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KOREAN EDUCATION

edited by

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most distinguishing characteristics of the Korean people is their passion for education, a passion that is arguably unmatched in the world. This fervor for learning, often labeled the “education syndrome,” has deep roots in Korea’s traditional respect for knowledge and deep belief in continuous, life-long human development. This emphasis on learning derives largely from the age-old Confucian belief that man is perfectible through education and that only the most learned should govern the country and society.

For more than a millennium major positions of power were allocated by civil service examinations, although the social structure was such that only the privileged class and its male members could take them. Success in the examinations determined a family’s fame and fortune. For Koreans, the ideal leader was a scholar-official, which explains why King Sejong, sage king and inventor of the Korean alphabet, is revered to this day.

Originally intended by the elite for its own edification and culture, education was at first provided to prospective leaders from aristocratic families to ensure high quality leadership. The Korean elite also believed knowledge enhanced moral governance. Education thus served as a check against incompetent or cruel government. At the same time, education also served to perpetuate the elite’s exclusive access to power through self-improvement, allowing them to claim their special heaven-mandated status even more convincingly.

Modern education, born at a time of great influx of Western democratic ideals ostensibly accepted by all Koreans, has become accessible to everyone. Ironically, however, democratic education has now become a mechanism for the formation and legitimation of new social classes, albeit offering some chance of upward mobility even for people of the humblest origin. Even in the modern era, educational attainment is accepted as one of the fairest measures of a person’s worth, and scholars are still called upon to fill some of the highest government positions. Education is also seen as an effective, fundamental instrument for nurturing national strength. The South Korean government emphasizes the country’s education, and the Ministry of Education (MOE) is one of the most important executive branches of government, in an interesting contrast with the equivalent body in the U.S. federal government.¹

Koreans have achieved phenomenal progress in making education available to all citizens, and by 2000 South Korea’s literacy rate was nearly one hundred percent. Koreans are among the most educated people in the world. In step with the remarkable economic growth, which has made the South Korean economy the 11th largest in the world, South Korean students have consistently achieved the highest math, science, and problem-solving scores in international aptitude tests. This was not, however, always the case. Merely sixty years ago, after Korea’s liberation from 35 years of Japanese domination in 1945, three out of four Koreans were illiterate, and fewer than five percent of Korean schoolchildren continued their schooling after elementary school.

As soon as the Koreans regained their independence, they committed their wealth and soul to educating their children. Unlike in traditional Korea, total upward mobility was possible for many people through educational attainment, and “many dragons emerged from the sewage,” as the Korean saying goes. Koreans became obsessed with obtaining diplomas—tickets to a brighter world. Today, many Koreans are active on the world stage, be it an academic, cultural, technical, medical, commercial, or sports arena. Much of their success came with the help of their education, enhanced with other traits such as entrepreneurial spirit, diligence, and a renewed sense of self-confidence, and optimism.

Any obsession, of course, has a price. There are endless stories of the absurd measures people take to send even very young children to the best schools including those in foreign countries. However, what has impressed education specialists around the world is the rather exceptional fact that the South Korean education system has been tailored to the needs of growth and structural change in the economy. A decade ago, the World Bank had already produced a training video for the leaders of developing countries entitled “Global Lessons: Korean Education Reform, A Training Video for Policymakers” (1997). Another point of interest to the World Bank team was the fact that Koreans themselves were extremely critical of their own educational policies and practices in spite of the conspicuous, remarkable progress they had made and the general respect they had received from foreign education specialists.

For the 2004 Hahn Moo-Sook Colloquium, we invited three experts who looked at the current status of South Korean education system from different angles. Michael J. Seth, a historian, sees the “Exam Hell” syndrome as very tightly related to the traditional meritocratic system, where passing civil service examinations guaranteed social status and very comfortable economic power throughout a person’s life. In contrast with traditional education’s emphasis on cultivating a moral being with good judgment, however, the modern exam-driven society demands much sacrifice on the part of the parents and often of the extended family and community. The modern measure of education seems, unfortunately, to be in quantity and labels, rather than the formation and quality of a character grounded in shared principles.

Jae Hoon Lim, an education specialist, analyzes the turn of the 20th century discourse on the so-called “school collapse” voiced by many South Koreans who are feeling a sense of urgency. The traditionalist discourse reflects a long-held view of education based on Confucian philosophy and practice. In addition, there are others whom she calls “democratic reformists,” “neo-liberalists,” and “de-schooling” advocates. Such responses may be attributed to class affiliation, but an even more critical determinant in the debate is the ideological understanding of the purpose of education as perceived and promoted by each of these different discourses. While the traditionalists and democratic reformists share a commitment to a common goal of education for the entire community, neoliberalists and de-schooling groups share a strong belief in individual choice, competition, and excellence. These broad groups represent, of course, a vast array of opinions across all echelons of society. What seems clear is that the South Korean educational system will break with tradition and no longer be of the same, uniform mold.

Anthropologist Nancy Abelmann and her graduate students, Hyunhee Kim and So Jin Park, present a fresh analysis of South Korean college students of different prestige and of various family backgrounds. What emerges from every interview is the image of a “new” person—a person who aspires to the fullest vital human development and accepts the “burden” of managing that vital personal project. Today’s Korean student is a person who distinguishes her or himself from the past and is committed to values of democracy, individualism, and cosmopolitanism. This new person is confident, ambitious, and entrepreneurial. The new person phenomenon is part of the general emphasis on individuality and the strong and striking creativity manifest in all sections of contemporary South Korean society. The threat from the North notwithstanding, South Koreans have enjoyed continued peace for half a century, and today’s young people are growing as free agents. There is a clear sense of a renaissance in South Korea today, and contemporary Koreans’ idea of education and socialization reflects a broader, richer, multi-faceted, and dynamic culture.

Koreans, both intellectual leaders and ordinary citizens, have shown disparate reactions to the ambitious scope and dizzying speed of recent educational reforms. The current debate centers on the theme of equity vs. the need for elite education for national competitiveness, which has effectively created a new ruling class. Some extreme measures have been taken to eliminate elite education by abolishing the severely stratified secondary-school structure. Students have competed fiercely to get into top-ranked schools whose admission depended wholly on entrance examinations. Now that education has become more egalitarian, some have fretted about the lack of elite education, though there have been only limited attempts to address this perception. While the former system of elite education through select high schools emphasized general liberal-arts training, the new elite education seems to be bent on highly specialized skill acquisition, although interdisciplinary work seems to be encouraged to some extent. Many also fear that, outside the few select schools and programs, the school system at large will suffer from low teacher and student morale, reduced funds, and a general drop in quality in those institutions not chosen for such privileges.

The South Korean government has eagerly been listening to proposals for education reform from domestic and international sources like the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Some frequently discussed topics are decentralization in higher education, school autonomy, an escape from exam-oriented education, the need for overall-person education, and enhancing creative thinking in education, as well as addressing the need for practical education for global competitiveness. All of these issues are interrelated, and various attempts at meeting the current challenges seem reasonable.

The South Korean education system is still struggling with a thorny structural problem—the excessive weight it carries in Korean society. Extreme reliance on educational attainment as the sole or first criterion of a person's worth is being repudiated but is by no means a thing of the past. Education reformers are considering measures for promoting a new standard of personal qualification. But with no major change in perception, children growing up in such an atmosphere cannot avoid concentrating on means of getting them from one distinguished diploma and certification to the next. Abolishing the examinations altogether does not seem to be a solution, either. In such a competitive environment, if the admission process were completely based on overall records, extra-curricular activities, recommendation letters, and personal essays, then the possibility of subjective assessment and the lack of safeguards against corruption could be major threats to fair evaluation. Even if the selection process were fair, the financial burden on individual families would increase even more than the currently disproportionate amount allotted to their children's informal education.

Promoting creative thinking is, of course, crucial and frequently presented as a problem in Korean education. However, South Koreans may not even realize it is already happening. Contributing to this phenomenon is the narrowing of the gender gap. Korea took a long time to provide a public space for women, but the “new” person discovered by Abelmann et al is at once a “new” woman. A new woman is a harbinger of a “new” society, where pluralism rather than homogeneity is appreciated, and where formal education is only a part of the individualized socialization process.

¹In January 2001 the MOE was restructured and renamed as the Ministry of Education & Human Resources Development (MOEHRD), indicating its expanded scope (http://www.moe.go.kr/eng_26/). For simplicity, we will keep referring to the Ministry as MOE.

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Once again, this year's HMS Colloquium proceedings received very professional care from our book designer and meticulous copy editor, Luke Johnson. Nancy Abelmann has offered valuable comments and suggestions to improve the volume, in spite of her new responsibilities as Director of the Center for East Asian and Pacific Studies of the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign. Catarina Kim provided significant and essential assistance, without which everything would have taken so much more time and effort.

We thoroughly enjoyed collaborating with Lenore Miller, Director of the Luther W. Brady Art Gallery of The George Washington University, for an exhibition of Lawrence M. Rozanski Korean Ceramics collection, entitled "Cultural Heritage through Ceramics" (October 14, 2004–December 10, 2004), which was presented around the time of our colloquium. Mr. Rozanski allowed us to display selected ancient Korean ceramics and objects that had never been seen by the general public. The 2004 HMS Colloquium also benefited from the sponsorship of Mike Mochizuki, Director of the Sigur Center for Asian Studies and Lenore Miller, Director of the Luther W. Brady Art Gallery.

To these individuals and many others including all the participants in the audience, who have helped us to maintain the fine quality of the colloquium series, we express our heartfelt gratitude and joy of knowing them all and continuing our very enjoyable dialogue.

The Editors

October 2005
Washington, D.C.

CONGRATULATORY REMARKS

KIWON JANG

I congratulate The George Washington University on holding the 11th Hahn Moo-sook Colloquium in the Korean Humanities on behalf of the Korean Embassy. It is my great pleasure to be with you at this famous academic forum today. I am also very glad to speak a few words of welcome to all participants. And, special thanks go to Professor Young-Key Kim-Renaud for doing her best to organize this forum.

The HMS Colloquium has dealt with a variety of fields in Korean Humanities for the past ten years, for example, arts, history, language, literature, thought, and religion. This year 'Education in Korea' becomes the main theme of the Colloquium. The honored speakers invited today will actively touch the theme from various perspectives. Through a series of presentations and discussions, I hope that we can find out some meaningful implications on the future of Korean education.

The modern education system in Korea has a relatively short history. Even so, it can be said that the system has shown great achievements in both quantitative and qualitative terms. A small example might be that now educational opportunity is universal, and available to all people who want to take an education, from primary school to university. Such a quantitative growth of education in Korea has made significant contributions to Korea's economic development and political democratization.

With this positive side of Korean education in mind, I would like to mention some issues being discussed recently. These issues can be easily identified by looking at continuous education reforms. Since the mid 1980's, large-scale education reforms have been initiated, without exception, by each new government under strong presidential leadership right after every five-year presidential election.

Education reforms cover almost every issue in the field of education. Here I would like to introduce hot issues being raised in primary, secondary education, and higher education.

Issues in primary and secondary education include:

- how to reduce class size and how to build new schools to improve overcrowded schools,
- how to increase educational budget up to the average of OECD Member States
- how to keep a balance between academic and vocational education
- how to lower private cost of education being borne by parents
- how to utilize IT in schooling
- how to harmonize equity and excellence in the high school system
- how to improve the university entrance system and curriculum

- how to normalize high school education.

Issues in higher education might be largely concentrated on how to secure quality assurance:

- how to define changing role of colleges and universities in terms of HRD
- how to evaluate and accredit university and college education
- how to harmonize national and private educational institutions
- how to downsize and restructure individual institutions to get more competitiveness
- how to increase research capacity in postgraduate programs
- how to recruit competent students.

Recently, through Korean newspapers and TV news, we can see a serious debate occurring in Korea regarding whether or not to introduce a high school grading system at the national level. This debate is just one example. It shows that any one of issues mentioned above is not so easy to solve.

Today scholars with different academic background get together to exchange ideas and information. I am sure that this forum will provide all participants with an exciting opportunity to create a better understanding of Korean education. Please, enjoy today's events. I must wish the best of luck to the HMS Colloquium and to all of you.

Thank you.

KOREAN EDUCATION: A PHILOSOPHICAL AND HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

MICHAEL J. SETH

South Korean education faces a number of serious issues. These include: an overemphasis on examination preparation; the high cost of education driven by private tutoring and cram schools; concerns over inequalities in educational opportunity as costs rise; overcrowded classrooms; pedagogy based on rote memorization rather than individual creativity; and the belief that nation's schooling—especially at the higher education level—is inadequate to meet the requirements of a modernizing nation.

South Korea's education is driven by examination preparation, particularly for the college entrance exam. While getting into a university is not as difficult as it has been in the past, admissions at prestige universities remain highly competitive. For this reason 26 percent of the examination takers in the 5 November 2003 entrance exam were repeaters, students who chose to spend another year preparing to take the exam again rather than accept admission to a non-prestigious school (*Korea Herald*, 13 November, 2003). This places great pressure on students who study late into the night. Reports that at least five suicides were associated with the November exams illustrate the seriousness of this issue. The drive for exam success has, in turn, resulted in parents devoting huge sums on private tutoring and cram schools. The scale of this private spending is high and becoming higher. The government has sought to counter this problem by significantly increasing public education expenditures but

private expenditures have grown faster. In 2003, public spending on secondary education (grades 7-12) came to 4.5 million won per pupil while parents spent an average of 3.5 million won on private after school lessons (*Korea Herald*, 8 January, 2004). Spending on private after school lessons rose by an estimated eleven percent in 2003, greatly outpacing not only the increases in public funding for education, but also private spending on housing, medicine, or any other major sector of the economy (*Korea Herald*, 6 April, 2004). The percentage of families paying for private lessons has increased and children are beginning such lessons much younger. It is estimated that in 2003, seventy-two percent all children from grades 1-12 attend private lessons, a figure up from fifty-eight percent in 2000 (*Korea Herald*, 18 February, 2004).

Koreans fear that private tutoring undermines the egalitarian goals of the education system. Since independence in 1948, South Koreans have promoted equal educational opportunity through a variety of measures, but how can there be equality of opportunity when affluent parents spare no expense on private lessons? The result has been a lack of confidence in the educational system—a belief that classroom instruction alone is not adequate to prepare students. Furthermore, most of the public regards Korean colleges and universities as not up to the highest standards. This has led to an exodus of students to foreign universities. After suffering national economic setbacks

with the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997-1998 and the devaluation of the won, the numbers of Korean students going abroad for education has risen. Between 2001 and 2003 the expenditure on overseas education nearly doubled. This became an economic concern since it threatened to harm the nation's balance of payments. The record number of students abroad in 2003 was, according to the director general of the Bank of Korea "attributable to the fact that Korean parents have scrambled to send their children abroad due to a loss of faith in the Korean education system" (*Korea Times*, 30 September, 2003).

To counter these problems the government responded with a number of measures. In late 2003, the Seoul Metropolitan Office of Education declared "war on expensive tutoring and late night cram schools" (*Korea Herald*, 17 November, 2003). In 2004, the Ministry of Education announced a number of measures including: a plan to revive after-school study hours, so that students would take lessons in school rather than outside of it; reducing class size; providing a wider choice of schools for students to attend; increasing programs for gifted young people; and conducting stricter teacher evaluations that would include input from students and parents (*Korea Herald*, 18 February 2004). The last measure was intended to place pressure on teachers to improve the quality of their instruction, thus making cram schools less appealing. Most of these efforts were greeted by public skepticism and rightly so since these educational problems have a long history in South Korea and are deeply rooted in the very factors that accounted for the country's transforming itself into a well-schooled nation.

Historical Background

The problems of South Korean schooling must be set against the remarkable national educational transformation after 1945. South Korea's edu-

cational expansion was nothing short of a revolution. In 1945, when the thirty-five year Japanese colonial rule in South Korea ended, the majority of adult Koreans were illiterate. At that time, mass primary education had only recently begun, and less than five percent of the adult population had more than an elementary school education. There was only one university in Korea, and most of its students were Japanese, not Korean. Five decades later virtually all South Koreans were literate, all young people attended primary and middle schools, and ninety percent graduated from high school. There were over 180 colleges and universities; and the proportion of college age men and women who enrolled in higher education was greater than in most European nations. The quality of education was high as well, at least judging by comparative international tests. These tests usually rate the math and sciences skills of South Korean primary and secondary students among the highest in the world.¹

From the 1950s to the 1990s South Korea was on the extreme end of the correlation between the general level of education and the level of economic development, with a higher level of educational attainment than other nations of comparable per capita income.² As the country developed economically into a major industrial power, the general level of educational attainment remained higher than almost all other nations at similar levels of per capita GNP. That is, not only did education keep abreast with the nation's much admired rapid economic development, it outpaced it. Fascinatingly, this educational expansion was largely paid for by students and their families. During the four decades after 1945 South Korea spent less of its government revenues of schooling than the majority of developing countries. This was because educational development was driven by social demand—a demand so strong that millions of middle class and even poor Koreans were willing to make enormous sacrifice to

attain academic degrees for their children.

The roots of this explosive social demand for schooling are found in Korea's centuries-old tradition in which formal learning and scholarship played a central role in society. This tradition, usually associated with Confucianism, entered Korea from China more than fifteen centuries ago. Education in traditional Korea was valued both as a means of self-cultivation and as a way to achieve status and power. An individual could become virtuous through the study of ethically oriented Confucian classics. He could then play an informal role as a moral exemplar and as a teacher and advisor to others, thus enhancing his status and influence in society. As in other East Asian societies, Koreans highly esteemed the written word and accorded great respect to scholars able to accomplish the prodigious task of mastering the accumulated body of literary and scholarly works. While education was recognized as an end in itself, in practice, it was also generally seen as a means of social mobility and status selection. Under the Chosôn dynasty (1392-1910), a series of highly competitive examinations served as the means of selection for prestigious government positions. Historians disagree over how open the civil exams were to those of commoner status and whether or not exams served only to allocate official positions among members of the *yangban* aristocratic elite (See Choe 1974, 1987; Watanabe 1969). All agree, however, that the examination system acted as the main selection device for the limited number of government posts and, consequently, the formal education was largely organized around preparation for the exams.

During this period there was an incongruity between the meritocratic ideal implied by the system on the one hand and a society emphasizing bloodlines and kinship and dominated by a hereditary aristocracy on the other. Korea was the Confucian state par excellence. The Neo-Confucianism developed in Song China became

the reigning orthodoxy in Korea in the fourteenth century and emphasized the perfectibility of all men and assumed that each individual was capable of benefiting by education and of achieving moral enlightenment. Central to this ideology was the concept that society ought to be governed by men of talent and virtue, characteristics best demonstrated by mastery of the classics, self-discipline, and correct personal conduct. In conformity with these beliefs the schools and civil examinations were theoretically opened to all except outcast groups; however, a number of practices arose that limited access to both state schools and to the exams. In addition, preparing for the examinations required many years of study, so those whose parents could afford to finance lengthy studies and hire tutors had an enormous advantage. And, as studies have shown, Korean society was one in which family lines, along with rank and hierarchy, were strongly emphasized. In reality, therefore, the examination system and the schools associated with it primarily served as a means of allocating power, privilege, and status, among members of the *yangban* aristocracy. In later South Korean society the *yangban* ideal of a refined, elite individual or family whose virtue, moral excellence, and right to privilege was periodically reaffirmed through educational achievement would remain a model for aspiring middle and even lower class Koreans.

As a result of the Confucian ideology and the use of examinations as a social selection device, pre-modern Korea was a society in which formal learning, important as a means of acquiring public office and for achieving personal moral perfection, was a major preoccupation. The first Western account of Korea written in the seventeenth century by a shipwrecked Dutch merchant who spent thirteen years in the country points this out:

The nobles and the free men take great care for

the education of their children. They place their children under the direction of teachers to learn to read and write. The people of this country are very enthusiastic about [education] and the method they use is gentle and ingenious. Teachers offer their students the teaching of earlier scholars and constantly cite their example of those who attained fame through high scholarship. The boys devote their time to study day and night (Choe 1987: 98).

Literacy in Korea among males was probably high by pre-modern standards and most likely increased in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. An indication of this is the growth in private academies that promoted education among the *yangban* class. There is also some evidence that the number of and enrollment in village schools expanded in the late Chosŏn period, but this is an area that still awaits investigation. What is clear is that the elite families at least, devoted a great deal of energy and expense on education and examination preparation. In this way they behaved much like modern South Korean families.

South Korea's social demand for education was also shaped by the four decades of Japanese rule. The colonial regime sequentially developed a modern educational system with a concentration on basic education followed by a slow growth in secondary and tertiary levels of schooling. While emphasizing the importance of education at home and creating what would become a comprehensive system of public education in the peninsula, the colonial officials limited Koreans' access to upper levels of schooling and assigned them to inferior schools. From the start, the purpose was to create a system that was regarded as more "appropriate" for Korea's level of development. The dominant view among Japanese policymakers was that Korea was a backward society, and that this backward society should occupy a subordinate position in the empire. Japanese wartime policies after 1938 further limited the

number of higher education institutions, and re-directed the curriculum away from literary pursuits and towards less prestigious technical education and vocational training. As a result, many middle class families became frustrated by the limited access to educational opportunities. This unmet demand for educational advancement is a key factor in explaining South Korea's "education fever" since the end of the Second World War.

After liberation from Japan in 1945, the pent-up demand for education was immediately felt. Hundreds of new schools were opened at all levels yet were unable to accommodate the sudden increase in enrollments. South Koreans poured into the schools after 1945 at a rate equaled by few other developing countries all despite the extreme poverty of the late 1940s and 1950s, the dislocation caused by the horribly destructive Korean War, and the political instability that bred the popular overthrow of the corrupt Rhee regime in 1960 and the military coup that brought Park Chung Hee to power in 1961.

The South Korean state established two important policies in the crucial post-liberation years that further contributed to the intense drive for education and its associated problems. The first was the decision to end the strict tracking system created by the Japanese. While secondary schools remained divided by academic and vocational focus, neither were terminal and both could lead to higher education. There was no structural winnowing of students, and all could and soon most did seek to advance to higher levels resulting in fierce competition. Second was the state's early commitment to universal and uniform basic education. This eliminated the sharp disparities between regions and social classes that often characterized developing nations. While this contributed to social cohesion and provided a literate workforce with the skills needed for a newly industrializing economy, it also generated strains between the demand for higher levels of educa-

tion and the state's efforts to prevent an oversupply of advanced degree holders. This made competition for entry into the restricted higher educational tiers fiercer, adding to the intensity of South Korea's "education fever." Taking advantage of the social demand for education the state transferred the burden of financial support to the students and their families. Thus the problems associated with contemporary South Korean education quickly emerged.

Emphasis on Examination Preparation

Soon after 1945, the social demand for education led to what the Korean press referred to as "examination mania," and this preoccupation with entrance examinations emerged as a central problem in education. The test-taking ordeal for South Korean students began with the middle-school entry examination that twelve-year olds took, and continued with the high school entrance exam and culminated in the university entrance test. Criticism of the emphasis on entrance exams among educators and in the press first appeared shortly after liberation from Japan. As early as 1949, the Ministry of Education (MOE) responded by ordering that the entrance exams be replaced by intellectual and physical tests, and that admittance to higher-level schools be also based on *naesin*, reports by the teacher of a child's achievement and character (J. Kim 1985:70). This proved difficult to implement. Criteria for intellectual tests could not be agreed upon, and the teachers' reports seemed arbitrary and confusing. In 1951, the MOE instituted a National Comprehensive Examination System (*kukka yônhap kosaje*) to provide a uniform entrance exam for all secondary schools. This proved unpopular with public and private school officials. Due to widespread protests by school principals and educators, the MOE abandoned the procedure after only two years. There was further experimenta-

tion with the use of *naesin*, but in general, entrance into secondary schools in the late 1940s and 1950s was determined by written subject tests prepared by the school's staff or the provincial education board (J. Kim 1985: 71). At the university-level, each institution administered written entrance exams based on subject areas. As in the case of secondary schools, a brief experiment with a national exam in 1954 proved so unpopular it was discontinued the following year (*Kyônghyang sinmun*, 27 December 1954).

The examination system was widely criticized. It was felt by many educators, journalists, and MOE officials that there was excessive pressure on children, and that it led to a situation in which teachers too often saw their role as preparing students for the exams. Both charges were well supported. Some schools offered special classes held in the evenings or weekends and collected tuition for them. This was especially common in Seoul and Pusan, which had the greatest concentration of students, money, and socially ambitious parents (*Tonga ilbo*, 20 November 1949).

When the military government under Park Chung Hee (1961-1979) came to power, it sought to control school entry exams by restricting applicants to middle schools and high schools in their resident city or province (*Korea Times*, 5 August 1961). The MOE's purpose in enforcing this regulation was to halt the tendency of rural families to move into the cities before entrance examination registration time in order for their children to take exams for higher rated urban schools. Family registers were checked to ensure that parents were in fact residents of the city or province where their children were applying to schools and that they had not moved to an urban area just prior to registering their children for the exams. In spite of these efforts, most still attempted to get into the most prestigious schools. December 1961 proved to be no exception, with competition ratios for desirable secondary schools in Seoul be-

ing around two to one, while institutions with lower rankings failed to meet their quotas (*Korea Times*, 23 November 1961). Further efforts to reform the college entrance exams in 1962, 1964, 1969, 1970, and 1972 similarly had little effect.

The most significant reform of the examination system under Park Chung Hee was the gradual abolition of the middle school entrance examination carried out between 1969 and 1971. The abolition of the middle school and the high school examination a few years later did not significantly reduce the examination pressure, however, shifting the entire focus of education to the college entrance examination. Consequently, there was no abatement in the heated competition for college entrance and its attendant evils. Rather, competition only became more intense. The greatest problem was the varying reputations of school districts. For in spite of all the efforts at equalization, the reputations of certain school districts for producing the greatest number of successful exam-takers continued to grow. In Seoul, the Eighth School District established in the new upper middle class section of Apkujông-dong, a sea of high-rise apartments constructed in the 1970s, had the greatest reputation for academic success. It became the most sought after place of residence and real estate prices soared. The reputations were, of course, self-fulfilling; the greater the fame of a school district for placing its graduates in universities, the more it attracted wealthier residents who could lavish large sums on private tutoring, which in turn added to the success rate of its high school students. Students often illegally transferred into schools from less reputable school districts. Residency could be faked, and crackdowns occurred regularly. The removal of illegal transfers could occasionally result in noisy protests like those in the spring of 1974, when a number of pupils refused to move back to their own districts (*Korea Times*, 29 March 1974). In the same year 500 pupils from rural areas pro-

tested their ordered transfers out of Pusan (*Korea Times*, 28 June 1974). In any case, families continued to find ways to circumvent regulations.

When Chun Doo-Hwan came to power in 1980 his administration sought to gain legitimacy by carrying out the July 30 Education Reform, so named for the date it was publicly announced. Under the measure, the state transferred administration of the college entrance examination from individual schools to the central government. A College Entrance Preliminary Qualification Test used during the preceding Park regime had not proven to be an effective screening device since the number allowed to pass had become, by the late 1970s, two-hundred percent of the enrollment quota and because students who failed the test could repeat it the next year (Yi 1986: 231). As a result, the Final Selection Test given by individual universities was more crucial. The July 30 Education Reform abolished both the state sponsored preliminary test and the Final Selection Test, replacing them with a new College Entrance Achievement Test. This was now the sole entrance examination. While the new test's content was not significantly different from the earlier state preliminary test, its role was far more important (Kwak 1991: 45-55). The College Entrance Achievement Test (*naesin*) was given greater weight and colleges could admit up to thirty percent of students over their quota, but they had to graduate only their allotted quota. This "admission over quota, graduation by quota" policy, as it was labeled, meant that institutions of higher learning had to flunk a substantial number of students by their senior year. This was a new practice, since in South Korea few students dropped out of college, and fewer flunked out. But universities unwilling to lose tuition revenue or to angry parents saw to it that few students actually had to withdraw.

Throughout the 1990s, the MOE endlessly tinkered with the examination system, changing

the rules almost annually. Entrance examinations remained a national obsession, the subject of newspaper articles, books, a number of popular films, and countless commissions, public hearings, and forums. Attention focused on the damage the examinations did to mental health, with frequent reports on teenage suicides and the victims' bitter notes complaining of their failure to live up to their parents' expectations. Such incidences became a staple fare for popular movies and novels. There were also reports of physical abuse of young people by parents and teachers who were, in part, driven by the pressure to see to it that their charges performed well on exams. One 1996 study found that ninety-seven percent of all children reported being beaten by parents and/or teachers, many of them frequently. This was attributed primarily to the pressure to do well in school (*Korea Newsreview*, 27 January 1996, 34). More ineffective reforms were carried out in the 1990s but brought no fundamental change in the use of entrance examinations as the main mechanism for deciding who gained access to higher education and were admitted to prestige institutions. Even if the state chose to abolish the entrance examination, the competition for entry into the best schools and the best departments would resurface in some other way since the pursuit of education was about status, with prestige degrees the primary marker of said status.

Kwaoe Fever

Parental drive to seek prestige degrees for their children created the issue of private lessons, a problem that has plagued education since the 1950s. From 1945 South Korean students and parents largely paid for education themselves, as one of the most pronounced features of the Korean educational system was the state's weak fiscal support. A variety of school fees, compulsory PTA dues, fees for exam papers, and informal gifts to

teachers made schooling at all levels a financial burden for those of modest means. Gradually the state increased its spending on public education but growth in private lessons meant the financial burden of schooling did not diminish for most Korean families. Both the ability of the state to shift the burden of expense on education consumers during the early decades after 1945 and the costly nature of schooling were the result of the public's drive for educational attainment. Educational demand was so strong that many families were prepared to make whatever sacrifice was necessary to place their children in school. As a result, the cost of education escalated in the 1980s and 1990s.

The greatest single factor in the escalating price of schooling was private tutoring and out-of-school lessons known as *kwaoe*. *Kwaoe* not only placed an enormous burden on Korean families, but also accentuated the impact of income among sectors of society and undermined the policy of egalitarian access to education. Furthermore, it represented a drain on resources that economic planners would rather have seen in savings and used for capital investment. As early as November 1955, President Rhee issued a public statement ordering all schools to end these extra classes. In the same statement he urged all schools and officials to "make a maximum effort to combat the evil practice" (*The Korean Republic*, 14 November 1955). This began a pattern of periodically banning extra classes and then lifting the bans after admitting the ban's ineffectiveness over the next four decades. An official ban on private tutoring in 1980, for example, proved to be ineffective, was moderated, and eventually abandoned. The Korean Educational Development Institute in estimated in early 1995 that families paid 17 trillion wŏn (US\$ 21 billion) on direct educational expenditures like tuition, mandatory fees, extracurricular activities sponsored by schools, transportation, and textbooks. By contrast, total

government public expenditure on education in 1994 amounted to 16.7 trillion wôn. That is, the public paid 51 percent of the total direct cost of education. In addition, an estimated six trillion wôn was spent on private tutoring. According to the KEDI study, when tutoring was included, parents and students absorbed 69 percent of the costs of education (*Korea Newsreview*, 4 February 1995, 12; *Korea Herald*, 24 January 1995). State expenditures on education accounted for about 4 percent of GNP, somewhat less than in most developed countries, but if the total costs were to be calculated, Koreans spent as much as 12 percent of their GNP on education, considerably higher than most other industrialized nations.

In reality, the costs of education are really much greater than even these figures suggest. First, the cost of private tutoring is very hard to estimate since a great deal of it lies outside the formal economy. Several surveys conducted in the mid 1990s came up with varying figures of the average expenditure on after school lessons. One survey undertaken in mid 1993 estimated that private tutoring for high school students came to 580,000 wôn a month (\$465) (*Korea Herald*, 4 June 1993). Although some officials expressed private doubts on the accuracy of these figures, it was clear that the amounts spent were enormous. Furthermore, while a huge exam cramming industry had always existed, it continued to grow in the 1990s. “*Kwaoe frenzy*” provided lucrative economic opportunities, with well-known private instructors charging as much as 1,500,000 wôn a month (US \$2,100) for lessons at their institutes, although the average fee was much less. Three quarters of college students engaged in private tutoring with their average income in 1995 estimated between 300 and 400,000 wôn a month. Parents had always spent large amounts on private lessons at *hagwôn*s (cram schools), on private tutors, and on special lessons given by teachers after class and during breaks. Wealthier

parents began sending children abroad when the restrictions on overseas travel eased following the 1988 Seoul Olympics. Thousands of families sent children to US high schools where they would pay a Korean family in America an average of two or three thousand US dollars a month to watch over their child. By 1995, this practice was growing so fast that the government enacted restrictions to prevent it, citing the drain on the balance of payments.

All indicators suggest that educational expenses were rising faster than the cost of living and the rate of increase was accelerating. A 1999 study found that costs of education rose 2.5 times from 1988 and 1998, outstripping the increase in cost of food, housing, health, transportation, utilities or any other major category of expenses (*Korea Times*, 19 January 1999). According to a report of the National Statistical Office in 1997, urban workers spent 9.8 percent of their income on education up from 6.7 percent in 1987, while rural families devoted a smaller proportion of their income to education. South Korea, in 1997, was eighty-five percent urban. The magnitude of this expenditure can perhaps be understood by comparing it with that of Japan, where a similar obsession with educational achievement had created the same reliance on expenditures on private lessons and tutoring. In Japan, urban workers spent 5.4 percent of their income on education up from 4.7 percent in 1987 (*Korea Times*, 6 August 1997). While Japanese commentators regarded this as a major economic and social problem, and the *juku* (cram school) was a ubiquitous feature of life, the economic burden was still modest by Korean standards. Despite public awareness of how costly the educational system had become at the start of the twentieth century, all trends suggested that families spending on education was continuing to rise faster than income. The financial crisis of 1997-1998 may have slowed spending a bit, but after 2000 spending on private tutoring and cram

schools grew at an alarming rate.

Concern for Equal Opportunity Education

One of the great contradictions of South Korean culture has been the concern for assigning rank and status in a society where egalitarian ideals were strong. An informal ranking system for secondary schools has existed since the colonial period. At the top, the most prestigious secondary schools were (in descending order) Kyônggi Middle/High School, Seoul Middle/High School, and Kyôngbok High School. For girls, there was Kyônggi Girls School and Ewha Girls School. All save Ewha were public schools, which in general had higher prestige than private institutions. All schools outside of Seoul were strictly second rank, but each region had its own hierarchy. At the top of the university hierarchy the elite school was Seoul National University (SNU), established by the Japanese in 1925 and known then as Keijō University. No other institution could quite compare in prestige and entry into SNU was the dream of millions of Korean youths and their families. Second in the ranking was Yonsei University, and in third place, Korea University. Both schools are private institutions in Seoul. The rankings for other universities have varied somewhat over time but the first three institutions have remained securely at the pinnacle of the prestige hierarchy.

The hierarchy of schools ran counter to the strong egalitarian strain in South Korean culture. In public policy this was expressed by the term “uniformity of education,” which took two forms. One was the idea that educational opportunity should be open to all. As the debates over the Education Law illustrated, there was a strong belief in universal educational opportunity. This idea stemmed from the spread of egalitarian and democratic ideas that rejected the rigid and largely hereditary class structure that had charac-

terized the country until the nineteenth century. The American missionaries, Japanese colonial rulers, and Korean intellectuals exposed to modern ideas all preached a sort of democratic ideal of a society based on merit. The concept of equal opportunity had some basis in the nation’s traditions as well. Confucianism had always stressed the idea of merit as the only valid criterion for judging an individual and awarding status. Within the Confucian school of thought was another powerful idea: that each person had the capability to be a moral exemplar and to provide leadership in society. Since education was key to moral perfection, education was by implication something that any person could utilize in order to manifest his virtue. In practice, access to higher educational institutions and the civil examinations was restricted to members of elite lineages, but with the breakdown of the old order in Korea, a popular belief that this educational avenue should be open to all emerged. Millions of Koreans clung to this idea with great conviction and were intolerant of unfair access to schooling.

Another related but somewhat different concept, uniformity—a sort of equality of condition—also had a strong pull on South Koreans. It came in part from the socialist conceptions of a mass society that greatly influenced Korean intellectuals and writers in the 1920s and 1930s and from the ethnic-racial nationalism derived from Europe and Japan. It colored the concept of nationalism in Korea that emphasized a uniform, homogeneous nation. Korean nationalists of all political stripes were proud of the long unity and ethnic homogeneity of their nation that gave it uniqueness and a clearly defined identity. Nationalist rhetoric and even textbooks proudly proclaimed Korea to be “*Tong’il minjok*” (united race/nation), a nation of one-people—a “single blood” even a “single mind.”³ The two concepts of a socio-economically egalitarian society and the ultra-nationalist ideal for a national, ethnic-

racial, and ideological unity together resulted in an intolerance of glaring social inequalities.

In the rhetoric on schooling, uniformity of education meant that the school system had to be more than just open to all; it had to be fairly open to all and uniform in content and standard. Yet this conflicted with a rank-conscious society quick to assign every school and school district a place in a status hierarchy. The tension between education as a grantor of status and Korea's burgeoning egalitarianism was a reflection of a society assimilating new Western ideas while adhering to traditional Confucian cultural values. The modern ideals of democracy and equality had won broad acceptance among a citizenry that simultaneously continued to view the world in hierarchical conceptual categories. For post-1945 South Korea uniformity of education meant, at the very least, that the entrance examination system ought to be fair. In official policy this was often termed the "equalization of education." At the time of the debates over the Education Law in 1949-1951, the idea of early tracking was rejected. Only by making no level of education terminal could access to upper tiers of schooling be assured (Seth 2002: 866-877). As a result, even vocational high schools offered college preparatory courses.

The Korean public remained ever vigilant for any attempts to create an "elitist" school system. To prevent this, a rigidly uniform curriculum was introduced in the mid 1950s. In order to prevent low-income students from being ghettoized in poor schools, the MOE created a lottery system in 1968 that randomly assigned students to schools within large school districts designed to include both wealthy downtown areas and the poorer outskirts of cities. The lottery system, however, was not popular with many parent and teachers groups, and was criticized as creating a "gambling mentality" (*Korea Times*, 6 June 1966). Nonetheless, it was enforced in the name of equalization. In 1969, one year after the lottery system was

introduced at the middle school level, a massive transfer of middle school teachers took place in Seoul with eighty percent reassigned. In the same year, school buses were acquired to transport students to schools too far away to walk to (*Korea Times*, 11 February 1969).

In 1973, a commission of officials and private educators drew up the High School Equalization Plan that eliminated the high school entry exams, used a lottery to admit new high school students and sought to make sure that facilities and instruction was uniform in all schools. Worried about swelling city populations, the government thought that the policy would also slow down the move into the cities by families seeking better educational opportunities (Park 1988: 2-5). In the 1990s, the MOE offered special aid and scholarships to upgrade all provincial universities, although this did little to change public perception that all provincial colleges were second rate. The state also used school records to give advantage to poor rural areas by weighing the scores as if all secondary schools were of the same standard. An affirmative action policy set a quota for students from fishing villages and remote areas that universities were required to fulfill, in 1996 this program was expanded (*Korea Times*, 12 April 1996).

Educational officials often insisted that the standards in elementary and secondary schools be consistent enough to insure fairness in educational opportunity (Im Hyông and Kim Chin'gyu, Ministry of Education examination officials, interviews by author, Seoul, 1996). But primary and secondary schools were not completely equal since those in the better districts outperformed other schools. Much of this was due simply to the fact that parents with greater financial resources and who were better educated themselves tended to move into these districts. Uniformity and equality have also been challenged since the 1990s by the educational reforms intended to

give greater autonomy to individual high schools and colleges in their admission processes and curricula. Equality has also been threatened by the rise of free marketers within the bureaucracy, the academy, and the media who have questioned the attempts by the state to micro-manage education and have called for the liberation of education from government restrictions. Some provincial boards of education have experimented with permitting private high schools to recruit freshmen from within a certain geographical range. In 1995, the Seoul Board of Education followed these initiatives and allowed private high schools to select freshmen from within ten educational districts beginning in 1998; admission was to be based on middle school records, not on entry examinations. This was necessary, board members argued, because the uniform system of admission “brought down overall quality of education” (*Korea Herald*, 27 January 1995).

But these changes brought protests from various civil groups including the Chôn'gyojo an active teachers union that was illegal until 1999. These groups argued that undermining the principle of equality of opportunity would give an unfair advantage to those that could afford the additional preparations and private tutors for their middle school children. It was feared that the egalitarian education system was being threatened, even if only in a limited way (Yu Sang-duk, Vice-President of the Chôn'gyojo, interview by author, Seoul, June 1996). The plan was consequently delayed.

The popular zeal for educational advancement had been based on the breakdown of the barriers that had once separated the elite from the non-elite. The egalitarian beliefs that surfaced on the peninsula after 1945 have shaped the educational system structured to allow for maximum social mobility. Faith in social mobility has propelled educational expansion and provided the foundation for democracy and prosperity. The

protests by teachers, journalists, civil groups, and angry letters to newspapers against efforts to allow for modifications of standardized school policy in recent years suggests that the South Korean public is still animated by the same concerns for personal advancement, social justice and equality, and the right of families to enhance their material existence and their social position through hard work and education.

Scaling the Ivy Walls

The pursuit of status enhancing degrees has led to great sacrifices by Korean families seeking an advance degree abroad and has been to the detriment of domestic institutes of higher learning. Throughout their history, Koreans have gone abroad for education. Tang China had a large number of Korean students. During the Japanese colonial rule when opportunities for higher education at home were limited, thousands of Koreans studied in Japan while a small trickle attended universities in Europe and America. US economic development programs and the close cooperation between some American universities and schools in Korea aided in the migration of students to American universities after 1945. A foreign—especially US—university degree generally held more prestige in South Korea than a degree from a local institution. US trained technocrats dominated many government ministries and staffed the large corporate conglomerates. In recent years the state has attempted to improve the quality of research facilities with such programs as Brain 2000 that channels government funds into universities specializing in research and development.⁴ Indeed, by many measures, the standards at South Korea's major graduate programs have improved although they still lag behind the top universities in the US and Western Europe.

While this has benefited Korea in many ways,

with professionals trained at the very best schools abroad, it has also hampered universities at home with undergraduate students often focused on GRE and TOEFL exams and graduate programs bereft of the potentially best students. Countermeasures have not only failed to significantly address this issue but the drive for prestige degrees has led to an increasing number of young South Koreans skipping local colleges and universities altogether and seeking admission to foreign, usually US, undergraduate programs. Instead of schools such as Seoul National, Yonsei, and Korea University, students are seeking degrees from elite schools such as Harvard, Stanford, Princeton, and Yale. This only creates another educational expense associated with English lessons and US test preparation companies such as Kaplan and The Princeton Review. States the director of Overseas Education at Kaplan, "If you are smart and you are rich, you have to have a US diploma, simple as that" (*Korea Herald*, 27 December, 2003).

Conclusion

South Korea's current educational "woes" have a long history. For the past fifty years educators, parents, and government officials have complained about the overemphasis on preparation for entrance examinations, the enormous expenditures on private tutoring and cram schools, the threat to educational opportunity private lessons pose, and the seemingly inadequate state of higher education that results in so many to seek advance degrees at foreign universities. None of the attempts to deal with these issues have been very successful because they do not address their fundamental cause: the drive by students and their families to enhance or maintain social status by earning prestige degrees. This is widely recognized in South Korea. The irony is that this drive was largely the motor that powered the nation's transformation into a modern, prosperous,

highly literate society.

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Endnotes

1. In the second test of OECD Program for International Student Assessment in given to upper level secondary students in 2003 South Korea ranked first out of 41 in problem solving, second in reading, third in math and fourth in science. Dropped to fourth from first place in science in 2001. Given in near end secondary school. Barry McGraw, "OECD Perspectives on Korean Educational Achievements" in OECD/World Bank/KEDI's *International Conference on 60 Years of Korean Education: Achievements and Challenges*, Seoul, June 2005.

2. The mean primary school enrollment rate for the fifty-six poorest nations measured in 1970 GNP per capita terms (which includes South Korea) grew from 37 percent to 53 percent in 1960 and 72 percent in 1970. For secondary school enrollments the figures are 5.3, 9.4 and 17 percent respectively (Meyer et al. 1979: 40). In the case of South Korea if we start in 1945 (1950 figures are unreliable) we find that primary school enrollment grew from about 37 percent to 96 percent in 1960 and 100 percent by 1965. At the secondary level enrollment grew from about 4 percent in 1945 to 29 percent in 1960. Republic of Korea, Ministry of Education. 1963. *Mun'gyo t'onggye yoram* (Outline of educational statistics). Seoul: Mun'gyobu, 43-44.

3. For examples of the influence of nationalism on education thinking see Hong 1991: 45-63.

4. Research facilities at leading South Korean universities have improved greatly in recent years, enough to draw some international attention. See "Asia's New High-Tech Tiger" *Chronicle of Higher Education*, (23 July, 2004), 34.

CLASS REPRODUCTION AND COMPETING IDEOLOGIES IN KOREAN EDUCATION:

A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS ON "SCHOOL COLLAPSE," 1999-2001

JAE HOON LIM

South Korea's educational system has been commended for its contribution to the country's rapid economic growth during the last four decades. Several Korean and international scholars (Ellinger and Beckham 1997; Han 1994; Y. Kim 2000) have attributed the nation's economic success to an educational system that provided the quality workforce required for economic expansion. Like many other developing countries in Southeast Asia, the South Korean government established a strong public school system and used it as the primary tool for the country's nation-building project. Schools introduced a new set of values, ideologies, and skills that support the political-economic structure of the society. Therefore, there has been little doubt that the Korean public school system, despite its relatively short history, played a significant role in the nation building process of South Korea.

With its rapid economic growth and emergence of a more democratic civilian government since the 1990s, education in South Korea has, however, faced a new set of challenges. In particular, issues of educational equity have attracted great attention from both educational researchers and the general public who perceived an educational system that reflected upper or middle class interests and contributed to the status quo. Several research studies on the impact of class on various aspects of the educational system and societal practice (Robinson 1994) often concluded "educational inequality between social strata...

rather intensified, especially in terms of qualitative differentiation" (Phang 2004: 71).

The relationship between class and education in Korean society is, however, rather complex. What is often missing in the majority of the critical research is the comparative nature of this phenomenon. It is rather ironic that several cross-national analyses and Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) reports actually point out the opposite. South Korea is often listed as one of the countries where social class has a minimal impact on educational success compared to other countries (Jeong and Armer 1994, OECD 2001). Researchers have identified various factors and forces that fundamentally affect the nature and degree of educational equality or inequality in the society. Cultural values and beliefs deeply embedded in the societal contexts and discourses are often referred to as critical elements shaping the unique characteristics of Korean education (Lee and Brinton 1996; Sorensen 1994).

Korean education, as represented in its K-12 school system, has exhibited an interesting mixture of different, even conflicting, ideologies from its inception. On one hand, the Confucian philosophy that reigned as the official governing philosophy of the Chosôn Dynasty (1392-1910), and now stands firm as the foundation of Korean culture as a whole heavily influenced the structure and human relationships in schools. On the other hand, democratic ideology and individual-

ism were constantly introduced in the contents of the national curriculum. Based on the mixture of Confucian philosophy and education for democracy, the intrinsic moral and ethical value of learning was emphasized yet the instrumental, extrinsic value of learning to meet the needs of national economic development was also presented as one of the primary goals of education.

During the last four decades, however, the fundamental difference and potential conflict among the different discourses that coexisted in the educational enterprise in South Korea was not apparent due to many reasons (e.g., little resistance to Confucian relational ethics, the government's strong involvement, etc). This conflict became clearly visible during the course of a heated public debate on "hakkyobunggoe" or "school collapse"¹ between 1999 and 2001. I will analyze the four different educational discourses that were part of the public debate on the school collapse phenomenon in South Korea between 1999 and 2001. This analysis will, I believe, illuminate the socio-political nature of the debate of school collapse, and its relationship with the fundamental purpose of education as adopted and promoted by different groups based on their class and ideological affiliation.

Origins of the School Collapse Discourse

The school collapse discourse can be traced back to the Korea Educational Research Institute's winter seminar in January 1999 (*Chamgyoyuk Silchôn Wiwônhoe* 1999) and a series of discussions and technical reports within the *Chôn'guk Kyojigwôn Nodongjohap* (Korean Teachers' Union or KTU) beginning in May 1999 (M. Kim 2000). The *Chamgyoyuk Silchôn Wiwônhoe* (Committee for Praxis for True Education), one of the KTU's sub-committees, reported the existence of school collapse in several city schools and the union's national executive committee discussed the na-

tionwide scope of the phenomenon in May 1999 (M. Kim 2000). However, the school collapse discourse became part of heated public discourse mainly through the mass media's contribution. In particular, the role of three major newspapers, *Chosun*, *DongA*, and *JoongAng Ilbo*, was significant. The most critical contribution was made by a series of TV documentary programs by two major broadcasting companies, KBS and MBC. Following the TV programs, many academic societies and research institutions opened up a series of discussions on the phenomenon of school collapse.

Even though some scholars posed a more skeptical point of view about the very existence of school collapse as a real social reality (W. Kim 2000; D. Kim 2002), many survey data from a variety of organizations with contrasting educational views seemed to verify that there had been a significant change in schools, namely the phenomenon of school collapse (Chôn 1999b; Yun, Yi and Pak 1999).² The level of profoundness or seriousness of the change, and possible solutions to it varied across different participants in the debate. Interestingly enough, the debate on school collapse presented at least four different groups of unique voices—discourses—that stemmed from fundamentally different social, cultural, and political ideologies and classes.

Theoretical Lens

A variety of social and cultural phenomena and human experiences exist even before we name them and communicate them in the form of public discourse. Some of our experiences remain unnamed and even unacknowledged without the opportunity to integrate them into the public discourse. Others successfully enter the realm of public discourse by integrating a variety of social and cultural phenomena and experiences that share similar characteristics, creating

a category that encompasses such phenomena and experiences under a certain name. This process, though seemingly natural and often unconsciously undertaken by the participants, is a political process, one that creates a new language to describe a social phenomenon, and uses it in a particular context with a particular intention always implying its political nature.

The phenomenon of school collapse did not exist in Korean society until early 1999. The term had primarily used to describe the problems of school absenteeism in Japan. Few people paid attention to the term, and the social phenomenon, because it seemed to have little relevance to Korean society. By the end of 1999, however, the term has gained a powerful social meaning in describing the daunting challenge faced by the entire Korean educational system. The phrase was popularized by a series of heated public and academic debates. Multiple, even contradictory, interpretations of the term were provided by various groups of people in different contexts. They competed with one another to gain overall, or partial, hegemony in the use of the term school collapse. Naturally, this appropriation process of the language was not seamless. It was, in fact, a compelling example of the political nature of social language and ideological undercurrents in the creation and circulation of language as described by Bakhtin (1981).

As a whole, this study is indebted to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), an interdisciplinary approach used to examine the sociopolitical nature of language and various texts in society (Fairclough 1989, 1995). CDA views "language as a form of social practice" (Fairclough 1989, 20) and attempts "to unpack the ideological underpinnings of discourse that have become so naturalized over time that we begin to treat them as common, acceptable and natural features of discourse" (Teo 2000, 36). Fairclough, a CDA theorist, argues that "language connects with

the social through being the primary domain of ideology and through being both a site of, and a stake in, struggles for power" (1989, 15). Based on this theoretical lens, I will explain four different discourses that competed with one another in the appropriation process of the phrase school collapse in South Korea during 1999-2002.

Traditionalists: A Discourse of Confucian Ethics of Human Relationship

Several senior scholars and educators interpreted the phenomenon of school collapse as a disastrous, yet natural, consequence of the moral anomie prevalent in contemporary Korean society. They explained that school collapse was largely caused by the two factors; the lack of proper discipline for children at home, and a series of "failed" educational policies that dissolved teachers' authority in educational contexts and debased the social status of teachers in society as a whole. Yoon and his associates' 1999 survey study showed that 58.3% of teachers attributed school collapse to futile educational policies and 56.4% believed absence of discipline at home and moral anomie in the larger society caused school collapse (Yun, Yi and Pak 1999). Many teachers who were dissatisfied with the new educational policies of the Kim administration, particularly the early retirement policy for teachers and the illegalization of all types of corporal punishment at school in 1998, expressed their position in this discourse (Park and Kim 2002).

The Korean Federation of Teachers' Associations (KFTA) was one of the main agents that actively produced this line of discourse. In their official documents, the KFTA explained the primary reason for school collapse was the administration's flawed educational policy that dissolved the teachers' authority in the educational environment:

Everything was caused by the policy of [enforced] early retirement of teachers. The administration used a means of educational reform in order to reduce the government workforce. Consequently, the early retirement policy drove many teachers out of schools. Dismissing so many experienced teachers ultimately resulted in the shortage of teachers, increase of class size, and loss of instructional savoir faire, and dropped teachers' morality as a whole: This was the very reason for school collapse (W. Kim 2000: 102).

The other major factor identified as a cause for school collapse in the traditionalist discourse was the absence of family education, particularly discipline at home (K. Yim 1999; Park and Kim 2002). K. Yim (1999) argued that contemporary parents did not provide proper discipline for their children at home and this hindered the development of a sense of control over their own behaviors in a group setting like the classroom. He deplored that such unself-disciplined children were not able to exhibit a minimal consideration for others' needs, which was essential to the order and maintenance of any school or classroom community. He identified this as one of the major factors that contributed to school collapse.

Based on this diagnosis, several scholars and policy makers voiced the need for a strong role of school in moral and personal education. For example, Yun, president of the Hakkyogyoyuk Paroseugi Yōndae (Alliance for Straightening up the Schools) that consisted of several major educational organizations, argued that school curricula should emphasize basic etiquette education so that students would abide by school rules. He stressed that the inclusion of a strong disciplinary component in school curriculum would be the first essential step to recover the school community in order to deal with the challenges of school collapse (Kim and Ko 2000, 161).

Some Korean Ministry of Education (MOE)

officials, despite their being criticized for several shortfalls of new educational policy, provided a similar suggestion reflecting the discourse of "traditionalists." Lee, a MOE Curriculum Policy Examiner, argued that schools must provide such basic disciplinary training for students, stating "[s]chools should stand firmly in their place as the major agent of education by emphasizing the personality education and recovering the instructional competency as soon as possible" (Yang 1999: 26).

Several scholars also took part in the traditionalist discourse in their discussion of school collapse. For example, W. Kim's extensive analysis of school collapse phenomenon partly reflected the traditionalists' view (2000). Even though he pointed to other factors that contributed to school collapse, he clearly identified the MOE's decision to legalize all forms of corporal punishment as the main factor triggering school collapse in 1999. He pointed out that that the MOE's decision failed to see the unique social and cultural contexts of education in Korean society, and the role and meaning of corporal punishment in the unique environment.

There are at least two essential characteristics that ran through the traditionalist discourse. First, it asserted that education's core values and relational ethics could not be changed despite the huge societal changes during the last half-century. Naturally, this discourse reflected the long-held Korean image of the teaching profession based on Confucian philosophy. Confucian philosophy advocates a set of fundamental principles in human relationships. The teacher-student relationship is often compared with that between parent and child, or the one between ruler and subject. As a result, respecting teacher's authority was an essential virtue for any student; questioning or challenging it was no less than immoral and unethical. In the past, the teaching profession was respected, despite the government's meager

monetary compensation, thanks to this unique cultural characteristic.

Many sectors of Korean society still reflect a strong Confucian influence. It is not surprising, therefore, that this discourse, with its embedded Confucian view of education and its implications for human relationships in an educational setting, is found in the voices of many different groups, including those who actually adopted a less traditional, even radical, approach to school education. For example, elements of the traditionalist discourse are found in documents from the Hakkyogyoyuk Paroseugi Yôndae (Alliance for Straightening up the Schools), and also in documents from National Teachers' Union. Furthermore, some parents actively participated in this discourse despite the limits that this discourse actually imposes on parents' participation in educational decision-making. One extreme example of parental support for the traditionalist discourse is the gift of a "cane of love" that several parents associations officially delivered to their children's school in order to announce their opposition to the recent MOE's policy regarding the illegalization of corporal punishment at school (W. Kim 2000). It is not, then, accurate to say that this discourse was exclusively based on the group of teachers who used to enjoy great privilege in the traditional Confucian model of school and society. Clearly there is population larger than "old fashioned" teachers that supported this discourse to some extent, including parents and students (E. Kim 2003; T. Yim 1999; MBC 2000).

Interestingly, this discourse also fervently opposed privatization and market-based educational reforms. At the surface level, then, the traditionalist discourse seemed to share a lot in common with the neoliberalist view because both criticized the government's educational policies. Similarly, the traditionalists seemed to share very little with the democratic reformists' coming from their rival organization, the Korean

Teachers' Union. Traditionalist and democratic reformists did, however, share a more fundamental common ground because both focused on the public and collective nature of school education as well as its strong moral and social aspects. Both discourses, despite their disparate roots in Confucianism and democratic ideology, viewed education, including the role of schools, in light of society's integrity, and regarded education as an intrinsically value-attached, collective enterprise.

*Democratic Reformists: A Discourse of
Democratic Schools and Society*

The axis of the second type of discourse, democratic reformism, was the democratization of the school environment. The major agent that produced this discourse was the Korean Teachers' Union (Kim and Ko 2000) and a new generation of young educational scholars supporting the union's perspective (Hwang 2001). The union and its affiliated institutes played a significant role in acknowledging and diagnosing the substantial changes in schools nationwide even before the public became aware of the school collapse phenomenon (M. Kim 2000). For example, M. Kim (2000) confirms that the Ch'amgyoyuk Silchôn Wiwônhoë (Committee for Praxis for True Education), one of the union's sub-committees, verified the existence of the school collapse phenomenon. The union's national executive committee then discussed the scope of the phenomenon nation-wide (M. Kim 2000). The union disapproved, however, of the issue's later public development based on the mass media's "exaggerated and disreputable reports of the new educational challenge." The KTU asserted that the media's inaccurate and exaggerated reports actually resulted in mistrust among teachers, parents, and students, and contributed to the acceleration of school collapse at many institutions across the country (Chôn'gyojo Sinmun [Korean Teachers

Union Newspaper] 1999).

The KTU's Policy Research Institute produced a series of publications after public awareness of the school collapse phenomenon emerged (Chông'gyojo chôngch'aek yôn'guso [KTU Policy Research Institute] 1999a; 1999b). While sharing some commonalities with the traditionalists, the democratic reform discourse presented a different philosophy of education with its affiliated political ideology providing different guiding principles.

The democratic reformist discourse assumed the primary goal of Korean education was to firmly establish modern rationality and institute a culture of democracy in every sector of society. Democratic reformists viewed the current school system and its organizational culture as heavily reflecting an authoritative and bureaucratic model. This obsolete and inefficient system and culture are the major hurdles to any educational reform. They prevented teachers and students from playing an active role in the school reform process, and the actualization of participatory democracy in society at large (Kim and Ko 2000). The following three documents illustrate what the union identified as the primary source of the challenges of school collapse.

Our schools have maintained the same infrastructure of curriculum since the liberation from Japanese Occupation. The central government has been controlling the quality, contents, organizational methods, and evaluation methods, providing no role for the people in the educational fields who actually produce and consume knowledge. This resulted in the alienation of students in the very field of education, and prompted the phenomenon of "school collapse" (Chôn 1999a: 121).

The remainders of the authoritativeness and oppressiveness in Korean education, and obsolete and dreadful educational environments

were the factors that amplified the phenomenon of "classroom crisis." ...various irrational and anti-democratic characteristics, such as unrealistic, excessive rules, oversized schools that pose a great challenge to communication with students, over-crowded classrooms, mismatch between curriculum and assessment, limited rights and participation of autonomous student self governance, etc., in fact, are the conditions that contributed to the phenomenon of "classroom crisis" (Chông'gyojo Kyoukcharyosil [KTU Center for Educational Materials] 2000, as cited in Kim and Ko 2000: 165-166).

The primary reason for teachers' failure in educating students with knowledge, skills, values and attitudes is the anti-democratic school management and closed system of communication—no rights [given to teachers], then no responsibilities (Chông'gyojo Chôngch'aek yôn'guso [KTU Policy Research Institute] 1999a: 140).

The democratic reformist discourse was also reflected in several works by a group of scholars including Hwang (2001) and Sim. Sim, for example (1999), emphasized that democratic school management and the praxis of participatory democracy in a school context are essential to overcome the challenges of school collapse (1999). He suggested three major changes for individual schools: the establishment of student self-governance system; restructuring school rules and regulations to promote student-self autonomy; and open communication and democratic, participatory school management.

Democratic reformists did not, however, buy into the idea of extreme individualism. Rather, they pursued a balance between the collective nature of education in the Korean context and the individual needs for personal growth through education (Kim and Ko 2000). Even though they paid attention to individual human rights of students (e.g., unlike traditionalists, they opposed corporal punishment in general) democratic re-

formists appreciated the communitarian nature of education and its role for political causes like reunification of the Korean peninsula (Chôn'gyojo Chôngch'aek yong'guso 1999b).

One of the most severe critiques raised by the democratic reformist discourse targeted the neoliberalist discourse that advocated the marketization of the educational system as a whole. Democratic reformists constantly emphasized the difference between them and the traditionalists and neoliberalists alike, but their criticism of the neoliberalists was much more intense than those leveled at the traditionalists. The following KTU document clearly illuminates the point of the democratic reformist critiques directed at the neoliberalists.

...Reckless implementation of individualized instruction represented as "open education," and consumer-based education that put individuals and market principles at the center [of educational discourse] resulted in the debilitation of the communitarian function of schools while amplifying individualism and self-centeredness. It should be acknowledged that there have been ideological propaganda against teachers, damaging teachers' authority, and depriving them of any controlling methods in the misguided course of educational reform. This was the fundamental reason for the rapid spread of the phenomenon of "school collapse," and teachers' inability, almost empty-handed, to find a solution to it" (Chôn'gyojo Kyoukcharyosil [KTU Center for Educational Materials] 2000).

Sim also argued that the competition-based educational reform during the last two administrations had actually expedited the process of school collapse (1999). He argued that school collapse had been caused by the three educational policies forwarded by the Kim Young-sam administration: "Educational Reform for Bolstering Nation's Competitiveness," "Excellence-based Education," and "Open education." Additionally, Sim cites

the "Neoliberalist policy" of the Kim Dae-jung administration also played a role in school collapse. Even though he acknowledged the benefits of "open education" in altering the authoritarian nature of Korean school culture in general, Sim held that educational policies stressing only individualism and competitiveness weakened the communitarian nature of education and reduced the possibility of social and political alliances. According to Sim, such educational policies caused severe damage to the structure of participatory democracy and prompted the collapse of school community as a whole.

Neoliberalists: A Discourse of "Choice," "Competition," and "Excellence"

The neoliberalist voice is one of the most powerful discourses to be found in the school collapse debate between 1999 and 2001. Sharing little in common with the previous two affiliated with teachers' organizations, the neoliberalist discourse presented a relatively clear class-based interest in education policy. The discourse's main agents were a group of parents, particularly those from middle and upper-middle class backgrounds, and the conservative mass media that contributed to the heated discussion of school collapse (Seo 2003).

The neoliberalist discourse regarded the school collapse phenomenon as a natural consequence of a school system that was unable to adapt to a new social and economic environment. They argued that the entire structure of Korean society had changed from a pre-modern agricultural society to a modern industrial society to a post-modern technology society but schools preparing the next generation had not changed. As a result, the younger generation has little access to a quality education reflecting their individual merits and desires. Neoliberalists asserted that the obsolete system and educational ideas would

put the younger generation in great danger as it moved toward a global society where unlimited competition is encouraged (D. Kim 2002).

Three major newspapers in Seoul—the Chosun, DongA, and Joongang Ilbo—produced a great portion of this discourse in their editorial sections. Neoliberalists enumerated many factors that contributed to the school collapse in these newspapers (e.g., Chosun Ilbo 1999b; 1999c; Joongang Ilbo 2001). In general, they viewed the government's strong control over the schooling system as undesirable or even detrimental. Many editorial reviews in the newspapers presented such perspectives (Seo 2002). The titles of such editorial reviews included "Unshackle Universities' Admission Process from MOE's Control," (Chosun Ilbo 2001b) and showed extreme criticism of the government's involvement in education, particularly in the high school and college admission process.

Neoliberalists believed the entire public schooling system put excessive emphasis on equality at the expense of excellence (Chosun Ilbo 1999e; 2001a). They asserted that, "the governing principle in our classrooms is nothing but an arithmetic view of equality...[a] mechanistic view of equality prevails over all other values" (Chosun Ilbo 2001a). Neoliberalists argued that school collapse had been caused by the government's ineffective educational policies based on this "mechanistic view of equality" at the expense of excellence.

The neoliberalist discourse attributed the failure of school education to three factors: the use of randomization in high school admission, inconsistent college admission policies, and lack of system-wide competition—including among teachers and individual schools. One of the major criticisms in this discourse targeted the lottery system used in high school admissions in most of large metropolitan school districts, including Seoul.

School collapse was, in part, caused by the system itself. The lottery system for high school admission made 90 percent of high school students "neglected children." There is no effective method for a teacher to teach a heterogeneous class with 50 students. Therefore, teachers tend to focus on only the top 20 percent of students in their instruction: The rest, therefore, became alienated and fell behind (Chosun Ilbo 1999c).

Neoliberalists argued that the government should permit more independent private high schools and special purpose high schools serving selective groups like gifted and talented students. In the same vein, this discourse criticized the government's control over early study abroad as an infringement of an individual's right for quality education.

Neoliberalists proposed a laissez-faire policy in the college admission process as well. They asserted that college admission should be left to the individual college or university so that each institution could select the most appropriate group of students for their particular educational purposes:

While the government (MOE) is involved in the admission process of universities, we have experienced all different sorts of problems, no matter which method was taken. Then, the conclusion is clear and simple. Leave it to up to each university, its autonomous decision making. The Scholastic Aptitude Test will be still used as one source of information available for universities' decision makings in the admission process; yet, how each university uses the information will be left to universities themselves.... There is no ultimate solution unless the government (MOE) unshackles the university admission process (Chosun Ilbo 2001b).

Advocating for competition in education is another compelling characteristic of this discourse. Neoliberalists, in general, argue for competition among teachers and schools in order to

improve performance and effectiveness (D. Kim 2002).

In any case, we believe that it is time to improve the competitiveness of the teaching profession as a whole. It was proposed a long time ago that a more competitive system should be implemented in the teaching profession. ...The competitiveness of a nation's system is closely related to the competitiveness of education. ...Teachers should leave their profession if they neglect their research and instructional responsibilities. Implementation of competition in the teaching profession is an inevitable trend in the contemporary era... Teachers' organizations should lead this discussion to find a way of implementing a competition-based system in education in collaboration with the government (Joongang Ilbo 2001).

The three major axes of neoliberalist discourse are "choice," "competition," and "excellence." The ultimate goal of school education embedded in this discourse was raising an individual who is able to compete in the ever-changing global economy. Neoliberalists eagerly accepted the marketization of education as a way to provide higher quality and more individualized educational goods for students.

What made the neoliberalist discourse so powerful in the discussion of school collapse remains unclear. It seems rather ironic, even contradictory, that middle and upper middle class people who benefited most from the strong public school system in the past have actually turned into the major force criticizing the school system as ineffective and obsolete. There is no doubt, however, that the Korean MOE still exerts strong control over every sector of education from elementary to higher education. The number of independent private schools at the K-12 level is negligible: The majority of private middle and high schools also rely on government funding and are therefore under the control of the MOE. Furthermore,

MOE control is not limited to school administration with the national curriculum also under its purview, the MOE establishes all the educational content and processes at schools as well. Nor is higher education an exception. The Korean MOE controls SAT and other college admission criteria even though individual universities and colleges have room for flexibility within the large framework given by MOE guidelines.

More interesting, however, is an analysis of the nature of the neoliberalist discourse that can be found in the work of several critical sociologists. Several Korean scholars have noted the stabilization of class structure in South Korea during the last two decades (Yang 2002). The emergence of stable middle and upper-middle class in Korean society has resulted in many interesting social, cultural, and political phenomena (Yang 2000). Most of all, this group started to express their class interests in various ways including mass media and political elections (Chôn and Kim 1998). Due to the government's strong control over the entire school system, however, the role that affluent families could play in their children's educational success has been very limited. The quality of school facilities and teaching forces remained relatively homogeneous nationwide and largely immune to the wealth of a particular school district or individual family. The government has not permitted several educational practices (early tracking, different curricula, independent private schools, university's flexible admission policy, etc.) that reportedly contributed to the reproduction of class through the educational system. As a result, the school system's contribution to class reproduction has been very minimal (OECD 2001). In other words, middle and upper middle class families constantly struggle to transmit their class status to their children because so little space is given to them to control their children's educational process.

*De-schooling Advocates: A Discourse of
Human Rights and Radical Education*

The last, and most radical, point of view that participated in the school collapse debate was that of the de-schooling advocates. They viewed the phenomenon of school collapse as a natural consequence of fundamental changes that had occurred in Korean society during the prior two decades (Cheong 2000). According to the de-schoolers, the Korean educational system, like any modern schooling system found in other countries, was originally based on the needs of modern society. The structure of schools and rigidity of the entire educational system reflected an old model of society. As society itself transforms into a post-modern, post-industrial, technology-based society, the old school system cannot help but fail to meet the challenges and needs of the emerging society. The emergent post-modern society presents a different economic, social, and cultural infrastructure; its educational demands are fundamentally different from those of the modern era. Based on the analysis of societal change, from a modern to a post-modern era, de-schooling advocates assert that the structure of schools and rigidity of the entire educational system were the fundamental causes of school collapse.

A mixture of various groups, including post-modernist scholars, and parents who supported alternative schools and home schooling participated in the de-schooling discourse. Even though the boundaries of this group were less clear than others, the social class background of major participants tended to be middle or upper-middle class. This group voiced a more liberal view of education than any other group described in this paper. The majority of de-schoolers were college educated and able to afford higher quality instruction and educational experiences for their children, usually at a cost much greater than

that of a public school education (Chosun Ilbo 1999a).

Many scholars and educators in the previous three groups also acknowledged that some changes had occurred in Korean society during the 1990s. Unique to the analysis of de-schooling advocates was their view that the change was much more fundamental than others had claimed. De-schooling advocates repeatedly pointed out that schools failed to meet the challenges from society because they were based on an old, obsolete model of society:

The most fundamental reason [for school collapse] was that the current model of schools based on the concept of industrial society is no longer effective in our post-industrial society represented as “information society” (Chôn 1999a: 120).

Ôm (1999) presented a similar diagnosis. He explained that while a modern schooling system following the Fordist model of mass production and mass consumption was effective in modern society, the same schooling system grew too unwieldy and unnecessarily rigid in a post-industrial society that encourages a limited production of variety, and the flexible accumulation system of capital.

De-schooling advocates were not sympathetic to the old system. Rather, they produced a set of poignant critiques on the modern schooling system. Their analysis of school collapse was often accompanied by an extensive critique of the modern school system and even modern society as a whole.

Schools developed a variety of methods to control the bodies of children to fulfill its primary goal of control: Most of those methods came from military training....Didn't politicians who hoped to have obedient people also want children to grow like an automatic robot always compliant with the authority? ...Didn't society

want the people who would just obey an order? Children trained in a school that forced them to fit into one same model, even reciting “in line, in line,” under the name of “order” ...functioned properly within the industrial society; they hardly absconded from their given role/position in society (Hyôn 1999).

De-schooling advocates presented three characteristics that are embedded in the modern schooling system that renders it unable to meet the challenges of newly emerging post-modern, post-industrial society: its oppressiveness, controlling nature, and pursuit of uniformity. They defined “the institutionalized system of education called ‘school’ as nothing more than a structure of oppression limiting the freedom, creativity, and individuality of children” (Chosun Ilbo 1999d).

The de-schooling discourse advocates emphasized one ultimate goal of education—an individual’s right to pursue happiness (Cho-Han 1999). They expressed an optimistic view of human nature and believed that creative and free-minded individuals could make positive contributions to society. It was not surprising that their discourse was often based on the concept of children’s rights—a call for children’s rights to the full extent (Pae 2000; J. Kim 2001) as well as the rights of parents to pursue their own happiness.

A most unique aspect of this discourse was its strong sense of agency in dealing with the phenomenon of “school collapse.” Even though de-schooling advocates identified several factors that had prompted school collapse, they basically viewed it as an unavoidable consequence of societal change. They encouraged people to think and act independently about their children’s education and not blindly rely on the system. De-schooling advocates constantly emphasized the importance of agency among the people involved in the process of education. They argued that every person, including parents, teachers, and children, should be able to communicate their

opinions and desires, and must make the best decision as possible each time. Based on their pragmatic, process-based approach, de-schooling advocates suggested a set of educational contents and methods fundamentally reflecting Dewey’s progressive educational philosophy. They valued the natural experiences of children as the fundamental basis of curriculum, and respected children’s social and intellectual needs and readiness as they organized instructional and learning activities (Kim and Ko 2000).

Discussion and Conclusion

The analysis of the school collapse discourse offered in this paper illuminates several interesting, critical aspects of Korean education as a whole. The four major discourses—traditionalist, democratic reformist, neoliberalist, and de-schooling advocate—seem to represent the entire spectrum of forces in Korean education. They existed prior to the public’s awareness of school collapse phenomenon; yet, through the public debate on school collapse, the existence of those four groups and their differences became much more visible. Via the school collapse debate each group/discourse created their space in social language and launched a more visible ideological competition in a bid for social and linguistic hegemony.

The class or group affiliation of each discourse was noticeable. It may be shocking to many Koreans who had hardly observed such clear class affiliations reflected in any educational discourse or debate in the past. This was a quite predictable event based on the rise of stable middle and upper middle class in society. The relationship between a particular discourse and its class base should not, however, be exaggerated. Variations existed between the discourses’ association with a particular class, such as the middle or upper-middle class. The neoliberalist discourse, for ex-

ample, showed a clear class affiliation yet a good mixture of people from diverse class backgrounds supported the other three discourses. In a similar vein, a similar class background did not render the same discourse. The discourse of de-schooling advocates was a good example. The majority of the group consisted of upper-middle class or at least middle class backgrounds but their school collapse solution was radically different than that of neoliberals who shared similar class and educational backgrounds. What seemed a more critical determinant in this debate was the ideological understanding of the education's purpose as perceived and promoted by each discourse. In other words, what people defined and promoted as the fundamental goal of education actually mediated the relationship between their class background and active participation in a particular discourse.

As Bakhtin (1970) argues, individual or group appropriation of a particular discourse within a special socio-cultural context is a complicated process. Various social, cultural, and political ideologies come into play, mediating and complicating the relationship between the economic base of the speaker/discourse, and the expressed position embodied in the discourse. A mechanistic view of discourse and its class base may be too simplistic as we attempt to explain this complex process.

A variety of interpretations can be made based on the contrasting nature of these four forces in Korean education. Some conjectures can be projected regarding the possible alliances and conflicts among them in the near future. Two themes become clear based on this study's analysis. First, one of the most compelling changes in South Korean education during the last ten years was the strong surge of individualism, as is illustrated by the strong presence of individualism in the public debate on school collapse. Neoliberals and de-schooling advocates actually shared a common

interest in individuals' intellectual capacity and need for growth. Even though the two discourses articulated completely different views on ideal society and the goals of education, both relied on individualism as a method to meet current challenges. This standpoint is exactly in opposition to the traditionalist and democratic reformist discourses that prioritize the communitarian goals of education over that of the individual. The tension between these two lines of thought will continue even though some participants in the debate may find both points complementary rather than contradictory.

The second interesting aspect about the school collapse discourse was its resemblance or connectedness to the larger international educational discourse (e.g., educational discourse in the American context.) In particular, the neoliberalist discourse that advocated market-based education constantly referred to the American model of education as an example that successfully achieves excellence through choice and competition. It is clear here that educational debates in South Korea, including those on school collapse, were not isolated social or linguistic events within their national contexts any more. The school collapse discourse was already rooted in a complex web of ideological discourses in South Korea and the international community at large. Therefore, even though the linguistic event is unique and contextual; the embedded power struggles and ideological competition and alliances are much more far-reaching than the Korean context.

Many scholars have documented the surge of neoliberalist or neo-conservative discourse in many countries during the past two decades (Chôn and Kim 1998). The neoliberalist discourse in the Korean context naturally exhibits some characteristics similar to discourses in other countries. One of the most disturbing characteristics of the neoliberalist discourse on education, both in Korean context and in other countries, is the lack of

interest or understanding about the ultimate goal of education. Even though all the neoliberalists' ideological terms, like "choice," "competition," and "excellence," are legitimate methods for achieving the goal of productivity and competitiveness in the global society, they cannot be presented as the ultimate goal of education as a whole. One of the most serious defects in this discourse lies in its lack of a value dimension—its dearth of ethical or moral aspirations that are so essential to human growth as a whole person.

Unfortunately, this kind of instrumentalization of education and learning based on the need of post-industrial society is not unique to the educational discourse in South Korea. This tendency is, in fact, widespread across the world. Maxine Greene, a renowned US educational researcher, also points out this problem, but still articulates an alternative view of education that seems to be fading out in the dominant educational discourse:

Yes, one tendency in education today is to shape malleable young people to serve the needs of technology and the postindustrial society. However, there is another tendency that has to do with the growth of persons, with the education of persons to become different, to find their voices, and to play participatory and articulate parts in a community in the making (Greene 1995: 132).

To some extent, the school collapse discourse in South Korea epitomizes the inevitable conflict between the instrumental view of education based on the demands of post-industrial economy and its alternative, the more cultural or political, value-oriented views on education. Though this conflict is global, each local context still presents unique dynamics based on the cultural, social, and political heritages of the society. How the Korean educational system, with its strong communitarian tradition and equity awareness, will

respond and react to the influx of neoliberalist discourse of education will be worth close investigation. The four different ideological discourses presented in this study will form new ideological alliances or draw battle-lines in the process of developing new dynamics among themselves as the four major ideological stances in the discourse of Korean education.

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Endnotes

¹ In this paper, I used "school collapse" as the English translation of "*hakgyobunggoe*" or "*kyosilbunggoe*" (classroom collapse)." Even though school collapse sounds awkward in English, I intentionally chose the direct translation rather than other meaning-based translations (e.g., "school crisis," "classroom crisis"). Even though a few Korean scholars use such meaning-based translations in their English publications, those translations do not convey the shocking image of the phenomenon as effectively as 'school collapse MOEs. Use of figurative expressions is a major characteristic in Korean language. Therefore, preserving the image associated with a controversial term in its English translation is essential and contributes to readers' understanding of the educational debate. I also believe that the discourse of school collapse became a heated public debate because of the shocking image of the term. In addition, *hakgyobunggoe* was the most common term used in this educational debate from 1999-2001. Five different Korean terms and their translations frequently used by Korean scholars and newspapers as they engaged in the discourse of school collapse are listed below.

Hakgyobunggoe, school collapse.

kyosilbunggoe, classroom collapse.

kyoukbunggoe, education collapse.

hakgyo kyouk wigi, school education crisis.

kyosil wigi, classroom crisis.

²Reality is a socially constructed phenomenon reflected in the purpose of the discourse analysis presented in this paper. From a social constructionist's point of view, it is ironic, even illogical, to argue that such reality—school collapse—actually existed separated from the collective,

interpretive lens of the people engaged in this social discourse. Yet, the powerful existence of the school collapse phenomenon as a social reality can be easily found in the reports of several survey research studies conducted from 1999-2002 (e.g., Ch'ôn 1999b; Kim, E. J. 2003; Yun, Yi, and Pak 1999). These reports examining the perceptions of various groups of people (e.g., teachers, students, parents, and the general public) confirmed the unprecedented, fundamental changes that had occurred in school environments, which the respondents eagerly labeled school collapse. The majority of survey research respondents and educational researchers indicated that the heart of school collapse lies in the breakdown of traditional human relationships between the teacher and students that had been the fundamental basis for all educational activities and didactic interactions in the Korean context. Major aspects of school collapse included students' blatant refusal to follow basic school norms, intentional violations of etiquette and school rules, total lack of respect for teachers, disruptive behaviors and verbal abuse during class, and lack of motivation and non-participation in instructional activities. The general public and Korean scholars acknowledged that it was very difficult, often impossible, for teachers to initiate and execute educational interactions with their students in the classroom because the most basic, essential conditions for instruction had been significantly eroded.

THE UNEVEN BURDEN OF VITALITY:

COLLEGE RANK, NEOLIBERALISM, AND SOUTH KOREA'S "NEW GENERATION"

NANCY ABELMANN, HYUNHEE KIM, & SO JIN PARK

This paper is interested in the transformed ways that contemporary college students in South Korea envision and narrate human development—namely, ideal ways to mature. Foremost, they are committed to becoming *vital* people who lead active and enjoyable lives—people who ‘live hard and play hard,’ aim to experience the world to its fullest, and are able to circulate in a wide and increasingly global arena. This paper employs “vitality” to capture an emergent discourse on personal attributes and proclivities and corporal (i.e., bodily) energy. With vitality we echo the burgeoning literature on biological citizenship that appreciates the life force itself, what Ann Anagnost (2004: 201) writes of as “bare life” (cf. Agamben 1998).¹ Vitality does not refer here to an emic construct, namely to a single term employed by our ethnographic respondents. We historicize this discourse at the juncture of neoliberal social, economic, and educational reforms in South Korea.

Vital students must thus be internally driven by their own passions and interests, and accrue a range of experiences in order to realize an adult life that is more than a narrow measure of success; in no way, however, do we assert that these young people are not interested in success and social standing. Further, these students want to be social while maintaining identities independent of collectivities of any kind. They distinguish this mode of being in a new and globalizing South Korea from student movement activists of

the past and from *pômsaeng-i*, a contemporary youth slang that mocks yesteryear’s *mobômsaeng*, hardworking and conformist “model students.” Both *pômsaeng-i* and activists are imagined as collectivistic subjects who were driven by the external demands of families and cohort groups respectively and who forfeited play. Students described earlier student generations who enacted hierarchical social relations, foremost the “senior/junior” (*sônhubae*) relations of all social groups, student groups among them. Where these former student cohorts were fashioned by external structures, the image of the vital student today is imagined to fashion herself, to cut her own cloth. We do not, however, argue that the lives of the students here *are* more active than those of yesteryear; indeed, personal development of the educated in South Korea has long demanded considerable diligence and activity.

These images of free-formed selves aside, students are well aware that this new mode of being is at the same time a requirement for productive life in a rapidly transforming and globalizing world. In this way, the discourse on human development is a narrative of human capital formation, a naked understanding of what it takes for a person to succeed in the contemporary economy. It is, thus, not lost on students that the *work* of becoming a vital human being is no simple matter, even if it presents itself as more fun than earlier ‘ways of being.’

Critically, the work of vitality is gendered

as co-educational and public. Many students asserted that exclusively feminine domains, such as women's colleges and the home, lack vitality. Such spaces are imagined to be domestic (in both senses of the word), and limited and limiting in direct contrast with images of free circulation on a global stage. One Yōnse University co-ed, for example—herself a transfer from a second-tier women's college—asserted the categorical difference of Yōnse University's "extent of activity (*hwaltongnyang*)" and went on to describe the large student gatherings on the Yōnse grounds in sharp contrast to the "eateries, beauty parlors, and beautiful girls" that marked her previous college.

These images of free circulation index a critical feature of this vitality—the global. Vital people must be global or 'at home in the world' (see Anagnost 2000; Park and Abelman 2004), reflecting an imperative already a decade old in South Korea's race to internationalize and now globalize (S. Kim 2000). English mastery is a critical piece of this picture (Park and Abelman 2004; Crystal 2003) and many students in this research described English as a necessary "base" (*peisû*).

The student generation featured in this paper spent their childhood in an increasingly prosperous and democratic South Korea. Importantly, however, in their early or late adolescence they met the IMF Crisis (1997-2001) that led to a broad array of social and policy reforms that were, broadly speaking, neoliberal in character. A concerted critique of South Korean crony capitalism led to the call for venture capitalism in a deregulated market. For some, creative, global, high-tech youth were critical to this reform project (Song 2003). Intensified privatization, individuation, and globalization are the large context for the transformations of subjectivity that have been characterized by numerous scholars across the humanities and social sciences.² This paper builds on the many arguments that in the

new economies we are increasingly becoming self-managers who must "produce themselves as having the skills and qualities necessary to succeed." (Walkerline 2003:240). We take particular inspiration from Yan Hairong (2003) who coins the term *neohumanism* to describe, after Marx, how human exchange value in China today has extended to subjectivity. Specifically, she analyses the Chinese construct of *suzhi* or quality, arguing that "*Suzhi* is the concept of human capital given a neoliberal spin to exceed its original meaning of stored value of education and education-based qualifications to mean the capitalization of subjectivity itself" (2003:511, cf. Anagnost 2004).³ Of course, post-IMF South Korea and China under market reform present entirely distinct historical configurations, but the neoliberal spin Yan describes is one, as others have argued, that perhaps unites youth worldwide (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000, 307).

For the South Korean case, we argue that the mode in which many of today's college students distinguish themselves from the past reflects the contemporary, global, neoliberal turn in which individuals take personal responsibility for their own development, effectively obscuring the work of structural features. The South Korean version of this global turn, which imagines contemporary "individuals" against the backdrop of earlier collective subjects is, we assert, a particularly powerful version because the liberal humanist project of post-authoritarianism coincides with the neoliberal transformation and thus the requirement for self-development is heralded in the language of human rights and democratic freedoms (Song 2003). In a narrower educational context, we find strange political bedfellows. For example, both progressives and conservatives call for reformist education devoted to individual-friendly creative curricular reform (Lim 2004). As Michael W. Apple (2001, 421) asserts, global neoliberal education reforms are nationally and

historically “contingent” on “the ways progressive tendencies have already been instituted within the state.”

In the case of post-authoritarian South Korea, neoliberal transformations are easily celebrated in the name of liberal values. In parallel, particular features of the authoritarian developmentalist educational system—primarily its egalitarian ideology and standardization—are easily dismissed as backward historical burdens (S. Park 2004). It is in this historical context that this paper examines how contemporary college students narrate their human capital development to obscure structural workings of family and institutional difference. Vitality works as a potent sign precisely because it is so easily foisted on the person as an organically conceived human quality (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000, 304). In earlier writing on developmentalist sensibilities in South Korea, Abelman has argued that the discourse on personality was easily understood as social and even political and thus revealed, even as it seemed to obscure, the workings of class (Abelman 1997a; 1997b; 2003). In the case of vitality and its linked constellation of imaginings it seems that individual choice and proclivity are much less clothed in sociological sensibility. What we might dub the post-collectivistic hubris of this new generation works specifically against a sociological imagination because it proclaims individuals who do not conform to social demands. As students become the keepers of their own life force, they are also rendered more flexible—literally, able to move. Many of the students we spoke with—particularly women—spoke about looking forward to flexible work lives in which they can both make good of their creativity and passions, and continue to grow and experience. We appreciate, however, that “flexible” is a fraught idea. It can refer both to bold images of infinite choice and to constraints of the labor market that demand flexibility, particularly of

women who have long served in South Korea, as in many countries, as a flexible labor force (Song 2003). Intriguing here is the absence of any worries about gendered constraints in the labor market, or any hint that flexibility itself might be a gendered constraint rather than freedom.

This “more radically individuated sense of personhood” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000: 305) thus obscures class and other structural differences. The “machine-like” (*kigye kat’ûn*) students—who lived “as they were directed to live” (*sik’inûn taero*)—of today’s students’ imaginings were, we assert, better able to articulate the structures imposing on them. The burden, then, of “living as one wants” (*hago sip’ûn taero*) renders invisible the many constraints that do impinge upon life and choices. As Comaroff and Comaroff (2000: 302) so eloquently note, “Complex, poetically rich, culturally informed imaginings have always come between structural conditions and subjective perceptions—imaginings that have... waxed more fantastic, as capitalist economies have enlarged in scale.” This paper examines these complex and poetically rich imaginings for young South Koreans.

This paper demonstrates that vitality is shared by students with vastly different class backgrounds and at a wide array of institutions of higher learning. What we analyze specifically, however, is how to listen to the ways in which this ‘burden of vitality’—as this paper is titled—is borne variously in accordance with South Korea’s highly stratified higher education sector (Seth 2002). Of course, class and college prestige are sometimes correlated but in no way coterminous with one another. Although we focus here on differences in college “brand,” we appreciate that students’ class backgrounds are also critical parameters. We contrast students at elite universities for whom the university itself confers vitality in a “brand”-like manner, from students at third tier colleges who are keenly aware that they must take on this

human development project on their own. This awareness does not, however, easily translate into a sense of structural disadvantage. We do, though, listen carefully for those moments when it does.⁴

Before turning to the students themselves, it is critical to place this new human development or capital narrative in the context of important transformations of higher education in South Korea. South Korean higher education, like South Korean mainstream K-12 education, has in some sense been playing catch-up in responding to social demands. In fact, the argument can be made that South Korean education has long been driven by the force of social demand, for equal access in early decades and currently for neoliberal reform, namely deregulation, privatization, diversification, and globalization. Although some charge that the state continues to lag behind consumer demand (*Hankook Ilbo* 2004; D. Lee 2004), today's South Korea nonetheless offers an interesting case of state-managed deregulation of higher education in accordance with the neoliberal values of efficient self (i.e., campus) -management, productivity/excellence, diversification, and global competition (Mok and Welch 2003; Mok, Yoon, and Welch 2003; OECD 2000).⁵ The transformed student is portrayed as an autonomous consumer who should manage her own lifelong creative capital development.⁶ We understand the elite university students discussed in this paper to have most benefited from the government distribution of national resources because of the very selective state support of higher education. As such, their co-educational campuses most deeply enact the new global human capital development that all these students articulate.

These neoliberal education reforms are not without their critics, as many understand that such reforms run against the grain of a longstanding ideological commitment to egalitarian education. Although never entirely

realized in practice, decades of policy reform in the past were made in the name of equal access and standardization. Today the debate between quality education and education equality rages on. A critical factor is the state's recent centralized higher education transformations, concentrating on the country's top tier universities. This focused approach to neoliberal reform intensified the already enormous stratification of South Korean education (J.H. Lee 2004).⁷ The complex political colors of the current education policy climate are easily observed through a recent *JoongAng Ilbo* editorial denouncing South Korean education as an "outdated steam engine" that hampers the "nation's competitiveness." The editorial continued, "Korea is still mired in the age of democratization, in which remnants of previous authoritarian regimes continue to linger. As such, the influence of ideology remains evident" (D. Lee 2004: 39-40). The fascinating logics of this argument speak, we think, to the complex political colors of the current moment in which "democracy," "authoritarian legacies," and "ideological remains" (coded leftist) are rendered parallel projects that mediate against neoliberal education reform. In a fascinating analysis of South Korea's fin-de-siècle discourse about "school collapse," Jae Hoon Lim (2004) argues that what she dubs the "traditionalist" response, for its primary lament over the loss of teacher's authority and other ethical protocol (5) and what she calls the "democratic" response share a commitment to a communitarian model of education. On the other hand, neoliberals and the de-schoolers, in spite of being quite politically divergent, shared a commitment foremost to the individual—and, by extension, choice, competition, and excellence (15, 22). Society's former radicals are interested in various modes of alternative schooling do not, in fact, sound so different from the explicit neoliberals—like the writer of the above editorial—with their objections to the mantle of

educational equality.

The contemporary education moment in South Korea offers consumers with economic wherewithal many new arenas for investment, primarily the option of study abroad prior to college. A 550 million dollar venture in the first quarter of 2004, doubling the figures from 2002, the so-called “early study abroad” (*ch’ogi yuhak*) is an escalating market (*Hankook Ilbo* 2004). Indeed, some argue that in the face of this drain of education expenditures South Korea should open its education market entirely (*Hankook Ilbo* 2004). Parents struggle as to how to best educate their children for a transformed South Korea in a transforming world (S. Park 2004) A not uncommon question is: ‘which will be more valuable into the future, a degree from Harvard or from Seoul National [South Korea’s premier university]?’ Of course, most people struggle not with the contrast between Harvard and Seoul National but instead with second or third tier schools in both countries, wondering about the futures they promise. These options present new, and sometimes risky, human capital development strategies. In the self-development narratives of students featured in this paper, we will see that they enthusiastically embrace these risks.

We now introduce four students in greater detail: one from Koryô University, a top tier private school; and the others from “third tier” schools, Myôngji University in Seoul and Inchôn City University outside of Seoul. The designation of university level is complicated. It is hard, for example, to put any university in Seoul on a par with those outside of the city, or even more so with those in the provinces (*chibang*); here Inchôn City University is somewhat betwixt and between for it is neither a Seoul school nor a provincial one. Although the Koryô University student we feature here busily distinguishes herself even from her own top tier university peers, she is nonetheless deeply invested in her university’s vitality

and excellence, and in the status that it confers on her—in short, in what we might call her campus capital. The Myôngji University and Inchôn City University students, on the other hand, articulate their projects of self-development against the grain of their campuses. They understand that precisely because their campuses are *not* brands of vitality that they must shoulder the burden of their own human development. They thus articulate visions of how to inhabit their colleges particularly and in some cases how to exceed the limits of their campus capital. The conversations featured in this paper took place in groups of departmental or club cohorts and friends, and in many cases, students staked their positions in relation to their peers. We thus aim to preserve this dialogic quality of the conversations.

An Elite College Coed

“It is the feeling of energy, the motivation to continuously do something...”

We met Heejin in summer 2003 and again in summer 2004, and each time she sported a baseball cap and sweats. We were struck by Heejin’s boyish voice, androgynous look, unselfconscious mannerisms and laughter, and fast pace. Heejin compared her current boyish, carefree style with that of her best friend in high school who ended up at a women’s college and transformed herself into a stylish and feminine woman who spends lots of money on shopping and body care. In contrast to her friend’s feminine consumption, Heejin stressed that she would rather spend her money on drinking; we note that with this contrast Heejin sketches her friend’s narrow, consumption world, with her more gregarious, masculine, and vital one. This distinction was one enlivened for Heejin by her chosen co-ed campus itself. Each stroll on campus with Heejin revealed her popularity and comfort in the environment. Conversations with

Heejin shed light on her cosmopolitan interests in being comfortable in the world at large. It was clear that Heejin was very much at home at Koryô University and with today's college scene. After several hours together in 2004, Heejin took us to the student union president who she praised to the sky even as she stood steadfastly against his every political and campus cause.

Recently, President Roh threatened to repeal the advantages accorded students of "special purpose" high schools whose graduates gained extra points on their college entrance exams.⁸ Heejin, a graduate of such a school, called the potential change "a policy to undermine students with high standards" and said of her entitlement: "I worked twice as hard as others to enter that school, and twice as hard to stay there." Further, for Heejin, successful entrance to Koryô University had particular meaning because her parents had insisted that if she could not enter a top-tier co-ed college that she had better attend a women's school; she had, thus, succeeded in avoiding a feminized space.

In 2003 we walked away from our meeting with Heejin with one of her phrases, "self-management" (*chagi kwalli*), resonating. We had been surprised to hear the phrase so directly, and to listen that summer to so many other students who offered similar narratives of what it takes to succeed in a transformed South Korea. Heejin dwelled on self-management to distinguish herself from her close associates during her *chaesu* year, the year when some students study to retake the college entrance exams to upgrade their college choice, or in some cases to secure admission to any college.

I probably shouldn't say this, but those of us here are at this level [gesturing around her]. Our society is lead by people at this higher level... Frankly speaking, among my friends from my *chaesu* year [those who attended the same college preparation institute], I am the only one

who got in here. Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying they are bad. They all go to provincial colleges or... We all used to hang out together, but when we parted at 1 a.m. I would go home and study until 3 a.m. before we went to bed. They just went to bed since they were tired. *So it was all about self-management* [emphasis added]... It isn't that I look down on them. If I was to talk to them like this, they would think I was a different person. But I only talk to them about fun stuff... I have friends that I hang out with, friends I study with, and friends I consult with about the future.

When we met Heejin a year later as a sophomore, her position on self-management had, if anything, hardened. Koryô University, she asserted unabashedly, was an elite school that should stand for, metonymically, the likes of her: self-managers invested in the kinds of new human development sketched above.

Heejin described a changed university, a far cry from the one that her high school teachers had described by telling them, "hang in there, hang in there, once you get to college you can do whatever you want." Instead, to her delight, Heejin found people who studied really hard and she described that she had been "moved" at the long line of students waiting to enter the library at 5 a.m. It was clear that for Heejin, competing, self-managing, working hard, and so on made her feel alive and vital. She described the energy that comes from achievement and activity:

[If you have to study in college] you can feel that you have achieved something... When I was selected to be an exchange student [she hasn't gone yet] the feeling was *amazing*—the sense of accomplishment. When I got into college, into the department I wanted, and... It is the feeling of *energy*, the motivation to continuously do something...

Heejin was unabashed that the quest should be eternal, and that the point was not to arrive at

one place or another. In 2004 we were joined by a member of the popular music club, Soona, who ended up playing devil's advocate to the human capital development extremes that Heejin offered that day. In the face of Heejin's insatiable desire to be credentialized, and for Koryô University to stand for excellence, Soona queried, "But does this leave *you* any room for *self* development?" Heejin's retort was quick and easy: "But this is a part of self development too." Where Soona reserved some self-development beyond, we might say, the marketplace, Heejin flatly rejected this sort of distinction. Minutes later, Soona pushed her again, "You enjoy competition so that you can realize your dreams, right? It isn't that you want to compete forever, right? Do you want to agonize yourself with endless competition." Soona had effectively asked the same question, and Heejin offered the same answer: "It isn't hard for me." When Soona pressed her further that she had witnessed Heejin complaining about the work at exam time, Heejin admitted that "yes" she complains, but that she nonetheless wants to compete. Where Soona articulated the "burden" of vitality, Heejin espoused a willingness to embrace it.

When we met with Heejin in 2004, we spent quite a bit of time talking about the university's recently established English requirements for graduation, namely an 800 or above on the TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication).⁹ At that time, the student government was busily campaigning against this requirement and other features of Koryô University's aggressive globalization efforts—it was because of our interest in this campaign that Heejin lead us to the student union president after our meeting. Heejin was matter of fact about the requirement, which she argued should be even steeper. When Soona protested the requirement, Heejin defended that the life or class circles (*saenghwal hwangyông*) of future Koryô Univer-

sity graduates were ones that demanded English mastery. In passing she remarked, "Last semester I saw more English than Korean." Heejin was unfazed that the university should want to confer these and many more credentials upon its graduates. She voiced her support for "anything that asserts that I have achieved to this [indicating the campus around her] level." She added later that Koryô University is her brand (*mak'û*) and hence she wanted the bar to be set high.

Heejin is a great defender of Koryô University's global turn from "national Koryô University" to "global Koryô University." She described the university's newspaper campaign, "Now we have turned our back on our homeland and are marching toward the world." She praised the university's efforts to be included in the list of the world's top 100 universities in which currently there are no South Korean universities, as well as the Dean's motto, "Let's make good on our [university] pride!" For Heejin, the march to the world, English, endless credentials, ever-rising standards, and the like are the registers of vitality, not an "end" as Soona would have it, but a way. Heejin's career goals encompass this sense of vitality. She detailed her ever escalating "desire" for foreign languages: "My major is English [literature]. But it is unsatisfying to only work on English. After all, everybody does English... Now I am learning Japanese, and I am continuing with Spanish too. And I also want to learn Chinese." She described crafting a career through which she can "contact [in English] foreigners." Heejin thus imagined herself in broad circulation, moving freely in the world, facilitated by the mastery of many tongues, and acting as an agent to bring South Korea around the globe. Heejin plans to become an "event director," more specifically she hopes to orchestrate public events, "circulating foreign culture." Heejin's description of the career synthesizes her aesthetics of vitality and activity, as well as her sense of the global.

I like to make plans and to act of them, to bring them to life. I'm the type who initiates getting together with my friends. I want to develop this side of me. I also like to deal with people. At one point I thought about becoming a producer, but I sensed that I would be constrained and that bothered me... A producer is confined to this country. Instead, I want to have a hand in circulating foreign culture.

On hearing all this, Soona again was not entirely unconvinced. Soona refused to equate "self development" with human capital formation and argued for something "personal" beyond the instrumental. For Heejin the personal and the instrumental came together in a vitality that was at once pleasurable and interested.

Throughout our time together, Soona spoke again and again on behalf of people left cold by Heejin's instrumental vitality—as did the author and her anthropologist colleague Jinheon Jung. Where Heejin was against every education equalization measure of the current administration, Soona wondered about the less fortunate and privileged, a category that Heejin barely allowed for. Heejin argued that in today's world of nations South Korea cannot afford to equalize, stating "it's too early, we are still at the point where we have to make students study more and more; all we do now is play." Lest the reader imagine that allergies to a particular image of collectivities preclude national identification, comments like these, championing "competition" in very nationalistic terms, were not uncommon. Heejin was not alone in asserting that South Korea could ill-afford equalization measures in the face of its own race for global standing.

As many have argued, nationalism and cosmopolitanism often go hand in hand (Park and Abelman 2004, Schein 1998). As for people who can't afford the private after school education indispensable to upper tier college entrance, Heejin offered, "they should work hard

and make themselves rich too." Here we can recall the highly personalized project of self-realization in which the "individual" must *tout court* fashion her own mobility. Heejin charged the state with "downward equalization"—dumbing down the country in a way that it can ill afford in the global race. Soona managed fewer and fewer comments in the torrent of Heejin's discourses of the vital. It is interesting that one little comment she made late in our time together baffled Heejin. Soona had managed to say that she liked studying Korean literature to which Heejin responded, "I don't understand." Although by no means a coherent political position, Soona had again and again spoken about the burden of the very sort of vitality that Heejin championed, and also thought about those people who are shut out of this particular sort of human development. To admit to liking Korean literature was, by that point in the conversation, to admit to hemming oneself in to, it seemed, a smaller universe, a domestic scene, lower standards and so on.

Heejin thus poses as a neoliberal paragon, all the more so as the graduate of a "special purpose" high school, one that ran against the long-term policy current of education equalization. As an elite college student, she enunciated the neoliberal turn, relishing in the project of her own creative capital formation. This is not, however, to say that the project imposes no burdens. There are cracks in the armor, found in Heejin's admissions of the difficulties of striving. Soona, however, registers the ambivalence more clearly: the burden of vitality sounds much more like that—a mode of being that if idealized, remains a bit unfamiliar and daunting.

A Third-tier College Coed

"I can't get anything from this school."

We met Sori for the first time in 2004 shortly

before she was to resume her senior year at Myôngji University after a year's leave. Myôngji University had been a disappointment to Sori in every way. Having been a hard working high school student in a peer group headed for greener pastures, Sori had a hard time coming to terms with herself at this "third-tier college." What is fascinating, if semi-tragic, about Sori's case is that she articulated a narrative of personal development not unlike Heejin's, even as her personal circumstances shut her out of the elite college "brand" that goes so far to confer vitality. The profound personal cost—trauma, even—of Sori's college story aside, she was nonetheless willing to take on the entire burden of her own human/capital development, holding herself "responsible for [her] own regulation" (Walkerdine 2003: 239). We take note of the intermittent moments in which Sori generated systemic or structural and gendered critiques, only to then quickly return to personal responsibility. With Sori, we continue discussion of the profound burden of vitality, of new constructs of human development.

It is impossible to wrest Sori's own college story from her father's college story; indeed, college is always an intergenerational conversation of one kind or another. When Sori "ended up" at Myôngji University, her father, an import export small entrepreneur and a self-made man, let her know that she had "yielded no return" on his expenditures and that there was no point to his "investing" in her any further. Sori had made her way to Myôngji University after her *chaesu* year. Her scores had been so low on the first round that she ended up not even applying to college because she had no interest in those schools that her scores would have afforded. Unlike most children from middle class families, which Sori's appeared to be, she did not attend a private institute that *chaesu* year, but instead buried herself in a public library because her father had pronounced her, his only child, a "hopeless case." We note here, that at this

point her family's education investment became clearly gendered. She described the hapless library crew, adrift in their private pursuits, many of them already years into the project of college entrance or study for one or another state exam. The irony of Sori's settling for Myôngji University was that her father, the first in his poor family to have attended college, had himself gone to Myôngji University; it was thus unthinkable that the daughter, who had been raised with so many more advantages, had not managed to do any better. A year later it turns out that Sori's college entrance exam scores actually went down; she explained that it seems that hers is a personal "*kodû*" ill-suited to the entrance exams. Further, she admitted to the senselessness of it all: her best test scores, for example, were on the third attempt when she didn't even study. But even when we pushed, and even with her admission that she is not an 'exam-person,' Sori refused any critique of this engine of selection in a highly competitive South Korea; instead, echoing Heejin, she took exams and competitive credentialization as par for South Korea's course.

When Sori took the time to tell us that the score that it took to enter her major at Myôngji University, the Department of Business Management, was no different from that required by less desirable departments at higher ranked schools, it seemed that she was about to criticize the stratification of higher education in South Korea, and the "brand" capital we have describe above. Instead, however, Sori was very critical of the college. She detailed the various ways in which Myôngji University did not live up to her ideal of college, an image made all the more palpable because the vast majority of her high school and after-school institute friends attended higher ranking schools; indeed, the day we spoke she was accompanied by a graduate student friend at prestigious Yônse University located but minutes from Myôngji University. She described the hollow Myôngji li-

brary, completely empty except during exam season; here we can recall Heejin who was moved by the students lined up to enter the Koryô University library at dawn. Also lacking for Sori were meaningful social relationships: she described that where students at Yônse or Koryô Universities build relations with their “seniors” (*sônbae*) and join clubs or study groups,¹⁰ for her “there is nothing that I can learn from them.” Going further, Sori said, “I can’t get anything from this school.” When we asked her why it is that she can’t even “have a conversation” with classmates at Myôngji, she continued:

To take an example: I am interested in English, but if I try to talk to them about learning English, they are clueless. They know nothing about what teacher is good at what institute or how to prepare for the TOEFL etc. If they even studied English a bit they would know that much and I would at least be able to talk to them about how hard TOEFL is, but all they can say is “I don’t know anything about TOEFL” or “I haven’t ever taken the TOEIC.”

With these comments, Sori described students with perhaps little bright futures or, at least, lower ambitions. We can also consider that Sori was remarking on the *manqué* of network or social capital at a place like Myôngji University; there were neither strategic ties nor helpful information to be garnered there. These very students who knew so little about the English exam that Koryô University was requiring an 800 on for graduation—the very score that earned Sori a sizable merit fellowship at Myôngji University—nonetheless went for stints abroad, but Sori stressed, “with no mind of their own.” “They just head for China or the United States because their parents send them. I don’t understand them. They say, ‘Isn’t it a good thing to study abroad? Doesn’t it expand one’s horizons?’ but they have absolutely no plan to make good on their study abroad ex-

perience.” For her part, she could never imagine using her parents’ money without “strong determination” to really study hard. Here Sori distinguished the spirit from the letter; her classmates, she asserted, lacked the spirit—the vitality—that would assure meaningful effects.

Aspiring to follow in her father’s footsteps, pace on the many observers of neoliberal subjectivity, Sori has taken on the burden of self-development on her own. Sori admires her father, a well-traveled and successful exporter, whom she describes as “a self made man who speaks English well considering his age.” She went on to note that his English is in fact better than hers. In spite of admitting to being “hurt” by him and to the trials of “never being able to live up to his expectations,” Sori is busily crafting her own parallel track. Foremost, she knows that she will need to identify her own “import/export item” (*ait'em*) if she is to succeed. Over the course of our conversation, we began to listen to the phonetic loan word “item” more metaphorically, to stand for the stress that many students put on discovering “their own” talent or nurturing “their own” passion. We are struck that Sori’s “item”—one that she would market or bring from abroad—parallels Heejin’s “events,” both of them self-styled, and both of them decidedly cosmopolitan for extending beyond South Korea and for requiring English. Sori does not want to be merely “a part of the machine,” aspiring instead to becoming a figure in her own right (*chudojôgin saram*).

Like her *chaesu* year, Sori’s “item” is a particularly gendered burden. She said: “My Dad says that his trade item is too good to let it die with his generation and that if he had had a son he could have had him take it over.” To wit, her entrepreneurship is indeed a self-entrepreneurship; the matter of fashioning herself as a woman is tied up in the project of somehow identifying that perfect trade item (Walkerdine 2003). Denied her entrepreneurial patrimony,

Sori's dream to circulate on a larger stage becomes harder to realize. Interestingly, Sori described that as a young girl she was indulged by her father who at that time still had big dreams for her. Like Heejin, she thus never even entertained the possibility of a woman's college that would somehow hem her horizons. It was as if, in the face of her failure, Sori's father relegated her to the feminine, as if to say, 'pull yourself up, if you can, by your own bootstraps.' At the risk of making an interpretive gamble, it is likely the family investments for a wayward son would have only intensified under similar circumstances. Sori's own senses of the gendered realms of her parents echo these calculations. She characterized that while her father moves on the world stage, her mother, the kinder and more empathetic parent, is confined to the domestic. It is telling, if ironic, that the "masculine" signs of vitality are cold and even cruel, while the sites of "feminine" kindness are hemmed in and domestic in both senses of the word. In thinking about her own "domestic" future, Sori spoke of her "dilemma" and her confusion.

On the one hand, she wants to marry and have children: "I want to have three kids and a harmonious home (*hwamokhan kajông*) filled with the sounds of children. I want my kids to have siblings and I want to hear the sounds of people making noise when I enter home." On the other hand, however, she is aware that to become the 'savvy entrepreneurial woman' (*môtchin yôsông*) that can please her father, this sort of domestic scene is still only the distant future: "Honestly, I don't think I can get married before my thirties... I need to work in a company and start my own business too, but if I get married and take care of my home and my husband, I won't be able to do anything." She dismissed out of hand the possibility of help from her mother who has already, she offered, "sacrificed too much to patriarchal demands." Sori's struggles, however,

must be appreciated in the context of what she described as the "two things that matter to my father: patriarchy and money." Sori is determined to "both marry well and become a classy woman by virtue of making lots of money" (*sijip chal kago and ton chal pônún môtchin yôsông i toemyôn*) so that her father will approve of her (*okei hasil kôt kat'ayo*) in spite of her having attended a third-tier college like he had. We detail the family context of Sori's situation to underscore that her "burden" of self-development is intricately stitched into the fabric of conservative family norms and patriarchy. Middle class largesse was in this case withheld along gendered lines.

Although the task of unearthing Sori's "item" is still a project for the future, she has meanwhile been taking a year off to study further for the TOEIC as well as to travel and take up photography. Sori was frustrated by what struck her as an irony: although third-tier, Myôngji's tendency for constant small exams throughout the entire semester worked against her own human development desires. In short, she calculated that she had better leave campus to be vital. English, travel, and photography comprise an easy trio, for they are all human development assets, assets that are all the more important for students from Myôngji University, where, Sori said the large firms don't even interview.

In sum, we have introduced Sori as a third tier college co-ed who realizes that her human development, in the sense we have described, is in her own hands. Without the college brand, and without the gendered inheritance of her father's import/export item, Sori is indeed on her own in the project of self-styling for a transformed world. Although Sori at moments called attention to matters beyond the boundary of the self-including personal exam proclivity, the insensitivity of college reputations at the departmental level, and inequalities in family contributions to exam preparation—she nonetheless considered that

she is both responsible for “ending up” at Myôngji University and in turn for the development of her own human capital. Hardly unfettered by the burden, Sori still embraced it.

Bordering the Megalopolis

“Each of us has to know exactly where we are headed and then make choices accordingly”

We turn now to two male seniors at Inchôn City University, Min and Kûn, both the children of small entrepreneurs and Min of a single mother. Although we foreground university stratification here, it is clear that Min and Kûn are from class backgrounds that differ from the students introduced earlier. Like Sori, Min and Kûn similarly take on the burden of human development beyond the walls of their university. Min argues for the self-management of college in which each student decides where college fits in their own self-development strategy. Kûn, having recently decided to take the civil service exam, is resigned to a rather conventional occupational future, but holds out for the possibility of personal development beyond the job, as he did throughout his college years beyond the university. We understand Kûn to articulate a somewhat different narrative of vitality—one that recalls Heejin’s friend Soona at Koryô University who wanted to reserve some element of human development beyond the instrumental. These distinctions aside, however, we appreciate that even beyond the confines of the “productive” realm, vitality can still burden; and further that the distinction between the productive and other realms perhaps makes less and less sense. Inchôn City University is a third-tier university attended by Seoulites who cannot enter colleges in Seoul proper, Inchôn locals, and students from the provinces. Inchôn, a sprawling city neighboring Seoul, presents an interesting case. Although an independent city with its own

history distinct from the Seoul megalopolis, it is close enough to Seoul to avoid easy classification as “provincial” South Korea but is nonetheless not clearly part of the greater Seoul metropolitan area. Interestingly, Inchôn City University was only recently designated a public university in the aftermath of a widely publicized corruption scandal and this change serves as a beacon of the new democratic era. The institutional history and character of colleges is one that is worthy of consideration and not sufficiently developed in this paper.

We met Min and Kûn in a larger group of Communication Department students in 2003 and in a smaller group again in 2004. In 2004, Min was off campus because of an internship that had turned into full time employment—although he still needed to finish up some coursework—and he made considerable effort to come and meet us because he had an urgent story to share (one that follows here). In 2003, Min—stylishly dressed in offbeat clothes—spoke of his “fate to follow a different life course,” and of his distinctive childhood without a father and with a “crazily” strong mother. When he introduced himself as an “eclectic philosopher,” it was clear that his classmates had heard much of it before, that Min was a frequent performer of his own difference. In 2003, Min, establishing himself as a confident talker, spoke at great length about South Korea’s impoverished culture of conversation or debate (*t’oron munhwa*). In claiming that English was “more comfortable,” Min seemed to be saying that, for him, English was somehow unfettered by South Korean schooling, convention, and perhaps even social life. With his comments on English, Min also highlighted his international travel and his cosmopolitan affinities.

When I speak English, it doesn’t seem so hard. It is easy and systematic. Speaking English is more comfortable and written English is more precise

[than Korean]. When I speak Korean, the words seem hard and I feel that in comparison Korean is difficult. People of the Republic of Korea learn that difficult Korean and so it is hard for us to learn that easy English. This shows that we have a real problem with our education system. We begin our schooling learning such strange things (in English education)—and in high school and middle school too. I don't know why we learn those kinds of things. We could just go and talk when the situation arises, but instead we study English this way. Who knows why we can't get out of our books?

Moments later, Min championed “survival English,” an English born in real life interactions and through a more natural process of acquisition:

If we say, “Mom, give me something to eat (*ômma, pap chwô*),” we don't consciously think of “*ômma*,” “*pap*,” and “*chwô*.” We just say “*ômma, pap chwô*” in one phrase. But [in South Korean schooling], we have to memorize the English words for “*ômma*,” “*pap*,” and “*chwô*” and combine them to make a sentence.... If I do it my own way, English rolls off my tongue easily (*yông'ô ka sulsul nawayo*). When I spoke English abroad, I didn't think about it consciously—I just memorized the words and sentences that people used and said them that way...It's really easy to learn how to just change the ending of sentences and put that into action, but instead [people in South Korea] just sit in the library five hours a day studying. That's meaningless. We really should change [the education system] soon.

If the English that Min spoke and learned in his trek in India was somehow “natural,” South Korean English was a disaster, held hostage in South Korean textbooks and classrooms. On hearing Min on English, Kûn did not negate what he said, but offered his own take on Min's position: “Our [i.e., South Korean] criterion for English study is the TOEIC exam. He hasn't studied for

the TOEIC exam, but he went to India and tried his English a lot there. In a word, he is talking about practical English (*silch'ôn yông'ô*).” We will see below that Kûn has only traveled domestically and thus has made different choices than Min, although we think that their class backgrounds are not so distinct.

In keeping with his deep-seated criticisms of South Korean English education, Min was also an avid critic of South Korea's chronic competition and of the connections (school, region, and kin) that it takes to achieve; in that litany, he included South Korea's “Seoul National University sickness,” referring to the pathological obsession with that one school. Interestingly, in his excursus on English, Min also asserted that his English mastery exceeded that of Seoul National University students. Like Myôngji University's Sori, Min makes structural critiques, but it was clear that he was much more deeply empowered by them, that he resisted personalizing his “failure” as an Inch'ôn City University student. While it is hard to generalize from this difference, we think that both class and gender do matter here. Min was not burdened by Sori's sense, as introduced by her father, that in the light of her middle class advantages she had failed by ending up at Myôngji University; nor did she seem quite as empowered to craft her own maverick way. Where Sori was burdened with the desire to please her patriarchal father, Min prided himself on his maverick family background, on being unfettered by “Korean” familial convention. Min's assertion of freedom from patriarchy can be considered ironically as a gendered privilege itself; a father-less daughter would be very differently positioned. In describing the many ways in which he had self-styled his path, from travel in India to side jobs in college, Min detailed a self-entrepreneurship that had begun early in his life by virtue of his cultural marginality, his position outside of the logic of patriarchy that

burdened Sori—even as her father’s “item” could not be passed down. In imagining his future, Min described his inspiration from Buddhism (“following one’s heart”); indeed, throughout the conversation he cited a range of early Korean religious thinkers. In 2003 he also spoke of his desire to make avant-garde films.

By 2004, via an internship, Min had landed a highly desirable job in Seoul as a TV producer in a broadcasting company. Although Min was not disparaging of others, the following comments on how he landed the job makes clear, however, that he understands that each person must take responsibility for the management of their own future, a management that is inherently risky, and driven by many choices.

When I was taking classes, I got many calls asking, “Min, are you up for some part time work?” And I would turn to my friends, “Hey, let’s do it together,” but most of the time they said “No, I can’t, I have class.” But in my case, I cut class and did those jobs. Because I skipped many classes, my GPA was between a B and a C... but I learned many skills in the field. And so I have been able to enter the work world this quickly. Those students who stuck to their classes can’t enter society and begin working as easily. It was a matter of my personal judgment (*chagi pandan*); I did what I did because I chose to do it. Grades are also important, and I did fret about my grades. Some of my friends made that choice [i.e., to secure their grades]...Each of us has to know exactly where we are headed and then make choices accordingly. I chose my course a long time ago and I have stayed on that path without wavering.

Min’s thoughts here about learning “in the field” echo his earlier pronouncements about language learning, and signify his embrace of new modes of human development. It was not, however, to offer these reflections that Min had made considerable efforts to meet us that

evening. He had come to tell us a love story and to share his broken heart. It was a very long story, spoken with almost no interruptions, other than sympathy pangs from the assembled listeners; for Kún and a newcomer to the department also there, it was clear that the story was already very familiar. In a word, Min had fallen in love with an Indian woman he had come to know because she was featured in a TV program that he had spear-headed as part of his internship, and by the time we were speaking, job. It was a fairy tale story of true love and of tragic parting: the woman in question could not marry out. Although a serious and at moments melodramatic telling, there were humorous asides, mostly about the ways in which Min skimmed on his work to follow his heart. We listened to the story intently—Min was skilled at keeping us tuned in. In the midst of it we were struck by the way in which Min seemed to mobilize the tale as an instance of the way in which he makes life choices—reminiscent of his description of his management of college. Min’s was an instance of living and experiencing intensely, vitally. While at first glance a very far cry from the credential-happy Heejin with her “events” or from “item”-seeking Sori, the intensity, the personal flair, and the interest in experience is consistent. That evening, within moments of our meeting Min had ruffled through his wallet to show us something, namely his graduation photo in which, against the grain, Min had decided to wear traditional Korean garb. It was a freshman in the department, who sat with us quietly and blushed when asked to talk a bit about herself, who flipped through her cell phone shots to produce the desired photo. Min, it was clear, was himself a bit of a departmental event or item.

Min also talked that evening about an encounter with a Japanese traveler in India. It was a lovely story about a serendipitous and minimal, but somehow very meaningful, meeting; it captured beautifully the allure of travel, the magic

that it promises the adventuresome. The talk of travel, yet another instance of “experience,” recalled the year earlier meeting in which all of the four students who spoke at length devoted much of their talk to travel, but most of all Kûn. Born and raised in Inch’ôn, Kûn had transferred from physics to communications, finding it better suited to his interests. After uttering this he said, “and I especially like to travel,” which prompted the author to ask about the relation between travel and his new major (communications) that made everyone chuckle. Kûn nonetheless did answer, tellingly:

Well, there’s no exact relationship between them, but...I think of travel as something that gives you time to contemplate. The way I think of travel is that while passing through new environments, it allows us to think alone and to plunge into our own thoughts.

The connection, we think, was that both the major and the travel were tailored to personal proclivity. Kûn would have liked to travel abroad, but limited resources precluded it. Kûn described his lofty goals at the start of each travel, “setting out for the answers to ‘how I should live,’ ‘what life is’ and so on,” but he continued wistfully, “after all, it’s the same. Whether I travel or not, life is hard.” Even in 2003, Kûn went on to say that the “weight of reality” had been getting in the way of his travels.

Kûn’s comments on his future in 2004 must be listened to in the context of the evening we have already described, one in which most of us, Kûn included, sat quietly listening to Min’s account. Kûn, conservatively and neatly dressed, smiled quietly throughout the telling. It was after this romp of experience—of adventuresome travel in India, television, and international romance—that Kûn shared his decision to take the civil service exam, a decision that would foreclose on any opportunity for the boutique employment

well suited to his studies and passions. This future seemed all the duller against the landscape of Min’s accounts. Kûn talked about the naked realities of contemporary circumstances, for all college students, particularly for ones outside of Seoul: “People say that our economy is getting worse and youth employment is becoming a serious issue. These days there are no college students who are relaxed. We hang out together, but the moment we are alone again we are overwhelmed with worry, worries about the future.” Kûn thus described an anxiety that we observed across many of our college student interviews, especially those at the lower tier universities. It is interesting that the Koryô University students above did not speak about economic downturns and the difficulty of employment. Kûn, however, went so far as to note that these days even Seoul National University students struggle. As with Min above, we can note the iconic way that Seoul National University is mobilized in student discourse. Traveler Kûn made peace with his decision to take the exam this way:

If I become a public servant, I will have enough spare time. WE can’t imagine working more than ten hours a day like Min. [As a public servant] I will go to work at 9:00 and finish by 5:30. The rest of the time is my own. And in the near future public servants will have every other Saturday off. And somewhere down the line all Saturdays will be off. With that time, I can do something for self-development.

In this way, Kûn registered or at least performed his peace with the arrangement: the decision, born of necessity, to become a public servant. The peace, as he described it, comes from the “self development” that he plans for after hours. It is interesting how Kûn even spoke of his shorter work day, contrasting with Min’s, as liberating in its own way. Kûn’s sketch is in accordance with widespread images of a changed salaryman

who does not forsake his personal life 'for the company.' Like Soona at Koryô University, Kûn described self-development in the leisure zone. In 2003, however, when still a junior Kûn had described his own desires, not unlike Min's, to live differently. Dismissing conventional marriage and family, he had said, "Why should I live like that?" And he had added, as if to explain his difference, "In any case, humans are alone." In 2004, however, Kûn spoke about the unparalleled benefits (retirement, etc.) of civil service jobs; he seemed to be sketching a "conventional" life course. Interestingly, he described that a future wife would be able to bring warmth to his natal family's domestic life. He lamented that over time conversations with his mother had become increasingly limited, ranging from short reports to perfunctory queries, for example, "Did you eat?" "Yeah." Kûn spoke of the sadness of his mother's home life and sought to bring new life to that home with his future wife. Of note are the contours of Kûn's filial burden: his concern for his mother's happiness perhaps stands against his own life course freedoms. But, if a civil service career smacked of something conventional, Kûn nonetheless reserved his after hours, and the promise of future Saturdays in a transformed South Korean work life, for that refuge that he had sought—if only half realized—through travel in his earlier college days. Even though "life is hard," Kûn is holding firmly to self-expression and development. Kûn strikes us as taking on the burden of vitality differently than the other students featured in this paper. We note that he is distinguished from the others because of his level of resignation to social inequalities, and because he does not personalize vitality to the same extent.

Conclusions

The university students in this paper—and it is important to underscore that these are all young

people who have made their way to four year colleges—all aspire to vital human development, and they all accept the "burden" of managing that vital personal formation. This "new" person—and here we must again caution that they are not, after all, entirely new (Song 2003)—differentiates herself from the past and aspires to realize values of democracy, individualism and cosmopolitanism. This paper has considered how a small number of students across three campuses inhabit these discourses of human development and how in turn they manage their education and chart the course of their future lives. We have paid particular attention to differences according to university prestige and family background. We have argued that the "burden" of vitality is borne variously across these campuses and that vitality is often articulated against feminized spaces and traits. We observed how Heejin occupies a privileged position where her campus itself confers the brand of vitality. We listened to their cosmopolitan dreams, like Heejin's vision of herself as a cosmopolitan event planner. We listened to the ways that they understand that vitality as a matter of personal responsibility and choice, entirely unfettered by structure or circumstance. Similarly we saw how English, a sign of the global, is a matter for personal conquer. But, we also saw, with Soona, that not all elite university students are enunciators of the neoliberal project to the degree that Heejin does. While Sori of third tier Myôngji University equally embraced the project of vitality, she was resigned to managing it on her own, off-campus. And we saw that her own cosmopolitan vision of the future—in which she secures her "item"—is a gendered "burden" that she shoulders alone, unlike a son who would have been able to take over her father's "item." Against the backdrop of Heejin's triumphant and integrated projects of personal development, Sori's rings more fraught, raw, and even pained. Finally, Min and Kûn of Inchôn City University are, like Sori,

students who figure the project of human development beyond the bounds of college. The two young men, however, emerge as distinctive cases: Min, like Heejin, offered an empowered narrative of effective choice, cosmopolitan belonging, and gendered freedom (all of this achieved in spite of his campus). Kûn, on the other hand, spoke of a vital future and reports on the riches of domestic travel, but at many points returns to the limits of his own particular circumstances as the son of a humble family and a student at a lower tier college outside of Seoul. Across these conversations there are mentions of circumstance, indeed by all of the students featured here except for Heejin. But, as we have noted at many points, the discourse of vital human development often works to obscure structural differences and instead foists the entire burden on the person herself, a burden that people necessarily carry differently. This paper has attempted to begin an analysis of both vitality's shared burden and its differences.

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Endnotes

¹ See Comaroff and Comaroff 2000, 304; Ong and Collier 2005; Rose and Novas 2005.

² See Anagnost 2004; Apple 2001; Borovoy 2004; Comaroff and Comaroff 2000; Du Gay 1996, 182; Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Fong 2004; Gee 1999; Kingfisher 2002; Muraki 2002; Rose 2000; Song 2003; Walkerdine 2003; Wallulis 1998; Yan 2003.

³ Comaroff and Comaroff (2000: 305) similarly write, "Neoliberalism aspires, in its ideology and practice, to intensify the abstractions inherent in capitalism itself: to separate labor power from its human context, to replace society with the market, to build a universe out of aggregated transactions."

⁴ See Borovoy 2004 for a study of the ambivalence of Japanese young people as they struggle to meet the newfound requirements of Japan's "new competitiveness." In parallel with the South Korean case in this paper, these Japanese young people are asked to become a new generation of individualized and creative workers. Borovoy analyses both how class works such that some youth are not afforded the opportunity to develop these new subjectivities, and how for elite youth these new requirements challenge deeply held values as well as ambivalences about American-style capitalism.

⁵ Yoon (2000, in Mok, Yoon, and Welch 2003: 61) summarizes South Korea's education transformation in terms of several key shifts: from standardization to autonomy, diversification, and specialization; from provider to consumer; and from classroom education to open and life-long learning.

⁶ As Mok, Yoon, and Welch (2003: 62-3) characterize, "the Korean government openly acknowledges that the existing system has failed to equip the society with autonomous capacity" to solve the problems presented by the new knowledge economy. Former President Kim Dae

Jung was committed to education reform that nurtured "autonomous" and "creative" human capital (Mok, Yoon, and Welch 2003; Song 2003).

⁷ Further it is widely understood that with the enormous expansion of the private after-school education sector—one whose expenditures are nearly commensurate with state funding for education (J.H. Lee 2004: 223) that family background makes more and more of a difference in students' education chances. By extension and in large part because of this private after-school market, many assert that the so-called high school equalization measures, namely the abolishment of the high school entrance examinations beginning in 1974, did not level South Korea's playing field (J.H. Lee 2004: 228; Seth 2002). In a similar vein, higher education in South Korea is supported by tuition at a very high rate (approximately 80%) (N. Park 2000: 132). And finally three quarters of South Korea's college students attend private sector schools with little public support (N. Park 2000: 132).

⁸ Special purpose high schools, which originally started in the late 1970s only for art and athletics in order to complement the high school equalization policy, have expanded during the mid-1990s in accordance with the educational reforms, which emphasize "diversification, specialization, and autonomy" of schools. These schools have special purposes to nurture talents for the new economy, including technical, science and foreign language skills. These high schools thus now seem to run entirely against the grain of decades of high school equalization measures (Kim Young-Chol 2003; Lee 1998).

⁹ Several universities now have English course and examination requirements for graduation. Moreover, these days TOEFL and TOEIC scores have become important even for elementary, middle, or high school students. This is related to the significant changes in the university entrance exam system during the Kim Dae Jung government (1998-2003). The new university entrance exam system emphasizes the "diversification" of ways of entering college, which has been popularly labeled a move from a policy of "one entrance (i.e. to universities) (*hanjul sŭgi*)" to that of "multiple entrances (*yŏrŏjul sŭgi*)."⁹ Thus, the government advertised that a creative student, who is excellent at only one subject (e.g., English, computer, writing, etc.), can now enter university more easily in accordance with more diverse criteria of admissions. There is, however, continuous debate about the effectiveness and negative byproducts of this change. This change in part also affects the current English education boom and the

private after-school market for children's preparation for the TOEFL and TOEIC.

¹⁰ See Borovoy 2004 for a fascinating discussion of college clubs as a mark of university status in Japan. More broadly, she takes college clubs as a key element of elite "college socialization" that prepares students for elite corporate work and social life. She considers both what it means that students at a provincial "low-level" college participate in clubs at significantly lower rates (30%) because many of them are commuter students; as well as differences in the "easy come easy go" way in which they participate in the clubs.

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KOREAN EDUCATION:

COMMENTARY

GREGG BRAZINSKY

Despite the importance of education in Korean society both at present and over the course of Korean history, the topic has not been the subject of a great deal of research. Much of the scholarship on the topic, especially in the social sciences, has been fairly simplistic and geared towards demonstrating the obvious point that education in Korea supported the country's modernization and development. The colloquium presentations have all gone far beyond this showing that education is not just a unifying force that can buttress development but also a very divisive and contested issue. Students, families, and educators all have deep, vested interests in South Korea's education system and have struggled for the system's soul.

I would like to begin by pointing out one common theme in these papers in this regard. All three of the papers reflect the critical concern that has existed in Korean history for at least the last century over how foreign influences—especially globalizing discourses about modernity and democracy—can be integrated into Korean culture. South Korea, like many post-colonial societies, has been anxious about how it can absorb modern social and cultural influences in a way that will not endanger or destroy its traditional beliefs and values.

This point comes across in several parts of Michael Seth's paper, building on his book that has already shown in great detail some of the conflicts that occurred when the United States first seriously attempted to transform Korea's school

system during the Occupation years immediately after the war. In his paper Seth deals with the threat to ideals of educational equality and uniformity created by Korean parents' willingness to spend millions of dollars annually on private tutoring and so-called cram schools. According to Seth, this contributed to a tension between the egalitarian idea that the entire school system should be "uniform in content and standard" and the more elitist tendency to assign every school and school district a place in a hierarchy of status. Interestingly, Michael Seth argues on page that this tension between "education as status climbing and egalitarianism reflected a society assimilating new Western ideals while adhering to traditional Confucian cultural values." Thus the tension between egalitarianism and elitism in the South Korean education system can be linked more broadly to tensions created by the influx of Western ideas.

Seth touches on this point more indirectly in the closing portions of his paper as well. He points briefly to the problem created by the prestige South Korean students attach to foreign degrees. Here, however, Koreans' desire for exposure to Western educational methods and institutions is a cause of inequality rather than a force for social equality since only the wealthiest Korean students can generally afford to pursue degrees at foreign universities. There are several interesting possibilities here that Seth might develop more fully. First, how does the great prestige accorded

to American universities hamper and/or contribute to the quality of education in South Korea? On the one hand, as Seth mentions, when the best students go abroad it weakens the caliber of graduate programs in Korea. At the same time, however, study in the West should theoretically contribute to the improvement of education in South Korea in the long term since it enables Koreans to receive the most sophisticated training possible before returning to their home universities. Additionally, many American universities are now setting up branches in Korea and other Asian countries, supposedly for Asian students who cannot afford to travel abroad. How will this affect the overall balance between educational equality and access to Western universities?

Similar conflicts over how to adapt foreign—particularly Western influences—to traditional Korean ideals can be found in the four discourses analyzed by Jae-Hoon Lim, whose paper examines debates over the issue of “school collapse” in South Korea that occurred between 1999 and 2001. Lim notes that the Korean educational system was based from the outset on a mixture of Confucian philosophy and democratic ideology. According to Lim, these two discourses coexisted with each other during most of the last four decades but the conflict between the two became much more visible during the “school collapse” debates that she describes. This point comes across most strongly in the paper’s discussion of what it terms the “traditionalist” discourse on school collapse. These traditionalists represent perhaps one extreme on the spectrum of opinions on how and whether Western ideas that are associated with modernity should be adapted and applied. Traditionalists seem to use the idea of “school collapse” to argue for the outright rejection of outside influence on the school system. They have opposed privatization and market-based reforms while criticizing the Department of Education’s decision to legalize corporal punishment as a failure to see the

unique cultural context of education in Korean society. The traditionalist discourse on school collapse stands in contrast to the neo-liberal discourse that has argued in favor of a market-based educational system that more closely resembles the one that exists in the United States. The debate between traditionalists and neo-liberals is also interesting because it reflects perhaps the most recent incarnation of the debates between how to adapt traditional beliefs to modernizing change in Korea. Specifically, how South Korea can and should adapt to the post-modern era of globalization.

The students discussed in Nancy Abelmann’s paper also wrestle with the impact of globalizing changes on Korean society. At first blush what stands out in Abelmann’s paper in contrast to the other two is the relative absence of a discourse on Koreanness or traditionalism. The students seem, for the most part, to embrace the idea of transforming themselves and becoming cosmopolitan in order to manage the demands of globalization. But they tend to approach doing so as an individual project much more so than as a national project. At the same time, this issue is complicated in Abelmann’s paper by the state assuming a role in promoting human capital formation through its “Brain Korea 21” project. The explicit concern of the project and an implicit concern of many of the students is whether South Korea itself will be able to keep pace with a rapidly transforming global environment. They are nationalist but their nationalism goes hand in hand with cosmopolitanism in a way that is quite different from traditionalist nationalist discourses with their more communitarian emphasis.

Another salient theme in all three papers that plays into the conflict of the global versus the local is the issue of class. In some societies globalization can contribute to the sharpening of class differences because those who are able to learn about new technologies most efficiently gain un-

precedented opportunity while those who are not get left behind. In South Korea, where the population believes passionately in the ideal of education as a means of achieving social equality this issue is of particular significance. In all three of the papers the tensions created by globalization connect to the issue of class in some way. Class issues are plainly delineated in Michael Seth's paper. Seth demonstrates how the expense of studying abroad and paying for private lessons can serve to perpetuate class inequalities in South Korea's education system because they allow the wealthy access to opportunities not available to the middle or working classes.

Interestingly, both Jae-Hoon Lim's and Nancy Abelmann's papers focus on showing the relevance of class but also its limitations. Lim's paper argues that class seems to have some effect on the ways Koreans perceive their educational system and its failings. The paper finds that a noticeable class affiliation with each of the four key discourses on school collapse existed. At the same time, however, Lim notes that class was only one of the key determinants of these discourses and that the determinative influence of class was mediated by ideology. Moreover, she finds that, ironically, the middle and upper middle classes that benefited the most from the school system have been the most strident in declaring the system obsolete. Nancy Abelmann's paper examines how class background works in conjunction with college prestige to influence the processes of human capital formation. As in Lim's paper class is an important but not determining variable. Among the students that Abelmann examines, it is Kun , with his frequent references to class and humble origins, who has least personalized the notion of vitality. But at the same time, Abelmann's analyses of other students makes it clear that differences in the ideals of vitality and cosmopolitanism can certainly exist within classes and even within particular universities.

There are common themes included in all of these papers. But there are also some common absences. I yearned in reading all three papers for a sense of what is actually going on in classrooms in South Korea. None of the papers really address what and how the teachers are teaching and how they are interacting with their students. None of the papers deals with what students gain or believe that they are gaining in the classroom. All three could have benefited from giving their readers a greater sense of this. In Seth's paper the reasons for *kwaoe* could be much more clearly elucidated against the backdrop of the limitations or at least the perceived limitations of the educational opportunities that are available to all. Abelmann's discussion of human capital formation almost begs for some explication of the classroom experiences of the students she discusses. Given that these students are so interested in equipping themselves with skills and experiences that can prepare them for a globalizing economy, it would be interesting to hear them reflect more on what they are actually experiencing in the classroom and how those experiences can contribute to the process of human capital formation. Finally, Lim's discussion of "school collapse" could also have been enriched by greater discussion of classroom experiences. Although Lim confines the objective of her paper to discourse analysis, it is nevertheless difficult to discern why these discourses exist and why they are so prevalent without greater knowledge of what is occurring in South Korean schools and classrooms.

Researching classroom experience is obviously difficult. It doubtless varies both from school to school and even from classroom to classroom. But it is nevertheless necessary to ground our analyses of the problems and prospects of education in South Korea with a more concrete sense of teaching methodologies and learning experiences. Without this, it is difficult to say what education in Korea actually is.

Moreover, such an exploration of what education in Korea actually is should be accompanied by a more detailed analysis of what Korean education was. Michael Seth's paper includes some discussion of education in pre-modern Korean society. But even Seth's paper focuses more on the socio-economic functions of education than on the process of education and education as lived experience. Analyses of the present conflicts occurring over education could be much richer if accompanied by some sense of how education has evolved.

Despite these inevitable absences, these papers identify some of the key issues that have confronted South Korea's education system in the past and will inevitably confront it in the future. By combining the theoretical perspectives adopted in these papers with a firmer knowledge of what goes on in South Korea's classrooms, scholars should be able to help Koreans move toward a resolution of these critical issues.

PROFILES

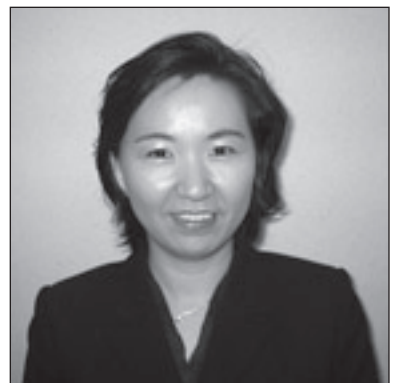
Nancy Abelmann is Associate Professor of Anthropology, Asian American Studies, East Asian Languages and Cultures, and Women's Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She currently serves as the director of the Center for East Asian and Pacific Studies. She has published books on social movements in contemporary South Korea (*Echoes of the Past, Epics of Dissent: A South Korean Social Movement*, University of California Press, 1996); on women and social mobility in post-colonial South Korea (*The Melodrama of Mobility: Women, Talk and Class in Contemporary South Korea*, University of Hawai'i Press, 2003); on Korean America (*Blue Dreams: Korean Americans and the Los Angeles Riots*, with John Lie, Harvard University Press, 1995); and on Korean film with Kathleen McHugh, *South Korean Golden Age Melodrama: Gender, Genre, and Nation* (Wayne State University Press, 2005). Currently she is completing *The Intimate University: College and the Korean American Family*, based on 4 years of transnational ethnography on the educational trajectories of Korean American public college students as they articulate with the educational histories of their émigré parents. She has received two campus grants with psychologist Sumie Okazaki to study Korean American adolescents and their families.



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