An ethical consideration of Korea’s Rise to Hegemony

Edward Choi

Lynch School of Education, Boston College
choief@bc.edu

Abstract

An Ethical Consideration of Korea’s Rise to Hegemony

This paper offers a thoughtful exploration of Korea’s rise to economic hegemony; the underlying historical, sociocultural and political motives; and the cultural sacrifices made in the process. Particularly illuminated is the role of higher education in Korea's narrative to individual and national success, and the need for a critical reevaluation of its priorities in light of the contemporary ethical state of affairs driving HE demand in the nation.

Keywords: Korea, Hegemony, Higher Education, Ethics, Confucianism.

Resumen

Una consideración ética del ascenso a la hegemonía de Corea

Este artículo ofrece una exploración reflexiva del ascenso a la hegemonía económica de Corea; los motivos históricos, socioculturales y políticos subyacentes; y los sacrificios culturales hechos en el proceso. Particularmente iluminado es el rol de la educación superior de Corea para el éxito individual y nacional, y la necesidad de una crítica reevaluación de sus prioridades a la luz de la situación ética contemporánea que impulsa la demanda de HE en la nación.

Palabras clave: Corea, Hegemonía, Educación Superior, Ética, Confucianismo.

ISSN 2280-7837 © 2018 Editoriale Anicia, Roma, Italia.
DOI: 10.14668/Educaz_7103
1. Introduction

South Korea’s (hereafter referred to as Korea) rise to world status is quite impressive. This is especially the case from a comparative standpoint in which the nation’s recent accomplishments and successes are measured against an era of economic inactivity, war, and foreign exploitation that characterizes much of medieval and premodern Korea. In the premodern era, not only was Korea considered a poor nation, as compared with both the advanced economic states of the West and Japan\(^1\), but also the peninsula was regarded by its neighboring territories as a site of geopolitical import because of its location (situated between Japan and China). China fought to preserve its control and status as protector over Korea\(^2\), and Japan, in a grander scheme of world domination, regarded the Korean peninsula as a base of operations, and a strategic entry point into China and the territories that lay beyond (Kim, 2000; Lee, 2000; Shimonoseki, 2016).

Together with the ongoing Sino-Japanese conflict (which, according to one source [i.e., Sajima & Tachikawa, 2009], dates back to as early as AD 663 with the Battle of Baekgang), later national tribulations caused by, for example, the Japanese occupation of Korea (1910-1945) and the Korean War (1950-1953) kept the

---

1. An agrarian society, South Korea’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita in the year 1900 was 800 international dollars while the U.S., an early adopter of industrialization, had a GDP per capita of 5,300 international dollars in the same year (Shimonoseki, 2016). Japan’s GDP was nearly double that of Korea’s, 1,400 international dollars in that year.

2. The imperial court of China’s Tang dynasty (618-907) regarded Korea as a tributary kingdom demanding fealty and adaptation to China’s foreign diplomatic strategy (Simon, 1999).
peninsula in a state of intermittent financial bankruptcy\textsuperscript{3} and political turmoil.

Against this historical backdrop, Korea’s economic and academic transformation – from a war-torn, agrarian society to a hyper-developed, knowledge-based economy with a GDP per capita of over 27,221 international dollars (World Bank, n.d.a) – is indeed striking. In a significant departure from Korea understood as a poor nation during the medieval and pre-modern eras, Korea is now associated with technological advancements (e.g., in computer chips, telecommunications, TVs, and cellphones), academic performance (as evidenced by rank on large-scale international assessments such as the Trends in International Mathematics and Science study and the Programme for International Student Assessment)\textsuperscript{4} and a highly educated workforce.

Perhaps most notable is the nation’s achievements in the economy of industrial exports. Not only is Korea known as a global producer of steel, surpassing Germany in 2006 (Shimonoseki, 2016), but also the nation has surpassed its economically developed counterparts in the area of ship production, e.g., Japan in 2002. In fact, Korea produced almost as many ships as the rest of the world as of 2004 (Shimonoseki, 2016, p.181). In motor vehicles, Korea consistently ranks in the top four car-producing nations in the world from 1985 to 2010 (Shimonoseki, 2016, p.184). In electronic merchandise and information and communication technol-

\textsuperscript{3} At the time of the Korean war, Korea’s Gross Domestic Product per capita was roughly 800 international dollars.

\textsuperscript{4} Korea’s secondary students consistently outperform peers in other developed nations in math, science and reading (Shimonoseki, 2016).
ogy, Korea’s monopoly in the global market is undeniable as evidenced by international sales in phones, laptops and TVs of its flagship brands, Samsung and LG. Finally, with respect to education, particularly higher education participation, Korea commands international recognition with roughly 95 percent of its college-age population (3.3 million) enrolled in higher learning as of 2013 (World Bank, n.d.b). This figure is an astounding testament to its rapid transformation considering the number of students enrolled in higher education in 1950 (11,358 students) (Kim & Lee, 2006).

However, while these achievements are exceptional under the marching order of progress and have allowed a relative life of comfort (and luxury) for the Korean population on the whole, they have been realized at a considerable cost, especially in the education sector. In the frenzy of nation-building, education has lost its cultural purpose, as a tool to challenge hegemonic structural norms that uphold oppressive educational and market systems (Gutmann, 1999), and has become instrumentalized for the purposes of self-preservation and societal advancement, as several scholars contend (e.g., Kim, 2008; Śleziak, 2013). Learning is only valued insofar it serves an instrumental purpose in society. Not only is education regarded as an engine for economic growth⁵, but also it is a prerequisite for individual families seeking a life of comfort, wealth, power and social status.

This understanding of education and learning has significant adverse implications for society, especially

---

⁵ Of course, the link between education and economic growth is not only found in Korea. It is a global reality as contended by many scholars such as Altbach (2016), Austin and Jones (2015), and Hazelkorn (2015).
for Korea’s youth. They are expected to perform (academically) under a great amount of societal pressure to succeed. Very early on, Korea’s youth are conditioned to maximize their social utility while moving through a shadow system of education known in Korea as the hagwon (cram school) culture.\(^6\) On average, students in both primary and secondary settings attend anywhere from six to 11 hagwons, perhaps more, to boost their chances at surpassing their peers in the formal education system. They spend their days learning advanced mathematics (e.g., an elementary student may learn geometry, typically a high school subject in America); a musical instrument (oftentimes multiple instruments); a second language (the most common being English); martial arts; calligraphy; and science, all simultaneously six to seven days a week. The typical Korean primary student may spend the whole day, from early morning to late evening, at school and various hagwons, with no time to enjoy the luxuries that characterize the Western idea of a childhood.

Complicating matters is the national college entrance examination, which in Korea is referred to as ipsi-jiok, or entrance examination hell (Kim & Lee, 2006). The importance of the exam to Korean families is indisputable, and the daily grind of hagwon life is a constant reminder of its approach\(^7\). Of the educative process, it is perhaps the most important stepping stone to a life of prestige, wealth, power and social ac-

---

\(^6\) Hagwon stands for supplementary private education institution.

\(^7\) The college entrance exam is taken by secondary students in their last year, immediately before graduation. It can only be taken once.
ceptance, for both Korea’s youth and their parents. This is because the exam, as a high-stakes evaluation tool, compliments the extreme vertical structure of Korea’s higher education system, with only a handful of universities considered elite. Top marks on the exam not only determine a student’s acceptance at one of these elite institutions, with Seoul National University commanding the greatest prestige, but also they justify for parents all of the years of financial and emotional planning involved in sending their children to hagwons.

Admittedly, the benefit-cost ratio for Korea’s youth is very low, as only a handful reap the rewards of entering the elite educative process. For the rest, they are left to “lick their wounds” while recalling a very painful childhood experience. According to Schwekendiek (2016), school-age children in Korea are known internationally for reporting the lowest rate of life satisfaction. Korea also has the highest share of students who feel pressured by school work (Schwekendiek, 2016); the reality is especially concerning given the possibility of a strong link between the low satisfaction and high pressure levels and the high rate of suicide among the nation’s youth. In fact, suicide “is the leading cause of death among teens” in Korea, according to Hu (2015).

---

8 Child rearing seems to have become sort of a high-stakes game of “who can provide the best education for their children” with the aim of creating the best possible environment to succeed on the college entrance exam. It is also a symbol of status. This perhaps explains the scramble to send children to the best hagwons and private tutors (all very expensive). The best shadow schools are located in an area of Seoul known for its affluence, Daechi-dong. As a result, Korea has the highest private expenditure rates among OECD countries as of 2000 (OECD, 2010).
This state of affairs may lend to a sobering understanding of the Korean culture. Under the name of progress, social transactions and intellectual capital have been reduced to an instrumental form, or, in the words of Horkheimer (1947), subordinated to a field of means to the end of self-preservation. Complicating matters is the erosion of values (a moral consideration of the ill-effects on Korea’s youth) in the process of instrumentalizing education and nation-building; as explained earlier vis-à-vis the worrisome state of affairs of Korea’s youth in particular, there is indeed some evidence to this effect.

Two questions emerge. First, how did Korea achieve the level of economic and academic success over a span of a few decades (from its liberation from Japan in 1945 to its present day economic success)? Second, why and how did the society of Korea become so focused on producing (economically, academically, etc.), with the aim of fashioning an elite state, at the expense of an erosion of values?

To address these questions, this paper turns to explore several underlying forces and rationales behind Korea’s evolution from a hermit kingdom to the industrial, economic powerhouse it has become today. Particularly, a focus is on describing the historical dimension of several external forces that seem to have had a large impact on Korean society and culture: Confucianism; Shinto-Confucianism under Japanese colonization; and the Western ideals capitalism and democracy. As explained in the course of this paper, what become apparent are two themes. First, the success of Korea is predicated on an amalgam of ideas, systems of belief, and external forces that on some level act as complimentary logics to create the competitive drive underlying Korean society. Second, the current ills of
Korean society – such as mammonism, understood as the pursuit of wealth – are nothing new. Indeed, there has been some outside influence; largely though, they are offshoots of a deeper and entrenched system of corruption and elitism that has existed since the earliest recordings of Korea’s history.

Confucianism in Korea

Confucianism advocates three ideal conditions in articulating the purpose of humanity: the virtuous and ethical individual, social harmony, and the ideal state (Lee, 2000; Lee, 2002). Of these, building the virtuous self is most emphasized in Confucianism since it precedes the other two. In other words, social harmony and an ideal state is predicated on the harmonious collaboration of virtuous individuals.

Under Confucianism, however, the idea of being virtuous may depart from a modern-context interpretation of morality, particularly where ideas of morality fuse and overlap with principles of democracy. This is because Confucianism advocates for an undemocratic and stratified society in which being virtuous in part means accepting one’s position in society. Slaves were to be faithful and loyal to their masters without questioning their agency. Masters were to treat their slaves as vassals who lived to serve and demonstrated filial piety. In fact, this understanding defined (and to a large extent still defines) all hierarchical relationships found in medieval and premodern Korea (57 BC – 1910), between the ruler and ruled; the father and son; the husband and wife; and the elder and younger (Śleziak, 2013). A ruler may thus justify an oppressive and
exploitative regime by grounding his or her authoritative status in Confucian ideology.

Indeed, the ruling class known as yangban during the Joseon period (1392-1910) used Confucianism for the very purpose of fashioning a state according to an ideology of elitism. The Korean society, therefore, was bloated with Confucian-based rites and rituals, all designed to preserve class distinctions and the elite pecking order in which discrimination against non-yangbans was a socially accepted practice. Non-yangbans broadly comprised two categories: pyongmin, or commoners based in agriculture, and chonmin, slaves and other social groups of low birth such as female entertainers and butchers (Ch’oe, 1974).

The discrimination was systematic and pervaded all aspects of society – in particular in the differentiated delivery of higher education among different classes and the recruitment process of government officials. During the Silla dynasty (57 BC – 935 AD), for example, a government institute known as Hwarang (which means ‘flowers of the youth’) was founded to train students in Confucian, Buddhist and Taoist principles; the Chinese classics; and military tactics9 (Lee, 2000). The preparation was in advance of Korea’s state civil service examination known as Kwa-keo during the Joseon dynasty (1392-1910) (Lee, 2001). Kwa-keo fell into two categories. According to Schwekendiek (2016), the higher-level exam, known as mun-gwa10,

9 Hwarang students were taught according to the Sesok-Ogye, or known as the five secular commandments: serve the king with loyalty, serve parents with filial piety, practice faithfulness in friendship, never retreat from battle, and refrain from wanton killing (Lee, 2000, p. 28).

10 In the period between 1392 and 1600 of the Joseon dynasty, the literary exam was further divided into two categories, the sama or
tested literary skills and qualified candidates for illustrious government posts while the lower-level exam, called *mugwa*, qualified candidates for lesser government posts in the military.

Unfortunately, admittance to Hwarang and later established national Confucian academies (typically located in the nation’s capital), such as *Seonggyungwan* of the late Goryeo and Joseon dynasties, was based on social status (Lee, 2005; Lee, 2000); as a result, discrimination against non-yangbans was socially accepted and regularly practiced in highly selective admission strategies. Not only were academic and career paths differentiated for yangbans and commoners, but also the educative process by law laid beyond the reach of people of the lower class (i.e., chonmins, merchants, descendants of merchants, children of remarried women, concubines, and demoted or fallen yangbans) (Ch’oe, 1974). Interestingly, the discriminatory state of affairs mirrors the logic embedded in conflict theories in which education is used by elite groups “to perpetuate the dominance of their status-group culture” (as cited in Schofer & Meyer, 2005, p.900). Geiger (2011) as well, in describing higher education culture in America during the 1900s, speaks to the ills of selective admission strategies, and avers that they are “part of a larger pattern of fashioning elite status” (p. 31, ebook).

Many barriers also existed for commoners in the recruitment process for government officials. While it was widespread that commoners studied alongside the lower examination (sokwa) and the munkwa or higher examination (taekwa) (Ch’oe 1974, p.614). Passing the former provides further learning opportunities in preparation of the latter or qualifies candidates for minor government posts. Passing the higher examination qualifies candidates for major government posts.
yangban class in rural secondary schools known as *hyanggyo*¹¹ (Choi, 2006), which prepared students to participate in both the higher-level and lower-level examinations¹² (Ch’oe, 1974; Schwekendiek, 2016), the reality of actually gaining admittance in the higher-level exam by commoners was an unfulfilled dream, for several reasons. For one, admittance to the exam was predicated on the requirement that candidates have among their family members a well-known public official and, in the event such a figure cannot be identified, the candidate must produce an endorsement signed by three government officials (Ch’oe, 1974). Certainly, this was a difficult condition to satisfy for commoners who lacked social capital. Complicating eligibility is another requirement in which certain civil exams required the ownership of a horse (Schwekendiek, 2016), a symbol of wealth that the typical commoner did not possess. Further, Schwekendiek (2016) avers that the civil service exams were held during seasons when commoners were most busy with their work (e.g., the harvest season).

These barriers are indeed many and, when considering them in their totality, it becomes reasonable to surmise that most commoners participated in the less restrictive lower-level exam (mugwa). Mugwa, however, was a

¹¹ Hyanggyo schools were similar to their higher education counterpart in the capital in terms of preparing their students for the civil service examinations.

¹² Commoners are permitted to take the higher-level exam in accordance with *Kyongguk taejon* or the ‘Great Codes for Governing the State’, which state the following: Persons in any of the following categories are barred from the exam: (i) one who, having been convicted of a crime, is permanently excluded from government service; (2) sons of corrupt officials; (3) sons and grandsons of remarried widows and of immoral women; and (4) descendants of concubines (Ch’oe, 1974, p.614). As revealed, there is no mention of commoners in the above stipulations.
far inferior exam in large part because it granted access to government posts without real power. Schwekendiek (2016) notes an interesting point that demonstrates the hidden agenda behind the lower-level examination system: He avers that yangbans used mugwa as a tool for social control, as a way to preserve the social order without driving lower classes to “bear arms”. In other words, commoners were kept docile by allowing their participation in lesser government positions with feigned power. The preoccupation with feigned power is how yangbans deceived commoners to think that they were part of the system, when in fact they were not.

However, the deception did not stop many commoners, as well as the lowest class, from seeking alternative routes to penetrate the upper echelons of society. Indeed, a culture of corruption thrived in which demoted yangbans, concubines, descendants of merchants and artisans, and men of low birth employed morally questionable strategies to partake in the examination process or forego it altogether to obtain government posts. Examples include the fabrication of family registries, forging of sponsor names and even buying of yangban titles (Ch’oe, 1974; Schewekendiek, 2016). This was rampant in the Joseon period, and the corruption is suggestive of a high demand for education and government posts, by all groups.

Shinto-Confucianism and Japan’s militarization of Korea

After several territorial conflicts with Korea\(^{13}\), Ja-

\(^{13}\) Japan failed to conquer the Korea as part of their aim to subordinate the peninsula as a base to mount an invasion into China during the Imjin War (1592-1598) (Lee, 2000). In 1868 and 1876, Japan
pan annexed the peninsula as its protectorate in 1910 (Schwekendiek, 2016). Korea’s loss of national sovereignty meant a complete capitulation to the values and beliefs undergirding the Japanese culture and government, which in terms of structure, perhaps was not largely different to the bureaucratized system under Confucianism during medieval and premodern Korea. In fact, Japan’s state cult, Shinto-Confucianism, is an offshoot of Confucianism combining Japanese ancestral worship, shamanism and animism with Confucian principles of loyalty to the state, learning, organization by rituals and rites, filial piety and societal harmony (Lee, 2002). Much like in Korea’s historical (and present) case, therefore, Japan’s state apparatus is modeled on a similar system of values that embody strong elements of bureaucracy, stratification and intellectual conformity (Lee, 2002; Marginson, 2011).

Thus, Japanization of Korea meant a strict adherence to a highly legalistic and top-down government system of rules, regulations and policies. Not only was the stifling environment resembling of a militaristic culture (Schwekendiek, 2016), but also the bureaucratization of the Korean society provided the necessary framework for Japanese scrutiny, involvement and control in its affairs. This is typical of governments modeled on Confucianism (Marginson, 2014).

Inter alia, Koreans were forced to worship at Japanese-Shinto shrines; refrain from learning and speaking Korean; chant in military fashion “the oath of the loyal subjects”; and participate in military service (Kim, 2000). Those who demonstrated great loyalty to forced Korea to open its ports for trade under the Meiji restoration and the treaty of Ganghwa Island, respectively (Lee, 2002).
Edward Choi

the Japanese cause by completely discarding their Korean heritage and beliefs were favored in the new regime. Typically, these Koreans were of high political and financial standing. For many Koreans, however, enduring targeted aggressions of torturing, prostitution, and killings became an accepted reality\(^\text{14}\) (Schwekendiek, 2016).

In the area of higher education, the impact of Japan’s occupation was one of regression. According to Cheong (1985), the Educational Ordinance of 1911 severely restricted the operations of existing Korean higher education institutions\(^\text{15}\) in a number of ways. For example, Japan repealed the degree-granting status of Christian colleges that were founded in the late Joseon period (1880-1910). In addition, the Japanese controlled higher education demand by outlawing the matriculation of Koreans in advanced fields, such as engineering, and forcibly limiting them to vocational tracks tied to physical and simple labor (Kim, 2000). Restricting the size of incoming Korean cohorts to nonimperial universities and forbidding Koreans from enrolling at imperial universities, such as Keijo Imperial University (Lee, 2000; Kim & Lee, 2006), also became a matter of policy. Only the offspring of pro-Japanese families and the wealthy, who were sympathetic to Japan’s cause, were permitted to receive an elite education. Japan’s aim was clear – to denationalize the Korean populace by preying on its intellectual inferiority (Lee, 2002).

\(^{14}\) In later periods of the Japanese occupation, these aggressions declined in frequency as Korea was given greater autonomy.

\(^{15}\) In addition to state-operated and private institutions that were founded during the late Joseon Dynasty (1880-1910), Western Christian missionaries established a number of institutions during the same period as part of their calling to spread Christianity (Lee, 2000).
While any positive footprint left in the wake of Japan’s occupation of Korea cannot justify the extreme suffering endured by the Korean people, this paper outlines what may be considered as benefits for the purposes of explaining Korea’s economic success. These benefits are tied to Japan’s approach to transform Korea into a supply base for its war effort. For one, Japan upgraded Korea’s production systems by investing in Korea’s technological capabilities. Targeted sectors included, inter alia, agriculture and heavy industry (King, 1975; Schwekendiek, 2016); as a result of investments in these areas, the Korean manufacturing industry transformed from a simple system of processing food and cleaning rice to a more complicated enterprise producing higher-value added goods such as iron and synthetic fiber (King, 1975, p.14). Korea also witnessed a general improvement in healthcare and education, but as an incidental benefit (Schwekendiek, 2016). According to Tikhonov (2016), the Japanese sphere of influence also provided prominent Korean businessmen with “greatly improved export and investment opportunities” (p. 326). Some scholars, such as Schwekendiek (2016), suggest that it was the impact of Japanese-style industrialization that led to Korea’s economic miracle in the late 20th century. Of course, it must be noted that the investments made above were driven by a self-serving motive in which maximizing industrial outputs was a goal tied to the transfer of technological capital from Korea to Japan (Schwekendiek, 2016).

A final note in concluding this section: It was at this time during the Japanese occupation when the increasingly popular theory of Social Darwinism, and its assumptive principle of emphasizing the survival of the strongest and the fittest, began to take root in the
minds of Koreans (Tikhonov, 2016). The idea of survival, as Tikhonov (2016) further explains, can also be understood as a nationalist-instrumental logic in which national essence and national ethics become emphasized as a state philosophy. Of course, stoking this state of mind was the desire to be free of imperial influence. Simultaneously, Koreans became sensitive to the plight of nations in similar circumstances, such as Ethiopia whose national sovereignty at that time was under threat with the signing of the Hoare–Laval Pact16 (Tikhonov, 2016). Empathy with such oppressive situations further propelled Korean thinking into what ended up as a clarion call to become powerful and independently stable. This point will be discussed in more detail later.

The role of democracy and capitalism in Korea’s higher education system

The retreat of Japanese imperial forces from Korea in 1945 not only served as symbol of triumph for the free world, but also signaled a new era for Korean higher education. The temporary installment of the United States Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK) immediately committed to a large-scale effort of nation-building, undergirded by the ideals of democracy, capitalism and pragmatism (Lee, 2000; Lee, 2006; Park & Weidman, 2002), and a systematic erasure of imperial elements (Lee, 2006). As part of

16 The Hoare-Laval Pact, put forward by Britain and France, stipulated the release of Ethiopian lands to the Italian Empire as a means of ending the Italo-Ethiopian war (Adejumobi, 2007; Tikhonov, 2016).
this process, the Korean higher education became an area of focus as averred by several scholars (e.g., Byun, 2008; Kim & Lee, 2006; Lee, 2000; Lee, 2006; Park & Weidman, 2002; Schwekendiek, 2016).

According to Lee (2006), USAMGIK lifted educational bans that have shuttered several institutions during Japanese rule and implemented a new educational framework based on “the spirit of Korean nationalism as well as the principles of American education” (as cited, p.4). In addition, the higher education curriculum was purged of imperial propaganda and redesigned to emphasize the democratic participation of Korea’s citizenry as a means to create a prosperous society (Lee, 2006; Schwekendiek, 2016). It was not long before the Korean higher education system witnessed a significant transformation. In terms of capacity, it grew from having 19 institutions with an enrollment exceeding 3000 students under Japanese rule to having 29 institutions and 20,000 students under USAMGIK (Lee, 1989, p. 101).

A point of significance to cull from this transformation is America’s instrumental role in facilitating the extension of postsecondary options regardless of social status and gender (Lee, 2000; Lee, 2006). All citizens were welcome to receive an education – indeed a far cry from the oppressive system of medieval and premodern Korea when woman and lower-class groups were barred as a regular practice. To note, Korea had witnessed a similar, but less systemic transformation of its higher education system in the late Joseon period (1880-1910) when Christian missionaries from the West established modern higher institutions of learning (Lee, 1989; Lee, 2000). The institutions of Ewha Womans University, founded by Mary F. Scran- ton, and Gwanghyewon, Korea’s first medical school
established by Horace Newton Allen, in particular demonstrate the infusion of democracy in the delivery of higher learning in Korea. These schools, as noted by Lee (1989) and Lee (2000), embraced a fairer admission policy. Following in this example was Seoul National University under USAMGIK (formerly Keijo Imperial University under Japan) and subsequently founded national/public and private universities during and after Korea’s first independent government. Newly established institutions include tuition-free normal schools for training elementary school teachers\(^{17}\) and five-year vocational professional schools for training technicians in various fields (Kim, 2000, p. 43; Kim & Lee, 2006).

In a related, but slight shift of focus, this paper now gives some attention to describing the impact of the Korean war (1950-1953) on the Korean higher education system. Particularly, an emphasis will be on discussing how Korea (Republic of), under the guidance or pressure (depending on the view\(^{18}\)) of Western nations and supranational organizations, was able to broaden higher education access in a context of impossible conditions.

According to Kim (2000) and Kim and Lee (2006), the Korean war had an enormously adverse impact on higher education in Korea. The carnage left many higher education facilities in a state of irreparable damage, destroying perhaps thousands, if not tens of thousands, of source materials in the process. It also

\(^{17}\) A primary goal of USAMGIK was to massify enrolment in primary education; as a result, there was a pressing need to train teachers (Kim & Lee, 2006).

\(^{18}\) Anti-American sentiment in Korea is well documented (refer to Kim, 2002).
had an immeasurably detrimental effect on faculty and administrative personnel (Kim, 2000), perhaps in the areas of academic mobility and research, and in the worst case, safety. In fact, academic casualties are certain provided the death toll was nearly four million by the end of the war (Schwekendiek, 2016).

However, there were a couple of bright spots to note in the dismal state of affairs. For one, higher education expanded during the war with the establishment of many new provincial private and national institutions (Kim, 2000). Some having been founded as temporary arrangements designed to provide continuity in studies for students forced to leave conflict-ridden areas, these institutions, together with others, would come to form the general framework of Korea’s modern-day university system (Kim & Lee, 2006). Of course, supporting the expansionist strategy were a horde of American and international agencies, both civilian and government, as well as foreign universities. Some of the more prominent entities that had a visible presence during the Korean war were, inter alia, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Agency for International Development (AID) (Kim, 2000).

The growth of Korea’s higher education system, under USAMGIK and during the Korean war, and its massification in the 80s and 90s (Yeom, 2015) could not have come at timelier junction in Korea’s history. This is because it coincided Korea’s industrialization phase undergirded by an ambitious long-range economic development plan (separated into seven five-year economic phases) that called for an educated workforce. Of course, the increasingly democratized and expanding higher education system rose to meet the challenge, and perhaps with ease, given the high
demand for education. In other words, the supply of a critical mass of highly-skilled labor was made possible on the combined merits of two factors: an education system that embraced democratic participation of Korea’s citizens, not to mention fairer admission policies and greater private sector involvement (Kim & Lee, 2006), and a high local demand for higher education; the economic development plan was in alignment with these two factors.

According to Schwekendiek (2016), Korea had no trouble in the area of higher education recruitment during a time that Kim (2000) refers to as a period of “rising educational expectations of the people” (p.50). Kim and Lee (2006), in fact, aver that a high demand for higher learning not only saturated the higher education market, but also fueled the expansion of the private sector. As part of this expansion, enrollment rates began to rise in the 1950s and significantly so after the 1970s (Schwekendiek, 2016).

What is the reason for the high demand? While many rationales may explain the phenomenon, such as the rise of high school graduates and Korea’s zeal for learning (based in Confucian ideology) (Lee, 2002), this paper highlights Korea’s hyper utilitarian view of higher education as a factor, which on some level dovetails with the aforementioned rationales. This is in contrast to a cultural belief system that emphasizes higher education as a site engaged in “the pursuit of knowledge unconnected to the trivial realities of the world economy” (Byun, 2008, p. 192). Perhaps in its

---

19 According to Kim and Lee (2006) and Shin (2011), primacy was placed on achieving universal primary and secondary education in the immediate aftermath of the Japanese rule. Higher education followed suit.
purest form, the Confucian zeal for learning complements the cultural view of education.

However, in departing from this cultural understanding, the pursuit of knowledge in the modern-day Korean context serves a more practical aim as Schwekendiek (2016), Kim (2008) and Byun (2008) contend. They highlight the social merit of holding a university degree, which without, any type of meaningful career (defined as one that brings status, power and wealth) would be difficult. They also highlight the practical purpose higher education serves on a national level, as an engine for economic growth and, perhaps, worldwide legitimacy. For some, these aims may be understood as being less charitable than they are self-serving. Certainly, they would better fit in the category Gutmann (1999) refers to as negative utilities as opposed to positive agencies that are more charitable.

The understanding of higher education in the context of Korea thus becomes reduced to another step in a lifelong process (beginning with the hagwon culture) of self-preservation. What has been lost among the frenzy to become stronger and better is a real consideration of what higher education ought to be. To Gutmann (1999) the purpose of higher is clear: a depository of critical knowledge and a site for conscious social reproduction in which ideas and knowledge challenge unethical hegemonic norms existing in the market and society.

Unfortunately, the Korean higher education system is designed to complement a society that values status, wealth and power. Those (students and their parents) who receive top marks on the universal college entrance exam are matched to elite institutions where they gain access to far greater opportunities, than they would have at lower-tier institutions, to build
a base of intellectual and social capital needed for meaningful economic participation. Post-graduation, the market welcomes them as the new elites and they operate as an integral cog in the oppressive apparatus. Their educational enthusiasm and need to succeed are then passed on to their children in a form of a feedback loop that drives the demand for higher education.

The state of affairs is not that different from the elitist education system of medieval and premodern Korea. In both contexts, there was/is a strong alignment between society and the education system, with participation in the elite educative process considered a prerequisite to gain a life of status, power and wealth in society. With this understanding, what begins to take shape is an idea that Korea’s modern-day educative system is an extension of past sins. The only difference is that the educative process has been opened to society at large in the current reality.

It is in this difference that the move to democratize education under and after USAMGIK can perhaps be perceived as detrimental, not according to standards of economic and academic performance as a nation, but via an ethical consideration of its (unintended) impact on society. Democracy in education, while applauded – even hailed by the free world – for increasing educational opportunities for lower class groups, has made self-preservation, a mechanism restricted to Korea’s aristocracy of the past, possible on a national scale. Underneath the veil of democratic participation lies a collective sinister plot of a negative utility. Self-preservation has become everyone’s modus operandi – unfortunately, at a great cost. Not only has society neglected to construct a virtuous higher education system that serves a cultural transformative purpose, but also it has placed a great downward pressure on the na-
tion’s youth to satisfy familial expectations of success and socially-determined goals.

Evidence of a hyper-competitive Korean higher education system alongside a morally-failed state is not hard to find. For example, the pressures placed on Korean youth by the hagwon culture (cram schools) and the expectations of overly ambitious parents have been a focus of many major news outlets including National Public Radio (NPR), Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), the Irish Times, the Korean Herald, and the Economist. These sources all provide a glimpse into the terrible and relentless culture pitting Korean youth against each other. Further, Mckay (2017) of the Korean Herald relates a somber narrative in which the nation has long neglected mental health issues in its workers and future workers with economic expansion taking priority on national agendas. In the same vein, Hu (2015) of NPR, PBS (2011) and the Economist (2011) shine a spotlight on youth depression and suicide in the face of unreasonable educational demands placed on Korea’s youth by society. Indeed, the competitive state of affairs fits well with competition and conflict theories that situate the educative process at the heart of attaining social status and draw a link between intensifying competition and success (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Collins 1971, 1979).

Conclusion

This study has sought to address two questions. First, how did Korea achieve economic and academic success over a span of a few decades (from its liberation from Japan in 1945 to its present-day economic hegemony)? Second, why and how did the society of
Korea become so focused on the value of *producing* while neglecting to fashion a morally-grounded state? While some reactions to these questions have been already presented in the course of this paper, some additional insights are warranted.

On the first question, this paper presented some evidence in support of Japan’s contribution to Korea’s economic miracle. In Japan’s takeover of Korea as a supply base, Japanese-style industrialization (a strategy of exploitation based on militaristic principles that were derived from Confucianism and Shinto-Confucianism, as this paper argues) and what Kim (2008) refers to as a legalistic utility-driven government were transferred to the Korean society. Korea then incorporated these Japanese elements into an aggressive national economic expansion plan that began under the controversial leadership of President Park Chung Hee (1963-1979)²⁰ (Schwekendiek, 2016). This plan, by most accounts, was a success in bringing Korea out of poverty and into a new era of economic reform and progress; however, the logic of the plan involved incredible government scrutiny in and steering of the higher education sector (Kim, 2008; Kim & Lee, 2006; Lee, 2000; Schwekendiek, 2016). For example, the government strongly encouraged the establishment of engineering departments in private universities in order to maximize the transfer of intellectual capital to support an expanding shipbuilding industry (Schwekendiek, 2016).

²⁰ According to Schwekendiek (2016), President Park, who received military training under the Japanese regime, incorporated Japanese-style industrialization (which is undergirded by militaristic principles) into an economic agenda that falls under three phases: export expansion, heavy and chemical industries expansion, and economic liberalization.
Japan’s unwelcome involvement in Korea’s beleaguered history was contributory to Korea’s economic miracle in one other way. As discussed earlier, Japanese imperial aggressions upon Korea’s national sovereignty fomented a Social Darwinian, also understood as a nationalist-instrumental, spirit among the citizenry, which later (early 1950s) turned into a powerful driving force directed toward staving off “the predations of both communist imperialism and exploitive Euro-American capitalism” (as cited in Tikhonov, 2016, p.333). While it is interesting to note the Freirean irony here, given the transformation of Korea into a hyper-capitalist and -utility-based state, Tikhonov’s message suggests the following: Korea’s ascendency as a world economic power is a matter of fear, being afraid of a future scenario in which its people are again thrown under the yoke of bondage. In other words, nation-building was the only recourse to secure a state free of imperial aggression. Korea would emerge from colonization as a people united in solidarity – firmly anchored in the drive to survive by, as Charles Darwin would put, becoming the “fittest”.

Indeed, Japanese-style industrialization and nationalist-instrumentalism are fitting rationales to explain Korea’s economic miracle. To complement these, this study, as others have in the past (e.g., Hofstede & Bond, 1988; Lee, 2002; Lee & de Bary, 2000; Tu Wei-ming, 1996), also highlights the role of Confucianism in Korea’s rise to power, with an emphasis on its intersection in particular with the Western element of democracy.

In a simplified explanation, both Confucianism and the Western ideal of democracy have created the necessary conditions under which Korea rose to economic prowess. By necessary conditions this paper
mainly refers to the democratically-informed activities of fairer admission policies, the establishment of Korea’s national educational framework, greater private sector involvement, and the Confucian ideal of educational enthusiasm. All of these factors made possible the supply of a critical mass of highbrow labor to support a rapidly industrializing Korea under and after USAMGIK. While the democratization of higher education allowed for the increase in higher education supply, the Confucian zeal for education drove demand. These elements were quite complimentary and mutually reinforcing in the Korean context; as a result, the nation now boasts one of the highest rates of higher education participation among its college-age cohort, not to mention a highly educated workforce.

However, there is an underside to the above success story. Undergirding Korea’s rise to economic power is a society replete with many ills, and particularly concerning is the relationship between higher education and the government/market. Far from the imaginary that Gutmann (1999) describes, where higher education signals the market and society to act in virtuous ways (e.g., by educating students to break down class barriers), the academic enterprise has evolved to take its cues from society to support social mobility and an expanding economy – unfortunately, the relationship discards a moral consideration of the process (which is built on a blind faith that embraces the exploitation of students and workers), and even the end goals of affluency and status. This phenomenon is further elaborated below as this paper’s conclusive remarks and as a reaction to the second question – why and how did the society of Korea become so focused on the value of producing while neglecting to fashion a morally-grounded state?
This paper argues that the very same forces that have accelerated Korea’s economic growth are to blame for Korea’s infatuation with producing driven by what can only be referred to as a hyper competitive spirit.

Under the Confucian state of medieval and pre-modern Korea, producing (by receiving an education and outperforming peers on the civil service exam) meant a life of prestige, wealth, power and status. Here, producing may be understood as being synonymous with or a prerequisite of self-preservation. The current state of affairs in modern-day Korea is no different, with Korea’s youth and their parents producing (by receiving a shadow education and outperforming peers on the universal college entrance exam) to remain socially relevant. In both cases, people reap the benefits of society by participating in the elite educative process. One may even surmise that Korea’s current state of affairs is an extension of its past. Thus, in a context in which self-preservation has come to mean social prestige, wealth and power (both individually and nationally), a considerable value has been placed on the art of production to remain socially relevant.

Further concerning is the reality in which the Korean people of the past and present participate(d) in the educative process without making substantive attempts or having the resources to transform the elitist system. The education system is still very much vertically differentiated with elite spots reserved for a worthy few via the high-stakes national college entrance exam, which according to Lee (2000) is rooted in the Confucian-based civil service exam (Kwa-Keo). Those who receive high marks become embedded in the system. This understanding sort of follows a Freirean logic in
which the oppressed become the oppressors (Freire, 2000).

With respect to Japanese colonization, it has contributed to Korea’s morally failed state in one main way. As discussed earlier, it was during the Japanese occupation that Social Darwinism, as an ideology emphasizing a nationalist-instrumental outlook, took root in the psychological fabric of Korean society. While its assimilation into Korea helped the nation become what it is today (as pointed out earlier), the absorption of Social Darwinism also seems to have had a deleterious effect on society. Tikhonov (2016) avers that national resilience and strength is predicated on the individual competition for survival. He writes “Social Darwinism as the logic of individual competition for survival… and that “today, individual success in globalized competition has become neo-liberalized South Korea’s unofficial ideology, collective (national) competition being now re-interpreted as the sum of individual success. Social Darwinism, long considered part of history, is rarely mentioned now, but it has doubtlessly provided the basis for the newly fashionable belief in self-managing, successful, and highly competitive individuals as the cornerstone of “national success” (Tikhonov, 2016, 334). While the overall message here is quite positive, there is a need to highlight the effect of Social Darwinism at the individual level – in particular, in facilitating the hyper competitive state of individuals. On some level, it can perhaps be argued that the nationalist-instrumental ideology had an exacerbating effect on the Korean people’s drive to produce, which, as this paper argues, began during the medieval and premodern eras. Whether this is true or not, Tikhonov’s message is fitting when considering the sad state of affairs in which Korean youth are pitted against each other in
the fiercely competitive environment of Korea’s education system – even at the expense of their psychological and physiological health.

Rather than providing relief, the infusion of democratic ideals in the education system may have intensified the competitive state. The logic here is that competition grows with more people. The democratization of Korea’s higher education system created a frenzy among the masses to act on their educational impulse (which has been molded and stoked under both the corrupt education system of historical Korea and the imperial oppressive system of Japan) with the end goal of elite membership. As this paper pointed out earlier, democracy in education made self-preservation, a mechanism restricted to Korea’s aristocracy of the past, possible on a national scale. On this point, there is some need for further elaboration. This paper’s aim is not to lambaste the sovereign idea of democracy. Indeed not. Democracy is good, even an imperative. If it were not for democracy, Korea may find itself in a much more oppressive condition. Rather, it is only drawing attention to a societal condition of Korea’s past and present that needs to be addressed before democracy can fully realize its intended purpose in everyone, not only an unfettered agency toward meaningful participation in society, but also a positive utility, as Gutmann (1999) would say, that is more charitable than self-serving.

Given the state of affairs, and as a final note, this paper reiterates the need for a critical reevaluation of the purpose of higher education in Korea. Until universities and the government of Korea revisit their aim and align their priorities with more positive (charitable) utilities, higher education will continue as a morally failed enterprise. Higher education will continue to strengthen class divisions while placing unmanageable
demands on Korea’s youth and parents. The question that emerges is clear: Do the benefits of individual wealth, power and prestige and international recognition on the world stage outweigh the societal costs?

References

An ethical consideration of Korea’s Rise to Hegemony


