

Success and Education in South Korea

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Over the past few years, we have come to expect high educational achievement from the countries of East Asia. The level of educational achievement in Japan has become widely known,¹ and South Korean students have recently achieved the highest mean scores in science and math in the International Assessment of Educational Progress (IAEP) administered by the Educational Testing Service to 13-year-olds in 19 countries, with Taiwanese students having achieved second highest.² This international success is well known in South Korea, having been widely reported in the media, and has become a source of national pride.

It is not immediately apparent why children in South Korea and Taiwan should be so successful in science and math. Neither subject is a traditional strength of East Asian intelligentsias, and educated Koreans often respond to questions about South Korean students' mastery of math by noting that none of the world's famous mathematicians have been East Asian. Lip service has been given to scientific and technical education since the founding of the Republic of Korea in 1948, but the actual emphasis in educational planning up until the 1970s was citizenship education—inculcating loyalty, patriotism, self-reliance, and anticommunism. Even the ideology of modernization introduced in the early 1960s focused on spirit rather than technology. In-su Son has characterized the educational policy of Hui-sök Mun, minister of education and culture during the Democratic Party Government of 1960–61, thusly: "If modernization is realizing humanity by making daily life more rational, then the spiritual aspect of modernization is even more important than the material, and the spiritual must precede [the material], if only in stages . . . human propensities and the structure of consciousness must be reconstructed as the driving force of social reform."³ Serious and sustained special attention to scientific and technical education came only in 1973

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¹ Harold W. Stevenson and Shin-Ying Lee, in collaboration with Chuansheng Chen et al., *Contexts of Achievement: A Study of American, Chinese, and Japanese Children*, Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development, Serial no. 221 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

² Japan did not take part in the IAEP tests. Chinese (PRC) students scored higher than Koreans on both tests, but, because the tested population was a limited sample of students, the Chinese were not placed in the overall rankings.

³ In-su Son, *Han'guk kyoyuk sa* (A history of Korean education), 2 vols. (Seoul: Munüm Sa, 1987), p. 728.

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with the establishment of vocational schools associated with the “movement to scientificize the whole people” (*chǒn kungmin ūi kwahakhwa undong*) that was developed in conjunction with the government’s heavy and chemical industrialization plan begun in the same year.

The state in South Korea does not devote an extraordinary amount of money to education—some 4.5 percent of the gross national product, compared with 7.5 percent for the United States. Rapid expansion of the educational system and the lack of secondary education in the past have yielded a teacher force with limited higher education (it was only in 1985 that all teachers’ colleges became 4-year institutions) compared with that of teacher forces in developed countries. Moreover, middle-school class size in South Korea, as in Taiwan, averages 40 to 50—almost twice the average class size in most developed countries. These conditions are typical of several East Asian countries that score well on international tests in science and math.⁴

Pundits trying to account for East Asian educational success, therefore, sometimes advance the notion that the economic and educational success of East Asian countries is due not so much to institutions and resources as to the efficacy of East Asian Confucian culture.⁵ According to this notion East Asian countries have succeeded economically and educationally because Confucianism has provided these countries with high levels of social capital in the form of strong family structure and norms of frugality, hard work, and a high valuation of education.

While it is certainly true that strong family structures and a high valuation of education are important ingredients of recent educational successes in East Asia, a note of caution is in order before we rush to judgment. Confucian economic and family values have been a constant in East Asia for the past thousand years, yet East Asia has not always been particularly economically—or educationally—successful in comparison with other parts of the world. It was only a generation ago that Confucianism—which, in any case, has always been a very different thing in Japan than it was in China or Korea—was commonly cited as the reason not for East Asian economic success but for China’s failure to modernize.⁶ Confucianism, it was said, fosters a status orientation that discourages the

⁴ Most of the information in this paragraph comes from the summary table opposite p. 16 in both *Learning Mathematics: The International Assessment of Educational Progress* (Princeton, N.J.: Educational Testing Service, 1992) and *Learning Science: The International Assessment of Educational Progress* (Princeton, N.J.: Educational Testing Service, 1992).

⁵ Herman Kahn, *World Economic Development, 1979 and Beyond* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1979); Roderick MacFarquhar, “The Post-Confucian Challenge,” *Economist* 274, no. 7119 (February 9, 1980): 67–72; Hung-chao Tai, “The Oriental Alternative: An Hypothesis on Culture and Economy,” in *Confucianism and Economic Development: An Oriental Alternative?* ed. Hung-chao Tai (Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute for Values in Public Policy, 1989), pp. 6–37.

⁶ Talcott Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action* (New York: Free Press, 1968), pp. 549 ff.

practical activity necessary for entrepreneurship and investment. Even educational Confucian values used to be seen as a hindrance to modernization, since Confucian humanism focuses on belles lettres and history as sources of moral instruction and promotes contempt for practical learning in mathematics and science.⁷

During Korea's Chosŏn period (1392–1910), when Neo-Confucian thought was established orthodoxy, systematic education, though highly valued, was mostly limited to a self-conscious, hereditary ruling class, known as the *yangban*, that numbered at most some 15 percent of the population.⁸ Learning was seen as unnecessary for the masses, and even such education as existed for the elite was almost entirely history, philosophy, and poetry written in Chinese.⁹ Education in practical matters—astronomy, medicine, foreign languages—was left to a much smaller group of distinctly lower-status specialized lineages located in the capital, which collectively were known as *chungin*.¹⁰ Commoners were almost totally excluded from official government service, and the level of advancement available to even the brightest *chungin* was strictly limited. Modern science and mathematics, of course, were unknown except to an extent among a small group of literati in contact with the Jesuits in Beijing who were introducing modern astronomy and mathematics as part of their mission to the Chinese.

Twenty-five years ago when Confucianism was a more living presence than it is today in South Korea, a long-time admissions officer for a U.S. university international program confided to me that Koreans at that time were generally considered “dumb” among international students on that campus.¹¹ Some of the reasons for this past negative assessment of the educational level of Koreans are obvious. A country as poor as South Korea was 25 years ago—with annual per capita income around \$200—has few resources to train and support teachers and schools. Families often had to withdraw children from school so they could work to help make ends meet. Having only begun to build a modern, independent educational system since liberation from Japan in 1945, Koreans were

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 548.

⁸ Susan Shin, “The Social Structure of Kŭmhwa County in the Seventeenth Century,” in *Occasional Papers on Korea, 1* (Seattle: University of Washington, 1972), pp. 9–35; James Palais, *Politics and Policy in Traditional Korea* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975), pp. 6–9, 319, n. 23.

⁹ Poetry and fiction in vernacular Korean is extant from the fifteenth century (and records of vernacular works that have been lost go back another thousand years), but these works, being written in the “vulgar tongue” (*ŏnmun*), were considered divertissements not comparable to the serious business of Chinese-language history, philosophy, and poetry that was tested in the state exams. They did not become part of a formal curriculum until after World War II.

¹⁰ Ki-baik Lee, *A New History of Korea*, trans. Edward Wagner with Edward Schultz (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), pp. 181–82, 250 ff.

¹¹ At the time the remark startled me, since missionary literature going back to the late nineteenth century uniformly characterizes Koreans as highly intelligent.

short on knowledge and experience in running modern school systems. The 3 years of death, destruction, and large-scale refugee movements that accompanied the Korean War raging up and down the Korean Peninsula in the early 1950s interrupted educational careers and reversed much of the educational progress that had been made since 1945. As a consequence educational facilities were seriously inadequate in South Korea even into the 1970s.

Moreover, because Korea, like the other countries in East Asia, had, by the nineteenth century, fallen behind the rest of the world in level of development, providing modern education has not been simply a question of disseminating knowledge that already exists within the country. It has involved importing advanced knowledge from more developed countries—in South Korea's case, primarily from the United States and Japan—and adapting it to local conditions. It is hard to remember, given South Korea's present level of development, that, in 1948, when the Republic of Korea was formed in southern Korea and a modern education system began to be built there, the very vocabulary to talk about modern science and mathematics hardly existed in the Korean language and had to be invented before textbooks could even be written.

The educational success of present-day South Korea—and by extension Japan and Taiwan, too—has been brought about by an exceedingly complex interplay of values, institutions, economic resources, and accumulation of knowledge, and this interaction has taken place in a specific historical context of international economic and military relations and of nation building. Humanistic Confucian values derived from the status-centered agrarian society of Korea's past play their part, but in the context of a modern, competitive trading nation with large engineering firms and heavy industrial enterprises.

In this article young South Koreans' educational success will be seen less as a matter of curriculum, class size, and educational technique than as a consequence of how education is embedded in the fabric of Korean society. We begin from the point of view of the students, by understanding the organizational structures they confront, the pressures to which they are subject, and the values and goals that seem most important in motivating them to succeed. To an extent these structures, pressures, and values can be considered "social capital" in Coleman's sense of a norm or institution "facilitating the achievement of goals that could not be achieved in its absence or could be achieved only at a higher cost."¹² Yet, as Bourdieu has noted for Europe,¹³ social structures, pressures, values, and goals are

¹² James S. Coleman, *Foundations of Social Theory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 304.

¹³ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984).

meaningless without taking into account historically conditioned notions of the relationship of knowledge to status, as well as definitions of the self in relationship to others.

The educational system of present-day South Korea does not simply reflect a practical need to train an efficient work force, since it also must respond to students' and parents' demands to provide upward mobility through education. But it cannot be seen simply as the means by which autonomous individuals seek upward mobility through the acquisition of cultural capital either, since Koreans, like most East Asians, tend to define the "self" in relationship to the groups—family, lineage, and nation—to which they belong.¹⁴ South Korea's educational institutions have, in fact, been created as an integral part of a national project to strengthen and develop the country for national survival. Although this project has been under way at the state level only since liberation from Japan in 1945, the basic assumptions about the nature of the world, Korea's place in it, and the role of education in creating modern citizens capable of taking charge of Korea's destiny had already been put in place by the cultural nationalists of the 1920s.¹⁵ These assumptions, though rarely articulated by students themselves, provide the context within which their behavior becomes meaningful, and they legitimate educational ambitions in the context of the nation as a whole.

The Development of Modern Education in Korea

By the late nineteenth century, Korea, which had been closed to outside contacts for 400 years until 1873, had begun the long and painful process of confronting the challenge of Western industrial civilization. A number of schools with modern curricula had been set up by missionaries, and the foundations for a modern school system had been established by the government.¹⁶ These early attempts to create a modern educational system, however, were truncated when Japan took over Korea first as a protectorate in 1905 and then as a colony in 1910. As Japan is both adjacent to and culturally similar to Korea, Japanese penetration was particularly intense.¹⁷ The Japanese colonial administration was autocratic, systematic, thorough, and used large numbers of ethnic Japanese brought from the metropole to occupy key niches in the civil service,

¹⁴ Clark W. Sorensen, *Over the Mountains Are Mountains: Korean Peasant Households and Their Adaptations to Rapid Industrialization* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988), pp. 130–31.

¹⁵ Michael E. Robinson, *Cultural Nationalism in Colonial Korea, 1920–25* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988).

¹⁶ E. Patricia Tsurumi, "Colonial Education in Korea and Taiwan," in *The Japanese Colonial Empire, 1895–1945*, ed. Ramon Myers and Mark Peattie (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 295.

¹⁷ Bruce Cumings, "The Legacy of Japanese Colonialism in Korea," in Myers and Peattie, eds., *The Japanese Colonial Empire*, pp. 485–86.

educational system, business, and industry. By 1942, the colonial bureaucracy in Korea, which was entirely supported by tax revenue generated in the colony, employed more than 100,000 ethnic Japanese but fewer than 50,000 ethnic Koreans (almost entirely in low-level clerical positions) to rule a country of some 24 million.¹⁸

The Japanese record of providing modern education at the elementary level in their colonies is good when compared with that of other colonial powers, but Japanese colonial education was designed to assimilate Koreans and to keep them in their place—subordinate in all ways to ethnic Japanese. Separate systems were maintained for ethnic Koreans and ethnic Japanese in Korea, with secondary education highly restricted for Koreans. The medium of instruction in all schools—even those for Koreans—was Japanese, and a large proportion of teachers in schools for Koreans, particularly secondary schools, were ethnic Japanese.

After the failure of the independence movement of March 1, 1919, the cultural nationalists, who were influenced by social Darwinism, became convinced that only through widespread acquisition of modern education could Koreans become qualified to regain their independence.¹⁹ Japanese control and manipulation of the school system, thus, did not prevent Koreans from seeking such education as was available. By 1942 almost 40 percent of ethnic Korean children were attending elementary school. Fewer than 5 percent of ethnic Korean elementary school graduates, however, went on to middle school.²⁰ Even Keijō Imperial University—set up in Seoul in 1924 in response to Korean demands for a university to provide tertiary education on the Korean Peninsula—enrolled a majority of ethnic Japanese. After elementary school, those few ethnic Koreans who continued their education did so in 5-year higher ordinary schools (with 1 year added for teacher training) or in shorter courses in vocational or technical schools rather than in the middle schools set up for Japanese. After their elementary grades Korean boys and girls went to separate schools, with girls' schools (regardless of whether they were vocational) providing 1 year less education than boys' schools at the same level.

When Korea became independent again in 1945, then, the Japanese departure left a huge, deliberately created gap in trained manpower.

¹⁸ Won-mo Dong, "Assimilation and Social Mobilization in Korea," in *Korea under Japanese Colonial Rule*, ed. Andrew Nahm (Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University, Center for Korean Studies, 1973), p. 164.

¹⁹ Korea's cultural nationalists felt Koreans had to prove themselves "qualified" for independence, because the Great Powers (particularly Great Britain and the United States) had supported the original Japanese takeover of Korea in 1905 on the basis of Korea's "inability" to institute modernizing reforms. During the colonial period the Japanese also promoted historical discourse that justified Japanese control of Korea because of Korea's "stagnation." Some Japanese historians even went so far as to deny that Korea ever had the qualities of true independence (despite the fact that Koreans had a united, independent state from 668 to 1905!).

²⁰ Dong, p. 157.

Illiteracy was still widespread in Korea—the overall illiteracy rate in 1945 was 78 percent—but even more critical was the shortage of teachers and others with a modicum of secondary education. Although a fair number of people had become acquainted with modern science and mathematics through the colonial education system, few could talk about these subjects in any language but Japanese. And the fragmented secondary education system created by the Japanese for transparently discriminatory purposes left a distrust among the Korean population of multitiered school systems with separate vocational and academic schools that track children from an early age into different social levels.

The Basic Education Law that (with modifications) is still in effect today was passed in 1949.²¹ It provided for the creation of a unified system configured as 6 years of compulsory free education beginning at age 7, 3 years of tuitioned noncompulsory middle school, 3 years of tuitioned noncompulsory high school, and 4 years of tuitioned college. Citizens' Schools (*kongmin hakkyo*) for adults who had been unable to receive education and mass-literacy campaigns were initiated. Widespread illiteracy was eliminated by the 1960s.²² The transition from the multitiered secondary education system of the colonial period to a unified 3-year middle school and 3-year high school system was completed by 1951.²³ Students in secondary education doubled between 1945 and 1947. Elementary enrollment ratios passed 90 percent in 1964, middle school enrollment ratios passed 90 percent in 1979, and high school enrollment ratios recently passed 90 percent.²⁴

Naturally an educational system that expanded as rapidly as that of South Korea has not been without problems. Particularly in the 1950s and 1960s, before rapid economic growth allowed for greater levels of government financial support, providing facilities and teachers for the rapidly expanding population was not easy. Semicompulsory parent-teacher associations (*sach'inhoe*), under the control of the school principals, charged miscellaneous fees to supplement meager state support, compromising the principle of free state-supported education. Quality suffered, as classes frequently exceeded 100 pupils in size, and schools sometimes operated two and three shifts a day in crowded urban areas. From 1953 on the government implemented comprehensive entrance exams for middle and high school to make sure that those who received the limited

²¹ Remarks about Korea before 1945 apply to the whole peninsula, but, after 1945, they refer only to the southern half.

²² By 1960 the illiteracy rate for males had been reduced to 15.8 percent. Female illiteracy rates had been reduced to below 15 percent by 1966. Noel McGinn, *Education and Development in Korea* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 48.

²³ Son (n. 3 above), p. 710.

²⁴ *Han'guk t'onggye yon'gam* (Korea statistical yearbook) (Seoul: Economic Planning Bureau, various years).

secondary education available were the most qualified. In an effort to encourage practical education for work rather than the traditional belles lettristic education for government service encouraged by Confucian attitudes, the government in 1963 compromised its earlier commitment to a unitary education system and reintroduced vocational high schools. Although the middle school entrance examination was abolished after 1969 as part of a government plan to make education at that level universal, entrance exams remain for high school and college to this day.

The Korean educational system has become a "testocracy," with the influence of the high school and college entrance exams rippling throughout the system.²⁵ Because they limit the type and quantity of education children can receive—affecting their future employment and marriage prospects—and because neither parents nor children like the "examination hell" (*sihōm chiok*), entrance exams are controversial in Korea. In response to political pressure, the Ministry of Culture and Education tinkers with some aspect of the secondary and college school entrance system almost every year, but such alternatives to limiting enrollments through exams as charging tuition high enough to exclude segments of the population or letting those with connections get into the best schools are unacceptable to the Korean public. Entrance exams of one sort or another, thus, are regarded by most Koreans as a necessary evil, the most impartial method of regulating access to education above middle school.

During periods of authoritarian central government—particularly the 1963–79 period—centralized state exams have been the method of choice, not only because they establish orderly standards throughout the country but also because they provide a means by which the state can control the content of education and the number of passes at each level. Exams test only school-based learning, however, and national exams make success more difficult for rural children and for others coming from environments with less access to good teachers and academic stimulation. Thus, during periods of democratization (1960–61, and after 1987) more decentralized examinations managed by individual schools have sometimes been used, particularly at the university level. In each school attendance area (*hakkun*),²⁶ students are assigned to middle schools on the basis of a lottery system that is supposed to provide for a relatively even ability mix in each school. High schools are of two types—academic (*immun kogyo*) and vocational (*sirōp kogyo*). Admissions decisions are first made for vocational high schools (industrial high schools and agricultural high

²⁵ Son (n. 3 above), p. 740.

²⁶ School districts are coterminous with the regular units of local administration—cities and counties. *Hakkun* are areas within school districts in which middle and high schools are matched for entrance purposes. Normally a number of middle schools are grouped with a number of high schools that are in the same geographic area.

schools) on the basis of school marks (*sōngjōk*) and an admission exam. Only then do the academic high schools that provide superior preparation for college entrance make their entrance decisions based on students' degree of success on the high school entrance exam, place of residence, and the lottery.

Since the government provides free education to everyone at the elementary level, only about 1 percent of elementary school students attend private schools. As the competition gets tougher, however, private schools become more important, so that almost 30 percent of middle school students, 47 percent of vocational high school students, 53 percent of academic high school students, and 80 percent of college students attend private institutions.²⁷ Private colleges are much more expensive than state schools, and several are among the top institutions in the nation. However, the tuition for private middle and high schools, which is set by the state, is only slightly more than for public institutions. All elementary and secondary schools, whether public or private, follow the same national curriculum and use the same textbooks. Teachers for private as well as public schools can be hired only with the permission of the superintendent of education. The school district-administered admission system, moreover, applies to both public and private schools. Because private schools are limited in their tuition-charging ability, and because they get less state support than public schools, they generally have larger classes and are less well equipped. They thus function as second-best overflow institutions for those students unable to be accommodated in the public schools rather than as elite institutions for the well heeled.

Vocational high schools, whether public or private, are generally considered less desirable than academic high schools by the public. During the 1960s and 1970s, the government, intent on education for industrialization, had hopes of educating 70 percent of students in these schools to provide technically trained factory workers and to discourage the diploma disease.²⁸ Korean parents and students have been wary of a two-tiered school system since the Japanese period, however, and generally see vocational schools as third best (after private academic high schools), even though the employability of vocational high school graduates in Seoul and Pusan has been better than it has been for academic high school graduates.²⁹ Vocational high schools today enroll only about 35 percent

²⁷ *Han'guk kyoyuk yōn'gam* (Korea education yearbook) (Seoul: Han'guk Kyoyuk Sinmun Sa, 1991), p. 87.

²⁸ McGinn notes that, as early as 1953, South Korea was producing more college graduates than the economy could absorb. The Chung Hee Park administration of the 1960s and 1970s was concerned about the revolutionary potential of idle college graduates. As the Korean economy has grown more sophisticated since the 1980s, this has become less of a concern, though overproduction of college graduates is still a problem. See McGinn, pp. 35 and 95.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

of the high school population,³⁰ and parental pressure has led them to add more and more academic material to their courses so as to allow at least some of their students to succeed in the college entrance examinations.

High school graduates who wish to continue on to college must first pass a preparatory examination (*yebi kosa*) to qualify for college application. At times a second state exam was given to sort university admissions, but, at present, individual universities manage their own admissions process by using preparatory examination scores and school marks. Because of the system of university admission by competitive exam, Koreans generally consider universities to be rankable on a monotonic scale, with Seoul National University (a state institution) at the head of the list. College graduates, too, are ranked in social prestige for the rest of their life by the ranking of the university they attended.³¹ The reason for the examination hell in middle and high schools, then, is that admission to a good high school is necessary for success in the final decisive competition for college entrance, and taking one's middle school education seriously is necessary for admission to a good academic high school. High schools are rated by the proportion of their students admitted to prestigious universities, and middle schools are rated by the proportion of students able to get into good academic high schools. Information on the reputation (which in urban areas is subject to change) of schools is exchanged informally in gossip networks of students, teachers, and parents, with the occasional newspaper article providing more solid facts.³²

Education and Equality

The system at the high school level and above is designed to sort students by achievement. The best jobs go to graduates of the most prestigious Seoul-based universities who have come through the best public academic high schools, with lesser job prospects for, in order, regional university graduates, vocational high school graduates, academic high school graduates who have not gone on to college, and school-leavers who, these days, are confined to unskilled occupations. This system, however, has not yet perpetuated old class differences—as is sometimes said to be the case for the highly tracked European systems.³³ Creating a

³⁰ Korea education yearbook, 1991 (n. 27 above), p. 117.

³¹ For this reason, one normally does not ask Koreans directly which university they attended. Those who did not attend the prestigious Seoul universities will often not answer.

³² The most recent gossip is that, since school grades have become a more important criterion for admission to college, it may now be better to put children in less competitive schools to improve their grades.

³³ As the new Korean society stabilizes, however, parents with modern education may try to replicate their new class status among their children. Signs of this change can already be found in the affluent, educated middle-class areas south of the Han River in Seoul, where educational competition is generally conceded to be most intense and where larger proportions of the population attend cram schools than in other parts of Korea. See Sŭng-mun An, Chong-ho Pak, and Hye-wŏn Kang

modern society on the ashes of colonialism has required Koreans to jettison the old cultural elite in favor of new groups with the knowledge appropriate for a modern, democratic society. This new knowledge imported from abroad has been disseminated largely through the formal educational system to students whose parents rarely had much modern education. The old Korean elite, whose educational legitimacy was based on knowledge of Chinese culture, has thus been less able to perpetuate status through control of cultural capital acquired outside school³⁴ than have European societies that have preserved more cultural continuity with the past. The more prosperous classes, to be sure, have been better able to shoulder the financial burdens of modern education, and their children are well represented in the new educated elite, but the culture of this new elite is still in the process of being created so that all members—whatever their social background—are, in a sense, newcomers whose status is based on mastery of math, science, and other “modern” knowledge.

Access to public elementary, middle, and high schools is regulated by residence as well as examination success. To the extent that social classes are concentrated in different places of residence, then, systematic inequality of access to education—such as is found in the United States—is a possibility. The government avoids publishing data that can be used to measure such inequality,³⁵ but it is generally conceded that the affluent areas of Seoul south of the Han River (Kangnam Ku), built in the late 1970s and early 1980s and housing a large proportion of Seoul professionals and their families, have superior schools, with students put under intense pressure by their parents to succeed. As one proceeds to provincial cities, small towns, and rural areas, the quality of schools is thought to decline.³⁶ Suburbanization of the more affluent families has only just begun, however, so that, compared to the United States, where each social and ethnic group tends to be concentrated in the same geographic area, school attendance areas in Korea are still quite socially mixed.

The Korean government since 1969, moreover, has tried hard to equalize (*p'yŏngjunhwa*) middle and high schools to ameliorate exam pres-

(1992) “Ch’ŏngsomyŏn ūisik tae chosa (A large-scale investigation of adolescents’ consciousness), *Uri Kyoyuk* 11 (1992): 40–72.

³⁴ Bourdieu (n. 13 above), pp. 13–14.

³⁵ Statistics published by the Ministry of Education, for example, are broken down by province but not by criteria that nongovernmental surveys reveal are likely to reveal inequality—such as either urban versus rural or affluence ranking of districts. School districts are coterminous with administrative districts, and rural and urban areas are systematically distinguished in the administrative hierarchy, so the reason the government does not publish educational data broken down according to this hierarchy (special city, direct rule city, provincial city, town, and rural district) is unlikely to be simply due to the mode of gathering the statistics or to inconvenience of compilation.

³⁶ In-su Kang, *Kyoyuk pŏp yŏn'gu: Han'guk, ilbon, miguk ūi kyoyuk pŏp mit p'allye rŭl chungsim ūro* (A study of educational law: Centering on case law of Korea, Japan, and the United States) (Seoul: Munŭm Sa, 1989), pp. 63–64.

tures and to make the school-area/lottery system more acceptable to the public. They have had only moderate success. When the middle school entrance-without-exam policy was implemented, the government closed a number of the most prestigious public middle schools in Seoul and other major cities, shuffled teachers around, tried to provide for a similar ability mix in all schools, and promulgated nationwide standards for buildings and equipment. Similar measures were tried for high schools in the 1980s. Inevitably, however, some schools have been better run or have had a more able student body.

Particularly obvious quality differences remain between urban and rural schools and between public and private schools.³⁷ Until illegalized in 1979, it was common for ambitious rural parents from all over Korea to send their children to live with relatives in Seoul to attend the better middle and high schools in the capital. Though the present school admission system is designed to give parents and students little control over their school assignments, some parents have inevitably gone to great lengths to get their children into particular well-known schools. This problem became especially prominent in the 1980s as education became simultaneously more available and more necessary for economic success: "fraudulent school admission" (*haksæng wijang chônip*) became a serious problem.³⁸ Since class and social status are very closely related to educational success, the struggle for upward mobility, to a large extent, is played out in the "examination hell" for secondary and tertiary school admission.

The Korean Zeal for Education

Koreans see "education fever" (*kyoyungnyôl*) as a traditional characteristic. A common theme of traditional folktales is success through hard study. In "The Story of Spring Fragrance," Korea's best-loved folktale, the protagonist, Yi Toryôn, is able to save his sweetheart, Spring Fragrance, from a venal new governor by placing first on the government exam, being consequently appointed a secret inspector who anonymously wanders the countryside checking up on administrators, and, in the nick of time, coming across the new governor oppressing the love he left behind in the countryside. Contemporary evidence of education's high valuation also abounds. Since 1945 demand for education has exceeded supply despite the fact that Korean enrollment ratios have been much higher than those of Euro-American countries with comparable standards of living.³⁹ Korean enrollment ratios now approach those of the most

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 61.

³⁹ Alice Amsden, *Asia's Next Giant: South Korea and Late Industrialization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 217-18.

developed countries of the world.⁴⁰ The fact that middle school education is not compulsory and requires the payment of a substantial tuition and yet has become universal, with a 98.5 percent enrollment ratio in 1990, speaks for itself. In fact, demand for education has been so strong that parents have, over the years, directly coughed up more than two-thirds of the total cost of education through tuition, "parent-teacher association" fees, and costs of school supplies. This is several times the proportion directly paid by parents in neighboring Japan.⁴¹ Government support of education in Korea is not high by international standards—4.5 percent of the gross national product in 1990, compared with 3.6 percent for Taiwan, 5.7 percent for Hungary, 6.1 percent for France, and 7.5 percent for the United States⁴²—but Korean parents' enthusiasm for education has led them to directly pay enough in student costs to bring the total proportion of the gross national product devoted to education in South Korea up to some 15 percent. And this figure does not include the huge costs of private tutoring as students prepare for the high school and college entrance examinations.

If the present-day zeal for education in Korea can be partially attributed to traditional attitudes, it can also be attributed to desires for upward mobility in a fast-changing society. In a recent survey of middle and high school students, 78.7 percent of the respondents answered that going to college is "a practical necessity," and, of those, the overwhelming majority cited the need to get a good job or the importance of social recognition (12.7 percent mentioned "seeking truth," and only 5 percent mentioned "parental pressure").⁴³ There is evidence, moreover, that these attitudes reflect reality. A person with a greater amount of education will be paid more for the same work, and this is perceived as just.⁴⁴ Only those with a college education are recruited for management positions.⁴⁵ Such positions are paid much more than what even the best-paid workers make. National studies have shown that the college-educated make double the

⁴⁰ Enrollment figures for 1990 were as follows: 100 percent in elementary school and 98.5 percent in middle school. Of middle school graduates, 92.2 percent continue on to high school, and, of these, 31.1 percent continue on to college. Son (n. 3 above), p. 152.

⁴¹ The proportion of total educational costs borne directly by parents varied from 70.9 percent in 1966 to 66.1 percent in 1975. McGinn (n. 22 above), p. 28, table 10. A 1982 study found the private share of educational cost in Korea to be 39 percent in primary school, 85 percent in middle and high school, and 75 percent in college and university. The comparable figures for Japan in 1981 were 1 percent, 20 percent, and 29 percent. *Korean Education 2000* (Seoul: Korean Educational Development Institute, 1985), p. 126.

⁴² *Learning Mathematics*, summary table opposite p. 16.

⁴³ An et al. (n. 33 above), pp. 40–72.

⁴⁴ Choong Soon Kim, *The Culture of Korean Industry: An Ethnography of Poongsan Corporation* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1992), pp. 106–8.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

income of high school graduates and three times the income of primary or middle school graduates.⁴⁶

Successful educational outcomes are also relevant for those who do not continue to college, however. Even though persons without a college education are rarely promoted from the shop floor into management positions, academic skills and educational background are used by management to regulate access to training in the most advanced (and best-paid) technologies where the ability to read English or use mathematics is important. "Labor aristocrats" with such skills have greater security than ordinary factory workers and sometimes, with overtime and bonuses, bring home more than some lower-level management (though, when the amount of work is taken into account, white-collar employees are still better paid).⁴⁷ In Korea, then, as in Japan and Taiwan—two other East Asian countries whose students do well on international achievement tests—educational success and socioeconomic status in Korea correlate much more highly than in the United States.⁴⁸

Education and Parental Pressure

Given the fact that educational qualifications virtually determine one's economic level, the Korean zeal for education becomes understandable. Any rational and ambitious person would want to do well. Since Koreans also deem education to have intrinsic worth as a marker of social status, parents rarely leave educational success to chance: they subject their children to intense pressure to study.

Within the memory of people still living today, most of rural Korea was divided into hereditary, endogamous, and ranked status groups. One's position in the status hierarchy was marked by mode of dress, by whether one studied or engaged in manual labor, and by the culture of one's speech. With liberation in 1945 and the creation of a new democratic society in South Korea, this decaying hereditary-status hierarchy was rejected. Status consciousness itself, rather than disappear, however, has been transformed to become a main feature of the new, dynamic, modernizing society. Status today is mostly achieved rather than inherited, and

⁴⁶ Son (n. 3 above), p. 755; Amsden, p. 230.

⁴⁷ Choong Soon Kim, p. 103.

⁴⁸ In the United States technicians make 1.6 times what production workers do, and managers make 1.79 times what production workers do. By contrast, in South Korea technicians make 2.46 what production workers do, and managers make 3.95 times what production workers do. Amsden, p. 231. The correlation between the occupational status of the father and his education was .66 in Minneapolis, .70 in Taipei, and .86 in Sendai. Stevenson et al. (n. 1 above), p. 231. For evidence that grades affect employment possibilities for Japanese high school graduates, see James E. Rosenbaum and Takehiko Kariya, "From High School to Work: Market and Institutional Mechanisms in Japan," *American Journal of Sociology* 94, no. 6 (May 1989): 1334–65.

amount of education is a determinant of status independent of its contribution to economic success.

Even economically successful persons find it difficult to attain high social status without education. One Korean of my acquaintance is a director of a highly successful construction company. He has a fancy house, fine clothes, a chauffeured car, and deference from lower-level employees. He is also going to night school to get a Ph.D. in economics. I have never inquired of him directly what his motivations for getting a Ph.D. are when he already has all the material attributes of success, but, when I mentioned this director's situation to another Korean of my acquaintance, he smiled and remarked, "Oh ho, of course! Otherwise people will talk behind his back. They will say he makes all this money, but he is really only an uneducated *sajangnom*," a derogatory term for uneducated, coarse businessmen.

The theme that formal education is an essential qualification to be taken seriously is widespread. Korean acquaintances have repeatedly argued that the democratization movement, so evident in Korea since 1987, is especially timely because formal secondary and tertiary education has become widespread so that people are now *qualified* to have a say in government policy—showing the continued influence of the Confucian notion that the *uneducated* masses should have no input in government decision making. A more abstract notion of the value of education was given to me by a Korean overseas student explaining to me why he wanted a master's degree: "I want to become a complete human being."

Mencius's dictum that mental labor is superior to manual labor still holds. The folkloric archetypes of ignorant peasants—the female Kapsuni and the male Kaptori (the approximate equivalent of Daisy Mae and L'il Abner in U.S. terms)—nowadays are applied to male and female factory workers, who are termed "Kongsuni" and "Kongdori." The former first syllable is now replaced by the syllable "kong" derived from the word for factory, "kongjang." The shame of being classified a factory girl is such that many of them spend almost their entire salary on clothes so as to look like office girls or students when they are not in the factory itself. Though vocational high schools are designed to train students for manual occupations—even highly technical ones with excellent employment prospects—parents avoid sending their children to them if they can and have continuously put pressure on the government to provide more academic courses at them so that their children might after all make it into college. Among high-status parents, in fact, failure to get children into good schools is said to be a frequent cause of emigration to the United States and Canada.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ I have been told personally by several Korean Americans that this was the reason for their emigration. See also *K'aenada t'uja imin hangnyök sujun kwa chaesan sangt'ae* (The educational level and property circumstances of capital-investing emigrants to Canada) (Seoul: Haewoe Kaebal Kongsa, 1986).

Structural characteristics of the Korean family make parental pressure more intense and effective than it would be in the United States. Unlike the most familiar family types in the Euro-American world, Korean families are corporate.⁵⁰ This means that Korean families have a designated head who has specific rights and duties, that they have clearly defined boundaries so that a person belongs to one and only one corporate family at any particular time, and that there is succession to family roles. This latter characteristic means that, on the death of a family head, for example, someone—normally the eldest son—succeeds to the headship so that the family as a single corporate group can continue generation after generation.

Korean parents expect to be cared for by their children in old age, and filial piety (*hyo*)—the obligation to respect and obey parents while young, care for them in old age, give them a good funeral, and worship them after death—is the core of Korean ethics. Though modernization has brought modifications to traditional ethics, the obligation to care for parents in old age is still written into the civil code and falls especially heavily on the eldest son, because it is he who is supposed to co-reside with his parents and continue the family line. Since parents expect to be economically and socially dependent on their eldest son in their old age, and since the status not simply of their son but of themselves and of the whole family line depends on this son's educational success, parents are disinclined to allow considerations of self-actualization and personal inclination to interfere with children's obligation to get ahead.

The corporate family system is not simply social capital. By making the generations reciprocally dependent on each other, it assures parents of payback in their old age and to their grandchildren of whatever investments they make in their children. Parents are thus more willing to make heavy economic and other sacrifices to help their children—particularly their eldest son—succeed than might otherwise be the case because they themselves reap some of the benefit. Among rural families who often have to board their children in the city for them to receive high school education, it is common for a grandmother or older sister or even for a mother (if sufficient female labor is left in the rural house) to move to town to cook and clean for the children in school so that they can concentrate exclusively on their studies. The economic sacrifices parents are willing to make for their children's education are proverbial. One rural family I studied in the late 1970s was spending well over 10 percent of its *gross*

⁵⁰ Although the details of family systems vary, corporateness is a characteristic commonly found among peasants around the world, including parts of Europe. For a general discussion of corporateness in Asian family systems, see Clark W. Sorensen, "Asian Families: Domestic Group Formation," in *Asia's Cultural Mosaic*, ed. Grant Evans (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1993), pp. 89–117.

income on educational fees for public middle and high school for its children. This proportion must have gone up considerably after the eldest son began attending college—a proposition several times more expensive than high school. It is commonly observed in rural villages, in fact, that high-status families that, in the past, were large landowners have little land today, since they have gradually sold it off to provide college education for their children.⁵¹

Combined with the corporate organization of the family is what Koreans often call a “clear role division” (*tturyōthan yōkhal punōp*) between males and females. In contemporary urban families fathers tend to work long hours and are often absent from the home, but mothers (except in the poorer classes where both mothers and fathers have to work) most often remain at home. Mothers’ role involves domestic labor, rearing of children, and frequently home-based income-earning activity as well, but family status reproduction is also a central concern.⁵² Within her areas of responsibility—which include making sure her children succeed educationally—the Korean mother has autonomous power that she exercises, if necessary, through what is known colloquially in Korean as “skirt wind” (*ch’imapparam*). In Korean families, where the parenting style tends to be more authoritarian than in contemporary Japanese families, “skirt wind” is not motivation of children through guilt, as with the Jewish Mother stereotype, but a more fearsome thing. One Korean dictionary defines it as “the force of a woman on the rampage” (*sōlch’inūn yōin ūi sōsūl*).⁵³ Likened to a glittering knife blade (*sip’ōrōn k’ allal*), “skirt wind,” when it is blowing, is difficult for a child (or husband, for that matter) to ignore.

Since they know that their success is not simply for themselves but for their whole family, and since concepts of ethical performance centering on setting their parents’ minds at rest leave them few options but to obey their parents, children usually acknowledge their heavy responsibility to work hard on education.⁵⁴ This responsibility seldom lies easy on them, particularly if they are not academically talented. In a collection of essays

⁵¹ Many of the largest landowners lost a substantial proportion of their land during the land reform of 1950–55. Former large landowners with whom I have talked sometimes mention that, once they lost their predominant place in the village, they could no longer bear the shame of living there. This has been an additional motivation for them to invest their resources in the education of children rather than agriculture—something that, in any case, is a low-status activity. It is surprising how frequently former large landowners have told me that at least one of their children is a college professor. Although I have had no way of checking whether this is true in each individual case, quite a few professors I have asked about their background have admitted to coming from a former landed family.

⁵² Hanna Papanek, “Family Status Production: The ‘Work’ and ‘Non-Work’ of Women,” *Signs* 4, no. 4 (1979): 775–81.

⁵³ Hŭi-sŭng Yi, *Essensŭ kugō sajōn* (The essential dictionary of the national language), rev. ed. (Seoul: Minjung Sōgwan, 1986), p. 1891.

⁵⁴ See Clark W. Sorensen, “Modernization and Filial Piety in Contemporary Korea,” in *The World and I* (Washington, D.C.: Washington Times, January 1990), pp. 640–51.

written by middle school students, collected by N. S. Kim and given the suggestive title *We Who Have No Place to Go*, a student writes, "They say Koreans have great zeal for education (*kyoyungnyōl*), but I wish it came from the spontaneous desire of students."⁵⁵ Much social pathology among children is attributed to parental pressure over school. A recent survey reveals that three-quarters of middle and high school students consider running away from home or committing suicide, primarily because of parental pressure over lack of success at school.⁵⁶ Although it is not clear that the adolescent suicide rate in Korea is higher than in other countries, accounts of schoolwork-related suicides, even among middle school students, make the newspapers often enough that it is a national topic of discussion. Students consider drastic measures like these because, from their middle school years on when they begin preparing for high school and college entrance examinations, they often see no alternative road to success except through education.

The Parent-Teacher Coalition

An essential element in the complex that motivates Korean students is the coalition between parent and teacher. This coalition comes about not because parents and teachers have intensive interaction—they do not—but rather because they share the same goals and assumptions. As in other Asian countries, teachers are much more highly respected in Korea than, say, in the United States. A large proportion at all levels are male, though, as Korea becomes more developed, female teachers are becoming more and more common, especially in the elementary grades. Because teachers' superior education is seen to make them qualified to mold the character of their students as well as to give them knowledge, parents are willing to delegate great authority to them. When children begin elementary school, the teachers put a good deal of time and effort into, among other things, teaching children the complicated respect language (*chondaemal*), mastery of which is necessary to get on in the world. Lessons in ethics and proper behavior (*todōk*) continue throughout the school years, for "school is a place where character is formed and correct values are nurtured."⁵⁷ At the same time, the teacher's word is law. Rather than foster discussion, parents, teachers, and students all assume that the teacher's proper role is to impart truth. It is a rare student that would question a teacher's authority, whatever his or her private doubts.

In the elementary grades I would characterize the student-teacher relationship as one of "warm authoritarianism"—demanding respect and

⁵⁵ Nam-sōn Kim, ed., *Kal kot omnūn uridūl: Uri nūn sihōmbonūn kigye ka anijanayo* (We who have no place to go: We aren't test-taking machines, are we?) (Seoul: Sagyejōl, 1988), p. 21.

⁵⁶ An et al. (n. 33 above), pp. 54–56.

⁵⁷ Kim, ed., p. 32.

compliance from students but at the same time convincing them that they care about them as human beings and have their best interests at heart. Such authoritarianism is not punitive, though later on, in middle and high school, less warm and more punitive forms are common. Almost half of middle and high school students, for example, report having received corporal punishment.⁵⁸

As in other educational systems that depend on exams to sort students, Korean parents and teachers unite against a common outside impediment—trying to get students through the examination hoops so that the students may succeed. “Teaching to tests” is common, but, in addition to skillfully imparting exam-relevant knowledge, teachers are also expected to use their authority to push students on. Korean students perceive that their future will be determined by their teacher’s recommendations,⁵⁹ and this pressure can be extremely intense for students who are not doing well. However cruel for those who have little academic potential or interest, however, the combined parent-teacher pressure keeps children in school (the dropout rate is very low) and keeps them plugging away at their studies.

Mechanisms for Translating Zeal into Success

It has been argued so far that student, parents, and teachers are keenly aware that acquiring a high level of education is the surest road to success in contemporary South Korea. An intensely status-conscious people who look down on those who do manual labor, Koreans value education as the most reliable marker of high status. Yet, since there are not enough educational opportunities in South Korea to satisfy everybody’s aspirations, qualifying and entrance examinations are used as the fairest means to limit access to the secondary and tertiary education that alone can provide the status and careers that most everybody desires. Because the corporate family system makes status a family, rather than an individual, affair, parents and children mutually depend on each other in this status quest. However, parents, more sure of a payback than they would be in a noncorporate family system, are also willing to make extraordinary commitments to their children, while the children are made conscious that not only their personal, but their family’s, success is dependent on them. Middle-class mothers have the time, the inclination, *and* the power to demand that their children succeed in school. And teachers are given great authority by parents to exhort their children to greater effort in school.

This proposition focuses not simply on social capital useful for promoting educational success but also more on the mesh of values with real

⁵⁸ An et al. (n. 33 above), p. 44.

⁵⁹ Students tell me that “it’s impossible to go against your teacher’s recommendation,” though they can rarely specify why.

social and economic structures that reward educational success and on a set of social institutions (corporate families, “warm authoritarian” teachers, and schools as sources of lifelong identity) that envelop students and provide them with an identity in relationship to the group at the same time that they demand that the students take their responsibility to the group seriously. What distinguishes South Korean students from those in other countries is not high-quality instruction measured in terms of individual attention to students, size of classes, training of teachers, and so forth but rather students’ assiduous attention to their studies that follows from high motivation reinforced by social pressure to succeed. The means by which these motivations and pressures are turned into achievement are primarily hard work, memorization, and repetition—and, for the most ambitious, participation in extracurricular study halls, use of private tutors, and attendance at cram schools.

The importance of hard study and extracurricular work can be inferred from the social and educational indicators in the original IAEP survey.⁶⁰ It is clear that having educated parents is an advantage,⁶¹ but the average educational level of South Korean parents is not yet high, so the achievement level of their children cannot be accounted for this way. South Korean students, more often than students in other countries in the IAEP assessment, reported having fewer than 25 books at home, and South Korean students less often had someone within their household able to help them with their homework. In the 1960s, when the parents of most middle school students of the 1990s would have attended middle school, enrollment ratios in South Korea were only about 50 percent for middle school. In other words, half of the parents of South Korean students of the year 1990 would not have reached the educational level at which their 13-year-old children are studying.

Korea ties with the former Soviet Union for the highest proportion of students who spend 4 hours or more on mathematics homework each week. However, although the proportion who reported studying more than 2 hours per day on all homework in South Korea is high, it is not among the highest countries on this item. This absence of correlation between rank in amount of study time and rank in math and science in South Korea is almost certainly a result of bias introduced by questionnaires insufficiently sensitive to the nuances of Korean academic practice. The English word “homework” is quite broad, and includes virtually any

⁶⁰ Data cited in this paragraph come from the IAEP summary table opposite p. 16 in both *Learning Science* and *Learning Mathematics* (n. 4 above).

⁶¹ The International Assessment of Educational Progress did not directly survey educational achievement of parents, but, as a partial measurement, asked students how many books they had at home. There was a positive correlation between this measurement and student test scores in science and math for all countries. See *Learning Mathematics* and *Learning Science* (n. 4 above), p. 65, table 4.2.

kind of preparatory work done at home for any kind of institution. The nearest Korean term, and the one used to translate "homework" in the IAEP questionnaires, is *sukche*, "problems given beforehand at school to be written and brought in, or answered and brought in."⁶² This term, while generally accurate, is much narrower in meaning than "homework," since it refers primarily to written assignments that are brought in and excludes general study (*kongbu*) and the widespread study practice known as *yönsüp*, "scholarly or artistic practice and habituation; making a new habit through repeating a specific task."⁶³ "Study" (*kongbu*), not "homework" (*sukche*), is the task that most Koreans assume students are engaged in at home.

The answers to IAEP questionnaires may also reflect underreporting of extracurricular study activity by students who are aware that many common studying practices in South Korea are technically illegal.⁶⁴ The "problem" of excessive study, excessive attendance of extracurricular cram schools, and excessive use of tutors in South Korea has gradually grown up through the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s in response to competitive pressures for educational success in a system where economic growth has made more and more education financially feasible for more and more people. The 1968 abolition of entrance exams for middle school was motivated in part by desires to ameliorate the "entrance examination hell." This just moved the examination hell up a few years to high school entrance examinations, however. By the early 1970s social critics were bemoaning the influence of large amounts of studying on students' physical development, the emotional anxiety associated with entrance exams, the distorting effect "teaching to exams" had on the educational system, the deleterious effects of competition among students, and the "social disease" of evaluating people on the basis of their school of graduation. Parents and students responded to examination pressure by putting time and resources into extracurricular study and tutors. Extracurricular study fees—on top of regular school tuition and fees—strained family budgets. Students were paying their regular school teachers extra fees to hold classes beyond the regular hours, as students and parents failed to trust the educational system itself, and examination cram schools (*sihöm chunbi hakkwan*) proliferated in major cities.⁶⁵

⁶² Yi (n. 53 above), p. 1176.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 1359.

⁶⁴ This was true through 1990, the time of the IAEP tests. The South Korean government has recently announced measures to loosen regulations on extracurricular instruction. See "Hagwön kwae chönmyön hōyong" (General permission for private academy extra-curricular instruction) *Chosŏn Ilbo* (June 6, 1993), p. 1.

⁶⁵ Republic of Korea, Ministry of Education, "Kodūng hakkyo mit taehak ūi ipsi chedo kaesŏn pangan" (Plan to improve the high school and college entrance system) (1973), quoted in Son (n. 3 above), p. 748.

The 1973 reform of the high school and college entrance examination systems, in which high school entrance went to a lottery system similar to middle school entrance (though entrance exams were not abolished), was an attempt to deal with these problems. Although the new system—by making it difficult for ambitious parents to concentrate high-ability children into elite schools and by making serious efforts to equalize school facilities and teaching staff—did make education somewhat more equal, the reforms did little to ameliorate problems of extracurricular study and fees and of examination cram schools. In 1980, 61 percent of the 3,288 students admitted to Seoul National University—the acme of the educational pyramid—had received extracurricular tutoring, and 14 percent had suffered from nervous illness, character blocks, or nervous breakdowns.⁶⁶ In the same year, a study by the Ministry of Education found that tutoring fees nationally had reached the astounding annual amount of 327 billion won (approximately \$400 million), a sum equivalent to 30 percent of the education budget or 6 percent of the national budget.⁶⁷ In Seoul's middle-class areas south of the Han River where pressure for educational success is higher than for any other part of the country, fully half of the middle and high school students surveyed in 1992 took extracurricular or cram-school classes (particularly if they were doing poorly), and parents spent an average of 280,000 won (\$364) per month on these lessons.⁶⁸ The reasons for the extraordinary reliance of Korean students on out-of-school study and tutoring, as analyzed by the Ministry of Education, were many of the same socioeconomic variables given above as motivating factors for Korean students: limitations in opportunities for high school education, contradictions in the university entrance system, lack of job opportunities, and the great differences in salary based on education. It is significant, however, that the Ministry of Education also cited weaknesses in school education itself, lack of sufficient government investment in education, and parental lack of confidence in the educational system.

The Ministry of Education responded to this "vote of no-confidence" in the educational system with its "Measures to Normalize Education and Eliminate Extra-Curricular Study," announced in 1980.⁶⁹ Included among these measures were changes in the university entrance system—including increasing admission quotas, relying more on in-university rather

⁶⁶ Son (n. 3 above), p. 756.

⁶⁷ *P'alsip yōndae ūi Han'guk kyoyuk kaehyōk* (Korean educational reforms for the eighties) (Seoul: Ministry of Education, 1983), pp. 30–31, quoted in Son, p. 756.

⁶⁸ In rural areas, on the other hand, only 16 percent received out-of-school lessons. An et al. (n. 33 above), pp. 45–46.

⁶⁹ "Kyoyuk chōngsanghwa mit kwayōl kwae haeso pangan," in *Korean Educational Reforms for the Eighties*, pp. 30–31.

than national entrance exams, modifying certain screening devices, and reducing the difficulty of the University Entrance Preparatory Exam. The heart of the 1980 reforms, however, comprised prohibitions on extracurricular tutoring. Before 1980 extracurricular study took three basic forms: (1) paying one's regular school teacher to hold after-hours classes, (2) attending a separate cram school in the evening taught by well-educated persons (some of whom were regular teachers), and (3) hiring a private tutor. The most common and available tutors are students at the major universities, who have proved their mettle by making it through the entrance process. Such tutoring by university students can be extremely lucrative—enough to earn one's way through school if necessary—and is known in Korea, as in Japan, by the German term for “work,” *Arbeit* (*arūbait'ū*). The 1980 reforms forbade elementary, middle, and high school teachers from doing extracurricular tutoring. It forbade university students from doing *Arbeit* for nonrelatives, and it made private academies return fees after August 1, 1980, to those students who were currently enrolled in school.

Both students and parents, hoping to be relieved from “examination hell,” reacted positively to these reforms.⁷⁰ Pressures to get ahead through education are such, however, that the government could not make the reforms stick. It was impossible to police *Arbeit* when such arrangements are made, as they always are, privately between a family and a university student. As competition for admission to prestigious universities and good high schools continues, moreover, schools cannot but respond to parents' and students' anxiety about entrance examinations. Schools gradually have set up programs of extracurricular “autonomous study” (*chayul haksūp*) and “supplementary classes” (*poch'ung suōp*). “Autonomous study” is optional study done in schools under the supervision of teachers but without explicit lessons. It is normally done 1 hour before the regular school day and sometimes after school as well, until nine o'clock or ten o'clock at night. Many schools offer an additional hour of “supplementary classes” (*poch'ung suōp*) for students who are not doing well. Although teachers cannot directly receive fees for supervising “autonomous study,” they can get extra fees for “supplementary classes.” In addition to these more or less public subterfuges, many other kinds of extracurricular (*kwawoe*) and irregular (*pyōnch'ik*) study are found. As In-su Son has written, “Since competition between high schools begets more competition, despite the fact that the authorities consider it illegal, irregular classes (*pyōnch'ikjōk suōp*) spread throughout the private schools, and infected

⁷⁰ Son (n. 3 above), p. 757.

with irregular studies the public schools famous in former days that could not stand to sit quietly by.”⁷¹

Conclusions

The IAEP found that South Korean 9-year-olds and 13-year-olds did, on average, better than any other country's students on tests of math and science and that there was relatively little variation around the mean in students' scores. South Korean children work harder and spend more time on their studies than perhaps any other people in the world. Although the amount of time South Korean students spend in school is at the high end of the spectrum, even more important is the amount of time they spend on academic work—not just homework, but also in practice and extracurricular study—*outside* of the formal school curriculum. All of this out-of-class work is not reflected in the IAEP reports, which are based on simple questionnaires translated from English, because South Korean students may do study and review that is not categorized as homework at home and at school. They may also work with tutors at home. They may attend “self-regulated study” and “supplementary study” sessions at their school, both before and after the regular school day. They may also attend separately established cram schools—particularly if they are behind in their achievement. A simple question of how much “homework” they do will not reveal all of this academic study. Although many of the more striking practices are most characteristic of middle and high school students, and particularly those in middle-class areas of big cities, pressures to succeed in entrance examinations color the whole system and have repercussions even in the elementary grades where examination pressure is muted.

It would be rash to conclude that South Korean schools—despite high class sizes and moderate levels of education for teachers—are doing *by themselves* a better job than the schools of other countries. There is no doubt that teachers “teach to tests.” South Korean students spend an inordinate amount of time memorizing textbook material. But they also practice problems by other than rote means, and they work hard to overcome inadequacies in their schooling. This is encouraged by their parents. One common Korean attitude was related to me by a Korean-American. “I tell my children, sure, private schools [in the American context] are good and all that, but the important thing is to study. I say to them that if you learn even 75 percent of what the teacher tells you, no matter what the quality of the school, you are going to be all right.”

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 758.

Despite government tinkering with the high school and university admission systems to mitigate the effects of competition, upward mobility through schooling dominates the lives of South Korean parents and children from middle school (seventh grade) on.⁷² Poor parents resent the advantages of tutoring and other extracurricular help affluent parents are able to provide their children. Affluent parents resent the economic burden of tutoring and extracurricular lessons they feel they must provide for their children but see no alternative—since they will have to depend on their children in their old age—in South Korea's increasingly competitive society, where education is virtually the only gateway to success and high status. Children hate the "examination hell" they find themselves in, but their parents leave them no alternative. To succeed, to discharge their moral obligations to their parents, they *must* succeed educationally. They try to meet their parents' expectations by studying hard and by using all available resources, both inside and outside the formal school system, to reach the all-important goal. Though many succeed, the cost in terms of emotional turmoil, loss of self-esteem, and delinquent behavior for the academically untalented is also high.

This article began with a criticism of the idea that Confucianism is responsible for East Asian educational success. We have seen that children are motivated to work for educational success in South Korea by prospects for concrete success in the workaday world that have little to do with Confucian ideology or with traditional Confucian notions of humanistic education for moral behavior. The transformation of South Korean society through modernization and industrialization has been much too radical for attitudes toward education to be mere continuations of "traditional" attitudes that, in any case, would have been unlikely to foster achievement in math and science. Nevertheless, there are two senses in which Confucianism does remain relevant for understanding the modern Korean educational system. The most obvious sense is in the family structure. Corporate family organization with a strong family head, a clear division of labor, and succession in the male line, combined with an ethic of filial piety, gives rise to effective parental pressure to succeed educationally and is an important element in motivating children to succeed—for the sake of their family if not for themselves. This family structure,⁷³ though neither simply traditional nor a mechanical application of Confucian prin-

⁷² New plans to give universities more discretion in their admissions process were announced by the Ministry of Education in June 1993. See "Taehak ipsichōngwōn tan'gyejōk chayulhwa" (Step-by-step move to self-regulation of university admissions and quotas), *Chosōn Ilbo* (June 10, 1992), p. 1.

⁷³ This family structure is outlined in the revised civil code of 1960 (which has subsequently also been revised). Some principles of present-day South Korean family organization go back 400 or 500 years, but others are innovations of the twentieth century that are explicitly designed to promote "modernization."

ciples of family organization,⁷⁴ has developed as a creative application of Confucian principles to contemporary Korean conditions and is one area where "Confucianism" lives in contemporary Korean society.

A second sense in which Confucianism is important for contemporary South Korea is in the status structure. Regardless of whether Confucianism inherently fosters a basically equalitarian or hierarchical view of human relations, as understood by most Koreans, it idealizes a hierarchical society in which domination is legitimated by an education that is conceived as morally transformative. This understanding of education as a force that produces "princely men" (*kunja*) suitable to govern the "small men" (*soin*) caught in their immediate material desires has been transformed in the modern situation to a more general attitude—that only education legitimizes high social status. It would be hard to justify the salary differential between the educated and uneducated in contemporary South Korean society solely on the basis of productivity or instrumental need. What makes the salary and status differentials between the educated and uneducated work in contemporary South Korean society is the legitimacy conferred by education itself. That is, so long as there are distinctions between high status and low status, rich and poor, South Koreans feel most comfortable justifying those differences on the basis of educational attainment. The application of this justification is perhaps the most important legacy of Confucian culture for Korean education.

⁷⁴ Consider that China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam—though all have "Confucian" family systems—vary greatly in their family structure. For more elaboration, see Sorensen (n. 50 above).