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# U.S. Influences on Korean Education: Understructure, Imprint and Overlay

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VOLUME XII

**KOREA** FULBRIGHT  
**FORUM**

AN INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF RESEARCH ON KOREA

MAY 1996

A Periodic Publication of the Korean-American Educational Commission

# KOREA FULBRIGHT FORUM

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*The Korea Fulbright Forum is an interdisciplinary journal which the editor hopes will further international understanding of Korea by introducing Korean Studies and related material, in the form of original and/or translated works, to an English speaking audience.*

*The views and opinions appearing in this journal should most properly be attributed to the individual authors and not to the Korean-American Educational Commission.*

# U.S. INFLUENCES ON KOREAN EDUCATION: UNDERSTRUCTURE, IMPRINT AND OVERLAY

*D. Russell Bailey*

The inaccuracy of outside analysis of a culture is compounded when the analytical perspective is that of a technologically advanced Western nation and the culture under scrutiny is a melange of Eastern tradition and rapid technological development. Since U.S. society has enjoyed economic hegemony through much of the twentieth century, our citizens have expected the rest of the world, especially the East and the developing areas, to be eager to transfer U.S. knowledge, *i.e.*, adopt our social, educational and especially our industrial structures in hopes of emulating our “miracle of modernization.” Thus, citizens of the U.S. have expected the Republic of Korea (hereafter referred to simply as Korea) to attempt integration into their society of our social, educational and industrial structures as extensively and wholeheartedly as possible. This chauvinist naïveté of the casual U.S. observer of Korean society often mistakes superficial overlay in the transfer of knowledge structures for more integral imprint or vital understructure. The ensuing discussion attempts to provide a frame of reference for knowledge transfer and to scrutinize and sort into three categories the influences which U.S. educational philosophy and practice have had on education in Korea.

There have been two major eras of U.S. influence on Korean education. The first was part of the massive influx of Western cultures which occurred toward the end of the 19th century, when the Yi Dynasty opened its closed doors to the outside world. The social context was changing and the traditional educational system began changing to maintain relevance and integrity within this context. In this first era one sees influence through knowledge transfer in the introduction of schools founded by the American Missionary Foundation, Paejae Hak Dang (1855) and Ewha Hak Dang (1886) and the twenty-seven other mission schools founded in Seoul and provincial capitals between 1883 and 1908 (Ministry of Education, 1989). Although there was no explicit attempt to introduce U.S. pedagogical structures, the moral and spiritual substance of the mission school curricula deeply influenced (at various levels) at least the system of private educational institutions in Korea.<sup>1</sup> Influence through mission schools on the national education system (at various levels) was only indirect, much as the “loyal opposition” influences the party in power. It is interesting to note, however, that many of these schools remained in operation during the Japanese occupation and

thus constitute a subtle but ubiquitous influence and, thus, a persistent and integral component of the educational climate in Korea.<sup>2</sup>

The second era began, one could say, with the Japanese annexation of Korea in 1910 and the Japanese program which destroyed the traditional control of *Tong To Sôh Ki* (Oriental learning and Western technology), "the dominant paradigm or frame of reference of Korean scholars during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century with regard to intercultural exchanges" (Lee, Adams, & Cornbleth, p.236). With this benchmark of intellectual balance destroyed, the stage was set for the later instances of massive importation of U.S. (Western) knowledge after 1945, the post-liberation period and beyond. The massive influx of Western knowledge (especially vis-à-vis technological development) at this time further weakened traditional control mechanisms (Korea Research Foundation). The imminent misfit of Korea and the West is presaged in a Korean saying or *sokdam*, where traditional Korean wisdom warns that the indiscriminate adaptation of Western (read: foreign and U.S.) ways makes for an odd mix: "*Chipsine kukhwa kulinda*" (to draw chrysanthemum flowers on straw shoes, as peasants imitated the silk chrysanthemum-decorated leather shoes).

The second, post-1945 era of influence is quantitatively much greater than the first and it is in this era that one must look more critically to differentiate the three levels of influence. Recent work in comparative education aids somewhat the deciphering of these levels. In the 1980s comparative educators (Armove, R.F., & Altbach, P.G., among others) devised a methodology called "dependency theory," which facilitates the analysis of educational influence between nations and cultures. This methodology has been applied by Jong Jag Lee and colleagues (Lee, J.J., 1986, 1988) to U.S. influences on Korean education. Dependency theory differentiates between "centre" (technologically more developed, economically more powerful) and "periphery" (technologically less developed, economically less powerful) areas and holds that knowledge (within a "knowledge system") is transferred from centre to periphery. This differentiation occurs both between and within nations.<sup>3</sup> The concept of "knowledge system" here includes the "complex of institutions, organizations, groups and social roles that form the social arrangement within which knowledge-related activities are carried out" (Holzner and Marx, 1979). For the purposes of this essay the knowledge system focus will be on "knowledge mediators" (*i.e.*, educators with recognized status and influence at all levels), types of reforms, curricula and textbooks.

A brief review of post-1945 U.S. influences on Korean education reveals that it is in the areas of science and technology where U.S. concepts and practices more often became part of the understructure.<sup>4</sup> This is because education was made to focus on efforts at rapid economic development in Korea. The structure of the Korean Advanced Institute of Science and Technology (KAIST), its undergraduate feeder school (the Korean Institute of Technology), and the thirteen or so feeder science high schools constitute the best and most important examples of clear and

extensive U.S. influences at the understructure level. The U.S. (centre) possessed the desired knowledge system (technological expertise, etc.) which Korea (periphery) wanted. Thus, Korea's zeal for technological development overrode all other considerations ( e.g., the traditional, cultural misfit) and forced the nation to compromise in whatever way necessary to acquire this knowledge.

What has been true in great part in science and technology is remarkably different from other knowledge areas. For the most part, influences in the social sciences remain as imprint and in the humanities as simply overlay.<sup>5</sup> The periods of greatest influence were 1945-1960, from the time when Korea came under the control of the U.S. Military Government in Korea (USMG) until Park Chonghee seized power and recentralized the educational system, and 1973-1980, from the founding of the Korean Education Development Institute (KEDI) until the assassination of Park and renewed momentum for recentralization of the system.<sup>6</sup>

In 1945 the USMG constructed the educational bridge between the system imposed by Japanese imperialism and the Korean pastiche of U.S., Japanese, and traditional Korean educational concepts and implementation.<sup>7</sup> Korea was ripe for almost any kind of educational intervention.<sup>8</sup> A system of locally controlled school boards was established by the USMG, which attempted to decentralize and democratize schooling. Unfortunately the USMG's attempts at educational reform (democratization and decentralization) were in almost constant competition with the centralizing effects of the Ministry of Education (MOE), which was never dismantled. Textbooks and school practices of these early years generally reveal a structurally U.S.-modeled system under close scrutiny of the MOE.<sup>9</sup> For example, many of the textbooks were compiled and edited by the Korean Council on Korean Education but published by the USMG (Linton, p.7). U.S. educated university professors were responsible for formalizing the Korean educational system. Peabody College provided an almost constant stream (conveyor belt) of pedagogical ideas and methods to the Korean national system via its formal relationship with Seoul National University (SNU) from 1948-1961.<sup>10</sup> The Peabody Project was one of many formal and informal collaborations which produced U.S. influences at various levels of Korean education. Many other U.S. universities provided Korea with a continuous supply of U.S.-educated and trained pedagogues. Other programs have had varying degrees of influence, but most of them were in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>11</sup> The most important foci for U.S. influences on Korean education are KEDI (founded in 1972)<sup>12</sup>, KAIST (founded in 1971), and the 1988 Olympics. KEDI and KAIST are formal conduits for U.S. pedagogical theories and methods. The opportunity for international exposure 1988 Olympics became the grand *raison d'être* for Korea's national push for world-class economic capabilities.

It is important to focus briefly on the humanities and social sciences, areas where U.S. influence has remained as overlay and imprint respectively. In the humanities there appears to be a sense among the Koreans (perhaps also among

the Chinese and Japanese) of superiority over the U.S. Although languages, literature, philosophy, fine arts and religion of the West are of interest to Koreans, there is implicit (and often explicit) implication that the Korean language is in every way better, more cleverly developed, more substantial than U.S. English. U.S. English is helpful primarily when one wants to study in the U.S. or understand technological information. U.S. literatures are interesting and cute, but of no great substance when compared to the Korean tradition of masters dating back millennia. U.S. art, music and theater forego Korean respect in great part because they stray from the focus on "the masters as models." Religion from the U.S. has proven practical in that it advanced general educational offerings through the mission schools. U.S. religions have also tapped into the stream of emotionalism flowing through shamanistic tradition. Still, as Crane points out, "Even among Christian groups, there is a gap between Christian dogma and Christian ethics. Many Korean Christians are in reality more Confucian than Christian in their attitudes and actions."(p.145). Christian religious overlay provided a visible sign of integration of Western ideas and values, but Christian religions are often unable to compete in substance, sophistication and wisdom with the religious traditions of Old Korea. Still, as "world television" and other media expose Korean masses to the constant broadcast of U.S. arts and humanities (as well as popular culture) programming, it is possible that the U.S. will have greater influences on Korean culture and education in these areas.

Social sciences as pursued in the U.S. have proven more attractive for inclusion in Korean education than the arts and humanities primarily because they can promote and facilitate acquisition of technological knowledge and thus enhance economic development. Still, U.S. educational theories and practices in the social sciences have not been embraced by the Koreans as strongly as those in the sciences because they possess less intrinsic value. The educational theories and practices in the sciences are merely means to an end: Korea's struggle toward technological parity in the world. One example from Korean-U.S. educational exchange will exhibit how the Korean educational system resists U.S. influence and refuses to accept foreign educational patterns into its understructure.

As described by Lee, *et al* (1986, 1988), there were substantial reasons and opportunity for the Korean educational system to incorporate the U.S. developed "inquiry teaching method" (ITM) into its curriculum as a way to broaden and enhance its students' learning. Lee, *et al*, explain that basic and incompatible differences exist between Korea and the U.S. The two share little in terms of history, cultural heritage, political and economic conditions. Such differences in social context, tradition and cultural environment elicit resistance and prohibit some knowledge transfer in the case of ITM. As mentioned above there has been adequate opportunity for U.S. influence on Korean education given the tradition of mission schools, Japanese destruction of *Tong To Sôh Ki*, U.S. involvement in Korean education following WWII, and the strong U.S. presence during and

following the Korean Conflict. As another wave of support for U.S. educational theory and practice developed around 1970, U.S.-Korean collaboration conceived of and created KEDI. KEDI was partially funded with U.S. monies and staffed by U.S.-trained pedagogues. Lee, *et al* (p.236), list three types of transitional networks which emerged at this time between Korea and the U.S. and promoted knowledge transfer:

1. institution-building through U.S. technical assistance;
2. direct technical assistance;
3. the quantity of Koreans being educated in the U.S.

Given these transitional networks and the strong U.S. presence in Korea, the following conditions developed to nurture a U.S.-dependent knowledge system in Korea:

- U.S.-educated scholars who were recruited into positions of leadership; the Korean reward system favored U.S.-educated scholars;
- U.S. democratic ideology (through churches, government, military and schools) became the basis for a new educational perspective; in addition to KEDI there were research institutes and educational facilities created patterned on U.S. models.
- Korea was prepared to import U.S. educational theories and methods and apply or adapt them to the Korean system.

ITM was a curricular method highly touted in the U.S. and thus almost automatically selected for transfer via the pedagogical conveyor belt to Korea. ITM embodied U.S. fervor for creativity, reflective thinking, discovery classroom discussions and projects. Byron Massialas' ITM text *Creative Encounters* was translated into Korean in 1972 in response to the interest of a coterie of knowledge mediators, who became enamored of ITM while studying in the U.S.<sup>13</sup> It appeared at a time when the traditional Korean "expository method" was being somewhat demeaned as staid and static, lacking the dynamism commensurate with Korea's desire to modernize. Thus, the expository method fell into disfavor and KEDI developed its first ITM model in 1973 as a replacement. ITM was instituted nationally in Korea and strongly supported until circa 1983.

There were uneven results with ITM methods. Surely, there were some successes, but there were a number of obvious reasons why most efforts to implement ITM resulted in failure. ITM required active student participation; Koreans were accustomed to passive demeanor in class. In ITM the teacher became more of a director or activator of discussions and discovery projects; Koreans were accustomed to the teacher as authoritarian leader. ITM was intended



for classes with relatively low student/teacher ratios (ca. 20-25/1); it was as high as 80/1 in Korea. ITM emphasized "higher level thinking skills" (application, analysis, synthesis, evaluation); rote-memorization was the preferred learning method remaining from Confucian Academy tradition (*i.e.*, "lower level thinking skills," knowledge, comprehension). Since ITM made an inappropriate fit with the Korean context, it was first adapted<sup>14</sup> then rejected and the expository method returned to favor.

## CONCLUSION

U.S. influences on Korean education are considerable, though not as massive or substantial as a cursory examination would suggest. Knowledge transfer has occurred most extensively in those areas providing Korea with the greatest advantages, namely in the realm of science and technology. The more integral knowledge proved to the advance of science and technology, the more readily and thoroughly was this knowledge transferred. The social sciences (especially as related to economics and politics) possessed integral value and thus educators attempted transfer of pertinent knowledge. The ITM implementation of 1972-1983 is the best example of "transfer" in this area. The arts and humanities have remained basically unintegrated since they are less vital to economic development.

Attitudes on Western, especially U.S., influences vary broadly. The well known Korean cultural critic Rhee Chongik sees extensive U.S. influences:

As far as Korea is concerned, we owe America and the Americans for the survival and life of this republic....America's independent and adventuresome national spirit has been a bright guidepost for many up-coming nations as well as their traditional allies for their future expectation and growth as competitive forces in the international community. Korea is of course no exception, and we have very special feeling toward America and the American people (p.138)....Korea's economic success as well as its democratic political development owe much to the advanced and fresh infusion of the knowledges and the practical know-how from abroad, particularly from the United States (p.399).

Rhee assesses U.S. influences as mostly beneficial and vital. Another noted Koreanist appraises this influence less generously. Crane allows that a

superficial overlay of Western thought patterns has changed the outward appearance of many [young people]. Because of this overlay of Western dress and manners, some Westerners

mistakenly assume that the inner man has changed. Relatively few persons, outside of some in deeply religious groups and some who have received advanced training abroad, have undergone substantial changes in their basic ways of thinking and acting (pp. 144 ff.).

Crane comments from a more general cultural perspective and judges U.S. influences to be either superficial or limited to specific groups. Rutt describes U.S. influence more pessimistically. For him it has forever altered the understructure of Korean cultural design:

The end of the nineteenth century marks the end of Korea. Since then Western so-called civilization has come in with overwhelming volume that nothing could withstand. Before this juggernaut the Chinese classics have gone down, together with the old course of classical study that prepared men for public office. Old religions, that comforted the soul and held society together for centuries, have been forgotten. All the ancient forms of the east have been flung to the winds in exchange for inextricable confusion that we see today....We weep over old Korea, a victim, not so much of political agencies, as of the social and intellectual revolution that has come from the west (p.319).

Although these insightful commentators disagree on the extent and depth of U.S. influence, all three agree that U.S. culture and ideas have washed over Korea. There is consensus that the U.S. knowledge system has been part of this influence. To the extent that the components of this knowledge system have promoted scientific and technological development, they have been integrated more deeply into the understructure of the Korean educational system. The realms of social science and the arts and humanities have proven less valuable and thus influences *in these areas remained as imprint and overlay* respectively. Influence resulting from the transfer of knowledge from the U.S. (centre) to Korea (periphery) is likely to continue as long as Korea senses the need for greater economic development.

## NOTES

1. One can argue that Christianity was accepted and lately has taken a firm hold in Korea by tapping into the tradition of emotionalism and irrationality which is embodied in shamanism. Disregarding the reasons for Christianity's influence, it is indisputable that the philosophy and practice of the missionary school systems strongly affected education in

Korea, especially through its emphasis on the individual versus the group and democratic process versus traditional hierarchy of roles. Syngman Rhee and Yun Po-sun, the first two presidents of the Republic of Korea, and former Democratic Party Premier were Christians.

2. It is interesting to note that there were some 3,000 private (mostly church-related) schools opened between 1905-1910 (H.H. Underwood), and many of them remained in operation during the Japanese occupation, since "Bible Club" was acceptable.

3. Thus, the U.S. is centre and Korea is periphery; Seoul is centre and the rest of Korea is periphery.

4. One need only look at U.S.-Korea business networks (autos, electronics, sport shoes, shipping equipment, etc.), educational exchanges, and the infusion of U.S. educational theory and practice at the Korean Advanced Institute of Science and Technology (KAIST), modeled on MIT, and the approximately 13 feeder national science high schools, modeled on the North Carolina Governor's School.

5. The case of the inquiry teaching method (ITM) in social studies will be sketched below. In the humanities strong preference for traditional concepts, e.g., expository teaching (versus active student learning and research), imitation of artistic masters, emphasis on grammar in foreign language classes, etc., discourages the "intrusion" of U.S. humanities; more on this below.

6. The school population in Korea increased dramatically between 1945 and 1970: from 1,366,024 primary school pupils to 5,622,816 (over 400%); primary school pupils increased twenty-fold; higher education students increased 170-fold (Ahn, p.3).

7. The Korean system inherited much from the German/Prussian system via the Japanese, e.g., the *rigid* exam system which intensified the Confucian concept of the Dragon's Gate.

8. According to H.G. Underwood II, "less than 25% of the Korean population of some 20 million people in 1945 had any formal education, and far less than 1% had even a 'senmon gakkō' [middle school] education" (p.311). Later, in the Korean war, education was dealt another blow: 23% of the schools were destroyed and 41% were severely damaged (Ahn, p.4).

9. The Education Law of 1949 adopted the U.S. 6-3-3-4 school ladder to replace the old two-track structure. Linton comments that the "content of education from 1945 to 1960, however, did not reflect the [efforts at] recentralization. The first official textbooks of the new Republic were heavily influenced by American models. In grammar school, a Koreanized version of the popular *Dick and Jane* series became the national language texts. Ethics texts in this period were international in character with almost half of the moral exemplars foreigners. The study of foreign nations was a major focus of education of this period. America's role in the Korean War was extolled with odes of gratitude supposedly written by Korean children. Detailed instruction in democratic process was also a characteristic of education at this time.

10. This indirect U.S. influence on Korean educational ideas and methods has been fairly constant: ca. 80% of KEDI researchers have U.S. graduate degrees; ca. 80% of Korea's university education faculty hold U.S. graduate degrees; ca. 85%-90% of SNU faculty have done graduate work in the U.S.; and ca. 90% of KAIST's faculty hold U.S. Ph.D.s. Perhaps it is because of this indirect, subtle link to the U.S. that Koreans believe the U.S. is the "second paradise" after Korea itself (Crane, p.85).

11. In 1971 Florida State University was requested to send a team to Korea to prepare recommendations for school reform. Their report *System Analysis for Educational Change: The Republic of Korea* led to the development of KEDI, which is staffed by ca. 80% U.S.-educated researchers. The Fulbright program has made it possible for many Korean-U.S. student and scholar exchanges.

12. Through KEDI there is constant formal U.S. influence; some examples from KEDI's 1982-1985 *Research Abstracts* in English: "The Study and Development of CAI Model Program," "Technological Development and Its Implications for Educational Planning in the Republic of Korea," "A Study on the Development of Educational Policy and Programs for the Gifted Students in Science at the Secondary School Level," "A Review of Science Education in the U.S.A. 1960-1980."

13. These were found in the Central Educational Research Institute, the Korean Institute of Research in the Behavioral Sciences, KEDI, the Korean Social Studies Association, the Korea Research Foundation, the Korean Ministry of Education, among others (Lee, et al, p.235).

14. ITM came to include some rote memorization and the self-determination of activities like "values clarification" became more "values indoctrination".

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