KOREA ECONOMIC INSTITUTE

Academic Paper Series

March 08. Volume 3. No 2

A Cultural and Philosophical Perspective on Korea's Education Reform: A Critical Way to Maintain Korea's Economic Momentum

By S. J. Chang

During the past several decades numerous discussions about the problems of education in South Korea have been advanced by government officials, education experts, teachers, students, parents, as well as the general public. Yet the problems still persist, and many would argue that the situation has been worsening in recent years.[1]

As this paper revisits the issue and makes an attempt to seek viable solutions at this particular juncture, it finds its rationale in identifying one vitally important aspect of the whole issue that has long been ignored by most discussants. Namely, this paper points out that the ultimate causes of Korean educational problems are cultural and philosophical in nature.

Such a proposition is presented on the premise that a society's institutions in major functional areas such as politics, economy, law, journalism, and education are a direct reflection of its culture, philosophy, and value system. Insofar as education reflects the society's cultural and philosophical tradition, it merits our attention to examine Korea's cultural legacy and philosophical heritage as we critically discuss the current educational problems in Korea.

The oft-cited economic progress of Korea probably owes much to Korea's past education system, however inefficient or dysfunctional it may have been. But with its lackluster performance and dwindling momentum in recent years, the Korean economy is at a crossroads. As Korea's traditional education system is found unfit for the new knowledge economy, many argue that the key to Korea's survival and prosperity lies with a radical educational reform.

The well-documented education absolutism in Korea has been producing one anomaly after another, prompting countless remedial measures. However, the proposition that the root causes of all these problems lie in the culture and philosophy of the Korean society indicates that those remedial efforts may well turn out to be futile, as they can offer only temporary symptomatic treatment for education-induced political and economic illness without getting to the essence of the matter. Yet, this proposition also serves

Dr. Chang's paper is the twelfth in KEI's *Academic Paper* series, which began in December 2006. In contrast to previous papers in this series, Dr. Chang's paper is a normative appraisal with limited empirical analysis. It provides a reflexive and cohesive discussion of several culture-based issues that, in the author's opinion, Korean society has yet to resolve in order to achieve desirable educational reforms.

In its *Academic Paper* series, KEI commissions and publishes 9 to 10 papers per year on original subjects of current interest to Korea watchers, which KEI distributes to over 2,000 government officials, think tank experts, and scholars around the United States and the world. A public discussion at KEI with the author generally follows publication. In February 2008, KEI published its first annual compilation of KEI Academic Papers in *On Korea, Volume 1*. To download (or order) a copy, please visit KEI's website at www.keia.org. The next KEI Academic Paper will be published in April 2008. Authored by **James L. Schoff** of the Institute of Foreign Policy Analysis and **Choi Hyun-jin** of Arizona State University, it will be entitled "**Reform Locally, Act Globally? Crisis Management Trends in Korea.**"

as a warning that Korea's educational reform cannot be easily attained without an enlightening evolution or shift in Korea's culture and philosophy.

Problems of Education in Korea

Obsession with Education

Korean society has long been obsessed with education. No other nation seems to have greater enthusiasm for education than Korea, and nowhere are students more pressured to study. Bluntly put, the entire Korean society is manic about education.

In Korea the long and grueling race to college entrance begins when the child is only two or three years old. Parents are desperate to move into better school districts even though that means paying a high housing premium. They compete fiercely for the best tutors, preparatory schools, and supplementary educational materials for their children.

Many Korean parents send their children overseas for education at the tender ages of five, six, or seven years. The so-called early study abroad craze has created a $600 million market that is still growing. A recent survey revealed that, if given the opportunity, one out of four Korean parents would like to emigrate for their children's education. Those who do move to other countries cite their children's education as the number one reason why they leave their home country.[2]

The result is mass expatriation of students for overseas education, an educational exodus in Korean style. ***Table 1*** shows the particularly alarming trend of an increasing number of elementary and secondary school students who have gone abroad to study in recent years. Today, Korea has the world's largest number of students per capita who go abroad for study. Ubiquitous are so-called wild geese families, in which the father stays behind in Korea to support his wife and children abroad. This is a manifestation of the total failure of the country's education system.

According to the International Institute for Management Development's Brain Drain Index, Korea ranked 40th out of 61 countries surveyed, indicating a strong tendency for highly educated people to leave the county.[3] What is remarkable about the Korean education exodus is the widespread extent of middle class participation in the "early study abroad" trend. The Korean education exodus not only produces a massive brain drain caused by the migration of the elites but also incurs significant social costs in regard to family emigration and reorganization.

Korean parents' relentless drive to push their children toward educational excellence entails serious social issues. Several isolated and seemingly unrelated incidents of late draw our attention. The notorious case of disgraced veterinarian Hwang Woo-suk, a Korean-born student's shooting massacre on a college campus, and a teenager of Korean origin caught pretending to be a student at a prestigious university do not appear to be even remotely connected. But, in fact, they are all demonstrations of the Korean people's seemingly incurable education disease and anxiety for overachievement.[4]

Another series of recent incidents regarding fake academic degrees that rattled Korean society only proved the fact that Korean people's obsession with education has not changed. From a college professor to a leading politician, a well-known architect, a star English instructor, a popular cartoonist, a curator, an actor, an actress, a celebrity interior designer, a performing artist, a TV anchor, and a Buddhist leader: as one prominent person after another has been exposed over recent months as exaggerating or even fabricating academic accomplishments, it is once again shown that Korea is a country where degrees from top universities carry an unwarranted high premium.[5]

Education in Korea is a religion or perhaps more than a religion. Korean society has been strongly influenced by Confucian philosophy, which stresses the importance of learning and scholarship. Confucian philosophy has also

Table 1: **Korean Students Studying Outside of Korea, 2001–06**

Kinds of students	2001	2002		2003		2004		2005		2006	
	No.	No.	Annual increase (%)	No.	Annual increase (%)	No.	Annual increase (%)	No.	Annual increase (%)	No.	Annual increase (%)
Elementary and secondary students	7,944	8,869	11.6	10,498	18.4	15,467	47.3	20,400	31.9	29,511	44.6
Total Korean students studying abroad	277,799	343,842	23.8	347,882	1.2	393,998	13.3	436,917	10.9	496,050	13.5

Sources: Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development, Seoul, various years; National Institute for International Education Development, Seoul, various years.

made Korean people highly conscious of social status, which is judged almost solely by one's educational background.

In modern Korea, the zeal for learning has been reinforced by a belief that getting a diploma from a good college is a ticket to success. Korean people thus regard higher education as a means to an enhanced socioeconomic position. As education is believed to be the only and surest path to success and prosperity, Koreans send their children in droves to private tutors, night schools, cram schools, and foreign schools. As far as education goes, Koreans see no limits or boundaries.

Failure of Public Education

Public education in Korea is in deep trouble. Secondary education, in particular, is a disastrous failure. Most high schools appear to have all but given up their role of properly educating students. Many do not even pretend to offer quality education, and teachers routinely tell students to study on their own.

The failure of public secondary education, which has been in large part caused by overly competitive college entrance exams often described as "examination hell," has caused excessive after-school schooling. About 80 percent of Korean students attend private cram schools known as *hagwon*. Commercialization of out-of-school education has produced a $12 billion *hagwon* industry. The Korean private education market is a unique industry within Korea that cannot be seen abroad.

All this translates into an unbearably high cost of education for many Korean households. Officially, Korea spends 7.5 percent of its gross domestic product on education, already a bigger share than any other industrialized country. ***Table 2*** and ***Table 3*** show the continuously rising costs for Korea's officially recognized private education. But these data do not include the $38 billion a year Korean parents shell out for out-of-school education such as *hagwon* and private tutors.[6]

Table 4 shows Korea's growing trade deficit in education. Approximately 20 Korean students study overseas for every foreign student who studies in Korea, and the per student, per annum expense for Korean students who study abroad is $23,417, more than 27 times the corresponding figure ($860) for foreign students studying in Korea.[7] As a result, Korea's education trade deficit has been growing by more than 30 percent annually over the recent years.

Table 3. **Cost of Private Education in Korea, 1994–2006, in billions of Korean *won***

1994	1998	2001	2003	2006
5,646	12,245	10,663	13,649	15,534

Sources: National Tax Service, Seoul, various years;
Korea Education Development Institute, Seoul, various years.
Note: Table shows taxable revenue only
(nontraceable costs such as private tutors are not included).

Economists forecast that the deficit will exceed $10 billion by 2011. Even when Korea's education service market is opened up by way of the pending ratification of the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement, the effect on the educational trade deficit is predicted to be marginally positive or even negative.[8] All told, astronomical amounts of educational resources are grossly misallocated because of the failure of public education. While these resources turn into a deadweight loss or social waste, much of the public education infrastructure remains substandard.

The gross failure of public elementary and secondary education in Korea is also seen through the country's ongoing and almost uncontrollable craze for English language learning. Korean parents eager to raise their children with English fluency go to great lengths to provide their children with English training. In 2006, for example, 24,000 Korean students in grades 1 through 12 left the country just to study English; this is more than triple the number who did so in 2001. In many cases young students are leaving the country even without their parents.[9] Their destinations are English-speaking countries—the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines, India, and as far as South Africa. One international school in a remote area in the foothills of the Himalayas, an eight-hour ride by car from Delhi, has 52 Korean students among its 470-student body. The town earns $769 in GDP per capita.[10]

Table 2: **Revenue of Korea's Private Cram School Industry, 2002–06**

2002	2003		2004		2005		2006	
Korean *won* (billions)	Korean *won* (billions)	Annual increase (%)	Korean *won* (billions)	Annual increase (%)	Korean *won* (billions)	Annual increase (%)	Korean *won* (billions)	Annual increase (%)
3,569.8	3,939.4	10.4	4,176.2	6.0	4,838.5	15.9	5,819.2	20.3

Sources: National Tax Service, Seoul; Korea Education Development Institute.
Note: Table shows taxable revenue only (nontraceable costs such as private tutors are not included).

Table 4: **Korea's Education Trade Deficits, 2002–06**

2002	2003		2004		2005		2006	
U.S. dollars (millions)	U.S. dollars (millions)	Annual increase (%)	U.S. dollars (millions)	Annual increase (%)	U.S. dollars (millions)	Annual increase (%)	U.S. dollars (millions)	Annual increase (%)
-1,410	-1,840	30.5	-2,480	34.8	-3,370	35.9	-4,430	31.5

Source: Bank of Korea, various years.

But families who cannot afford foreign travel have plenty to choose from at home: English immersion villages, English summer camps, English-speaking babysitters, private tutors, and even salons where pregnant mothers go in hopes that unborn children will absorb the English being spoken. Koreans spent $15.6 billion on English-language tutors in 2006, three times more than the Japanese.[11] In 2004–05, Koreans made up 19 percent of the number of total applicants for the Test of English as Foreign Language (TOEFL), and more than 700 billion *won* was spent on various standardized English tests.

Korea's troubled public education system has been exhibiting many varieties of wrongdoing in and around schools, ranging from bribery to classroom violence and bullying, student abuse, teacher heckling, parental protests, and corrupt practices in college admission and hiring of professors. In Korea, therefore, such highly regarded virtues as human rights and academic freedom are often openly ignored right in the classroom or on the school grounds.

Principle of Absolute Equality and Mediocritization in Education

Korea, now the 12th largest economy in the world, is heavily dependent on overseas education. The great majority of Korean professors have advanced degrees from foreign schools, and many students from elementary to college level go abroad for their basic education. No other country of similar stature shows such a severe dependency on foreign education.

This speaks volumes about Korea's dysfunctional education system, which has been mass-producing highly educated but incompetent people since the introduction of a standardized education policy some 30 years ago. Pursuing absolute equality not only in educational opportunities but also in educational outcomes, Korea adopted a rigid school system with little educational competition, diversity, or flexibility, let alone autonomy.

The lack of competition among education providers is in fact a major source of Korea's troubled education system. Not to be misunderstood is that in Korea competition among students is extremely high, yet there is not much meaningful competition among schools. Students or parents do not have the basic right to choose a school. By the same token, schools do not have the right to choose students. This makes all high schools evenly mediocre. While Japan, China, and India—Korea's major rivals—are showing strong commitment to high-level science and engineering education, approximately two-thirds of Korea's high schoolers go to college without learning science. One out of five freshmen at Seoul National University, the country's top university, is reportedly having difficulty understanding what he or or she learns in class.[12]

Within such a closed education regime students are put through only rote memorization and cramming procedures, which stifle individual vitality and creativity. It is ironic that, with so many Koreans trying so desperately to have their children educated overseas, the Korean education system is often praised by other countries as a model to follow. Indeed, Korean high school students frequently rank at the top in standardized tests on math and science. Koreans generally excel within a well-defined framework; but, thrown into a wide-open environment without a rigid framework and rules, they lack free-spirited creativity and entrepreneurship.[13] This is the result of an education system that destroys the innate desire of students to satisfy their intellectual curiosity.

The Korean educational system thus offers no flexible education covering the gifted at one end and the learning-disabled at the other. It teaches students only social obedience and conformity by taming and domesticating them under a very authoritative educational hierarchy. As a result, the scholastic ability of students has deteriorated, the cost of private education has skyrocketed, and public education has been ruined.

The extreme inefficiency in Korean education can be seen once again through its seemingly futile effort in English education. Despite the astronomical amounts of resources continuously funneled into the unprecedented national craze for English learning, Korea perennially ranks among the lowest when it comes to communication ability in English. In 2004–05, the TOEFL scores of Korean applicants ranked 93rd among 147 nations. And since a speaking section replaced the grammar component in the TOEFL exams in

September 2006, Korea's rank dropped further, to 111. In the speaking section, Korea ranked almost rock bottom, at 134.[14]

The idea of absolute equality coupled with Korean people's obsession with education has not only produced a dumbing down of lessons through equalization or standardization, but it has also created a tremendous "education bubble" or "education inflation." Today practically every position in Korea is filled by a degree holder. Korea has the most Ph.D. holders on a per capita basis in the world, yet it also shows a very high unemployment rate among college graduates. Korean people's insatiable demand for education props up all kinds of teaching institutions at all levels, including numerous specialty graduate schools, broadcasting colleges, language schools, science and math schools, online teaching institutions, cram schools, and various test prep institutes. These institutions print out diplomas and certificates in large quantity, which only exacerbates the education inflation in Korea.

Education Politicized at Government's Whim

In Korea, where almost all social issues are exclusively controlled by the central government's heavy hand without anyone questioning, it is no surprise that the same heavy hand has been taking complete charge of the nation's entire education system. The country's overpowering education ministry has been the major culprit in crippling the autonomy, competitiveness, creativity, and resource development in education.

Over the years ministers have come and gone through the revolving door of the education ministry; their tenure has been so short-lived that their ambitious reform plans invariably ended up paying only lip service to those highly expectant education consumers. During the 2003–07 period, the average tenures of ministers and vice ministers at the Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development were only eight months and one year, respectively,[15] while the corresponding numbers for previous administrations had not been much longer. One minister was forced to step down after only 57 hours in office, and another had to quit after 14 days at the post. The longest tenure during this period was less than 18 months.

The short tenure of education policymakers clearly points toward the strong political aspects of Korea's education system. Consistent execution of policy is important for education, but the Korean government has been holding on to its top-down school governance and whimsically changing education policies. During recent years the government has changed college admission policies and guidelines almost every year, thereby neglecting education contents.

Deprived of autonomy, various school sites have been performing only passively the roles dictated by the government and thus have been unable to produce leaders, thinkers, or innovators. In this vein, Korea's education decision makers should realize that, from the flush toilet to the Internet, to venture enterprises like Microsoft, to space exploration, and everything in between, not one major innovation has come out of a rigid educational environment such as the one in Korea.

Politicization of education in Korea is also shown by the fact that there have been numerous name changes and structural changes in the education ministry, and some 20 special governmental committees and task forces on education reform have been formed and dissolved since the mid-1980s.[16] Choked by the government's heavy-handedness, education suppliers and consumers respond with populist and sometimes violent resistance. Korea has one of the most militant teachers' unions in the world. While civil activists were raising their voices against government education policies, disgruntled students and parents were staging boycotts and protests. With the new administration taking the unprecedented initiative of overhauling the government structure, Korea's education ministry is going through another name change, which many people hope will accompany substantive measures to depoliticize the education system.

Hesitance and Fatigue in Education Reform

The widely recognized group-oriented mentality and the resultant favoritism in Korean society have long been deterrents in launching and implementing sincere efforts in educational reforms. A strong correlation between social ties and social advancement in Korea has bred an almost incurable nepotism, which is willfully exercised by many people to create social rents for the group members at the expense of nonmembers.

Such collective rent-seeking behavior tends to make people callous to social justice, averse to competition, and resistant to changes and reforms. In this sense, Korean society lacks true leadership, genuine political ambitions, social commitment, and driving forces to implement educational reforms.

The noncompetitive and reform-hesitant Korean education system thus suffers downgraded equalization and rampant corruption at the same time. The lack of sincere reform efforts has also contributed to closed communication channels in education, which all but blocks direct and effective communication among education stakeholders. In such an environment, even those who would exert well-intended reform efforts get fatigued quickly and easily.

Root Causes of Education Problems

Legacy of Confucianism, Feudalism, and Defeatism

This discussion already hints that the causes of Korea's education problems are rooted in its cultural heritage and traditional value system. As we recognize the failure of the education system as one of the so-called Korean diseases that share the same causes, we realize that the problems do not just lie within the administrative policies of government but instead lie in the very culture of Korean society.[17] Korean education has been suffering from misguided and misconceived missions not only at the governmental level but also at the individual, parental, familial, and societal levels.

The educational philosophies prevalent among Korean people have been heavily influenced by the teaching of Confucianism, the rigid and closed mind-set of feudalism, as well as the legacy of imperial Japan's colonial education.[18] It is these outdated philosophies that constitute the essence of Korea's educational problems because they have turned out to be highly dysfunctional in contemporary Korean society.

Throughout Korea's long history, the feudalistic authority has been practically the only source of societal power in Korea. This has entailed a chronic high demand for political and educational formalities, which, in turn, has created massive political and educational bubbles as well as social inefficiency, waste, and corruption. Korea's education has been and still is dictated by such feudalistic philosophical thoughts and almost religion-like beliefs steadfastly held by its people. Korea's cultural and philosophical heritage has been imposing a great distortion on its education system.

Shallow Credentialism and Education-at-All-Costs Mentality

One mind-set that is almost universally held by Korean people and almost universally reflected in their behavior is a shallow credentialism that accords undue prestige and political influence to academics. In Korea it is the diploma—not the individual's abilities, accomplishments, or potential—that matters. This is an extreme pretentiousness functioning as an absolute social criterion and resulting in an obsession with education. With their good-school-diploma-means-success mentality, people forgo almost anything for that diploma from a good school.

Such absolutism and rigid thinking in educational philosophy tend to promote ill-advised parental guidance for children's education, which is often characterized by excessive pampering, overprotection, and extreme pushiness. In Korea, good grades make everything A-OK. Thus, if a child enters a respected school, everyone congratulates the child's parents. If the child fails, however, the parents behave like repenting sinners.

Under this extreme paternalism, children's education is even viewed as old-age insurance for the parents, an idea that needs no justification in Korea, where such traditions have long been cherished as another Confucian virtue in the name of filial piety. This means that Korea is still holding on to feudalistic standards of familial or collective accounting of honors and responsibilities, while in all other modern societies people are recognized and respected individually, and, therefore, rights and duties as well as honors and responsibilities start and end with individuals.

The shallow credentialism and the extreme pretentiousness make Korean society overly conscious of the appearance of things and negligent about other things that are not quite visible: conscience, morality, and ethics, for example. Consequently, general awareness of such invisible virtues is dangerously and pathetically low in Korea. Korea's deep-rooted form-over-content norm has been implicitly encouraging people to misbehave, act unethically, and take part in many kinds of wrongdoing. In Korea, therefore, no one seems immune from accusations of impropriety.[19]

Hardly newsworthy in Korea are some otherwise startling confessions openly made by college professors: "In Korea professors routinely approve many poorly written dissertations." "Up to 70 percent of all advanced degrees conferred by Korean universities are unqualified." "College professors themselves are accomplices in substandard, lenient screening of theses, dissertations, and their own peers' articles."[20] This confirms our belief that the recent scandal surrounding fake degrees is only the tip of the iceberg.

Although Korean society's exceptionally high zeal for education is often touted as one of its competitive advantages, such overzealousness entails an education-at-all-cost tendency that is unhealthy and harmful for the society in general. A reverence for education obviously motivates people to pursue educational excellence.[21] But in Korea's case reverence long ago turned into idolatry. Like any other social aspects of Korea, education is plagued by stupendous consumption, brand chasing, and the so-called numero uno syndrome.

Favoritism and Inbreeding

It has been well documented that Korean society is dysfunctionally influenced by factionalism, groupism, and regionalism.[22] A persistent nepotism based on three major social ties—blood, hometown, and school—has produced

strong public mistrust in society and has made people insensitive to social justice.[23]

With this backdrop, it would be no surprise at all if Korea were found to have the most school alumni associations in the world and they were the most actively functioning associations. As school favoritism based on these alumni networks runs wild, Korean society in general widely engages in mutual forbearance, serious educational prejudices, stereotypes, and discrimination.

Although public outcry against it is often heard, school-based nepotism is continuously practiced in every sector of Korean society—politics, business, judicial system, journalism, academia, and even sports and entertainment. When a new president takes office, people expect and take for granted that many of the president's high school and college classmates will be appointed as ministers and other high-ranking government officers. Widespread social dependence on such personal relationships makes it difficult to establish transparency in Korea.[24]

Korea has never shaken off the mutual back-scratching of a feudal society, where the establishment has tight social connections forged by blood, school, or regional ties. As people resort to such connection-based exclusivism and favoritism in order to get ahead of others, it almost surely results in corruption, unfairness, and immorality that, in turn, incur often immeasurably high economic costs.

Korea is also known for its widespread academic inbreeding in higher education, which over the years has created a noncompetitive environment for universities and professors. As competition is easily stymied, the efficiency and productivity of Korea's higher education suffers. Not surprisingly, Korea's education competitiveness in the global arena is pitifully low, and no Korean universities consistently rank as the world's top universities. In 2006 the commonly cited IMD rankings for Korea's competitiveness in colleges and overall education were 54th and the 44th, respectively, out of the 60 nations surveyed.[25]

When people openly practice such education-based favoritism and discrimination, the society finds a widening gap between the educated and the undereducated. In Korea the vicious circle of "the rich get richer and the poor get poorer" also applies in education. A recent Korean government report confirmed this when it showed that the gap between the top and the bottom income groups' expenditures on education has been widening as the households among the country's top 20 percent by income spend 5.7 times more on education than those in the bottom 20 percent income group.[26]

College graduates are not only favored in employment opportunities, they are also regarded as having distinct and often undue advantages in terms of marriage, promotion, and social status and reputation. Thus, there is practically no meaningful interaction or communication between the educated and the undereducated in Korea. Today, Korea exhibits a serious social bifurcation based on education, which deters social harmony and balanced development.

Absolute and Blind Education Equality Based on Collectivism

In contrast with the traditional Western culture, which was brought up on a strong individualism that recognizes rights and responsibilities on an individual basis,[27] Korea's academic "favoritis" has been a natural product of Korea's unmistakable collectivism. Korea's traditional ethical standards, known as *Sam-Gang-Oh-Ryoon,* prescribe ethical values in some narrowly defined close relationships, namely, a person's relationships with spouse, parents, children, and friends. This ethical perspective has produced a system where one recognizes other people differently and with discrimination, depending on whether that person holds a relationship with the individual and how close that relationship is.

Korean society has known only the closed-circuit ethics that apply to those people connected through blood, friendship, hometown, and schooling, but no broad-based ethical norms exist that recognize individuals equally regardless of their familial or social ties. As Korean ethics are silent about how one should recognize, treat, and respect John Doe or Jane Doe on the street, this apparent ethical lapse has planted an ill-advised notion in the minds of Korean people that those with whom they have no relationship are nobodies against whom they can discriminate and whom they can disregard, snub, ignore, or renege on.

When such closed-circuit collectivism prevails, seemingly the only way to achieve an overall social fairness is to ensure equal outcomes and results for every socio-politico-economic function. Thus, while it is preoccupied with fairness in outcome distribution, the society may become negligent in creating and producing more goods and services as well as promoting and increasing greater utility and welfare in the first place.

While today's knowledge-based global political economy finds its ground rules in accepting differentiated results based on the idea of a "fair start" and "fair competition," Korean society has often been governed by the rule of unconditional equality in outcome. As such, it tends to engage in a blind pursuit of absolute equality in education, too.

When the idea of absolute equality is applied to education, people do not willingly accept skipping or repeating a grade, and they willfully deny the value of top-rated schools.

Korea's noncompetitive, downgraded, equalized education system, which concerns itself with only the formalities and not the contents, is in fact a reflection of a socialistic or even communistic view on education. Excessive collectivism and uniform mentality tend to not only stifle the innovative, entrepreneurial, and enterprising spirit, but also to suppress individuals' educational freedom and discretion. Like every other thing in Korea, education lacks diversity, creativity, originality, true competition, and autonomy.

In sum, the root causes of Korea's educational problems are found in its major cultural and philosophical factors such as formality-based pretentiousness, collectivism, and narrow ethical boundaries, public mistrust and feudalistic civility, and Confucian absolutism and conformism. ***Figure 1*** depicts their interlinkage and resultant educational dysfunctions.

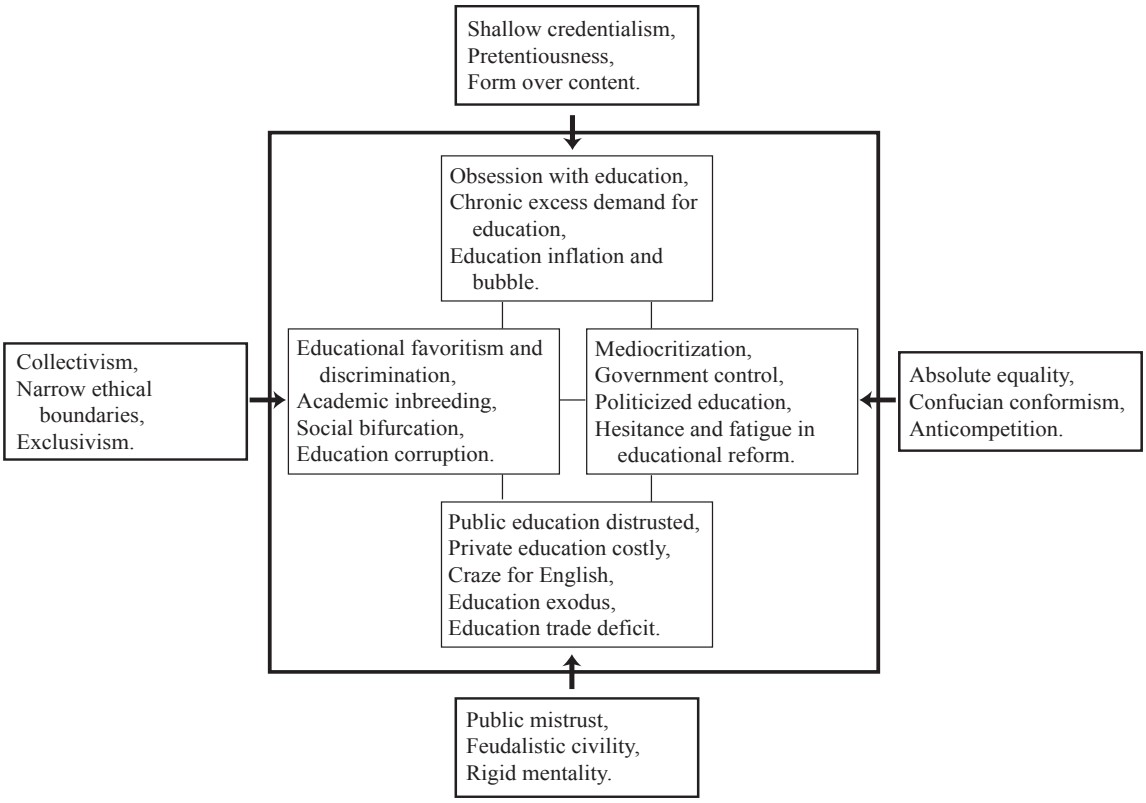
What Can Be Done to Undo Korea's Mis-Education?

Education Reform through Education

Korea's dysfunctional educational system is a social disease and a mental disease. Since the failure of education is essentially a reflection of the failure of the social fabric, society in general and the people themselves must reform before education can be reformed.[28] Thus, the issue of Korea's education reform is an issue of social and human reform—a reform that should be driven by a fundamental change in people's mentality and civility. This also means that Korea will never achieve a true educational reform unless and until it breaks its tradition and obsession with education at all costs.

That the root causes of Korea's education problems are found in its cultural and philosophical foundations forewarns that these problems cannot be resolved easily or quickly. Culture and philosophy are directly related to the society's historical heritage and traditional value system, and a long period of

Figure 1: **Korea's Cultural Heritage and Dysfunctional Education System**



Source: Author's concept.

time is needed not only to form and accumulate but also to change, evolve, and develop. Therefore, first and foremost, Korean society must be patient and ready to endure a long process of educating and enlightening its people.

Korean society should launch an all-out effort to correct the outdated educational philosophy that is universally embraced and practiced by all its members; it must do this through educating, re-educating, preaching to, and enlightening the people. It must teach them that their feudalistic education absolutism is harmful and dysfunctional in today's globalized, knowledge-based, competitive environment. Korea must realize that its excess collectivism, favoritism, and uniformity have yielded a blind pursuit of education equality as well as low morality in education philosophy. Korea, which in its long history has never experienced an intellectual tradition of any kind of liberalism, must enlighten itself to be more willing and open to changes and reforms.

Depoliticizing Education and Achieving Relative Equality

Korean society is called to realize and apply the principle of relative equality in education. Korea's educational systems, institutions, policies, and even philosophies are all dictated by the idea of absolute or uniform equality, which mainly concerns the equal distribution of final outcomes. Every parent believes his or her child is entitled to receive a college degree regardless of the child's capabilities or desires; and the government also addresses educational issues from this uniform perspective.

Absolute equality, however, is not a desirable motive for social progress. Throughout history it has been convincingly proved that a society can develop most efficiently when it accepts differential outcomes induced by free competition, and this is the relative equality that the Korean educational system should heed and pursue earnestly. Korean people should willingly accept that, after all children are provided with a fair start and a fair opportunity, the rest of the education process should be determined through free competition based on individuals' characteristics and aptitudes, skills and talents, and wills and desires.

Korea must ensure that educational policies are designed and implemented in such a manner that the differentiated outcomes of competitive educational experiences are not only accepted voluntarily but also assessed and rewarded accordingly. In such a discriminating educational environment, both the Nobel prospects and the learning disabled will be given fair and commensurate opportunities so that they all can be educated to fulfill their potential to the fullest. Korea needs to realize that top schools are a naturally and spontaneously arising phenomenon in a competitive society.

Thus, Korean education should be severed from politics. Korea should decentralize and simplify its education governance. Education has been by far the most closely controlled industry in Korea. For example, private colleges account for more than 70 percent of all higher education institutions in Korea, yet they are not quite private because they have been as closely regulated as national or provincial colleges.

Korean education needs extensive deregulation. Education in general and public secondary education in particular should be given far greater flexibility. While the appointment of principals, teachers, college presidents, and faculty should be widely delegated to local education boards or schools themselves,[29] the country should consider privatizing standardized college admission tests. The Korean government should seriously consider delegating or privatizing many other educational matters, ranging from school accreditation to degree conferrals; sanctioning textbooks; and to public exams such as medical exams, bar exams, and accounting exams.

Recent public outcries against the government's excessive intervention and the public's call to the government to loosen its grip on education have been on the rise.[30] In response, Korea's newly inaugurated president, Lee Myung-bak, pronounced that education reform would be a key task of his administration.

The new administration has started by restructuring and renaming the education ministry. The notorious Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development has been substantially downsized and merged into a new ministry called the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology, which has also absorbed the affairs of the former Ministry of Science and Technology. While the administration has vowed to allow colleges significant autonomy, whether it will manifest its genuine interest, end government control, and free Korea's education once and for all remains to be seen.

More important to note in the context of the current discussion is that almost all college-educated Korean parents believe their children should go to college even though they also believe that higher education is not meant for all members of society. Korean people, particularly such college-educated parents, should realize that all human beings are created equal but not all are created equal in learning ability. They must realize that not everyone can be a rocket scientist, a brain surgeon, or a Ph.D.

Korean society should teach its members that education cannot and should not be dispensed absolutely equally for all. Indeed, there is a huge blind spot or dead zone in Korea for undereducated people. Thus, Korea should make a concerted effort to provide an adequate educational safety net through the expansion of vocational training and welfare systems. Ultimately Korean society and the people themselves should voluntarily and with discretion determine who among them should go on to college and who should not.

Education Reforms and Human Reforms

The rote learning and cramming of Korea's educational system should probably be credited with transforming a poor, mostly agrarian nation into an economic powerhouse in the space of just three decades. But it can and should not continue in today's environment. Korea is at a crossroads. Chung Un-chan, an economics professor and the former president of the Seoul National University is quoted as saying, "The key to resolving our economic problems lies in a radical reform of our education."[31]
There is no question that Korea must radically reform its education system in order to continue developing. Alvin Toffler has said that Korea's education system is unsuitable for today's increasingly knowledge-based society.[32] Korea's current educational system is unfit not just because of societal changes but also because of its extreme cultural and philosophical stance toward education.

Every culture has unique strengths and weaknesses. Hence, a social failure, be it an economic or educational one, cannot be attributed solely to culture. Instead it is generally attributable to the inability of the society, particularly its leaders, to build on the strengths found in the culture. It is largely up to enlightened leaders to devise appropriate policies that make the culture's strengths productive and weaknesses irrelevant. Ultimately, the determining factor is not the culture itself, but people's will to overcome cultural deficiencies and weaknesses.

Today Korean society demands educational overachievement. Yet, Korea's public education system is in disarray. Thus, policymakers are called on to work out revolutionary measures to restore public education. Korean people should realize, however, that the issue of Korea's education reform is an issue of social and human reform—a reform that should be driven by a fundamental change in people's mentality and civility. Korea may never achieve true educational reform unless it breaks away from its feudal traditions. Today, one's life touches, and is touched by, a great many people—far more than in the old days of Korea's family-based farming society. More than ever, people interact—physically and electronically—with unknown publics. People, capital, information, and technology now travel more freely and rapidly.

This means that today societies need to promote sound social rules and ethical guidelines that govern all of their constituencies in order to balance the divergent interests, maintain civil order and social harmony, and promote economic integrity. Korea is in a transitional zone where the system based on traditional personal ties should be replaced by more transparent social rules.[33] As modern societies are continuously transformed by globalization, democratization, market liberalization, and advancement in information and communication technology, the impacts and implications of education grow bigger and encompass new meanings.

Korea needs a flexible, versatile, and proactive education system. As the kind of human capital needed for economic development changes over time, it is essential for the education system to be able to meet this shifting demand. However, Korean people should be ever reminded that their educational problems can only be resolved by education and through education.

It is particularly important for Korea to ensure that efforts be funneled to the growth of civil society by eradicating unhealthy collectivism, favoritism, pretentiousness, uniformity, and rigidity from people's minds. To that end Korea should launch a process of serious soul searching and self-reform. Reform would demand complete reforms and paradigmatic shifts in Korea's educational and social discipline. It will take a great deal of moral courage from the nation's entire populace—political leaders, government bureaucrats, social elites, professionals, and average citizens.

S. J. Chang is a Professor and Associate Dean in the College of Business, Illinois State University, Normal, Illinois.

Endnotes

1. P. Altbach, "Asia's Academic Aspirations: Some Problems," *International Higher Education* (2000); S. J. Chang, "Sociopolitical Analysis of Korean Economic Crisis of 1997," *Review of International Finance: Global Risk, Emerging Markets, and International Investment* (2000): 457–77; M. Y. Han et al., "Establish a National Commission for Education Reform: An Open Letter to the Korean Society (23 November 2003); Lee Chong-jae, "Educational Decentralization and Institutional Leadership in Korea" (presentation at the Third International Forum on Education Reform, Bangkok, 2003), www.worldedreform.com/intercon3/third/p_sbm_korean%20case.pdf; J. H. Shim, "Education Black Hole in Korea," *Korea Herald,* 12 February 2003; "English Camps Reflect S. Korean Ambitions," *Washington Post,* 18 November 2004, sec. A; M. Y. Han, "Torment and Struggle (editorial)," *Information Exchange for Korean-American Scholars,* issue 07-25, no. 481 (22 June 2007); "Korea's New School of Thought," *Business Week* (2 July 2007); "The Education Exodus Must Stop (editorial)," *Chosun Ilbo,* 10 October 2007; "Fake School Records Shame Korean Figures," *International Herald Tribune,* 28 August 2007; "In South Korea, It Feels Like a Scandal a Day," *Los Angeles Times,* 30 November 2007.

2. "Fake School Records Shame Korean Figures"; "Too Much Emphasis on Academic Degrees," *Chosun Ilbo,* 10 August 2007.

3. Florence Lowe-Lee, "Brain Drain: Korea Exports Human Capital," *Korea Insight* (Korea Economic Institute) 9-7 (July 2007).

4. Han, "Torment and Struggle."

5. "Fake School Records Shame Korean Figures."

6. "Korea's New School of Thought."

7. "Still Possible to Improve Service Trade Deficit," *HRI Economic Report* (Hyundai Research Institute), no. 321 (16 April 2007).

8. "Analysis on Service Sector Issues in the Proposed Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement," KIET Korea-U.S. FTA Analysis Report Series (Seoul: Korea Institute for Industrial Economics and Trade [KIET], August 2005); and C. S. Chang, H. J. Lim, and S. W. Mo, "Cost Projection of Study Abroad for Korea's Trade Balance Management," *Journal of the Korea Industrial Economics Association* 19, no. 6 (2006).

9. "Driven to Speak English Better, Children Fly Alone," *Joongang Ilbo,* 30 July 2007.

10. "The Education Exodus Must Stop."

11. "English Is the Golden Tongue for S. Koreans," *Washington Post,* 2 July 2007.

12. "Korea's Basic Science Education Needs Improvement," *Dong-A Ilbo,* 9 July 2007.

13. Steve Kang, "Koreans Lag behind in Stem Entrepreneurship," *National Dialogue on Entrepreneurship News* (18–24 June 2007).

14. "Driven to Speak English Better, Children Fly Alone."

15. "Average Tenure of Education Ministry Officials Is Less Than a Year," *Dong-A Ilbo,* 2 October 2007.

16. Kim Ki-seok, "Can Korea Build a World-Class University? On the Practicality of Korea's Ambitious Aspirations" (speech at First International Forum on Education Reform, 2001), www.worldedreform.com/intercon/kedre10.htm.

17. Han et al., "Establish a National Commission for Educational Reform."

18. Lee Jeong-kyu. "Japanese Higher Education Policy in Korea during the Colonial Period (1910–1945)," *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 10-14 (7 March 2002).

19. "In South Korea It Feels Like a Scandal a Day."

20. "Professors 'Routinely Pass Substandard Work,'" *Chosun Ilbo,* 14 August 2007.

21. Nicholas D. Kristof, "The Model Students," *New York Times,* 14 May 2007.

22. Korean Psychological Association, *Regionalism from Psychological Perspectives* (Seoul: Sungwonsa, 1988); Korean Sociological Association, *Korea's Regionalism and Regional Prejudices* (Seoul: Sungwonsa, 1990); Chang, "Sociopolitical Analysis of Korean Economic Crisis of 1997."

23. Kim In-chul, "Korea's Growth Potential and Crisis Management in a Changing International Environment," in *Joint U.S.-Korea Academic Studies: Korea and the Asian Economic Crisis: One Year Later* 9 (1999): 63–82.

24. Yee Jaeyeol, "Is Korea an Advanced Country?" *Korea Herald,* 21 November 2007.

25. Korea Development Institute, "Policy Directions and Agenda for an Advanced Korea," *KDI Report* (21 November 2007).

26. "Private Education Costs Reach New High in Q3," *Korea Herald,* 21 November 2007.

27. Michael Novak, *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* (Lanham, Md.: Madison Books, 1991).

28. Han et al., "Establish a National Commission for Education Reform."

29. Ibid.; Korea Development Institute, "Policy Directions and Agenda for an Advanced Korea"; and Woo Cheon-shik, "Issues and Development Prospects for Korean Education in the Globalization Era" (presentation at economics seminar at Sogang University, Seoul, May 2006).

30. "Korea's New School of Thought"; Korea Development Institute, "Policy Directions and Agenda for an Advanced Korea"; "A Welcome Slap in the Face for the Education Ministry," *Chosun Ilbo,* 3 January 2008.

31. "Korea's New School of Thought."

32. "Education Reform Key to Korea's Future, *Korea Herald,* 13 September 2007.

33. Yee, "Is Korea an Advanced Country?"