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## Seodang: A Pilgrimage Toward Knowledge/Action and "Us-ness" in the Community

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## CURRICULUM & TEACHING STUDIES | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Seodang: A pilgrimage toward knowledge/action and “us-ness” in the community

Seungho Moon<sup>1\*</sup>

**Abstract:** The purpose of this article is to present a Korean theory of epistemology and to provide an epistemological embodiment of Korean epistemology as it appears in a traditional, local village school called a seodang. A seodang’s curriculum is grounded upon individualized instruction and whole person education and emphasizes mutually respectful relationships that sustain supportive local communities. I have attempted to create an intersection between cultural elements present within Korea’s indigenous knowledge and innovative research methodology by making use of multilingual representations, visual interpretations of the text, and cultural poetry. By weaving together these two stripes of epistemology and methodology, I underscore the value of ethno-epistemology in curriculum and cultural studies as well as the need to imagine multi-linguistic, visual representations of Korean epistemology. Major texts and images taught in seodangs are interwoven with these articulations as a means of examining methodological concerns in curricular and cultural studies.

**Subjects:** Korean Studies; Ethnography & Methodology; Curriculum Studies



Seungho Moon

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Seungho Moon is an associate professor in Curriculum Studies at Loyola University Chicago (LUC). His research centers on releasing the social imagination to promote equity and justice in education by interrogating interdisciplinary knowledge. He investigates cutting-edge discourses in curriculum and instruction, developing innovative research methodologies, and advancing cross-cultural conversations. Notably, his research on non-Eurocentric curriculum theorizing appears in *Educational Philosophy and Theory* and *Journal of the American Association for the Advancement of Curriculum Studies* (JAAACS). The multiplicities of curriculum inquiries have been published at *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, and *Race Ethnicity in Education*, to list a few. Currently, Seungho is actively involved in AERA-Division B and the Critical Issues in Curriculum and Cultural Studies (CICCS) SIG. Seungho is the recipient of early career award at CICCS in 2017. He is also the elected program chair at the AERA-SIG: Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism in Education (CTBE) and a treasurer at the American Association for the Advancement of Curriculum Studies (AAACS).

### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

What knowledge is important and who makes the decision? How to represent important knowledge in research? These are classical questions in education. This paper introduces Korea’s local village school called a seodang in answering these questions. A seodang’s curriculum is grounded upon individualized instruction and whole person education. It emphasizes mutually respectful relationships sustaining supportive local communities. In this innovative research paper, I create an intersection between cultural elements of important knowledge and how to represent them in an academic paper. Readers encounter with multilingual representations, visual interpretations of the text, and cultural poetry written in Korean, Sino-Korean, and English. By weaving together these two stripes of “what” of important knowledge and “how” of sharing data, I underscore the value of diverse methods in educational research grounded upon a seodang curriculum. Major texts and images taught in seodangs are interwoven with these articulations with the researcher subjectivity.

| **Keywords:** curriculum studies; innovative research; seodang; Korean studies

學而時習之 不亦說乎? *Is it not pleasant to learn with a constant perseverance and application?*  
(Confucius, 1893/2009, p. 137)

This article is an invitation to *open* to different approaches to knowledge, the knower, and the known. The knowledge/action connection is a crucial element in defining a knowledgeable person, which is known as *Junzi* [君子 a wise person in Confucianism]. This article examines self-cultivation and “*us-ness*,” which are core elements in defining the goal of education in Korean traditional wisdom. Figure 1 is an image I took from my research trip to a seodang, which is a local village school or learning center in Andong, South Korea. I begin this article with this image of *open-ness* that appears in one of seodangs. I combine the very first chapter of The Confucian Analects, which expresses the joy of learning, with the welcoming image of a seodang’s front gate when exploring Korean epistemology per se and its educational practice in the Korean context. In the curriculum and cultural studies fields, researchers focus on ethnocentric, indigenous knowledge to answer the Spencerian questions of what constitutes knowledge and ontological inquiries concerning the knower and the known (Bernal, 1998; Dillard, 2000; Smith, 1999). In this article, I examine the multiplicities of important knowledge and explore the ways in which Korean epistemologies of a relationship-oriented curriculum and a community-oriented learning community are embodied in seodangs.

Drawing from multiple epistemologies, educators of color in particular propose and theorize diverse definitions of “knowledge” and “learning” that move beyond Eurocentric, normalized approaches. For example, Chen (2010) utilizes Asian epistemology to represent lived experiences as a means of explaining cultural experiences among Asian communities. According to Chen

**Figure 1. Invitation to learning.**



(2010), Asia as a method refers to using “Asia as an imaginary anchoring point” that contributes to individual’s reference points in order to take action, so that “the understanding of the self can be transformed, and subjectivity rebuilt” (p. xv). An alternative reframing and mapping of *important knowledge* and meaningful teaching-learning strategies is possible by “shifting the frame of reference” (p. 243), as proposed by Chen to a different epistemological framework. Similarly, in the recent special issue of *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies*, postcolonial scholars theorized the meaning of *decolonizing autoethnography*. Chawla and Atay (2018), as the editors, explored the ways in which postcolonial theories reframe the field of autoethnography and vice versa. Another special issue in the *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* theorizes the ways in which “settler colonialism” is perpetuated and reproduced in daily lives (Rowe & Tuck, 2017, p. 3).

Persuaded by Chen’s argument, I shift and create “the frame of reference” (p. 243) in answering core epistemological and ontological questions about the very notion of important knowledge and who is considered the knower and the known. At the same time, I partially draw from Chawla & Atay’s (2018) invitation to use postcolonial studies in reconstituting the frame and representation of autoethnography and vice versa. Furthermore, I participate in Rowe and Tuck’s (2017) invitation to extend the field of indigenous studies and decolonizing studies by interrupting the Eurocentric, imperialistic notions of important knowledge in education. Guided by the complex meanings of subjectivity in the postcolonial/decolonial space, I attempt to create an intellectual space garnered in Korea’s indigenous knowledge and educational tradition as they appear in the seodang’s approach to education, which is through private, community-based learning centers in local villages.

Overall, this inquiry introduces the seodang’s multiple approaches to *important knowledge* and explores how to decolonize the Eurocentric understanding of curriculum as inspired by indigenous knowledge. Methodologically, I experiment the representation of Korean epistemology and seodang curriculum at the intersections of visual description and interpretations, multilingual explorations of text, and cultural poetry of the subjectivity. This project is grounded in three overarching research questions: What are the portraits of the seodang curriculum reflecting about Korean epistemology? In what ways does a seodang education provide a diverse framework for the international audience to conceptualize important knowledge in the 21st century, which in turn is influenced by market-oriented values of human beings? What innovative methodologies are possible to represent Korean epistemology, a seodang education, and the subjectivity of researcher? Ultimately, I aim to enrich the discourse on important knowledge and efficient teaching-learning strategies by examining Korea’s educational practices at seodangs, which mainly emphasize cultivating a holistic person through education. The investigation of the seodang’s educational system extends ongoing effort to recognize the value of indigenous epistemology and pedagogy in curricular discourses as well as to introduce innovative ways of representing *data* in cultural studies.

### 1. The places of learning

“A seodang is the foundation of Korea’s education” (Jung, 2012, p. 5)

My field trip to visit multiple representations of seodangs was a pilgrimage to experience Korea’s cultural heritage as it related to ways of knowing and ways of practicing. I kept in mind my Korean intellectual and cultural heritage and emphasized relationship-oriented epistemology and the interconnection between knowledge and action. I refer to my research trips as a pilgrimage driven from a sense of guilt for having ignored the value of such assets, which was influenced by the imperialist grammar often used to promote the inferiority of local culture. Other factors contributing to my guilt include the Otherness of my subjectivity and learned and reinforced helplessness about my own cultural heritage as an immigrant and ethnic minority in the U.S.

옛 것으로 찾아가는 서당여행은 또 다른 순례의 길. 다른 방식의 앎과 행함으로 향하는 이 여정에서 나는 관계 중심, 그리고 앎/실천이 하나로 엮여진 한국적인 인식론을 마음에 새겨본다. 이 순례의 길은 나 자신에 대한 000의 반향일지니, 왜 그리 내 문화, 내 자산에 대해 소홀히 여기고 승자의

논리에 억눌려 약함과 타자성에 그리 길들여 있었는가? 미국에서의 이민자, 소수자로서의 삶에서 또 다른 무엇을 어찌 창출할 것인가?

Ironically, I opened my eyes toward ethnocentric epistemology after working in the field of curriculum studies in the U.S. for more than a decade. The literature in ethnocentric epistemologies and cultural studies encouraged me to delve into my own cultural heritage and become a *pilgrimage* of sorts, putting forth theories about different ways of learning and diverse notions of important knowledge, as shown in Chicana epistemology (Bernal, 1998) and Black feminist theories (Dillard, 2000).<sup>1</sup> I theorize that a seodang is a place of learning founded upon two major elements in Korean epistemology: that is, relationship-oriented epistemology and knowledge-action connections in defining important knowledge. A seodang is a starting point for understanding Korean culture and educational heritage (Jung, 2012). I regard a seodang as a means of articulating how the aforementioned two components of Korean epistemology are embodied in the seodang curriculum. My field trips to three sets of seodangs in Korea opened the door for my exploration of the value of Seodangs for contemporary curricular and cultural discourse in the U.S.

Figures 2–5 are images of seodangs that reflected my thoughts during the research trip. Seodangs themselves reflect the complexity of learning through their different architectural styles and the complexity of their historical development, which has depended on the sociopolitical context of the times and their location. For example, during the Joseon dynasty, the target audience of seodang education varied from being exclusively for the noble class during the 14th to 18th centuries, to an inclusive model of teaching peasants in the 19th century. Around the 15th century, scholars and retired politicians built a learning center to continue their scholarship. Conversely, in the 19th century, seodang education included peasants in the local village schools (Chung, 2014; Jung, 2012). The location of the seodang and the teacher's social status also varied depending on the community's needs. Among previous images of seodangs, Figure 2 is an image from Yi Hwang, who was a very famous scholar and politician. This scholar's seodang articulated and disseminated his philosophy and interpretation of Neo-Confucianism.

Figure 3 is a local noble class seodang where the learning center was established to teach and sustain the tribe's heritage.

Figures 4 and 5 are located in Cheonghak, Jirisan Mountain, in the southern region, where the people lived under Japanese imperialism in the early 20th century while simultaneously striving to maintain Korean ethnic heritage, language, and culture.

**Figure 2. Dosan Seodang in Andong.**



**Figure 3. Jisan Seodang in Andong.**



**Figure 4. Cheonghak Seodang in Jirisan Mountain.**



Figure 5 is the zoomed in version of Cheonghak, Jirisan Mountain. The format and practice of seodang education shifted depending on the community's needs. Relational and sequential recognition of the individual value very much impacted and depended on the family, community, and nation.

For example, in an affluent community, the noble class focused on sustaining their royal status supported by seodang education. Formal learning was a privilege of the elite and ruling class rather than a system designed to teach texts for the common lay people (Phee, 2008). Another format of seodangs is that of a retired *Hunjang* [village school master] who generates and

**Figure 5. Zoomed in version of Cheonghak Seodang in Jirisan mountain.**



disseminates his knowledge to local communities. During Japanese colonization in the early 20th century, the Seodang was a place to keep Korean heritage and teaching literacy in direct opposition to the Japanese-only policy (Song, 2014). In fact, a political attempt was made to close Seodangs during this historical period of turmoil.

## 2. The portrait of the seodang curriculum

父生我身 (Bu-sang-ah-shin; My father gave birth to me)

母鞠吾身 (Mo-guk-oh-shin; My mother raised me with care)

腹以懷我 (Bok-ih-heo-ah; She carried me)

乳以哺我 (Yu-ih-pho-ah; She fed me with breast milk)

以衣溫我 (Ih-eui-ohn-ah; They clothed me to keep me warm)

以食飽我 (Ih-sik-pho-ah; They fed me to my heart's content)

恩高如天 (Ohn-goh-yeo-chun; Their gratitude is as high as the sky)

德厚似地 (Deok-hu-sah-ji; Their virtue is as thick as the earth)

爲人子者 (Wee-in-ja-ja; Since I am their child)

曷不爲孝 (Gal-bul-wee-hyo; I fulfill my filial duty)

A seodang was a private learning community playing a crucial role in educating young children in traditional Korea and has maintained its legacy of teaching children in small villages in contemporary times (Jang, 2014). A seodang was both a place of learning and a site to practice

knowledge about the proper way to establish relationships with parents, families, peers, and community members. A seodang was also a space to embody multiple pedagogical approaches from mastery learning to collaborative learning. The above excerpt is the first chapter of Four-Letter Small Learning (四字小學 Sah-ja-sohak), which introduces proper parent-child relationships and filial responsibilities to young children. The Canons of learning varied from the basic literacy book (e.g., Ten Thousand Letters) toward philosophical discourses on human nature and cosmos (Jung, 2012). Scholars wrote and used literacy books containing own pedagogy in literacy education and teaching the Canons. Dasan, for example, wrote a literacy book for children, *Ah-hak-pyeon* 兒學編, in teaching literacy. In designing the sequence of learning, Dasan emphasized familial relationship before introducing abstract ideas (Moon, 2013). The below is the first four phrases in *Ah-hak-pyeon* and these phrases demonstrate how family and relationship become the foundation of learning.

天地父母 (heaven, earth, father, mother)

君臣夫婦 (king, public officer, husband, wife)

兄弟男女 (older brother, younger brother, man, woman)

姊妹娣嫂 (older sister, younger sister, younger sister-in-law, older sister-in-law)

When learning major texts, including Four-Letter Small Learning, multi-age groups of children learn and practice the lessons in the Classics of Neo-Confucianism under the guidance of *Hunjang*. Studying proper relationships in the family and community is one scope of the seodang curriculum appears both in *Sohak* and *Ah-hak-pyeon*. To learn this big idea, Choi (2008) articulates that the seodang curriculum focuses on a differentiated, individualized curriculum that depends on each student's interest and intellectual capacity. Among multiple texts, *Sohak* [小學, The Small Learning] is a widely used text to teach *Il-yoon* [人倫 being true human with humanity], which highlights ethical and relational practices in life.<sup>2</sup> *Sohak* was originally edited by Zhu Xi, who cited major Confucian Canons and lessons. Notably, *Myeong-ryun* [明倫] is the chapter dealing with the basic principles of human relationships (Chung, 2014). *Sohak* [小學, The Small Learning] is contrasted with *Daehak* (大學 The Great Learning). The former emphasizes self-cultivation and individual practice for disciplining oneself and the family-community relationship, whereas the latter addresses principles that should be exemplified by leaders in charge of the community and State. *Sohak* is the stepping stone to learn *Daehak*, which is the key notion of self-cultivation and the beginning point from which one governs the State and the Cosmos. Shin, Ye, Yoon, Lim, and Chi (2017) argue that *Sohak* underscores “the habituation of what is learned, for habit leads to continuation of action, out of which the development of character emerges” (p. 182). The habituation of learning through daily practice is the key element that determines *important knowledge* in the seodang curriculum. This connection of knowledge and morality (or ethical practice) consists of major texts, including the *Sohak*.

When learning and practicing *Il-yoon* (人倫), seodangs implement extracurricular activities that include plays, field trips, and biographical studies purported to educate a whole person through intellectual, emotional, and social development. Notably, Choi (2008) explains how plays have crucial roles in understanding government and a sense of belonging within the community. “[In seodang] a play led to understanding about a systematic conception and grade[s] on a government post, correlation in titles, rank, scenic spots and places of historic interest, climate and products, and figures. And, a play led to fostering the expressive power, a belonging sense to a group, a cooperative mind, combination power, law-abiding property, and local patriotism” (p. 365). Jang (2002) cites the 18th century scholar, Deok-mu Lee, in describing proper teaching-learning strategies in Seodang. Major components include applying *less is more* principle in teaching; emphasizing student autonomy in text interpretation; being patient with children who need more time for learning, and utilizing supplementary text for literacy education. Jang (2002) implies that seodang curriculum-teaching is grounded in student autonomy in learning. Recitation of text



is crucial in order to apply the knowledge in practice, and the attitude of learning, including the proper posture of learning, is also emphasized.

### 3. The postures of learning

In contemporary teaching-learning terms, the seodang curriculum is founded upon an individualized, one-on-one teaching-learning model in a small learning community. The posture of learning in a seodang takes place in a supportive learning environment with multiple teachers and peers as well as through individualized instruction. Using contemporary educational terms, a seodang uses small classroom sizes, a flexible curriculum, a multi-age learning environment, and autonomy and self-regulation in learning. Although children enter a seodang at the same time, the scope and sequence of the curriculum varies according to an individual student's ability. A *Hunjang* (訓長) teaches school children (called *Hakdong*, 學童) depending on the individual students' abilities and personal differences. Learning occurs not only in this *Hunjang-Hakdong* relationship but also from interactions with an advanced-level peer (*Jeopjang*, 接長) and other peers (Cho, 2002). In recalling images of seodangs, Danwon's painting (Figure 6) is the most circulated. Multi-aged *Hakdongs* sit around a *Hunjang* and study individually. The *Jeopjang* is sitting to the left of the *Hunjang*. His hat symbolizes that he plays a different role in this learning community. Notably, the child in the middle just completed a check of his homework, which usually involved reciting the text in front of the *Hunjang*, and failed. After being punished for not successfully completing this task, he began crying.

This historical archival image does not fully represent all the images and methods of learning in seodangs. Drawing from Danwon's image and literature about seodangs, historians describe major characteristics and teaching-learning strategies (Lee, 2002). Mastery learning is important for understanding text based on letters, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs. In the seodang curriculum, literacy education focuses on independent reading and literacy grounded in the interpretation of the big meanings of the texts and their interpretations (Jang, 2002). Conversations between teachers and students are crucial for assessing a student's level of understanding. The Western notion of Socratic conversation is compatible with this method. Under this individualized guidance, the

Figure 6. Seodang by Danwon [Kim, Hongdo].



mentorship provided by the Hunjang is crucial for the student to differentiate the instructions that pertain to content and those dealing with methods. The seodang curriculum is different from the contemporary factory model of schooling, wherein a large-scale mass production is desired based on a standardized curriculum and competition models (Cho, 2002; Lee, 2002). In a seodang, no child learns a standardized curriculum based on a uniform learning process. As seen in the image, a small number of students study together with mentorship and assistance from a Jeopjang and their peers.

#### 4. The rhythms of learning: Mastery learning in literacy

A seodang is a place of learning with the rhythms, which refers both to practicing mastery learning in literacy and practicing what is learned through daily ethical practices. Choi (2008) describes three different teaching-learning strategies for mastery learning: instruction [Gang, 講], question-answer [Gaeng-shin-go-beop, 更辛苦法], and repetition [Sun-seung-cheop-beop, 循繩尺法]. In literacy education, teacher-centered learning occurs through Gang (講) and Gaeng-shin-go-beop (更辛苦法). Children listen to the Hunjang's instruction on the text and then answer his or her questions. Learning is not only completed when the repetition of the text is accomplished but also requires the student to keep the meaning of the text in mind and further embody this meaning in a lived experience. Sun-seung-cheop-beop (循繩尺法) is regarded as a perfect learning method through repetition for mastery learning to reach the point of practicing knowledge. With a rhythm, children master the Canons (e.g., Sajah-Sohak) "with the mouth, eyes, heart" (Kim, 2014, p. 59). Recitation is an inner space where the learner must put their hearts and minds into the living text.

Educators who value creativity, not rote memorization, criticize the seodang's teaching-learning method. They claim that it does not advance critical thinking skills through rote memorization. I argue that creativity emerges from a rigorous foundation of knowledge and the actual practice of the knowledge in making daily decisions. For example, Di (2017) reviews East Asian educational practices and provides a counter narrative about creativity. By analyzing one of the texts (學記, Xueji), Di challenges the myths that East Asian educational practices are authoritarian and promote rote memorization over creativity and diversity while perpetuating passivism and oppression in learning. When analyzing the major text in Xueji, Di claims that mastery learning appears in Xueji and encourages inquisitive conversation between the teacher-student and creativity in this conversation. Notably, a holistic approach of Oneness to teaching, learning, and life is constructed through the goal of becoming Junzi as an integrated person. The teaching-learning that appears in Xueji is "a highly interactive and reflective approach of teaching and learning far beyond simple memorization" (Di, 2017, p. 3). Di analyzes that Xueji encourages students to integrate knowledge and content in a deeper level with actions and lived experiences.

In defining mastery learning, Kim (2014) introduces the seodang curriculum as a model to promote combine knowledge and practice in a contemporary context. Recitation includes not only repeating the text but also reading that occurs through a mouth-heart-eye connection. A traditional western epistemology would not categorize a moral or ethical element under the umbrella of mastery learning. In a seodang curriculum, however, the nexus of knowledge and practice, particularly in ethical decision making, is integral in defining mastery learning (Shin et al., 2017). What one knows should be embodied in daily practice through ethical decision making. This mouth-heart-eye connection is possible because the seodang text emphasizes ethical relationships among people and creates a supportive and healthy society. Children at a seodang do not memorize mathematical formulae; for example, they do not depend on gimmicks to help them memorize technical math formulae. By reciting 父生我身 (Bu-sang-ah-shin; My father gave birth to me) and 母鞠吾身 (Mo-guk-oh-shin; My mother raised me with care), children are reminded of their parents and commit to their filial obligations for their parents. By reciting crucial phrases about human-human relationships in a public space, children learn how to interact with other people. Below is another example of a phrase from the Sajasohak that embodies basic principles related with creating sound relationships:

一杯之水 必分而飲 일배지수 필분이음  
我敬人親 人敬我親 경아인친 인경아친  
我敬人兄 人敬我兄 아경인형 인경아형

Even a glass of water, drink it after sharing it. When I respect other people's parents, other people also respect my parents. If I respect other people's siblings, they will respect my siblings likewise (Wu, 2005, pp. 58-59).

These phrases in the Sajasohak demonstrate the value of mouth-heart-eye connection in mastery learning (Kim, 2014). Mastery learning is knowing and practicing what you learned applied to daily lives interacting with siblings, neighbors, and family members. By reciting these phrases, children learn how to interact with others and actually put effort into practicing these lessons in their daily lives.

### 5. The authenticity of learning

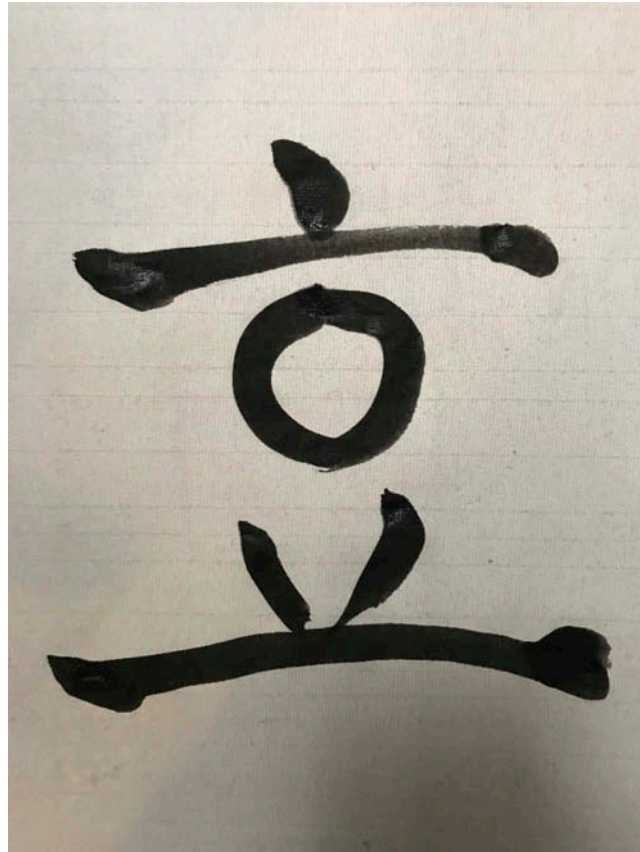
A seodang is a place of learning where knowing and practicing are not separate but are interwoven. The authenticity of learning occurs when knowledge is truly practiced in life. By learning 爲人子者 (Wee-in-ja-ja; Since I am their child) and 曷不爲孝 (Gal-bul-wee-hyo; I fulfill my filial duty) in the Sohak [Small Learning], children connect these eight letters with their interactions with their parents and elders. During literacy education at a seodang, three major courses are implemented for the authenticity of learning: reading text with comments and recitation [gangdok 講讀], composition of poetry [jesul 製述], and calligraphy (seup-ja 習字).

Seup-ja, calligraphy, is an important educational practice that is used to reflect on the text while disciplining the mind and reflecting on one's life. In the age of computers, penmanship or calligraphy is no longer a part of contemporary education. At best, it is taught in art classes or as a specific discipline. In the seodang curriculum, seup-ja is a way for students to reflect on their learning and discipline their minds. Calligraphy is both an abstract art and an intended art that contains specific value for the learning process. Yee (1973) explicates that calligraphy is the common form of arts and expresses an artist's personality as well. Calligraphy involves several steps for its preparation. Grinding an ink stick (usually made out of pine tree oil) requires a good amount of time to create ink, and meditation is involved in this grinding process. Reading the text is practiced by writing letters and composing poetry with the addition of natural objects, such as flowers and animals. Calligraphy is an art form in which the flow of pure energy and spirit has been recorded on traditional rice paper with ink for thousands of years as a form of teaching and manifestation (Yee, 1973).

In Figure 7, the Sino-Korean letter Hyo (孝, piety) portrays how the very first chapter of the Sohak is represented in this image. Students at a seodang practice this calligraphy both as a means of self-discipline and as a medium through which to reflect on how to re-build and/or imagine their relationships with their parents.

Having my new-born daughter is an earth-breaking event. Everything is upside-down. What I valued has been changed because of my love for her. I look back my relationship with my parents through this new parent-child relationship. In a superficial level, I knew that my parents loved me and took care of me. I did not know how much my parents truly loved me (unconditionally) while feeding my daughter and soothing her. With the mindset of remembering my dad who passed away in 2015 and my mom who is now in her 80s, I recall the meaning of piety from scratch. I decided to write the letter of piety both in Sino-Korean and Korean as a format of seup-ja. As part of meditation, I produced ink out of grinding an ink stick. I used a brush for seup-ja practice imagining I am in a seodang learning and practicing the core value in Saja-Sohak: Piety and filial responsibility. I recall the etymology of piety in Sino-Korean: the combination between an old person (Figure 9) and a child (Figure 10). I remember my mother who is holding a cane (Figure 9) and I become the son (Figure 10) who is piggybacking on her. While looking at the letter Hyo (孝piety) in Figures 7 and 8 again, I keep saying Thank You with tears to my parents.

**Figure 7. Korean letter Hyo (Piety).**

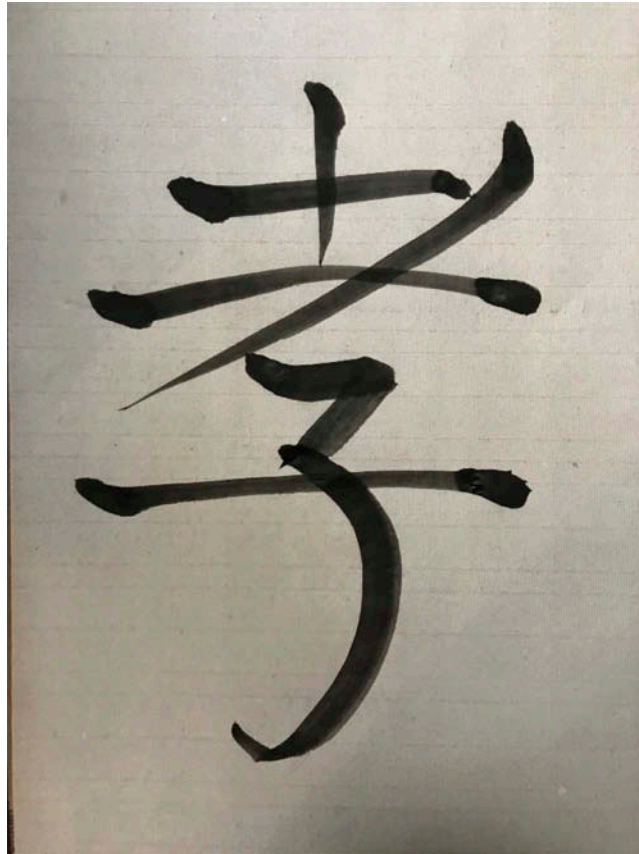


Authentic learning in a seodang incorporates learning through practicing and practicing through learning. My brief autoethnographic narrative shows how my seup-ja practice is connected with my understanding of the letter *Hyo* and my determination how to construct and sustain parent-child relationship across generations. In a seodang, the knowledge/action connection is a method to educate a holistic person whose knowledge and actions are not divided but instead are integrated (Kim, 2017). At the same time, literacy is not technical consumption of knowledge but is interconnected with the artistry of seup-ja as a mean to combining knowledge and action through meditation and calligraphy. This step is the point through which the authenticity of learning is advanced by promoting character education through literacy and artistry.

#### **6. The dream of learning**

The seodang curriculum is directly connected with creating an ideal community and is grounded in constructing healthy relationships. I postulate that the seodang curriculum is the actual embodiment of Korean epistemology because the self-other relationship is infused within us-ness. This learning in a seodang challenges individualistic models or meritocracy ideas that a person's efforts deserve to be rewarded. Attention is focused more on communal devotion to raising a person to be Junzi (a good person).<sup>3</sup> Learning is accomplished in a communal space rather than an individual territory of achievement and rewards (Kim, 2014). In the curriculum content of Confucian texts, creating relationships is the core of the teaching and includes parent-child, friend-friend, and spousal relationships. For example, with Myeongshimbogam, children learn the wisdom and knowledge of self-cultivation, social ethics, and human interactions. Humbleness is the core point of Junzi and the foundation upon which a supportive environment in the community is created. "Those who are able to lower down themselves will deal with important work; those who love to win will meet the enemy finally"

**Figure 8. Sino-Korean letter  
Hyo (Piety).**



(chapter 80). Seodang underscores I-thou relationships and thus I-thou interrelationality in daily life by reminding us of the us-ness in life. The dream of learning exists in creating a community that supports mutual respect. In practice, this joy of learning in the community is implemented in the curriculum assessment at the end of the season. By completing a book (Kae-chaek-rye 掛冊禮), students demonstrate their knowledge as a form of performance assessment. Community members gather together to celebrate their children's learning and share food and drink. This festival of learning with the community takes place in each community. By drafting and sharing a diary of learning, the diary's leaning contents and styles can be shared among the students in the school (Kim, 2017).

### **7. Seodang: Living in the text and text in the living**

我汝不二 (아여불이 A-yeo-bul-ih)

相補 調和 (상보조화 Sang-boh-jo-hwa)

知行 不二 (지행불이 Ji-haeng-bul-ih)

相生同行(상생동행 Sang-saeng-sang-dong-haeng)

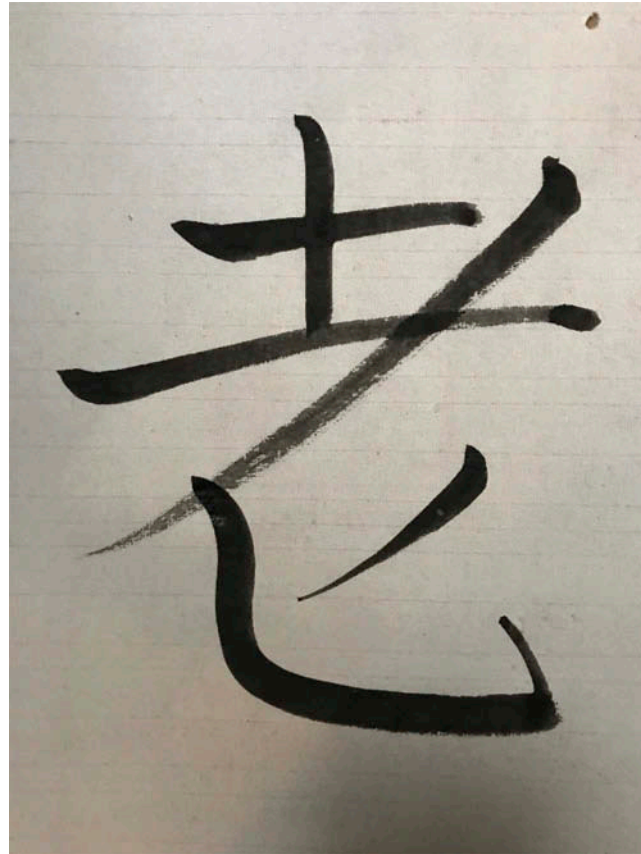
나와 너는 둘이 아닌 하나이니

서로 채워가며 조화를 이루고

앞과 행함은 둘 이 아니니

서로를 살리며 함께 하느니라

**Figure 9. Sino-Korean  
Representing the old (Rho).**

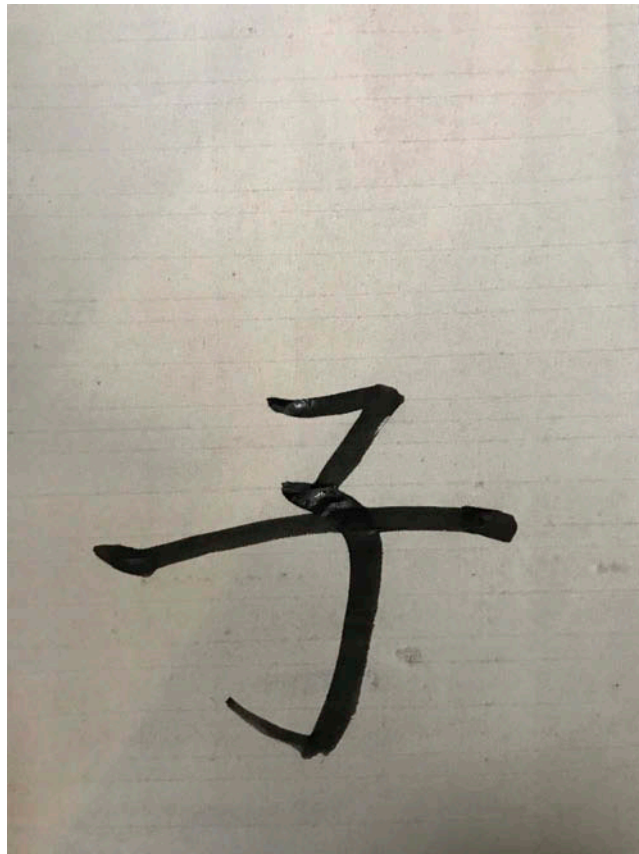


*Thou and I are not the two but One  
We keep the balance, filling in each other  
Knowing and acting is not the two  
We nurture together*

As a pilgrimage, I took the journey to ethnocentric epistemology by revisiting sites of knowing and learning. I composed the above poetry in Sino-Korean and Korean and translated it into English. My expression of Korean epistemology partially portrays the message that I intend to convey throughout this article examining the seodang curriculum—namely, the emphasis on proper relationships and “us-ness.” I introduce Korea’s traditional teaching-learning strategies, which provides a different perspective to interrupt the current Eurocentric, imperialistic educational practices. Rowe and Tuck (2017) argue that colonizer’s ideology of *settler colonialism* is perpetuated and reproduced in intellectual disciplines. They suggest to invent and apply a new frame to cultural studies, minimizing the cultural reproduction of settler’s ideology and advancing the revitalization of indigenous epistemology. This article is a courageous effort to address an epistemological concern in education and to provide the seodang as a case study to examine ethnocentric epistemology. Subscribing to Rowe and Tuck’s (2017) argument, I explore Korean epistemology in order to challenge the Eurocentric, imperialistic, and colonial agenda informed by the Western settler’s ideologies. Notably, I provide a new frame of defining important knowledge from Korean epistemology—underscoring “us-ness” through proper self-other relationship and emphasizing knowledge-action connection in life.

Teaching-learning in Korean traditional education is originated from the recantation of the text and practicing major phrases in/through/with mind-heart-action. Educators in the West

**Figure 10. Sino-Korean  
Representing a child (Ja).**



reproduces the stereotypes about a traditional East Asian educational model, criticizing the lack of creativity and rote memorization. I argue that this metanarrative stems from the misunderstanding of Korean epistemology. A new, de-colonial frame is crucial to redefine and imagine what important knowledge is and should be. This new framework can be used to excavate the unknown but was not used to circulate wisdom that has spread historically. This framework can be also used to embrace indigenous wisdom and recalibrate the trajectory of the notion of important knowledge. I hope that Korean epistemology of knowing and the known will provide a new framework for interpreting and defining what should be taught and how it should be taught in schools.

I create and apply a new, de-colonial frame of important knowledge with the use of Korean epistemology. I present three major angles that are exemplified in seodang education: the Oneness of knowing and practicing, self-other connections in the community, and mentor-mentee (teacher-student) relationships with individualized caring. Based on this major Korean epistemology, I dismantle the bifurcation of knowledge-practice, self-other, and teacher-student dichotomy in contemporary educational discourse in the West. Learning is a process involving interweaving knowledge and practice as One—that is, ethical and relational elements are the center of the scope of knowledge. Learning is a process of Tao in which Tao accepts the humility and smallness of one individual's being and his/her inter-relationality with others to create communities. One person cannot exist without communal support, including the family and other elements. In the end, the creation of a healthy community with respect, caring, and self-discipline is the way to reach Junzi which is the ideal model of a human being. I do not support the fixed, hierarchical model of Neo-Confucianism sustained social stratification. Instead, I value attention to human relationships by creating the value and importance of learning and practice.

Critical discourse on a seodang education may be a leading point for rethinking colonial, neoliberal educational practices that emphasize meritocracy and the survival of the fittest. Currently, students live in a global society where new epistemology and pedagogy are required to challenge the current neoliberal, market-oriented social and educational practices. The language of literacy, numeracy, and college/career-readiness limits the scope of education under the current curriculum reform movement (Moon, 2015). This article provides another lens that challenges the normalized understanding of curriculum and test-oriented educational practices. I revisit the contemporary meaning of education, which is highly influenced by the neoliberal definition of learning and knowledge. I rethink the output-oriented value by asking the different question: “what is the real meaning of living and life?”

In writing this article, I am reminded of all the teachers and colleagues who encouraged me to grow and to become the person that I am today. When assessing and reflecting on my previous experiences, I note that we tend to remember those teachers who have taught us how to live and given us a purpose in life. I hardly remember the specific content that I learned from my teachers. Teaching about *the way of living and practicing* is what I truly recall from my previous public education. The value and implication of a Seodang education and Korea’s indigenous knowledge emerges from this perspective to underscore humanity in education, not competition, and to create a sense of community, “us-ness,” in imagining a contemporary application of living together.

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#### Notes

1. I define my research as a curriculum historical inquiry that examines historiographic archives and related documents about Seodang education and its curriculum. In defining a historical inquiry, Davis (1991) articulates the importance of “telling” stories that happened in the past to provide meaningful implications for contemporary curriculum theorizing and curriculum practice (Davis, 1991). By subscribing to Davis’s articulation, I explore the history and practice of the Seodang curriculum and offer implications for including indigenous knowledge in defining important curricular practices. During my field trips to three major Seodang institutions, I was reminded of the cultural and political contexts that impacted Seodang education for centuries and still persist in contemporary educational practices in Korea. As Davis mentions, a historical curriculum inquiry raises critical questions about the urgent educational issues informed by innovative interpretations. This historical inquiry forced me to examine urgent problems and issues in the curriculum and cultural studies field, such as how to decolonize Eurocentric understanding of a curriculum as inspired by indigenous knowledge.
2. It is challenging to universalize major texts and curriculum taught in Seodang during the Joseon Dynasty. Due to the scope of this paper, I do not introduce major books used in Seodang. Briefly speaking, Jang (2014) list the sequence of text from literacy books for children toward the Confucian Canons, including

Cheon-ja-mun (千字文), Dong-mong-sun-seup (童蒙先習), Tong-gam, So-hak (小學), Four Books and Three Canons (四書三經), Sah-gi (史記), Dongsongmun, Dangyul, Chunchu (春秋), and Yegi (禮記).

3. The new bourgeois who emerged in the 19th century wanted to use Seodangs for social promotion to pass the governmental service exams. However, I argue for the basic ideal in Confucianism and actual communal involvement in creating a sound community.

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