

A Religious Analysis of Education Fever in Modern Korea

Lim Hyunsoo

Abstract

This paper offers an analysis of the excessive education fever in Korea from the perspective of religious studies. Based on reviews of previous discussions of this phenomenon, centered mainly around sociology and education since the 1980s, the paper first points to what these previous discussions lacked. It then examines the religious nature of Confucian education during the Joseon dynasty, and explores why Koreans' interest in education has been dubbed an "excessive fever" by looking at some examples. The paper concludes that Korean education fever is a product of parents' sacrifices for their children, and that this sacrificial attitude is heavily influenced by the traditional Confucian theory of "salvation." By doing so, this paper tries to demonstrate that a religious studies' approach to the issue can contribute new understanding of the excessive zeal for education in Korea.

Keywords: excessive fever for education, Confucian concept of "salvation," modernity, Confucian education, Social Darwinism, statist education policy, anticommunism, self-sacrifice by the parents, continuity of existence, family religion

Lim Hyunsoo (Im, Hyeon-su) is a researcher at the Korea Institute for Religion and Culture. His publications include "Rethinking the Concept of Time: Modern Historical Consciousness and Historiography in Korean Society." E-mail: temps82@hananet.net.

Introduction

During my college and graduate school days in the 1980s, my professors and older colleagues would often touch on the evils of Korean education. They stated that while being accustomed to the mechanical training geared to college admissions from secondary education and the lack of exposure to the humanities curriculum that would help shape their character, these new kids were insufficiently grounded in the basics. In contrast, they, in their middle and high school days, read literary works like poems and novels and were angst-ridden over philosophical questions, they added.

Sick and tired of entrance exam training mechanically repeated day after day, I envied their experience, a time I had completely missed. I also expected that my younger colleagues, who were quite likely to tread in my footsteps, would be freed from the hellish college-entrance-exam-centered education as soon as possible and the past's ideal days restored.

Not a short period of time has elapsed since, but no improvement whatsoever has been achieved. Korean society still suffers from a chronic "excessive fever for education." To remedy the inordinate zeal for education, the state has come up with a series of new educational policies, yet none have proved effective. Korean society's zeal for education stirs up endless competition among students toward the instrumental goal of entering colleges and top universities. The diverse methods utilized for surviving this competition vividly demonstrate how abnormal a track Korean society's enthusiasm for education treads.

More distressing is the fact that such undue fever for education is not at all new. Arguments that education ruins the nation (*gwaoe manggunon*) and discussions about adverse effects from "mothers' frequent appearances on campus" (*chimat baram*) began to take place in the 1950s. A foreigner's remark, "I've never seen people more interested in education and who want it more ardently than Koreans"¹ tells how extreme Korean education fever is. Such evils emerged as a social problem at home and abroad, prompting the

establishment of countermeasures as a core task of the state's education policy. What is more, signs of such immoderate zeal for education began to emerge during the enlightenment period and Japan's colonization of Korea—in other words, when the currents of Western modernization began to reach Korean shores.

It was in the latter half of the 1980s that an academic review of Korea's inordinate zeal for education began. Discourse on the causes of undue zeal for education and measures to remove them took place mainly among pedagogists and social scientists. I do not intend to deny the various positions they took in diagnosing and assessing the various approaches to understanding Korean education fever. I intend, rather, to respect them in this paper as much as possible. This paper, however, advocates the need to consider the religious background of Korea's inordinate level of educational zeal, along with those previous approaches. It is also hoped that a religious interpretation of the phenomenon will be of some help to better the matter at hand.

The Religious Dimension of Traditional Confucian Education

The educational system in the Joseon dynasty (1392-1910), before the shock of Western modernization reached Korea, was dominated by Confucianism. Educational methodology and content differed depending on the strictly separated classes of the nobility, farmers, artisans, and merchants. But the Confucian worldview and value system were placed at the top of all possible accomplishments, which everyone, crossing all class boundaries, was expected to pursue. With *Zhuji jiali* (Family Rites of Zhu Xi) diffused across the country since the mid-Joseon, in particular, Confucianism was consolidated as a universal norm, defining the dimensions of all social constituents' concepts and actions across all social classes. Although the only class that enjoyed the core of Confucian education was the

1. Kang (2002/2003, 268).

yangban, the status group in Joseon society privileged to occupy civil and military posts in the bureaucracy, the scope of influence from Confucian ethos and norms encompassed the entire society.

But the classes qualified to directly benefit from Confucian education were quite limited. The principles of Confucianism held that Confucian education could be given to all members of society. Anyone can become a sage, the ideal person sought out by Confucianism, when one, regardless of birth or class, cultivates oneself to the fullest extent. In this respect, Confucianism is open and universal. At the same time, Confucianism is conservative in that it acknowledges the established order of social hierarchy. The notion that everyone has moral obligations given him or her, as emphasized in Confucianism, in fact, represents that the categories and scope of actions one must observe according to class were quite different.

Accordingly, the social role of Confucian education cannot be understood correctly unless it is kept in mind that Confucian education functioned as the mechanism reproducing the ruling class of the Joseon dynasty. In other words, the Confucian value system was influential enough to reach all classes because the core group, entitled to inherit Confucian education, was given the role of leading the lower classes according to Confucian guidelines. In fact, among social roles bestowed on the ruling class were the refinement of village customs and edification of ordinary citizens based on Confucian principles.

During the Joseon dynasty, the literati class, who was able to directly benefit from Confucian education, was given an opportunity to be recruited for government positions through the *gwageo* (civil service examination) system. The *gwageo* was the prime vehicle for getting ahead in the world; passing the state examination was the surest way to bring honor and prestige not only to the successful applicant, but also to his family and clan. In truth, the *gwageo* was much more than a system for fulfilling an individual's desire for success and advancement. Joseon society expected Confucian intellectuals to play a greater role than that of bureaucrats as participants in the governance of the state. The Confucian education principle of

“cultivating oneself so that one might be able to govern the people” (*sugi chiin*) was the guideline intended not only to regulate horizontal interpersonal relations, but also was meant to promote an extension of the vertical relationship required between Heaven and human beings. Confucianism accords very special status to humans, who are distinct from all other beings in the universe. Heaven opts to entrust the governance of the universe to humans as its deputies, rather than carrying out tasks all by itself. Among human beings, the sages—those who totally embody the virtues of Heaven—are chosen to serve as its deputies.

Sages are such because they, by way of self-cultivation, have embodied and completed the virtues of Heaven accorded to all human beings. Self-cultivation is nothing less than a reflection of the virtues of Heaven, which are inherent in all human beings, and therefore can be said to be a unique relationship linking humans with Heaven. Through the process of such self-cultivation, those eligible to become sages were entitled to rule not only over human beings but also the entire universe as Heaven's deputies. The principle of “governing the people” (*chiin*), accordingly, does not simply define political relations between people. Involved here is a religious dimension of how Heaven, the ultimate entity of Confucianism, relates itself to the domain of human beings, and, in other words, through what method Heaven saves mankind.² As the deputies of Heaven, sages are tasked with promoting the well-being and peace of the entire community through their clerical roles. Sages in Confucianism are politicians, intellectu-

2. The “salvation” advocated by Confucianism is very practical in the sense that it, unlike Buddhism and Christianity, does not pursue an afterlife and transcendence. The following passage in the Chapter “Hongfan” 洪範 (Grand Law) from *Zhushu* 周書 (History of Zhou Dynasty) of the *Shujing* 書經 (Book of Record) epitomizes the practical “salvation” of Confucianism: “The five blessings (*obok*, *wufu*) are wealth, long life, a comfortable life, the cultivation of virtue, and a natural death from old age. The six curses (*yukgeuk*, *liuji*) are dying young of unnatural causes, illness, worry, poverty, wickedness, and feebleness.” *Hongfan* refers to nine major norms Heaven accords to men of virtue. The five blessings denote specific outcomes of the salvation human beings eventually receive from Heaven. Here we can understand the “practical” nature of salvation sought by Confucianism.

als, and clerics combined, and the Confucian community, in nature, is a compound community, with politics, academics, and religion not strictly separated from one another.

Virtues possessed by the sages do not essentially differ from the virtues of Heaven. The virtues of Heaven are essentially the power that creates and presides over all creatures. Heaven, in other words, is a being that produces and nurtures all living things, as the origin of life. The virtues possessed by the sages are bestowed on them by Heaven, which are, in fact, universally accorded. However, the sages differ from others in that they, through the process of self-cultivation, embody the virtues of Heaven bestowed on them. The sages, as canons or exemplars of humanity, assume Heaven's role of giving life force to creatures on behalf of Heaven. The weight the sages carry in Confucianism, thus viewed, cannot but be extremely special, because the areas covered by the virtues of the sages are not confined to human beings. The sages have to endeavor to maintain a harmonious circle of life in the universe by granting their virtues to all beings, including humankind. Here, we need to pay attention to the fact that canonical and historical Confucian books attribute natural disasters to a lack of virtues caused by mistakes committed by a top contemporary ruler. This interpretation arises from a view of the sages, unique to Confucianism, that diagnoses real politics as based on the ideals of sage politics. This is why we should regard the sages of Confucianism as clerics with cosmological status, transcending simple politicians or intellectuals.

We need to keep in mind that "salvation" in Confucianism is directed at a whole group going beyond the dimension of individuals. Whether one is saved or not is determined not by the degree of individual internal faith, as is the case with modern religions, but through group "salvation" depending on the capability of who is leading the group.

Accordingly, all members of a group are concerned with how brilliant a leader they meet. Since the principle of "cultivating oneself so that one might be able to govern the people" and the ideals of sage politics, no doubt, are mentioned as a matter of principle, it is

appropriate to view it as another matter whether such ideals are actually materialized in real politics. Because the principles constituting a Confucian community pursue a society ruled by sages under the educational principle of "cultivating oneself so that one might be able to govern the people," however, rulers in reality are always evaluated by the ideal criteria of the sages.

Confucian intellectuals and bureaucrats recruited through the *gwageo* system had a high degree of social role expectations and responsibility based on the criteria of sages. The Confucian education of the Joseon era operated with particular attention to the question of how to train such talents. This was because the Confucian worldview itself had the religious characteristic of pursuing group "salvation" through talents equipped with the nature of the sages.

This does not mean, however, that the Confucian concept of "salvation" is inclined only to collectivism at the level of the universe or a state. As beings who completely embody the virtues of Heaven on a human level, the sages are also beings who function as models for all in everyday life. When confronted with a specific question of how individuals should behave in their everyday lives, except for ruling conducted at the state level, role models provided by the sages were nothing but eventual solutions. Had the behavior references of the five moral virtues (*osang*) of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, knowledge, and sincerity naturally stemmed from the perfection of virtues, people who have completely implemented them could not but be sages. Applying and implementing those behavior references in one's everyday life by cultivating virtues like the sages was, accordingly, a goal for all human beings. The implementation of the five moral virtues can be said to be a phenomenon in which individuals specify virtues in their everyday lives. All in all, it may not be unreasonable to understand it as the function of individuals' giving and taking life forces among themselves, as is the case with the virtues of the sages. Living a life from the perspective of Confucianism, accordingly, can be said to be a process in which all human beings, including the sages, imitate the virtues of Heaven and provide virtues to one another, namely a process of sharing life forces. Such

are the very means of realizing “heavenly way,” the ideal so prominently emphasized by Confucianism. The whole notion is epitomized, by implication, in Confucius’ words, “Were I to comprehend the Way in the morning, I wouldn’t mind dying in the evening.”³ This thought leads to the ultimate concept that “Heaven and Man are one and the same” (*cheonin habi*).

Now we need to pay attention to the fact that when such virtues are realized on a private level, the birth and nurturing of children carries very important significance for individuals and their families. This is because children, from the Confucian point of view, are important elements through which the parents can perpetuate their existence. Let us pay attention to the following before explaining this.

As a matter of fact, bestowing one’s virtues upon others in general, in addition to the nurturing of one’s own children, is a process of practicing Heaven’s way; it is a way of seeking eternal life. Because methods for seeking eternal life differ among religions, religious conflicts sometimes take place. A case in point is the life-after-death dispute between Confucianism and Buddhism when the latter was introduced into the country from China. The dispute raised by Neo-Confucians of China’s Song dynasty was reignited in *Bulssi japhyeon* (Miscellaneous Discourse on Buddha), a critique of Buddhism, authored by Jeong Do-jeon, a Neo-Confucian in the early Joseon dynasty. Whether the soul is mortal or immortal was the theme of the debate between Confucianism and Buddhism. Buddhism asserted immortality of the soul and Confucianism the opposite.

Important is not which side was correct in the dispute, but the different viewpoints stemming from different attitudes toward life and death. In terms of ontology, Confucianism regards the question of life and death simply as a process of transformation of “being.” Even if an individual entity temporarily appears and disappears, Confucianism does not interpret the process as a transition from somethingness to nothingness. For example, Neo-Confucianism explains that life and death represents nothing more than the process of the

3. 朝聞道 夕死可矣. “Liren” 里仁 in *Lunyu* (Analects of Confucius).

pre-existing “great emptiness” (*taeheo, taixu*) concentrating and dispersing, and that accordingly, life and death are not a process of something turning into nothingness. In other words, Neo-Confucianism holds that the eternity of “the being” per se is maintained intact regardless of its changing forms. Further, it is asserted, “Life does not necessarily denote a gain nor does death necessarily signify a loss.”⁴ Both life and death are the alternating phases of the eternity of the being. Death is nothing but the return of an individual entity to its roots after having taken the form of life. Life is merely the appearance of a new individual entity. Both life and death are nothing more than different stages of immortality.

It was natural that Confucianism, which did not regard life and death as somethingness or nothingness of the being, opposed the immortality of the soul held by Buddhism, which dealt with the subject of the transmigration of the soul after death. It may be closer to the point to say that Confucianism, rather than simply opposing the Buddhist position, found it totally heterogeneous. It is to be noted here that Confucianism understands life itself as a process of eternal life. While other religions place much more weight on after-death problems than on life, Confucianism is strongly inclined towards life. This is because Confucianism interprets living itself as a continuity of existence and an eternal process. To what extent one realizes heavenly way through self-awakening while alive is related to whether one recognizes the significance of one’s life as an individual entity within a cosmological structure. This can be said to be a form of life in pursuit of more complete perfection. In short, the sages, it can be said, are beings who lived their lives understanding the meaning of their existence in relationship with heavenly way, and who experienced complete eternity.

It was suggested earlier that the birth and nurturing of children carried a special meaning from the perspective of Confucianism. I discussed at some length the question of life and death, as interpreted in Confucianism, to explain that children carry a very different

4. Feng (2002, 495).

meaning in Confucianism. As discussed above, if life is nothing but eternity, the birth of a child, one's possible alter ego, from the standpoint of an individual being, creates an opportunity for him to seek eternal life after death. Life ends when a person dies, but children extend life through their own existence. Parents experience the eternity of "here and now" through their own lives. But at the same time, they can realize eternity through the children they bear. Traditional Confucianism paid close attention to the birth and rearing of children out of this unique attitude toward life and death. Inquiring into the truth of the matter, the act of bearing children itself meant providing the virtues given by Heaven, essentially identical with virtues extended to others. This shows another aspect of the Confucian theory of "salvation."

The Beginning of Modernity and Changes in Education Values

The dimension of religious "salvation," contained in the Joseon dynasty's Confucian viewpoint on education, tumbled in the face of the modern educational system introduced to the country from the West. Confucian education in the traditional era, as mentioned above, functioned as part of a religious system. The educational system in the Joseon dynasty was aimed eventually at handing down Confucian values and worldview and training the ideal persons sought out by Confucianism. The educational system in the Joseon era, of course, was not necessarily related to Confucianism; other educational areas allotted by social hierarchy existed. Confucian education, however, was placed at the top of all possible accomplishments by all classes. With the Neo-Confucian worldview being consolidated in the everyday lives of ordinary people from the middle of the Joseon dynasty, Confucian education encompassed other functional education systems and secured the position of the supreme norm. While producing the ruling class of the Joseon era, the Confucian education system pursued the eventual "salvation" of the entire community through the clerical status assumed by the ruling class.

The dual roles played by the traditional educational system, however, underwent drastic changes in the modern age. For example, the Confucian educational system, a conduit guaranteeing both religious "salvation" and secular success, could no longer sustain itself when religion was separated from secular affairs in the modern age. As a complex body politics and religion built upon the infrastructure of the Joseon dynasty, moreover, Confucianism was deprived of its base when the country was colonized by Japan. In other words, Confucianism, along with the dissolution of the Joseon dynasty, lost its practical influence over all walks of life on a national level.

The religious role played by Confucianism in the past was then replaced when each region successfully adapted to the modern, secular educational system and other aspects of modernity. It is difficult to describe the process under which the Confucian educational system gradually lost its competitive edge to modern educational systems since the 1894 reform, the Great Han Empire (1897-1910), and the Japanese colonization of Korea. Neither is it an important theme to be dealt with in this thesis. The influence of the Confucian educational system remained until the Great Han Empire, though it was encroached upon considerably by Western educational systems. The dominant view at the time, "Eastern thought, Western tools," relegated the Confucian role to that of Eastern ways. In contrast, modern Western thought, science, technology, politics, and sociology were aggressively accommodated under the banners of civilization and "wealthy nation, strong army." Various modern schools established during the Great Han Empire period were conduits for Western civilization to be introduced to Korea. But Japanese colonization and the resultant loss of Korean sovereignty was decisive in completely eliminating the Confucian educational system from the grounds of education.

The modern system that developed after Confucian education was eliminated from institutional education completely deprived education of religious colors. Modern education aims basically at nourishing abilities to objectively explain and convincingly understand

matters, and conveying functional knowledge needed for performing occupations. Modern education also assumes the role of inheriting culture and group ideologies needed for living as members of the state or society. The religious dimension of “salvation” assumed by the Confucian education system in the past was now regarded as a specialized function of established institutional religions. Modern institutional religions, through the educational systems unique to each of them, have institutionalized the study of religious doctrine and clerical training, and offer differentiated opportunities to layman believers of understanding how to reach religious “salvation.”

The Reality of Child Education and Excessive Education Fever in Korean Society

How to raise and educate one's children is one of the major concerns of most parents. Parents want their children to grow healthily, acquire a socially recognized education, and lead a successful life. Thus viewed, great interest in the education of one's children can be said a general attribute of parents. If questions are raised regarding children's education, they are mostly likely to be related to issues of proper education and parental duties.

But Korea's educational phenomena are so peculiar that parents' passion for the education of their children itself has come into question. Korean parents' interest in educating their children is intense and uncommon in the world, and results in peculiar educational phenomena. Education experts have already conceptualized such phenomenon as “excessive fever for education.”

A basis for that conceptualization can be found first in the fact that this fever gives rise to educational phenomena rarely found in other countries. For example, housewives voluntarily work as housemaids in order to earn their children's private tutorial fees, parents push preschool-age children to learn English, and teachers are bribed by parents, albeit less and less frequently, to ensure extra advantages for their children. Such phenomena have long become serious social

issues, exceeding the internal problems of education.

Phenomena arising from this disproportionate zeal for education are common among Korean parents. The excessive education fever has not been confined to any particular class, region, parental occupation, or religion, but can be found in most parents. For example, parent who cannot afford to send their children to cram schools are so ashamed of themselves that they feel a sense of guilt.

What is the background to all this? It is attributable to the structure of Korean education that stirs up limitless competition toward the identical goal of entering universities. No students undergoing primary, secondary or tertiary education in Korea, can be free from the competitive system geared to university admissions, dubbed “entrance exam hell.” As a consequence, it is said, the essential goals of education are lost. Little can now be expected of the educational goals of offering students diverse educational opportunities befitting their aptitude and temperament, while training them so that they may contribute to the community by sharing the knowledge they acquire with others. To make matters worse, public education is now such in name only, due to the expanded private tutorial market, the degraded authority of teachers, rising levels of school violence arising from students' stress caused by entrance examinations, which result in increased emigrations for the purpose of educating children overseas, led by parents fed up with the educational system in the country. The problems are becoming chronic.

The government has implemented a series of measures to overcome this shortsighted and unreasonable situation, but have enjoyed little success. For example, the government enforced a policy to diversify criteria for university entrance in addition to abolishing universities' regular entrance exams. But the policy resulted in an increased parental financial burden, as more students were led to attend cram schools.

In the present state of Korean education, Korean parents continue to put up with this difficult situation. Few parents find fault with excessive zeal for education in and of itself. Rather they are inclined to regard it as the driving force of individuals' growth and national

development. Accordingly, they tend to think that it is the role of the government to monitor fair evaluations and procedures in entrance exams and see to it that parents' financial burdens, such as found in private tutorial costs, is curtailed.

It seems somewhat contradictory that while taking undue zeal for education for granted, Koreans criticize the various irrational educational phenomena caused by it. Payment of immoderate private tutorial costs and the collapse of public education are caused by inordinate zeal for education. Hence these problems cannot be solved unless excessive zeal for education is eliminated. Why do Korean parents fail to correctly understand such a causal relationship? Are there certain factors that prevent them from viewing the situation critically?

The next chapter will discuss the historical, social, and psychological conditions that gave rise to excessive zeal for education, and how they affect the attitude of Korean parents toward the education of their children.

Critical Analysis of Causal Theories on Korea's Education Fever

In the process of its modernization, Korea heavily emphasized the training of talent through education as a basic condition of national development. Experts at home and abroad cited Korea's high zeal for education as one of the most important causes of its rapid economic development. Under these circumstances, a perception prevailed that the higher the level of education, the better, and that educational problems found in schools were incidental to such zeal. Accordingly, it was thought that problems could easily be resolved once adequate supplementary institutional steps were taken.

This attitude toward education fever in Korea still remains. Some scholars of pedagogy, affirmatively assessing Korea's excessive education fever, still maintain that it is more important to prevent this fever from resulting in serious problems in education, rather than problematizing fever per se. But it is apparent that this attitude is

gradually changing. Some scholars, who take a negative view of the education fever in Korea, assert that the current irrational educational phenomena resulted not simply from the absence of desirable educational policies, but from the inordinate zeal for education itself. It was in the late 1980s and early 1990s that Korea's undue enthusiasm for education emerged as a subject of academic study unto itself.⁵ Prompting the emergence of academic attention was a need to make an accurate causal analysis of the educational irrationality found in the country and a critical perception that an affirmation and admiration of Koreans' enthusiasm for education could rather hurt the basic objectives of education.

While describing the various aspects of educational problems found in Korea, such as excessive private tutorial costs and education geared towards fierce competition over entrance exams, most academic research in this period sought the fundamental cause underlying these problems. It was in this context that excessive zeal for education in Korea began to attract academic attention. Such zeal was cited as a fundamental cause of serious educational problems in Korea, and it was diagnosed that all countermeasures would be nothing but a stopgap unless they were accompanied by steps that dealt with the excessive educational zeal itself. It was also in that period that "education fever" settled into a specific academic concept, to be defined elaborately.

Why, then, did excessive passion for education emerge in Korea? Having been cited as a basic cause of Korea's evil educational phenomena, it is natural that attention was given to the conditions under which the zeal arose. Diverse views on the conditions were aired mainly by pedagogists and social scientists. This paper will note the limits of each position in the established studies, while paying attention to their accomplishments. At the same time, I will attempt to discuss another possible condition that may explain these phenomena

5. The following are outstanding articles and books on the subject. Bak Hye-in (1994); Chung (1999); Kim (1999, 2001); Oh (2000); Kang (2002/2003); O (2000/2002).

more fully. It is added that noting the limits of each position does not negate the position completely. A phenomenon or incident cannot be explained in a linear form; it, in most cases, takes place from multi-dimensional and compound factors. This paper, accordingly, takes the stance of faithfully accepting previous research findings, while attempting to be of help in understanding Korea's immoderate zeal for education by locating and describing a factor that established studies failed to take into account.

To begin with, the dissolution of social order, raised by most scholars who have dealt with the subject, can be cited as a factor that has facilitated the fever for education. Following the official abolition of the traditional order of citizens' social status in the Gabo Reform in 1894, the public's desire to enhance its status positively expressed itself. Modernity, the structural characteristic of modern social culture, perceives individuals as entities independent of traditional hierarchical order and blood collectivism. All individuals are born with equal rights and assessed by the capabilities of each. Evaluation of individuals in modern society tends to be done within the rubric of a so-called meritocracy. Individuals thus display strong reliance on education as a condition for acquiring higher levels of abilities.

It can be said, accordingly, that since modernity per se, which has within itself the possibility for merit-based elevation of one's status, was the precondition for the initial emergence of zeal for education in Korea. It is necessary, however, to keep in mind that abilities and education do not necessarily match each other. Those getting a higher level of education do not necessarily acquire greater abilities. The desire to increase one's social mobility in modern society, free from traditional hierarchy, can function only as a necessary condition leading to high zeal for education, but it seems to lack enough explanatory power to convincingly explain all. The close relationship between such a desire social mobility and immense zeal for education is not confined to Korea, but is universal in almost all countries that have undergone the process of modernization. This theory, therefore, is limited in explaining the extreme enthusiasm for education in Korea.

Some scholars have argued that the modern merit system

emerged in Korea in the form of credentialism (*hangnyeokjuui*), which overemphasizes academic credentials, and *hakbeoljuui*. The argument holds that credentialism and *hakbeoljuui* are Korean-style accommodations of the modern merit system. "Credentialism denotes a tendency or practice placing excessive importance on schooling backgrounds as a criterion in evaluating or judging individuals' capabilities, allocating positions, or determining their treatment."⁶ *Hakbeoljuui* as an extension of credentialism, denotes a format of behavior for people sharing identical levels of schooling to form exclusive groups in an attempt to monopolize social positions and resources. Inordinate zeal for education emerged in Korea, according to them, because people lacking in certain academic backgrounds and *hakbeol* encounter difficulties in seizing opportunities for social status advancement. Academic backgrounds and *hakbeol* in Korea are, they assert, a new form of modern valuing of abilities, corresponding to the "social order" of the traditional society, and constitute a sort of qualification certification used for social mobility.⁷

Credentialism and *hakbeoljuui*, varied as they are in degree,

6. Kim (1999, 93).

7. Kim (1999, 93-95). According to Kim Dong Choon, credentialism is a phenomenon that occurred through the institutionalization of public education in a modern capitalist society. The establishment of a capitalistic economic order and state apparatus necessitated principles for mobilizing and compensating for the manpower needed for sustaining the economic and social order. They felt a need to distribute the people who had reached certain levels of accomplishments and who gained qualification certificates similar to those conferred on the privileged and skilled in the traditional society. Here arose state-recognized "academic credentials" as a new form of meritocracy, which could replace traditional order. Credentialism, accordingly, can be said to be universal in most modern countries. The later a capitalist country develops and the quicker he maintained, the deeper the zeal for education tends to be. In late-comer capitalist societies, state building precedes industrialization and the educational system is established before industrialization begins in earnest. The zeal for education emerging in these late-comer capitalist societies during the pre-industrialization period is related not to the question of training capitalistic industrial manpower, but to a policy of recruiting a state elite. Credentialism lends strong effect to qualifying certificates for people to be mobilized as state officials, the acquiring of which enables them to amass wealth at the same time.

however, is a universal occurrence in modern societies. Accordingly, they can hardly be regarded as something unique to Korea. Interest in academic backgrounds and *hakbeol* remains even in countries like the United States and Britain, where the modern meritocracy is well established, though it applies to a limited number of classes and individuals. However, few countries in the world are so riddled with disproportionate enthusiasm for education as Korea is.

What is more, the weight of credentials as a mode of social mobility is decreasing due to successful economic development and diversified social functions and activities. According to one scholar, Korea has already passed the phase in which people elevate their status through the valuing of academic backgrounds.⁸ This means that Korean society is arguably now more open to individuals in varied fields who are recognized according to their aptitude, qualities, and abilities. Nevertheless, the inordinate zeal for education shows no sign of subsidizing, but is intensifying ever more.

Accordingly, this method of explaining Korea's education fever through credentialism and *hakbeoljuui* evidently has its limit. There is another view that sees credentialism as a symbol or sign of class distinction, rather than regarding it as a means of social mobility.⁹ According to this position, the passion for obtaining impressive academic credentials is not solely due to the desire for acquiring promising jobs, securing higher posts, or amassing wealth. Academic credentials are favored not for their use values, but are sought as a kind of exchange value by a ruling class to distinguish itself from the ruled classes. Jean Baudrillard writes in *The Consumer Society* that the ruling class consumes to fulfill its objective of demonstrating class difference rather than obtaining the actual use value of things. Academic backgrounds likewise function for "those who do not have a key to open the door as a momentum of more cruel and cunning cultural alienation."¹⁰

8. Kang (2002/2003, 304-306).

9. Kang (2002/2003, 313-321).

10. Baudrillard (1995, 70).

This argument, locating the cause of Korea's inordinate zeal for education in the social desire for class distinction, is insufficient in two respects. First, the utilization of academic credentials as a mechanism of cultural distinction is ubiquitous in a so-called "consumer society." That is, such utilization is not found only in Korea. The phenomenon of utilizing academic credentials to ensure class distinction occurs only among those who have reached a certain level of social class. Accordingly, it is inadequate to explain Korea's excessive zeal for education, which is found in all social classes.

The causal analyses discussed above are limited in explaining the peculiarities of Korea's inordinate enthusiasm for education. The conditions presented as causes of excessive education fever are seen in any countries that have undergone the process of modernization. This gives rise to the need to present particular conditions that can explain the situation specific to Korea, which has found few counterparts in other countries. In response, a series of attempts were made to focus on the process of modernization in Korea and examine the conditions of Korean-style modernization in order to clarify the causes of the inordinate zeal for education.¹¹

Scholars, supporting this position, varied as they are in the degree of stress, commonly note that Korea's modern education system was established under state initiatives. Korea's modernization is closely related to the extraordinary national crisis following the opening of its ports. Korea had no way but to concentrate its energies on saving the entire country from crisis; accordingly, there was no room to develop a mature individual and civil society. The top-down process of modernization led by the state was an unavoidable choice under the circumstances. Statist ideology that placed much greater importance on the state than on individuals and civil society can be said to be an outcome of the process of Korean modernization.

State-initiated modernization was reflected throughout the course of establishing the nation's modern education. The state controlled all educational affairs, including the establishment of modern educa-

11. Kim (1999, 112-125); Chung (1999, 11-16); Oh et al (2000, 208-216).

tional institutions, curricula, and content. Education was naturally focused on training citizens capable of realizing statist ideologies. Social Darwinism, introduced into the country during the early years of Korea's modernization, helped create an atmosphere stressing the training of talents capable of surviving competition under imperial powers.¹² This state-centered educational policy resulted in recognizing the acquisition of academic credentials through modern education as state-approved certification, and caused over-heated competition in the race to attain these credentials. According to this logic, Korea's inordinate zeal for education sprouted with the statist educational policy adopted in the early years of the nation's modernization.

The statist educational policy persisted during Japan's colonization of Korea and even after its liberation. Anticommunism, stemming from the division of the country, in particular, worked as a decisive factor further fanning inordinate enthusiasm for education.¹³ In other words, anticommunism completely blocked the possibility of diversifying the means or survival conditions for social mobility. Anticommunism did not permit an outlet through which individuals could resolve their interests through political party activities or political struggles, and thereby liberate themselves from their realities. In this context, the attainment of formal schooling, a state-approved certification, was seen as the only way for citizens to overcome hardships and satisfy their dormant desire for increased social status.

The notion that Korea's modern education was pushed ahead under state initiatives from the outset of modernization, and that such a statist educational system was interlocked with anticommunist ideology following Korea's liberation, are simply more convincing than any other analyses discussed above. The major causes giving rise to an excessive passion for education include a statist ideology that permitted no challenge against state authority, the application of Social Darwinism that invited limitless competition among citizens, a statist educational system aimed at educating people who can

12. Chung (1999, 14).

13. Kim (1999, 121-122).

adapt to statist ideologies and training talents capable of surviving limitless competition, and an anticommunist ideology that suppressed any survival conditions or means of pursuing social mobility that were not permitted by the state.

This apparently remains the case today, though over one hundred years have passed since Korea first faced modernization. In the meantime, Korean society has undergone drastic changes, and has become a more pluralistic society in various arenas while challenging uniformity. However, statism and the state-centered educational system remain, and Social Darwinism, through a new variant of neoliberalism, has been felt strongly in Korean society. Anticommunism has also dominated most people's psyches. Viewed this way, it is likely that the aforementioned analysis can offer a very appropriate model for explaining the fever for education in Korea.

This paper, nonetheless, takes the position that Korea's inordinate zeal for education cannot be completely explained by the statist educational model. This is because the excessive zeal for education in Korea is not seen as a problem by educational consumers themselves, namely the students and their parents in particular. One pedagogist says plainly, "Koreans' enthusiasm for education indicates a high degree of parental motivation to improve the level and quality of education their children receive."¹⁴ It is therefore no exaggeration to say that Korea's undue passion for education is led by the parents to a great extent.

How to explain the phenomenon in which not students but parents, who are not the direct beneficiaries, take the lead in Korea's inordinate zeal for education? This question must be asked because the parents' interest in the education of their children is manifested through extensive self-sacrifice on their part. Korean parents willingly give up their personal lives for their children's education. Mothers who engage in hard labor to earn money for their children's private tutorial fees and "wild goose" fathers who live alone and suspend their normal family life to support wives and children who move

14. Lee (2000, 21).

abroad for education are only the tip of the iceberg in Korea. The zeal for education that is manifested through such self-sacrifice cannot be explained solely by the statist educational system introduced above.

If the model for a statist educational system is sufficient to explain the education fever, it must be premised on the following prerequisites: that the various factors driving Korean society's excessive zeal for education are being accepted in their entirety by the prime actors involved. That is because human beings are not automatons. An explanatory framework used by social science is apt to commit the error of treating a specific social structural factor as an absolute. Even if one were to inevitably arrive at a social structural cause, it would be very incomplete unless the prime actors accepted it, whether consciously or unconsciously, as is. Likewise, if the statist educational model were capable of fully explaining Korean society's excessive zeal for education, it would have to be presumed that there existed prime actors that accepted into their lives all the factors giving rise to the education fever under discussion. Here prime actors of course refer to the direct beneficiaries of education, namely, the students.

Even though those who personally experience inordinate zeal for education must necessarily be the students, however, the fact that parents are also among the subjects involved exceeds our imagination. We might state that the parents' role is confined to assisting in the education of their immature children, and therefore the children are absolutely those exhibiting excessive zeal for education. If so, how can we explain the sacrificial attitude parents hold toward their children's education? How can we explain this phenomenon, which could not happen unless the parents themselves were the prime actors? Why do the parents become the prime actors in this disproportionate zeal for education, despite not being the direct beneficiaries?

Conclusion: The Religious Nature of Korean Society's Excessive Fever for Education

One of the characteristics of modernity is that all human beings are treated as independent and autonomous individuals in modern society. This is equally true for the family community, the most intimate and basic group in society. Even parents and children are linked with each other as strictly different individuals. Important changes in modern society include the shift from a traditional clan-centered kinship structure to the small-scale community of nuclear families, with relationships between members of a nuclear family premised upon the full independence of personality. Accordingly, it is considered important for parents in the modern family group to provide their children with the necessary conditions for growing independent and mature individuals. It is therefore considered virtuous for parents to not intervene in the affairs of their children more than necessary and to respect their personality, aspirations, and desires to the fullest possible extent.

If parent-child relationships in Korean society reflected this modern family structure, could the excessive zeal for education have taken place? In other words, even if the social and cultural structure provided the necessary conditions for giving rise to inordinate zeal for education, could an undue zeal for education have occurred if parent-child relationships reflected the modern family structure? In order to understand the fact that the parents, who did not have to plunge themselves into the vortex of excessive fever for education, became the prime actors of such passion, should a relationship between parents and children that is entirely different from modern human relationships be presupposed? That instead, it may be a relationship of organic unity on the basis of homogeneity between the parents and children.

Attempts to identify the causes of this immoderate zeal for education from traditional contexts are considered to have arisen from this idea. The above-mentioned explanations attach importance mainly to social structural factors that appeared in the course of mod-

ernization. In contrast, an emphasis on traditional society was also present.¹⁵ Scholars siding with this stance emphasize that the persistence of the Confucian cult of success in the Joseon period became a major cause of the ensuing zeal for education. The Confucian zeal for education, represented in the deeply rooted tradition of over-valuing scholarship and the cult of success through the *gwageo* constituted a historical condition for disproportionate zeal for education.

Given the reality that Confucian influence persists in the Korean consciousness to this day, the above assertion is convincing to a certain extent. But even so, it is difficult to conclude that the Confucian cult of success naturally led to an excessive zeal for education on a national basis.¹⁶ In addition, we have to find a clear-cut explanation as to why education in Korea, from among Asian countries sharing the Confucian tradition, displays excessive zeal for education.¹⁷

Such an explanation, albeit incomplete, is significant value because it points out that the issue of Koreans fever cannot be properly dealt with without emphasizing traditional factors. Korea's undue zeal for education, when based on a modern worldview, gives rise to phenomena that cannot be explained through common sense alone, and that stem from the parents' irrational and almost blind self-sacrifice. This suggests that traces of the traditional parent-child relationships are found in Koreans' consciousness today. Why we judge the zeal for education to be excessive in Korean society is because the zeal the parents pour into the education of their children cannot be explained unless premised on the unity of the children

15. Bak (1994, 83-92); Choi (2000, 55-120); O (2002, 340-348).

16. Oh et al (2000, 208).

17. Kim (1999, 115-117). In addition, Chung Soon-Woo argues it is untrue that zeal for education was very high in the Joseon dynasty. In support of his view that passion for education was very low in that period, Chung cites documents indicating how hard the court tried to encourage cultural development. The cult of success, several scholars have cited to back up their alleged high zeal for education in the Joseon dynasty, he says, was structurally limited and did not become over-heated because it was restrained by the "philosophy of resignation," upheld by the Neo-Confucian worldview. An inordinate zeal for education in Korean society is entirely a modern phenomenon, according to him. Chung (1999, 1-16).

with their parents. That, in turn, is because the education fever in Korea is premised on thorough self-sacrifice by the parents. This means the unity of the children with their parents, in which the parents regard their children as another extension of themselves or another character instead of being independent individuals. Here we find a traditional factor has remained intact in our modern social structure. Emphasis on the roots of the lineage and intense love and passion for one's children as one's extension or alter ego constitute an important factor causing such inordinate zeal for education.

That parent-child relationships are understood to be inseparable this way points to the legacy of Confucian culture as still remaining among Koreans. Confucianism, having lost its state-level influence when the Joseon dynasty collapsed, still maintains its thread of life in the personal areas. The evidence is manifest in the preference for male offspring, the continued observance of Lunar New Year's Day and Chuseok, the Korean harvest celebration, mass homeward migrations during major festival seasons, continued ancestor worship rites, and emphasis placed on clans, family names, and clan registers. These phenomena, needless to say, are traditional factors whose life force is strongly sustained in the daily lives of Koreans.

What are then the common features of these phenomena? Contained here is a desire to maintain the continuity of one's existence along with a powerful urge to return to the root of their existence. In other words, this is a consciousness of "salvation" that cannot be expressed unless a constant continuity of life is perceived as the top value. Those phenomena are mainly linked with the base of existence, represented by deceased ancestors. Citing those phenomena, many scholars often maintain that the filial piety (*hyo*), frequently mentioned by Confucianism, still dominates Koreans' world of meaning. We need to pay attention how the notion of filial piety is expressed in a way not confined to one's directly related ancestors. If one were to trace back the scope of one's ancestors indefinitely, we eventually cannot but meet the base of some topmost existence, the root of creation and the provider of life. Accordingly, filial piety does not remain simply in the category of ethics, but carries an ontological

significance that can be traced back to the very beginning of existence, where one lays tribute to the root of one's own life for the beneficence it has bestowed.

Such a powerful urge to return to the root of existence, represented by one's ancestors, is not sufficient in itself; it directs the relations of people who live "here and now" to a certain direction. We have to keep in mind the fact that the lives we live "here and now" constitute the last apex on the extension of eternal life continuing from the beginning. From the perspective of an individual, one understands not only that it is the natural duty of one's newly born child to succeed one's existence, thereby constituting another apex, but also that it must necessarily be the meaning of existence itself and sustain one's life. How great a weight is placed on the birth and caring of children in Confucianism was discussed fully in Section 2. All in all, children, from the perspective of the parents, are an extension of their existence; and parents, from the perspective of the children, represent the root of existence as persons to be later incorporated into an unbroken line of departed ancestors. The continuity of life continuing from dead ancestors to parents and then to children is a form of religious "salvation" still remaining in the consciousness of contemporary Koreans. This may be called Koreans' "family religion," observed outside institutionalized religions.

Korean parents' total sacrifice for the education of their children, as well as devotion and passion for the task, may be interpreted as a representation of religious "salvation" pursuing continuity of existence. Bearing and nurturing children itself carries a very important ontological significance for Koreans. Korean parents' extraordinary concern for the education of their children may be attributed to their perception of education itself as an activity that secures the continuity of life.

It may therefore be concluded that the education fever in Korea is an outcome stemming from the particular historical experiences Korean society has undergone and accompanying social and cultural causes, and that it is attributed to the self-sacrificing attitude of the parents who willingly accommodate those conditions into their own lives on behalf of their children.

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GLOSSARY

<i>Bulssi japbyeon</i>	佛氏雜辨	<i>hangnyeokjuui</i>	學歷主義
<i>cheonin habil</i>	天人合一	<i>hyo</i>	孝
<i>chimat baram</i>	치맛바람	<i>osang</i>	五常
Chuseok	秋夕	<i>sugi chiin</i>	修己治人
<i>gwageo</i>	科擧	<i>taeheo</i>	太虛
<i>gwaoe manguingnon</i>	課外亡國論	<i>taixu</i> (Ch.) ▶ <i>taeheo</i>	
<i>hakbeol</i>	學閥	<i>Zhuzi jiali</i> (Ch.)	朱子家禮

(Ch.: Chinese)