Korean Confucianism. One of research findings of this study is: Asiatic ethical value is regarded as the ethical value affecting Asian people's culture, especially on the basis of Confucian culture, and it is related to the traditional Confucian ethics, whose emphasis on mainly self-cultivation, social harmony, and political righteousness. For future research, it is recommended that the study be undertaken to explore the ethical codes of research as well as the ethical norms of university administration.

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**This academic article is a descriptive position paper.*

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I. The Concepts of Value, Ethical Value, and Asiatic Ethical Value

The concepts of value have various definitions. Values are enduring beliefs that the specific modes of conduct or end-state of existence are personally or socially preferable to the opposite or converse modes of conduct or end-state of existence (Rokeach, 1973, p. 5). Geertz (1973) asserts that values are tangible evidence of culture in our society. Swidler (1986) claims that values are related to culture inseparably because culture is actually a combination of values and practices in our society. Borgatta and Borgatta (1992) contend that values indicate preferences which people share for certain types of outcomes in their lives and for certain types of conduct.

The concepts of value can be changed by the different meanings in accordance with adding words. For instance, social value is defined as a means of balancing members' needs against the needs of society to maintain and entrance itself (Parsons and Shils, 1951); cultural value is regarded as a combination of values practices in culture (Swidler, 1986); educational value (Bagley, 2008) is related to the controls of conduct in school organizations; and individual value (James, 2016) is concerned with the evolution of

consciousness. Therefore, ethical value is considered as a moral principle or norm (Shea, 1988; Trevino, 1986).

What are the concepts of Asiatic value? The concepts of Asiatic value have been defined as concrete tendencies or beliefs affecting Asian people's behavior and culture (Lee, 2012, p. 79). The term of "Asiatic value" is commonly used to as "Asian value". The concept of Asian value was generally debated as a political ideology of the 1990s (de Bary, 1998), while the concept of Asiatic value has been generally discussed with subjective opinions in the categories of their cultural boundaries by several Eastern and Western theorists from the various perspectives, mainly political, social, economic, ethical, and cultural sides (Berger, 2003; de Bary, 1981; Hall & Ames, 1987; Hofheinz & Calder, 1982; Huntington, 1996; Kahn, 1979; Knowles, 2015; Krugman, 1995; Lee, 2012; Pye & Pye, 1985; Pye, 1992; Shimada, 1990; Tu, 1999; Vogel, 1979; Weber, 1951). The Asiatic value has been considered as a catholic or uniform value by the above several Western theorists who have negative or positive viewpoints regarding mainly Confucian culture (Lee, 2012).

What is Asiatic ethical value? It is regarded as the ethical value affecting Asian people's culture, especially on the basis of Confucian culture. Asiatic ethical value is related to the traditional Confucian ethics, whose emphasis on mainly self-cultivation, social harmony, and political righteousness.

II. For Whom and What is Higher Education?

For whom and what is higher education is the significant statement in postsecondary education. The statement includes the important purpose and function of university education which is inseparably bound to the purpose of our lives. The above questions simply show a teleological viewpoint, but they also contain ontological and utilitarian perspectives (Lee, 2012).

First of all, from a teleological standpoint, this question inquires the purpose of learning as well as the object of learning. The purpose of learning is different in accordance with each individual, but the pursuit of happiness may be a

general thought of all human beings (Lee, 2012). Thus, the objects of higher education are all humans who can access tertiary education. One of Neo-Confucian scholars, Zhu Xi (1130-1200) states that *Da Xue* (the Great Learning) as the way of self cultivation and governance is to be studied by all people, not only those in, or seeking, political office (Gardner, 1998). In *Da Xue* (The Great Learning) as one of Chinese Confucian classics, the beginning sentence shows ‘what the Great Learning teaches is to illustrate illustrious virtue, to renovate the people, and to rest in the highest goodness’ (trans. Legge, <http://ctext.org/daxue> Retrieved on March 1, 2017). Zengzi (505-436 BC), as one of the authors of the Book, insists that the purpose of the Great Learning is to bright virtue, to cultivate the individual, and to achieve the ultimate goodness. The purpose of the Great Learning is similar to Aristotle’s assertion in his book, the *Nicomachean Ethics*, which mentions that happiness is the highest end of virtuous life or ultimate goodness (trans. Ross, 1988).

From the above viewpoints, the purpose of higher education may be concluded as the following: to cultivate the individual, to achieve the ultimate goodness, and to attain happiness.

Secondly, from an ontological viewpoint, this is also related to what is the reason for being of a university. The functional purpose of a university is the preservation, transmission, and advancement of knowledge with instruction, research, and community service. In addition, the university is a place of teaching universal knowledge to educate human power or resources having professional knowledge and scientific skill for enhancing individual life quality as well as for building welfare society (Lee, 2012). According to Xun Zi (300-230 BC) as one of the greatest Confucian scholars of the classical epoch in China, he emphasizes not only the learning of propriety with self-cultivation, but also the learning of sages' teaching to change the inherently immature and evil human nature (Cheng, 1991). In addition, Confucius (Kongzi, 551-479 BC) argues that knowledge or wisdom can be obtained by constant practice and learning (Lee, 2016). In a university, the students can learn sages' teaching and wisdom indirectly or systematically.

Last, from a utilitarian viewpoint, physical or material utility means a tool

for solving the necessities of life, such as money, socio-political power and position, fame, health, and success. In addition, it includes the meanings for obtaining the practical things enable to seek pleasure or happiness as well as to keep human value or dignity (Lee, 2012). Xun Zi (300-230 BC) argues that human being is born with desire, but that desire can be controlled through education and practice (Cheng, 1991). In this vein, education is not only a utilitarian tool or means to fulfill practical or physical sufficiency, but also a moral medium to restrain physical or material desire (Lee, 2012, p. 217).

III. Korean Higher Education and Asiatic Ethical Value

This paper discusses contemporary Korean higher education from socio-political and ethico-cultural perspectives, and Asiatic ethical value is reviewed on the basis of Korean Confucianism.

In the history of modern Korea, higher education and Confucian values have been dedicated to Korean industrialization and democratization. The former has been considered as an important means of rebuilding national capabilities for applying western science and technology to the progress of westernization and industrialization, while the latter has been regarded as a motive power for building social morals and individual success, and for enhancing educational excellence and social harmony.

In particular, Korean Confucianism which emphasizes humanitarian value and learning has been urged the Korean people to develop her democracy and higher education. With the economic plans of the Korean government, educational zeal regarding higher education has been a significant factor for Korean industrialization and modernization. In the history of Korean culture, education has been traditionally regarded as a valuable means to obtain a socio-political position and privilege, because the major function of Confucian education was to foster Confucian bureaucrats, with building self-cultivation and social harmony.

For this reason, Korean Confucianism viewed socio-political and

ethico-cultural values more important than utilitarian or pragmatic ones. From a this standpoint, Confucian values were positive or negative functions to develop national industrialization and democratization, as several western theorists asserted (Berger, 2003; Huntington, 1996; Perkins, 1986; Pye, 1992). Korean Confucianism has naturally stressed a hierarchical rank system on the basis of age, gender, occupation, and socio-political position. This system was a golden rule applied to all social levels and groups in a traditional Confucian Korean society (Lee, 2012).

Asiatic ethico-cultural values which influenced by Confucianism are as the following: authority, loyalty, sincerity, obedience, or filial piety toward the family, group, and nation; social harmony, stability, and prosperity; academic excellence and educational enthusiasm; a family-oriented creed, a group-centered formalism, and cronomism; socio-political monopoly, favoritism, paternalism, factionalism; collectivism, and communitarianism. Especially, the system which constructed by two socio-political concepts, obedience and authority, as obstacle factors for democratization in modern Korea, emphasizes patriarchal authority and authoritative leadership. On the other hand, the Confucian system also stressed reciprocal human relationship.

In contemporary Korean higher education, the above cultural values and factors have shown in university administration and organizational culture. From the perspective of university administration, hierarchical authority leadership and reciprocal human relationship on the basis of Confucian values are coexisted. The hierarchical authority leadership is so strong or excessive that it may bring on patriarchal authority with totalitarianism or despotism, whereas the reciprocal human relationship is so a clan or group-centered that it may carry on personal-tied or paternal relationship with negatively egoistic collectivism or declined-paternalism.

From the negative viewpoint of the reciprocal human relationship, there are a number of socio-cultural and politico-economic problems in current Korean society and higher education as the following: bureaucratically egoistic elitism, homogeneously closed academic factionalism, close crony between politicians and conglomerates, and egoistic ambitions for success in life.

In considering currently ongoing political protests against Korean President Park in South Korea, the main causes have been related to not only severe incompetency and corruption of closed political leadership, but also close crony between egoistic political leaders and immoral conglomerates (Lee, 2017). In particular, not a few of elite bureaucrats or politicians who graduated from a prestigious university have closely tied to some Korean conglomerates, what we called “*Jaebeol*”, econo-politically.

In a case of higher education, the former president of Ewha Womans University(EWU) and several faculty members were related to informally immoral academic affairs. Korean prosecutors raided EWU, which was suspected of corruption in admitting a daughter of President Park’s crony (The Chosunilbo, Nov. 23, 2016). As the result of this crony scandal, the former president, who allegedly benefited from several government-funded projects, was finally resigned.

The above case shows an example of informally or immorally close ties between politico-economic power and university academic administration. It may be a negative type of reciprocal human relationship on the basis of Asiatic ethical values. However, a prototype of reciprocal human relationship is paternalism which among the traditional Confucian values planted humane culture that stressed not only mutual fraternity but interpersonal geniality or commiseration between teachers and students, male and female staff, seniors and juniors, superiors and subordinates, administrators and faculty, between colleagues in Korean higher education institutions (Lee, 1999; Lee, 2000).

Another example is favoritism related to research ethics or norms in Korean higher education. Junior faculty members generally follow or respect senior members’ research results or theories, without any argument or critique in a case of the same university or alumni ties. If the junior faculty members criticize or argue the research findings and results of senior faculty members, juniors may get any disadvantage regarding their evaluation, promotion, and other academic affairs. Thus, the culture of critique or argument in Korean higher education is not broadly spread. It is one of significant obstacles to develop academic superiority as well as to enhance the world class university.

From the above viewpoints, the Confucian ethical values have been still important norms applied to all social levels and groups in current Korean society and higher education.

IV. Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to discuss the importance of ethical value in higher education as well as the relevance between ethical value and higher education. In order to review the study logically, three research questions are addressed: First, what is value, ethical value, and Asiatic ethical value? Second, for whom and what is higher education? Last, what is the relevance between Asiatic ethical value and Korean higher education? The research questions defended through a descriptive content analysis method, with a cross cultural approach. Additionally, the study is defined as the following: higher education is limited to contemporary Korean higher education, and ethical value is confined within Asiatic value on the basis of Korean Confucianism.

The research findings of this study are as the following: First of all, Asiatic ethical value is regarded as the ethical value affecting Asian people's culture, especially on the basis of Confucian culture, and it is related to the traditional Confucian ethics, whose emphasis on mainly self-cultivation, social harmony, and political righteousness. Next, the findings of second question simply show a teleological, ontological, and utilitarian viewpoints. In a teleological perspective, the purpose of higher education is to cultivate the individual, to achieve the ultimate goodness, and to attain happiness. In an ontological viewpoint, the university is a place of teaching universal knowledge to educate human power or resources having professional knowledge and scientific skill for enhancing individual life quality as well as for building welfare society. In a utilitarian standpoint, education is not only a utilitarian tool or means to fulfill practical or physical sufficiency, but also a moral medium to restrain physical or material desire. Last, Korean Confucianism viewed socio-political and ethico-cultural values more important than utilitarian or pragmatic ones.

Confucian ethical values were positive or negative functions to develop national industrialization and democratization. The Confucian ethical values have been still important norms applied to all social levels and groups in current Korean society and higher education.

In conclusion, based on this research results, the author suggests that it is necessary for higher education institutions to make healthy ethical values as well as to build harmonious organizational culture and leadership. For future research, it is recommended that the study be undertaken to explore the ethical codes of research as well as the ethical norms of university administration.

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