The Limits in the SKY:

An Examination of High-Pressure Education Culture in South Korea

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I. Introduction

To ask what the meaning of education is can garner a diverse range of answers depending on personal view. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the verb “to educate” as: to train by formal instruction and supervised practice especially in a skill, trade, or profession; to develop mentally, morally, or aesthetically especially by instruction; to persuade or condition to feel, believe, or act in a desired way (Merriam-Webster 2017). These general definitions touch upon the behavioral and functional side of education is. They emphasize the passing along of information in a trickle-down, or top-down manner with verbs such as “formal instruction,” “supervised,” and “condition,” as if it is meant to be transmitted by a high-ranking, powerful influencer.

After I learned about the contemporary issue in Korean society in which high stress that high school students face surrounding academic pressure and educational culture can often lead to a low mental wellbeing and even suicide in some cases, my interest was piqued into delving further into the issue. The overall objective of this paper is to shed light on the reasons for this amount of pressure on students and the dynamics in which it exists in. Examining the place education has held in Korea at various times throughout its history also became relevant in explaining these processes. Along with this, it also became important to highlight the cross-cultural definitions of education. These factors assisted my investigation of the extent to which what is coined as the phenomenon of “education fever” by Michael Seth holds true.

Education in Korea has a very prominent place in its history, beginning with the civil examination process during the Koryŏ Dynasty in which men took a selective exam to gain positions in central and provincial governments (Wagner 1974). It also played a significant role in the rebuilding of the country after decades of occupation by the Japanese and the destruction
of the Korean War (Connor 2009). The act of acquiring education is incredibly valued in Korean society. Literacy in the Confucian classics along with demonstrating loyalty towards country and helps to raise one’s social standing. Further, it provides the opportunity for personal enlightenment as related to the time period and place one has in society.

South Korea is consistently praised by Western governments and media outlets for the high performance of its students in international tests on core subjects, with former U.S. President Barack Obama having praised its education system for it being given such a high importance and made a priority, which is what he claimed the U.S. could learn from (Fenton 2015). In Korea, high school students generally have much more rigorous academic expectations placed on them than American students. This is facilitated by the intensely competitive environment that is prevalent throughout much of the society. The culmination of a student's’ academic performance is known to be and the country's’ national college entrance examination, known as the CSAT (College Scholastic Ability Test). Students take the test in hopes of receiving a high score to gain admittance in one of Korea’s top three most selective universities (Connor 218). A securement of university entrance is crucial to shaping one’s future path. The place that education holds in Korean society and the extent of its importance as discussed here is referred to as a, “national obsession with education” by Michael J. Seth (9). While these high academic expectations can be advantageous for Korea’s image globally and for those who succeed, an intensely competitive makes it a downfall for those who do not.

With expectations of a high academic performance ingrained into a collectivist society, the individual aspirations, talents, and wellbeing of students are often not considered. Those who do not do as well academically are thought of less worthy in society, whereas those who do succeed often have certain privileges which allow them to do so (Byun, Schofer, and Kim 2012).
As mentioned previously, a high suicide rate amongst youth is also prevalent among youth, and the rigorous education culture is determined as being a primary contributor to it (Zeng and Le Tendre 1998).

Unfortunately, with this there have been chronic issues that have arisen from this intense value of education. One’s success in the education system as dictated by excelling in national educational standards to the point where it is valued over other characteristics in people, including one’s individual passions and creativity. The pervasiveness in the amount of pressure placed on young people to do well academically keeps hidden the fundamental reason for obtaining knowledge and retracts the positive benefits of personal empowerment and social mobility education provided throughout Korea’s past, leaving people inhibited and constrained by the high competition, pressure, and standardization of the contemporary education system. The overall welfare of Korean society runs the risk of being severely damaged in the future if the roots of the issues of the education system fail to be adequately addressed.

My discussion will begin with an overview of the history of education in Korea to gain a background on its significance in the country from the Old Chosŏn era (Premodern) into the present day, focusing on the definition of education and how it changed throughout Korea’s history in relation to the political and social matters going on during given times. The methods used are a survey of the works of the most influential scholars in the field of Korean history, Confucianism and gender studies.

The second section, an overview of the current education culture will be provided in relation to the way in which education was defined in the past. The issues associated with Korea's education system in the contemporary era will also be discussed, along with a discussion of cultural representations of Korean education and student life as represented in the media.
through films, exploring the ways in which the school environments tie to overall themes regarding social status through getting ahead of others in the educational system. The methods used in this case are influential texts by scholars that focus on the modern history of Korea and the education system and culture surrounding education as it is currently in Korea.

The final section contains a case study examining the experiences of students who have engaged with the education system in Korea. It is a cross-cultural comparison study in which the experiences and attitudes toward education culture of both Korean and American and other international students at Arizona State University were examined through the conducting of qualitative interviews on campus. The goal of the study in Section IV is to determine the validity of the existence of Seth’s “education fever” and the extent to which it held true in comparison with the U.S. and other countries outside of Korea. Interview responses revealed Korea, being smaller in land size but high in population, has made it so all members of society hold education with a high degree of importance, which then requires an extensive amount of effort to perform adequately to determine one’s place and future, mostly supporting the claims of the existence of “education fever”. The next section will begin the discussion of the value education holds within Korean society, leading up to the nature of it in the contemporary context, by locating it at various points throughout its history.

II. Meaning of Education in Korea and its Historical Impact

When attempting to place the root of current educational phenomena in a culture with an intense value for educational performance, the interplay between personal enlightenment and demonstration of service to country as prevalent throughout Korean history points to locating the reasons for the nation’s “education fever” (Seth 9). A definition of education, closer to its
pragmatic meaning in society as found in the Merriam-Webster dictionary, emerged when modernization began in Korea in the early twentieth century would then be the acquiring of knowledge with the intent to achieve social prestige and success as dictated by society. The chronic issues prevalent in Korea’s education system today, particularly in relation to the idea of access to education and the prestige that comes along with it being reserved mainly for the elite class thus reproducing class inequality are echoes of Korea’s past, even after the influence of industrialization, standardization and economic development.

**Three Kingdoms Period (1st Century BCE-CE) To Unified Silla (676-935)**

The earliest examples of Korean education, based on the extant related historical sources, dates back to the Buddhist and Confucian educations of the Three Kingdoms Period. During the Three Kingdoms Period in which the Korean peninsula consisted of the Koguryo (37 BCE-668 CE), Silla (57 BCE-935 CE), and Paekche (18 BCE-660 CE) territories, private education for the elite was a means of making sure royal youth were prepared to hold government positions upon reaching adulthood.

Additionally, this marked one of the first times in which those from the lower classes had official schools established for them. While they were not eligible to serve in the high-ranking government positions that those of the elite classes were able to, it was still important for them to become educated on the basics. This signified a time in which education offered the goal of status through the desire to gain some of the knowledge the elites had.

Because society was dominated by Buddhism during this era, it is believed that it played an influential role in providing a means of realizing education at both the individual and social levels. Although Buddhist education prevailed throughout much of Korean society during this
time, education on Confucian classics under the great influence of Chinese politics, culture, and literature gradually evolved into being taught within public education, however not widespread just yet. During the Silla dynasty beginning in 682 CE, Confucian academies for those of high ranking were constructed consisting of both core and specialized curriculum, as well as the establishment of a state examination in 788 (Lee 1). The Confucian classics as influenced by this soon became the preeminent educational material during this time as marked by the systematic replacement of Native Korean with Sin-Korean words in writing (Lee 24). Moreover, these Chinese classical texts were considered to encompass the ideal moral system including the virtues associated with the respect of elders and studying hard (Connor 208-209).

Academies were established by the states themselves to ensure the proper teaching of the young aristocrats. The various institutions by state consisted of the National Confucian Academy (T’aehak) in the territory of Koguryŏ, the National Confucian College (Kukhak) in the Unified Silla province (“Education” 334). This set the footing for the well-established education system that favored those of royalty to become educated that would soon be common in Korean society. Because it was thought that only those that came from the upper ranks were fit to be the future leaders of the country, it left most other civilians out in their ability to contribute at the governmental level to the country’s progress. However, this did not stop basic education from becoming valuable for commoners.

In regard to education for the common classes, there were academies established that gained popularity for their teachings of Chinese classics and basic literacy. In Koguryŏ, an academy known as kyŏngdang taught martial arts and essential Chinese texts. These schools then expanded into institutions geared towards commoners throughout the country, which were known as sŏdang, meaning village study halls. They gave villagers and their young children
education in basic elementary education. The success of sŏdang in providing education for the lower classes continued with the establishment of more and more institutes throughout the country well into the Chosŏn era (“Education” 334).

After unifying the Three Kingdoms in 676 a national college, Kukhak was established while King Sinmun was in power. Like the institutes of the Three Kingdoms Period, it was made to train younger men of royal blood for government service. They learned the Confucian classics and Chinese history and literature (Weidman and Park 9). Education during this time still very much followed the notion of the past Kingdoms in that it was a tool for the elite to maintain their power and contribute to the prosperity of the country.

Throughout both the Three Kingdoms and Unified Silla area in Korea’s history, the elite classes maintained much of their power throughout their education in the Confucian classics. However, the lower classes were still represented in history through the establishment of academies specifically for them and the continuing prevalence of Buddhist teachings despite the introduction and widespread adoption of Confucianism. This dynamic between Korea’s social classes would continue in the Koryŏ dynasty.

Koryŏ Dynasty (918-1392)

During the Koryŏ dynasty, Buddhism had amassed a significant popularity in the lives of Koreans for its unique spiritual offerings. Despite this, the Koryŏ Kings still highly emphasized the importance of all civilians as living by the morals as laid out per Confucianism, especially within the education system. Confucianism becoming more dominant within society at this time, largely due to the establishment of the civil service examination (Pusik 1075-1151). Sunjong initiated an Imperial Decree in Education which sought to create “positions for doctors in twelve
local provinces of the country” and eventually establish, “a higher education institution (Kukjagam) in the capital city of Kaesong” (Park and Weidman 10-11).

While Buddhism was a dominant force within society at this time, Confucianism was more widely accepted as the primary method for selecting those who would serve as government officials throughout the Koryŏ dynasty. These officials, in their high status roles, established Confucianism as a higher political force that gradually overshadowed the existing influence of Buddhism amongst the people (Brimacombe 2013).

In this way, the focus was still very much so on preparing young men for the civil service examinations. In conjunction with this however was the introduction of technical schools for law, calligraphy and accounting as separated by public and private institutes. Unfortunately, the social strength and value of education was diminished during the Koryŏ era beginning with the invasion from the northern Jurchen tribes and the of the Mongolians, and would continue until the fall of the dynasty (Connor 209-210).

One of the most well-known Confucian scholars Zhu Xi (1130-1200 CE), yielded enormous influence on educational culture during the Chosŏn dynasty. He achieved this status through establishing what was deemed the Four Books as a means of standardizing and simplifying the study of Confucian ethics to have it amount to what was most important to know for the civil service examination. He also believed that the value of learning lied in the absorption of only a few key texts rather than quantity of how many read. The classics in his mind were in existence to learn principle morals of Confucianism and would not need to exist were there an alternate way of receiving them (Oh 15-28). During this time education expanded through the addition of technical schools in specific trades, but it was also diminished in the stifling of the morals Buddhism taught and the influence of the Jurchen and Mongolian
invasions. The danger to the country’s prosperity the invasions threatened would provide reason to emphasize one standard system of education with one set of morals so as to better strengthen the country and be cautious against foreign powers. During the latter half of the Koryŏ dynasty, the tension between the previously existing Buddhist powers in conflict with the newly established Confucian ranks grew and eventually resulted in the adoption of Confucian-trained and focused individuals to lead the ranks of society as officials, with one of them being Yi Sŏnggye, the founder of the Chosŏn dynasty (Brimacombe 2013).

**Chosŏn Dynasty (1392-1910)**

Under the reign of Yi Sŏnggye, in the Chosŏn dynasty, as continued from the Three Kingdoms Period, there existed institutions in place to educate young men of the elite classes to be prepared to adequately serve in future government assigned roles. Reflecting the emerging influence of Neo-Confucian ethics on government practices and educational initiatives of the time, the school for the young aristocrats was known as Sŏnggyun’gwan (the National Confucian Academy). It also included local education academies that were regional and locally based such as the “Five Courses Academy”, Sahak (or Sabu haktang) and *hyanggyo* (County Schools) in the more rural areas. In addition, there were private schools such as The Twelve Assemblies and the *sŏwŏn* as well as libraries founded to match the high level of academia the government sponsored schools did. The *sŏdang* schools for those of the lower classes in rural areas also continued to increase from their success during Koguryŏ Kingdom (“Education” 334). Amid the continued heavy emphasis on Confucianism, all showings of Buddhist practices by the public were immediately stifled by the government (Park and Weidman 13).

A quintessential period for the growth of Confucian ideals, the Chosŏn dynasty introduced Yao and Shun who were chosen as sage kings to embody the moral order of
Confucian world view as established previously by the political theory of Neo-Confucianism. The maintenance of sagehood required adhering to the Taehak (Great Learning; Daxue in Chinese) which included the, “intellectual, spiritual, and moral development and cultivation of self” along with a duty to the family, state and world (Haboush 7-8). This led to the melding of duty based on divine forces and grounded social responsibility that would characterize the Chosŏn Dynasty, especially in regard to how people were trained and educated to fulfill their destined roles in society.

Confucian Influence on Education

The influence the ethical codes of Confucianism had on the dissemination of knowledge was massive. The teachings were a means of keeping society in harmony as guided by the three human relationships or the Three Bonds of subject and ruler, children and parents, and husband and wife (Kim and Pettid 49-50).

While becoming educated in Confucian classics would have seemed to be limiting towards one’s opportunity for self-empowerment because its adoption emphasized the needs of the state above those of individuals, there were numerous ways in which people of different classes in society used it to their benefit to become self-empowered. The ideal for self-fulfillment through education, along with the ideal of social mobility was supported within Neo-Confucianism.

Staples of Confucian ethics that were important in history which included respect for elders and studying hard can be found today. While educational attainment nowadays does not necessarily reproduce the same elite social class as constantly being in power, is still heavily tied
to the dream of upward social mobility and moving oneself up higher in the social ladder through educational achievement.

**Significance of the Civil Service Examination and Educational Culture**

The main intention of obtaining education was to obtain self-cultivation, social mobility, status and power in the hopes of achieving a position in high office, with the only way to do this being to pass the civil service examinations (Connor 210-213). In relation to this it was also regarded as the ultimate opportunity to be able to serve the country in this reproduction of family royalty lines. Evidence of education as being an end in and of itself is prevalent in the establishment of private schools and village study halls in the effort to become literate and knowledgeable in core classics. In the same regard, the development of these schools after the governmentally established ones may also point towards people not of the elite class wanting to catch up in way to their repertoire and become educated in the same things as they were to prove they could rival them in intelligence and skills, thus providing them with a way to rise beyond their social status as given by birth.

This continued with the creation of Hangul by King Sejong in 1443 at his academy, *Chiphyŏnjŏn* which was developed for scholars to engage in creative work, thus resulting in the creation of Hangul. Study in other subjects from literature to medicine were also encouraged to be studied (Park and Weidman 15). This demonstrates the way in which education was utilized as means to foster creativity and further develop society.

Yet the years 1495 to 1505 were unfortunate for education because the reigning King Yŏnsan closed down all higher educational institutions and killed distinguished scholars. The value for education was attempted to be brought back to life by King Chungjong in 1506 as he
implemented the repairing of the Shrine of Great Confucian Scholars and the building of academies (Park and Weidman 15). This demonstrates the significant value educated had secured in Korean society as a means of keeping society prosperous and it was not given up on even when its significance was threatened. The value and attempt to foster further contribute to the needs of the society was no more evident than in the emergence of the civil service examination system.

The civil service examination system holds a prominent place in Korea’s educational history in serving, “as a means of allocating power, privilege, and status—all closely associated with office holding—among members of the yangban aristocracy” (Seth 12). To gain yangban status was to be a reader of Chinese classics, a government official and a follower of the virtues prescribed in these texts (Oh 13-14). It is closely tied to the intense competition that exists in the college entrance examination today, and provides similar incentive for social prestige that still remains today.

In an article by examining historical records of the civil service exams during the Chosŏn dynasty, scholar Edward W. Wagner he describes that the civil service examination requirement was for mainly young men with an aristocratic heritage to obtain almost all High State Councilor and Censorate and the Office of Special Advisors positions. Thus, the exams are viewed as symbolic of the Chosŏn Dynasty policy and social structure through their reproduction of leaders from elite statuses. With this lies the question of whether those who succeeded in the exam and went on to serve in a high government position were truly talented and worthy of the role, or if it was the privilege they had in being born of a high class standing that gave them access to a position (Wagner 1-2). With the aim of providing an answer to this question, Wagner conducted a study of those who passed exams between 1776-1875, looked at rosters, genealogies, and local
gazetteers (Wagner 2-3). While evidence of favoritism towards Seoul-centered families, it was ultimately concluded that talent was the determining factor for those selected to be in government service, and everyone had the opportunity to advance socially and pass the exam, but it was difficult to accomplish for everyone. He concludes that ultimately the exam system contributed to dynasty longevity (Wagner 8).

Students preparing for the civil service examination were also held to strict ethical codes. The writings of one of the most prominent scholars that were recovered reveal a few of the rules students were expected to abide by:

“A scholar should have a definite purpose in mind in pursuing the great way to becoming a scholar, a statesman, and promoter of world peace.

A scholar should bear in mind that filial piety is the source of all good conduct and negligence of this cardinal virtue is the root of all evil.

A scholar should maintain the spirit of righteousness, which is completely above self-interest” (Park and Weidman 19).

This finding supports the idea of education reproducing class inequality and being reserved for those in the privileged classes, but it also demonstrates the openness and meaning of success for anyone in the name of passing the test and contributing to national livelihood, which is a meaning has the possibility of translating to today. There is likely hope associated with test taking and the social prestige as the reward for those who succeed for youth today. The writings reveal the strict teachings those who took the service exams had to live by, which were highly influenced by Confucian teachings. This would serve as the basis for the education system as supported by the government for the remainder of the Chosŏn dynasty. This particular means of
obtaining education bears some resemblance to the current system of the Korean college entrance examination system, in that it requires strict preparation and at the same time, in regards to social class, it provides the opportunity for one to elevate their social standing in society through hard work and dedication. Yet the fundamental difference lies in the core teachings contained in each system. In regards to the civil service examinations, there were ethical codes based on the morality of being that one was expected to learn and follow in addition to being knowledgeable on Confucian classics. The current college entrance exam in Korea is a test that relies no amount on moral teachings, or lessons based on the way in which students should conduct themselves in their daily lives. It is instead much more instrumental in use in that is designed to be an equalizer in society to allow anyone obtain a greater status and livelihood through future university and career opportunities upon doing well. There is not a deeper meaning of personal wisdom to be gained attached to preparing for the exam as there was during the Chosŏn period.

Confucian Education and Women

To better understand Confucianism’s impact on individual enlightenment in conjunction with its emphasis on serving the country’s needs, it is important to examine the ways in which women interacted with and interpreted the male-produced texts that emphasized living by the virtues of Confucianism.

First, the devastation towards women brought about by both the Japanese and Manchu invasions in which countless women were captured and raped greatly affected the way in which texts geared towards women were written. The sexual abuse of many women tampered the purity of the ideal women according to Confucian teachings which concerned the government at the time. This caused an even further emphasis of the ideal woman by Confucian virtues in texts to
divert attention away from the issue of the “dirty” women as caused by the invasions and build loyalty to country. The most prominent example of this was the distribution of the Tongguk sinsok samgang haengsil, which contained 717 accounts highlighting women who were considered exemplary in upholding expected virtues (Kim and Pettid 52-55). Despite the government’s emphasis on women following Confucian virtues, it is argued by Kim and Pettid that very few women realistically met the requirements for what was deemed the ideal woman.

A change then took place, while still aligned with core virtues of Confucianism, towards the valuing of the more practical aspects of women’s daily lives such as, “childrearing, management of the domestic sphere, and serving her husband” mainly within the upper class (Kim and Pettid 58-59). It is argued that with this the women likely used various Confucian texts to, “establish an autonomous and empowered space for women both within the domestic sphere and beyond” (Kim and Pettid 65).

Further classic Chinese texts that were utilized to facilitate this education of women were created during this era. Such one of these included the Samgang haengsiltto. Is illustration depicted the three social principles women were instructed to uphold, including faithful minister, filial son, and chaste woman. Because the vast majority of women during this time did not have the means of, nor was it thought appropriate, to learn to read and write Chinese script at an extensive or advanced level, the Ch’ŏnjamun, which contained one-thousand of the fundamental characters in Chinese arranged in groups of four, which allowed women to easily memorize them. Naehun, was used to train young girls on the ideal behavior of a woman which included the basics of moral conduct, proper speech and appearance and womanly tasks, and the expected roles of a woman once married including emulation of the model daughter to her parents-in-law, wife to her husband and mother to her children. The Yŏsasŏ and the Tongmong sŏnsŭp, provided
basic instruction on the expected behaviors of women through stories written with women in mind and the inclusion of notable historical stories in the history of China, along with supplementary biographies of distinguished women who acted as virtuous throughout their lives (Deulcher 257-258).

As Deuchler discusses, it was vital for women to be educated through works was upheld by the notion that, “the moral human being was molded by the teachings of the sages” (Deuchler 258). For women to fill their role in their relationships and demeanor as guided by historical Chinese philosophies, was essential to the overall harmony of society at the core of Confucianism.

While the education women received was meant to align them closely with the goals of the government and upper class in regards to the virtues of Confucianism, women of the upper class had the ability to carve out their own meanings of the texts they read and define their own course for the type of wives and mothers they wanted to be. While these women possessed the opportunity to be empowered, they came from a place of privilege that resulted after the Japanese and Manchu invasions that took advantage of numerous other women. The women of the lower classes were not likely to be literate and have access the texts that women of the upper class could. In the context of the Chosŏn era amidst foreign attacks, social standing played a major role in who benefitted from education.

Another occurrence during the Chosŏn dynasty were women who were not necessarily considered part of the royal class, but served as entertainers who lived in the same quarters as those of the upper class. One of the most well-known palace entertainers is Hwang Chini, for instance, who remains an iconic female figure in Korean history for her exceptional beauty,
talent and independent nature. They catered to male customers through their talents in composing literature as supported by their knowledge on Confucian classics. This gave them the ability to carve out their own space within what could be seen as their confinement as entertainers to the male gaze; their access to education through having close ties with the upper class allowed them the freedom to express their thoughts and feelings much more so than women of the lower classes.

Despite the Chosŏn dynasty being predominantly male-centered with regard to the yangban class and the practice of studying Confucian classics, women of different social status and resources also found a means of obtaining knowledge. The educational spectrum began to broaden with the rise of education for personal fulfillment, as seen with the female entertainers. However, demonstrating the idea of the spectrum of education, to learn and acquire knowledge during this time held a different purpose depending on one’s social status and gender. For the high classes, education meant the acquiring of better communication skills, and for the lower classes it meant gaining basic knowledge for everyday life. Alternatively, for men education was a means to achieve success in the public sphere and for women it was for them to be able to serve the men in their lives and family. To this day, women are still impacted by these traditional Confucian virtues, along with men, in the pressure put on them to succeed academically and in exams in order to be successful in their public lives and bring about family honor.

Development of Modern Education; from Late Chosŏn Dynasty (1880-1910) to Japanese Colonial Period (1910-1945)

In the hopes of furthering national development and strength as a country, Korea became more open to foreign influence on education, being heavily influenced by Japanese and American models of education. Both the English School (1883) and the Yugyŏngg Kongwŏn
(1886-94) became the first government established modern schools. Following this was the creation of private schools such as the Wonsan Academy (1883) and Ewha Women’s School (1886). An effort to educate women continued to be made during the Japanese occupation, along with men and women who were not of the elite class in general. The ideal of modern education was viewed as a way to attain “national prosperity” through the education of future heads of state, as declared by King Kojong in the “Kyoyuk ipkuk chosŏ” (1895). The decree also honed in on the value of wisdom, virtue and health in any educational path. Furthermore, the building of schools was a channel for maintaining strength in the face of imperialism by the Japanese before the turn of the twentieth century (“Education” 335). To further emphasize the opening of educational access for women and the lower classes during this point in history, this inclusion of modern education was often combined with Christianity teachings by mostly American missionaries. The meaning of education for the individual and their role in society became to give them the opportunity to be of equal standing and worth in comparison to others, a part of the New Women’s Movement, which became visible in Korea beginning in the 1920s. Going along with this, some women had the opportunity during the Japanese occupation to go abroad and learn skills in a preferred trade, allowing them to return and have greater participation and representation in society than ever before (Kwon 381-405).

This opening of Korea’s doors to other influences is the beginning of what its current education model is today. It allowed for the beginnings of utilizing education as a means for everyone regardless of social standing or family lineage to become educated in the name of bolstering Korea’s development and strength as it moved into the modern era which would prove to produce many hardships.
During Korea’s era of Japanese occupation beginning in 1910, a comprehensive education system was established. However, the bureaucracy in which the system was established under was comprised of all Japanese to serve the goals of the empire. Koreans were not permitted to gain an education past the elementary level per the restrictions of Korea being subordinate to Japan by the state. Furthermore, education that was provided to Koreans was done so to indoctrinate them into Japanese culture essentially forcing them to assimilate to it (Seth 19). The development of the Educational Ordinance of 1911 put into place two education systems, one for Japanese and one for Koreans, with the Korean one being described as “separate and unequal”.

This made it so Koreans could only complete a maximum of eight years of schooling whereas the Japanese could complete fourteen except for Koreans who were going to be trained to be civil servants. While private schools were established for Koreans, they were required to teach Japanese alongside Korean and have their curriculum approved by the Bureau of Education as stated in regulations issued in the “Regulations of Private Schools” in 1911. Reform to provide elementary students education was put in place by Minami Jiro in 1937, but it was not built fast enough and still took away “Korean ethnic sentiment”. Sŏdang, or traditional village schools remained the most common education systems for elementary school aged Korean children. It was still limiting in terms of equal access to education later in life when compared to those of Japanese descent, who were educated under a more modern educational system, making them more likely to secure a more ideal future (Seth 20-23). While the restricting social hierarchies based on family heritage and its limitations of providing equal education for all Koreans was limited, it was replaced by a socially equal but limited education for Koreans. What
had become a major source of power and influence in shaping the country had been used against them by making them subservient to Japan.

In regards to higher education, a plan for a Korean university to be established was put in place in 1922 but it ended up being a predominantly Japanese run school despite the promise of it being geared towards Koreans. Higher education for Koreans who were not of the elite class was also limited to skills that qualified them only for entry-level, lower career paths in society, such as areas in agriculture and fishing (Seth 24). Concerning women during this time in history, for those whom did not benefit from the opportunity to go abroad and mainly those of the lower classes, it was common for them to have little other options than to move to developing urban areas do factory work, which was often accompanied by demanding working conditions and treatment, including violence. Another devastating occurrence with regard to women of the lower classes at this time was the forcing of girls and women into sex labor by the Japanese military (Min 938-957). In this regard particularly pertaining women were disempowered without the ability to educate themselves. As Seth mentions, the frustration that resulted from the limitations to education put in place under Japanese rule served to set the stage for the enthusiasm for education in the coming years.

*Establishing a New Model: Education Practices Since the Korean War (1950- 1953)*

During the Korean War, the primary goal of was to provide education opportunity for all Korean students in the hopes of reclaiming Korean heritage after it had been threatened to become nonexistent in public practice since the beginning of the occupation by the Japanese. An American model for school year structure was adopted as a result of this initiative under the occupation of America, and literacy rose dramatically with the use of Hangul as well. Despite most educational facilities being ruined from the war, motivated efforts were made to rebuild and
education ceased to be put on hold. In the grand scheme, education for Koreans was viewed as a means to practice caution to foreign powers and was a means of reclaiming their power and dignity back after having it put in jeopardy by foreign powers for quite some time (Connor 215-216). The restoring of Korean heritage and power was the most important result of the aftermath of the Korean War. The ability to have control over the education of their people was one of the most symbolic representations of the restoration of power and Korean identity. This would serve as a defining motivation in the mass development of society and the education system that was to follow in the coming years.

After the agreement to halt the Korean War and the splitting of the North and South territories along the 38th parallel, the south experienced rapid economic growth and expansion of education at all levels. Numerous schools were established, and by 1975 Korea reached one of the highest levels of education in the world with literacy being at almost one-hundred percent. Government education positions were established, and higher education expanded. Teachers also began to be held in high esteem as education began to hold more and more prominence in relation to success in society (Connor 216-221).

The creation of a standard education system for all was based on the reclaiming of power that was lost for so many years under the control of foreign powers. It utilized as the primary force to exude power for Korea and thus was valued by many. In this era, rather than education being thought of as reserved for the elite few, it was considered everyone’s job to influence the future outcome of society by becoming educated and contributing to the general good.

The adoption of standardization of education was meant to provide social cohesion and make it widely available to all youth, eliminating privilege based on background in becoming formally educated. As Seth emphasizes, the focus was on, “bringing the general population up to
a shared standard of education rather than concentrating resources and efforts on creating a well-schooled elite” (Seth 4). While this initiative was designed to promote equality for all, a strain between the demand for higher education by countless citizens and the state’s formal policy to prevent too many highly-educated people emerged (Connor 216-221). Too many individuals wanted to achieve the feat of a higher education yet society could not realistically afford to have a high ratio of people becoming highly educated because then lower level jobs that contributed just as much to the flourishing of society would not be adequately filled. This fundamental problem, along with the high regard for becoming educated and succeeding in it based on its deeply-rooted significance in Korea’s past directly contributed to the host of issues with the state of contemporary education culture.

III. Issues and Problems in Contemporary Educational Culture and Society

As Korea moved into the contemporary era amidst rebuilding after the destruction of the Korean War and the splitting of the North and South territories became solidified, education underwent a mass transformation as well, which contributed to the system in place today.

Beginning with the American Occupation (1945-53), the standardization of education for all gave hope for children’s lives to be better than they were in the past through the promise of “universal education”. After the restructuring of the education system along with the focus on rebuilding nation, the wide availability of education contributed to the establishment of greater competition when it came to college, or a vocational track, as 82% of students are known to move onto post-secondary education after graduating from high school (Connor 215-221). With this emerging intense competition, which is still a problem today, numerous social issues arose out of this initiative early on in the establishment of South Korea.
Shadow Education and “Other” Schooling

In order to compete and qualify for the social prestige that comes with educational achievement in society, students and parents invest large amounts of time, commitment and money into acquiring extra schooling on top of general education in the form of private tutoring and institutes (Ablemann 97).

Private schools ease “middle-class anxieties about the maintenance of class status” and “offer a pedagogy of care and comfort”. In addition, because of the more relaxed nature of the school’s students feel more comfortable with the private schools in that they feel they ask questions or switch schools if they do not like the teacher. However, they are also seen by some parents as a hindrance to their children’s ability to study effectively on their own. If enrolled in an institute that uses a “learning in advance” method, or sonhaenghaksup, they have the opportunity of learning material earlier than in regular schools.

Yet it was found in a 2002 study by J Lee et al. that this method had little result on the outcome of grades than on a “positive academic attitude”. The institutes can thus be seen as a ‘sedative’ to cope with anxieties on educational achievement (Ablemann 97-98) This over-reliance on the institutes by parents and students, makes them feel as though they are being proactive education even if it has little effect on the retaining of knowledge by students. There is the concern that the institutes inhibit students stripping away their ability to studying for themselves and opportunity to delve further into satisfaction of learning for themselves (Abelmann 111-112). This removing of a passion for independent education and self-discovery as a result of the focus on rote memorization as influenced by the institutes cancels out the original intention of education in providing one with individual self-enlightenment for the exchange of being able to get ahead socially through doing well in school.
The UN Committee on the Rights of Children even took notice of the damaging “educational climate” of Korea and claimed that asserting that “early education” (chogi kyoyuk) violated the rights of South Korean children by contributing to severe stress at a young age. Unfortunately mothers are accused as the primary perpetrators of this issue because of their generally high participation in their children’s education (Ablemann 121).

The current way in which education is generally viewed for youth in Korea inhibits the value for the individual student to discover their passions and develop a strong sense of identity and self-esteem, directly contributing to the issue of the poor state of youth mental health in Korea as a result of the stress and limitations placed on them by their academic lives.

*College Entrance Examination System (Sunŭng)*

The entrance examination system in Korea is one of the primary sources of the intense stress and pressure placed upon students. With parents incredibly involved in their children’s education and its meaning holding as much prominence as determining one’s entire future resulting in what is termed “examination hell” by Michael J. Seth.

The exam has its roots in the civil service examinations during the Yi Dynasty because of the securement of a future in government service, which was a highly-revered position in society at the time. In an interview discussing the phenomena of the Sunŭng, Seth stated that, “Even if you weren’t attempting to enter into government service, you wanted to be a degree holder to maintain the status of your family.” Because of its ties with Confucian virtues which were highly emphasized by the elites of society, becoming educated was “a means to moral authority” (“South Korea’s Testing Fixation”).
Immense amount of pressure is placed on high school students to do well on the college entrance exam that typically occurs on one day in November annually. It is not uncommon for mothers to go to Buddhist temples for multiple times leading up to the exam date and pray for their children to do well. Because each student only has one opportunity to take the test. If they do not do well or wish to achieve a higher score, they must wait a whole year to be able to retake it. Emphasizing how serious the exam is taken, businesses and law enforcement accommodate students on the day of the exam. Many businesses opening later to allow traffic to be less congested and allow students to get to their testing site on time. Police can also provide emergency escort services if needed to ensure students get to the exam on time (Connor 218-221). This demonstrates the high value for academic achievement in Korea currently and the all-or-nothing mindset that students are encouraged to have towards the exam, which can be emotionally damaging for the students if they do not do as well as expected on the exam. Issues also arise in the intense value of the exam when it was revealed that college did not necessarily secure a good job for graduates because the market was highly competitive (Connor 218). This competition in education and eventually the job market makes it extremely difficult to succeed by one’s own or one’s family’s standards.

Correlation Between Academic Pressure and Youth Mental Health and Suicide

Korea’s high school students are known to work incredibly hard in their academics, through being pushed to do so by their parents and, as mentioned previously, do not have the opportunity to have a leisure-filled childhood as most children do throughout the world (Connor 218). Stress caused by academics has been found in fairly psychological studies to be a unique link to youth suicide in South Korean comparison with links to youth suicide in other countries. The major stressors for suicidal adolescents in a 2002 study (Jung et al. 521-532) included,
“difficulties with career choice, low academic achievement, amount of academic work and lack of rest”, with a common trigger for suicide attempts being less than satisfactory results on the national university entrance exam in a 2000 study (Kim and Chun 127-152). Yet a 2006 longitudinal national study (Moon 143-158) revealed that, “secure attachment with parents was associated with the lower level of suicidal impulse stemming from academic stress among middle school students” (Lee et al., 534). This reflects the amount of influence parents have in the overall wellbeing of their children. A lack of positive encouragement by parents could very easily affect the child and make them feel overly stressed and unable to meet the expectations of their parents.

A relation between a student’s general satisfaction with school environment and suicide has also been found. A 2007 study revealed that, “academic stress, negative relationships with teachers and negative peer relationships increased the likelihood of suicidal ideation among high school students” (Chung et al. 2003). However, along the same lines as the studies linking academic stress and suicide, an additional study produced the finding that a positive relationship with teachers reduced suicidal tendencies in male students (Kim et al. 2007) (Lee et al. 536). This also goes back to how much parents also affect the overall wellbeing of students. Because of the strict enforcement of respect for elders in Korean culture, it is expected that young people would value meeting the expectations of the authority figures in their lives quite much. It is clear to see how the overbearingness and disappointment in regards to learning material or a test score by parents and teachers can easily contribute to a highly negative self-view and value of themselves, thus making anxiety disorders, depression, and suicidal tendencies more likely to occur.
The rigid opportunities for success students have within the system can also be seen as limiting to their self-view. Because the college entrance exam which is taken one day out of the year carries the weight of determining one’s future, any type of mistake can severely impact their plans for the future. It is quite difficult to stand out amongst the intense competition for spots in universities, which is the ultimate goal for many as it is highly desired and viewed as one of the top determiners of social status, and this contributes to the vast majority feeling like they are failures if they are not the top students for admission into university.

*Cultural Representations of Education and Popular Media: Film*

The analysis of films taking place within the education system and in schools in Korea provide a reflection of contemporary issues, especially in regard to youth culture and the state of morality shown towards students in regard to education revealed in the outcomes of the plot and character growth. Here I discuss general issues and characteristics of changing school environments in modern Korea as depicted in the films, *The Harmonium in My Memory* (1999) and *See You After School* (2006), which both took place at different time periods within Korea’s history.

To provide a brief background on one of such films that depicts various aspects of students’ lives and the issues prevalent in schools is *Yŏgogoedam* (1998-2009) series of films, which is one of the most famous Korean films depicting school life, set in a girls’ high school. The series depicts the negative aspects of contemporary educational culture through the personification of spirits of past students who died from the conflicts surrounding peer conformity and violence (“Whispering Corridors (Film Series)”).

*The Harmonium in My Memory* (1999)
The Harmonium in My Memory (Nae Maŭmŭi P’unggŭm) directed by Lee Young-jae, set in the rural 1960s, provided an alternate view of teaching and an education culture than that of what would be expected nowadays. The film follows a young school teacher Kang Suha as he moved from Seoul to a village school in Kangwŏn Province, and an older student in the elementary school, Yun Hongyŏn as she develops an intense crush on him. The students in the school are generally unmotivated and lag behind in national education standards, largely attributed to the environment of the rural area in which most of the children’s parents are not literate themselves with it being only several years since the conclusion of the Korean War.

The strict, long-established teaching methods of the older teachers at the school are contrasted and sometimes come into conflict with the gentler and kind style brand-new teacher Suha and another new teacher and his initial love interest, Yang Únhŭi display. On the first day with her class, Únhŭi states to her students that scholastic achievement is not everything and the importance of all student’s unique differences and interests. Similarly, Suha has a friendlier demeanor towards the students than the older teachers in the school and recognizes his shortcomings throughout his first job as a teacher. As he continues to get to know his students, particularly Hongyŏn, he remarks that it teachers should learn from students. While no inherent competition within the students is depicted throughout the film, there is a depiction of the hierarchical relationship between students and teachers in which the students must learn information and obey the teacher at all times. The teacher is not necessarily a friend or a relatable figure for students, but a figure of status that must be respected per the culture of hierarchy that is very much still prevalent in Korea. The most important value that then stems from school relationships is the ability to see one another, both students and teachers as equals, and not in competition with one another, but and growing as people and learning together.
Statements such as this and images of more inexperienced and gentler teachers are refreshing in comparison to the contemporary image of the all-knowing, strict teacher in Korean society. There is more of an opportunity for both the student and teacher to see one another on the same level and not have a fear of teachers that could result in the limiting of knowledge and lessons gained. At the same time, it also highlighted the challenges faced in opportunity for those brought up in the rural areas of Korea and lack of equal standard education to those in the cities during a time the country was still in the process of rebuilding itself after the war.

*See You After School* (2006)

The film *See You After School* (*Panggwahu Oksang*) directed by Lee Suk-Hoon focuses on transfer student Nam Kungdal who is known for his “bad luck” and has trouble fitting in at any school he goes to. He begins at a new school and after receiving advice from an old friend he finds out attends the school, Yŏnsŏng, he decides to provoke a fight with the school bully Chegu to prove his dominance to his peers and prevent himself from seeming weak and susceptible to getting pushed around by other students. This results in Jae-Goo challenging him to meet on the school’s rooftop at the end of the day for a fight. Kungdal then goes through the rest of the school day attempting to do whatever he can to get out of the fight, both succumbing to bullying acts himself, and realizing and resolving his wrongs by the end of the film.

In the film, competition and the exclusion that results from not meeting the standards of fitting in are the fundamentals of the rigid social hierarchy within the school. Kungdal’s struggle of having “bad luck” at fitting in because he is different is representative of the stringent pecking order Korean youth are subjected to throughout their time in school. The film’s use of comedy with drama seems to both mock and simultaneously deliver a message on the deterioration of morals that can occur as a result of an over-valuing of ranking systems with the constant attempt
at fitting a mold for what an ideal or popular student is that it is acceptable to be hurtful to others in the process. This is evident in the prevalence of bullying in the school by Chegu and his gang and the way in which Kungdal knowingly commits moral wrings in both stealing and bullying others himself. Despite establishing himself as a hero amongst the “school losers” throughout the day by standing up against Chegu. The scene in which he beats up a student who is picked on at the command of Chegu’s gang with the promise of not having to fight him anymore and becoming a part of the gang, serves as his fall from grace and succumbing to cruel acts to win social status and protection from being at the bottom of the pecking order.

The consequences of the hierarchical-based status culture of Korea is also evident in the scene in which Kungdal’s teacher begins to verbally and physically attack one of the students in the class under the conviction of ultimate and power teachers hold in the school system and the respect students are obligated to show to them no matter what. In this scene, Kong-Dahl stands up to the teacher, trying to defy his authority and get detention to get out of going to the rooftop. In his spiel in front of the class he objects the high standards students are held to in school by stating that getting good grades doesn’t automatically and that students should be recognized for who they are as people. He seems to further convey in his objection that teachers should not treat their students as human being rather than seeing them as students they can make follow their every whim, and should instead act as role models. Instead they demonstrate that abuses of power are acceptable to exert dominance and a high social standing, which ends up spreading to the students and influencing the way they decide to treat one another.

In reflecting upon the above discussion of films in relation to what the meaning of education in Korea is and its subsequent strengths and consequences, it is helpful to return to the basic idea as mentioned in the beginning of what the meaning of education is in the
contemporary world. London-based researcher and educator, Mark K. Smith discusses and analyzes just this with a fresh-take on the question seemingly fit for a contemporary world. Contrary to the behavioral definition that is so closely tied to it as a social institution, and separate from the closely related idea of “schooling” as he states, he chooses to define education as, “the wise, hopeful and respectful cultivation of learning undertaken in the belief that all should have the chance to share in life” (Smith 2015). The films depict this ideal of education in that they humanize the main characters through showing them as equals to everyone else. While a hierarchical or competitive atmosphere is present in each, what ultimately prevails as a takeaway message is the emphasis that the socially instrumental definition of education is not what is most important, but that it is the more philosophical definition of individual growth and opportunity to take part in life equally as the result of education.

IV. Supplementary Examination of Education Culture: Qualitative Interview Study

As a supplement to the historical and contemporary analyses completed on Korean education, a case study was completed in the form of qualitative interviews with both Korean and American and other international students on their thoughts and experiences toward education. A preliminary watching of recent documentary films on Korean high school culture was done as well to provide the contemporary context of the reality of what students experience in their respective educational environments in Korea.

A Display of Contemporary Korean High School Education Culture: Documentary Films

In preparation for the interview study, documentaries on contemporary education culture in Korea that highlighted the issues with it were viewed. This assisted the development of the interview study by providing a means to examine very recent on-site research done by
filmmakers in the form of documentaries on what life is like for Korean high schoolers. It provided an overview of the current issues with education as a platform for the creation of the qualitative interview format and questions. These films included the short form documentaries on that focused on different aspects of Korean high school as related to education. They include the unofficially titled short film (currently in post-production), *A Documentary Film on Korean High School* (2012) by Kelley Katzenmeyer, short film *ExamiNation* (2011) by Judy Suh, and the full-length film, *Reach for the SKY* (2015) by Steven Dhoedt and Wooyoung Cho.

*A Documentary Film on Korean High School* is a short film that portrays the pressures placed on students to fit a status quo and compete with their peers in school throughout their adolescence in high school. It focuses on the pressures they face socially including academic performance and fitting standards of beauty. Through recorded conversations between high schoolers and interviews with them, along with the inclusion of foreign students and teachers, both an insider and outsider view of this aspect of Korean culture is expressed in the film. The filmmakers’ friendship as an in-group member of the group through her being a student herself allows for an accurate depiction of life in Korean high schools.

*ExamiNation* then focuses on the rigors of high school as related specifically to preparing for the CSAT (Sunûng). The filmmaker follows a female high school student by the name of Bitna Hwang on a typical day of school. She expresses her views on the many aspects that would be deemed issues such as the lack of encouragement by the school or government to maintain their wellbeing through sleeping and exercising well, and an overemphasis on studying to prepare for the college entrance examination. While she does acknowledge the problems with education in Korea, Bitna expresses a free-spirited attitude with a view of her environment as a normal part of life, and the entrance exam as a rite of passage. The filmmaker ends with the
pondering of whether the sacrifices Bitna and other Korean high schoolers make for their education are worth it in the end.

The documentary *Reach for the SKY* documents the countdown to the 2014 CSAT (Sunŏng) in Korea through the stories of multiple high school students that focuses on various aspects around preparation for the exam. These include outside tutoring and exam preparation and its role in the private education sector. The role of the mock Sunŏng exam and its use to predict university admission along is also depicted. Religion and its relation to praying for a good score and ease tension on the exam is shown as well. Seth’s characterization of the “national obsession” Korea has with education and preparation for the exam is supported and shown in this film. It carries a bleak and ominous tone throughout, but also one of hope in the dream of students to do well on the exam and get into the university of their dreams.

The long days, exaction and stress that students feel, along with the pressures they face from their teacher and parents, and competition with peers are also present and through visuals on the screen. The film ends with a questioning of what the value in the test is through reflections form two of the students who took the exam (one who did well and the other who did not). Through this the film focuses on the dynamic opinions currently on Korean equation culture. Not all benefit the same way from it, or views its meaning in the exact same way. While the filmmakers clearly represent the issues present in it, it does not necessarily take the side of criticism or offer a clearly defined solution or suggestion to reducing the pressures placed on students to succeed.
Exploring Degrees of Pressure: ASU Interviews on Educational Experiences

Study Overview

A qualitative interview study on student’s attitudes and experiences with education was conducted between from March 17th- 24th at Arizona State University’s Tempe campus. A total of thirteen Korean graduate students in Master’s and PhD programs and four undergraduate American and other international students in Bachelor’s degree programs were interviewed as part of the study. The short title of this study was ASU Cross-Cultural Education Study so as to contain as little bias as possible in what was being asked of participants.

Students were recruited through the reaching out to faculty within the School of International Letters and Cultures and Korean cultural clubs as organizations at Arizona State University. Each one-on-one interview took approximately 30- 45 minutes and participants were compensated with $25.00 at the conclusion of the interview for their time and contribution. Basic demographic information including program(s) of study, academic standing, exchange student status, gender, country of origin and country in which the majority of education was completed was collected prior to the interview meeting times through a Google Form in which all interested participants were asked to fill out via email. A total of thirteen open-ended questions were asked of the interviewees and categorized by theme, which included questions on educational background, personal views and experiences, and a reflection on education culture, all dependent on their country of origin and where they had completed the majority of their education. Questions for American and international students were nearly the exact same questions with the questions for Korean students, with the exception of it being modified to fit educational experiences within America or another country - most notably the question regarding the
experience taking the respective college entrance exam (see Appendix A and B for the full list of interview questions).

*Study Background and Objectives*

The purpose of this study was to examine 1) the phenomenon of “education fever”, the national obsession with education, which has emerged due to various historical and social processes in South Korea and 2) the degree of pressure placed on Korean students to succeed academically and get accepted into one of the nations’ top three most prestigious universities: Seoul University, Korea University and Yonsei University (acronym of SKY) (Seth 2002).

The primary question that was sought to be answered in this study was to determine the degree of pressure Korea’s education culture currently places on its students to succeed academically. This was done through conducting interviews including a series of open-ended question that seek to get at experiences with the education culture of participants with the aim of also discovering the most determining factors that contribute to this pressure and its impact on students’ self-image, esteem and overall mental health. A further objective was to supplement these findings through interviews with American students and possibly other international students in order to provide a context in which to compare the education cultures across countries and their effects on students.

Past studies in conjunction to this study include Sarah V. Makenzie’s observation and discussion with students in China about their views on their education culture, which like Korea, is also known for being rigorous and competitive (Mackenzie 2006). Another study was done by Laura-Lee Kearns that examined marginalized high school students’ thoughts and feelings on their school life and standardized testing (Kearns 2011). This research contributes to existing knowledge on South Korea’s education culture and the dynamics of its effects on young people.
as students. There is not a large body of research on this topic from a Western perspective, so this study will help bring further awareness to it and hopefully inspire future research endeavors that can seek to build upon these findings.

**Research Findings**

The conversations and the answers provided by all participants interviewed were quite beneficial in that ideas on education culture based on contemporary analyses were confirmed as well as new insights gained.

Amongst all Korean participants, there was a clear unifying sentiment that education highly valued by all Koreans, no matter what who one is or what their socioeconomic status is. For instance, one participant expressed that, “all groups are the same, all attitudes are the same in their belief that education is important for everyone’s life, all think it is important until early twenties” (Female, Interview #6). There was also a commonality between the Korean participants that there are issues in the education system that related to both inequality and the opportunity for achievement in education. The sentiment also existed that this inequity is existent in the country’s’ deeply rooted hierarchical culture. In addition, it was expressed that the concern regarding overemphasis on memorization in relation the college entrance exam as essentially determining one’s life and future career are not easily solved.

Amongst the American and other international students interviewed, each of whom were either American or had been educated mostly in America, there was the general view that American education is flawed in its tied to economic achievement and not adequately measuring students’ intelligences based on their true potential. Whilst the issues in each countries’ respective education system are similar, the difference seemed to be that in Korea, education simply matters so much more and the issues are so much more magnified due to its small size as
a country and the lack of opportunities for all. While educational attainment is of course valued and emphasized in the United States it is not entirely dependent on one’s future as is in Korea because of the large size of the country. In support of this, a participant stated, “[I] believe that it is not the people themselves that are so influenced by the desire to succeed in academics, but the societal factors surrounding them as to why it is important” and the participant then gave an example along the lines of Koreans were in another environment that wasn’t so small, resulting in competition, they would not care as much about education to the extent of it being a significant pressure (Female, Interview #6).

In addition to this finding, multiple students touched upon the idea that the pressure put to succeed academically in high school, specifically in preparations for the college entrance examination hindered their focus and value for education once they enter university. Another participant stated, that in high school, students, “Could not do anything, (in reference to the lack of the ability of students to do study and do what they like) so in university, once got there, [they] did not care”. Additionally, she stated that, “Before age of 18 [students have] no experience to make decision of life path and, “after graduating HS the mindset is to not study [because] university important for entering society” (Female, Interview #2). This conveys reinforces the idea that there is a significant amount of pressure placed on students, so much so that it causes them to conceive a different meaning of education that is solely instrumental-based (to obtain a career after the conclusion of university) rather than one based in individual enlightenment.

Going along with this, while the amount of pressure Korean students explicitly expressed they faced varied, they all expressed that they worked hard in school to prepare for the Sunŭng, with multiple participants reflecting on their long daily schedules in high school. There seemed
to be an acceptance of it as a normal part of their life, without too much resent toward it.

Twenty-nine percent of participants mentioned a long school schedule when asked about their preparations for the CSAT (Sunûng). One participant stated that, “high students [in Korea] study more than 15 hours a day” (Male, Interview #11). While some did use words such as “turmoil” (Female, Interview #6) or the like to describe their experience preparing for Sunûng, most mainly characterized it as difficult and with the explanation of the problems with it, but did not harbor exceptionally negative views on it.

The idea of “education fever” by Michael Seth was supported to an extent in that most participants in the Korean sample of participants emphasized the importance of education to everyone and the dedication others and themselves put into succeeding. It was also further supported in comparison to the American and other international students’ responses in that it was clear American students do not have nearly the same amount of pressures or inclination to succeed academically as Koreans do.

*Study Limitations and Future Implications*

While this study held a strong correlation to the previously researched knowledge on the pressures prevalent in the Korean education system today, the study was hindered in its limited representative participant sample and study design.

In relation to the sample of the interviewees, due to time constraints, they were all limited to students at Arizona State University. It would be assumed that those who are currently pursuing a college degree at the undergraduate or graduate level would hold different opinions than those who are currently do not. Since a main question in the study was regarding college
entrance examinations and attitude toward them, it would be beneficial to interview current high school students of either American or Korean nationality.

Another aspect of the participant pool in relation to the Korean students interviewed that goes along with this that may have limited the chance for a more diverse set of answers is in regards to the Korean student population being primarily in their mid-twenties all through their fifties and having a set career path in mind. In addition, they all came to the U.S. and are fluent in English, giving them a greater world view, or ability to see their culture from the outside, as opposed to Koreans who may not necessarily be fluent in another language or have traveled outside of Korea before. In addition, because of this greater world view, they may be more inclined, or easily primed into giving criticism on the issues of Korean education culture. If this study were replicated in the future, it would be beneficial if this was taken into consideration, and Koreans who have not left Korea and are not fluent in another language could be interviewed. This would of course require relocation, translation assistance and a degree of Korean language proficiency.

In relation to the interviews conducted with the American and other international students, it was difficult to see the value in the responses provided, given the very small sample size of four. Given that this is a study done from a Western point of view, the study could have possibly been done without the inclusion of a comparative group of people who are not Korean in nationality, or that have been educated primarily in Korea. A final conclusion to this could have possibly been formed had more American and other international students been interviewed in order to see how diverse their responses and activities toward education in the U.S. or their home country would have been. While it may not necessarily need to match the number of
Korean participants, if the study were replicated, it would be ideal to interview a greater number or non-Korean students.

V. Conclusion

To conclude, this paper sought to examine educational culture in Korea in light of what can be perceived as contemporary issues surrounding the inequalities in access to education and the competition and pressure placed upon students to succeed academically. Another key aspect to this argument was the exploration of the meaning of education in Korea, whether for improving the functions of society, or for individual growth or knowledge, the methodology began with an overview of education throughout Korea was provided. Next an overview was supplied looking at current educational phenomena in Korea that can be viewed as social problems. Films and documentaries were then analyzed with the intent to survey depictions of the environment within current school culture in Korea. Lastly, a series of qualitative interviews were administered to examine the extent to which the idea of a pressure-filled academic environment is a norm in the country.

It is clear that education holds a strong significance to Koreans based on the development of its culture throughout history. Taking into consideration the interaction of historical and contemporary research completed and the interview study administered, the phenomenon of “education fever” does hold true. It appears to be determined by individual environmental factors, however, meaning that one is not necessarily predetermined to be faced with a great amount of pressure to succeed academically.

It is my hope that this discourse could open up for further discussion of education as a dynamic aspect of Korean culture and society from a Western perspective. I intended to do so
through a redesign and re-administration of the qualitative interview study and further examination of the historical and contemporary processes that make up the meaning of education culture in Korea. While the issues in education that are prevalent in Korea, along with its inherent strengths, are not resolvable in a short amount of time, a step in the right direction can be made through discourse such as the undertaking of this research, and an attempt to if not seek a definite solution, to at the very least understand gain a better understanding of it.


The Harmonium in My Memory (내 마음의 풍금). Directed by Lee Young-jae, Dawoori Entertainment, 1999.


Appendix A. ASU Cross Cultural Education Study, Interview Questions – Korean Students

ASU Cross Cultural Education Study

Interview Questions – Korean Students

Educational Background

1. Why did you choose to go into the field of study that you are in now?
   a. How much do you think your education in Korea influenced this decision?
2. About how many years have you completed your education in Korea, as well as the U.S.?
3. Have you completed your education in any other countries besides Korea and the U.S.?
   a. In which countries and for what amount of time?
4. What is the highest level of education your parents have completed?
5. What factors influenced you to study in the U.S.?
   a. What influenced you to study specifically in Arizona and ASU?

Personal Views and Experiences

6. What do you consider to be the meaning of education? (How would you define education?)
   a. Do you think this definition relates to your decision to pursue your current field of study? How so?
   b. Do you think this relates to your decision to study in the U.S.? How so?
7. On a scale of 1 to 10, how important is it for you to succeed academically, with 1 being very little to 10 being very much?
8. On a scale of 1 to 10, how difficult do you feel it is to succeed academically in Korea, with 1 being very easy and 10 being very difficult? Feel free to elaborate on why you think this is.
9. Did you take the CSAT (수능)? If so, what was your experience like with it (Kearns 117-18)? (Reflect on another college entrance exam if did not take CSAT).
   a. What did you do to prepare for the test?
   b. How did you feel before the test (Kearns 117-18)?
c. Was the test similar or different from what you learned in your regular classes?
   How so? (Kearns 117-118)?

d. Is there anything you would change about the test (Kearns 117-18)?

10. Did you take advantage of outside tutoring at any time during your education to do well in your classes or prepare for the CSAT (Sunūng)?
   a. Why did you choose or not choose to do so?
   b. Looking back do you think it made a difference in your academic performance?

Reflection on Education Culture

11. How would you describe the general attitude toward education in Korea?
   a. What is the attitude of your family and peers toward education?
   b. How do you feel about it?

12. From your point of view, what do you think are the biggest strengths of the education system and attitude toward education in Korea (Mackenzie 2006)?
   a. Do you feel as though these have helped you get to where you are now in your education? In what ways?

13. Going along with this, what do you think are the biggest weaknesses of the education system and attitude toward education in Korea (Mackenzie 2006)?
   a. Are there any changes you would make if you had the power to do so to improve it (Mackenzie 2006)?
Appendix B. ASU Cross Cultural Education Study, Interview Questions – American and Other International Students

ASU Cross Cultural Education Study

Interview Questions – American & Non-Korean International Students

Educational Background

1. Why did you choose to go into the field of study that you are in now?
   a. How much do you think your education in (the U.S. / your home country) influenced this decision?

2. About how many years have you completed your education in (the U.S. / your home country)?

3. Have you completed your education in any other countries besides (the U.S. / your home country)?
   a. In which countries and for what amount of time?

4. What is the highest level of education your parents have completed?

5. What factors influenced you to study in Arizona and ASU / the U.S.?
   a. If applicable: What influenced you to study specifically in Arizona and ASU?

Personal Views and Experiences

6. What do you consider to be the meaning of education? (How would you define education?)
   a. Do you think this definition relates to your decision to pursue your current field of study? How so?
   b. Do you think this relates to your decision to study in (Arizona and ASU / the U.S.)? How so?

7. On a scale of 1 to 10, how important is it for you to succeed academically, with 1 being very little to 10 being very much?
8. On a scale of 1 to 10, how difficult do you feel it is to succeed academically in (the U.S. / your home country), with 1 being very easy and 10 being very difficult. Feel free to elaborate on why you think this is.

9. What was your experience like with the (SAT / College Entrance Examination in your country) (Kearns 117-18)?
   a. What did you do to prepare for the test?
   b. How did you feel before the test (Kearns 117-18)?
   c. Was the test similar or different from what you learned in your regular classes? How so? (Kearns 117-118)?
   d. Is there anything you would change about the test (Kearns 117-18)?

10. Did you take advantage of outside tutoring at any time during your education to do well in your classes or prepare for the (SAT / College Entrance Exam in your home country)?
    a. Why did you choose or not choose to do so?
    b. Looking back do you think it made a difference in your academic performance?

Reflection on Education Culture

11. How would you describe the general attitude toward education in (the U.S. / your home country)?
    a. What is the attitude of your family and peers toward education?
    b. How do you feel about it?

12. From your point of view, what do you think are the biggest strengths of the education system and attitude toward education in (the U.S. / your home country) (Mackenzie 2006)?
    a. Do you feel as though these have helped you get to where you are now in your education? In what ways?

13. Going along with this, what do you think are the biggest weaknesses of the education system and attitude toward education in (the U.S. / your home country) (Mackenzie 2006)?
    a. Are there any changes would you make if you had the power to do so to improve it (Mackenzie 2006)?