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INTRODUCTION



Encounter of East Asian educational tradition with western modernity: The Korean Case

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The idea of modernity has been a *problematic* concept throughout the twentieth century, not only in the *self-understanding of the West* where the idea originated, let's say, with the Enlightenment spirit of the eighteenth century, but also in the historical consciousness of the non-western world which suffered from the colonial rule of modern European imperialism since it started in the eighteenth century. This tendency becomes intensified and sharpened with the postmodern turning of the discourse in cultural theory into so-called post-colonialism, which is often said to have originated with Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978). Post-colonialism as a field of study is usually concerned with the cultural legacy of modern western colonialism, questioning and reinventing the manner in which a culture is being viewed, as well as challenging the modernist narratives, such as universal norms or progress, expounded by the West during the colonial era (Loomba, 1998, p. 12). What seems to be generally agreed upon among highly varied lines of the post-colonial thinkers, thereby being called post-colonialism *as a perspective*, is that 'both the "metropolis" and the "colony" were deeply altered by the colonial process' (19). This means that the colonies played a constitutive role in the emergence and development of the metropolitan European psyche, as *the other* of its being. On the other hand, this also means that the imposed or imported form of modernization in the colonies has never been a simple, one-way 'incorporation into universal norms defined by western ideas and practice of modernity' (Lee, 1997, p. 1); there were always colonial dynamics as ambivalent, indeterminate, or negotiated in the complex forms of resistance. In other words, there has been globally pervasive dependency between imperial rulers and colonized subjects in the historical formation of their cultural identities in the colonial process of modernization.

This complex picture of post-colonial assumptions can lead us into two *educationally* interesting yet challenging insights. First, it allows us to notice the possibility of a conceptual disassociation between 'modernity' and 'western hegemony' in understanding the phenomenon of global modernization. This means that the process of modernization in the non-western ex-colonies does not necessarily imply the perpetuation of the western hegemony, as many Marxist thinkers often presuppose by equating modernization with westernization. For westernization does not need to be *the* aim of modernization; the multi-forms of modernization remain as a possibility as a political, social, and cultural movement in different regions of non-western societies. Secondly, the post-colonial awareness of the globally pervasive interdependence between the colonizer and the colonized, or the West and the rest, in the constitution of their respective cultural identities or selfhood, suggests a possibility for us to conceive so-called *inter-cultural* learning and communication in pursuit of the de-colonization of our modern subjectivity in the hybrid form of subjectivities, which can disrupt any binary oppositions between Europeans and the others. Yet, as many post-colonial theorists warn us, this possibility of intercultural

learning should be regarded with a special caution, given the complexities and differences in the historical conditions where the process of colonization/de-colonization has taken place across the globe since the eighteenth century (Loomba, 1998, 19).

Here is the place where this special issue may play a constructive role by contributing to the discourse of intercultural learning and communication from the post-colonial perspective. The issue is intended to be part of a larger project of exploring the idea of so-called 'East Asian form of modernity' to see if it can be a plausible theoretical construct in understanding the educational culture in this region, which has had a troubled history with the West in their process of modernization since the nineteenth century. With this attempt, it tries to avoid the *essentialist* approach or what Kwame Anthony Appiah named 'nativism' (1991), as shown in the so-called 'Asian values discourse' that received global attention out of the economic booms in the region particularly in the 1980s. Adopting a *historical* perspective with critical eyes, this issue attempts to understand and show how people in the region as the (ex-)colonized have *actually experienced* the modernization process, especially in the practice of modern schooling. Here, the key concern is to see a possibility of developing cultural interpretations *from within* or the self-representation of the colonies about their own educational experiences and practices. I think this can be described as the first step of understanding themselves as human agents in charge of their collective destiny in shaping their future, free from the oppositional binary framework of a colonial legacy, while not falling back into one's own cultural particularism.

Modern Korea has gone through a rapid historical transition to modernization in her economic, political and cultural development for the last 60 years. It is widely acknowledged that Korean's high educational zeal played a pivotal role in the success of this transition. This educational zeal in modern Korea can be safely characterized as East Asian, common to most of East Asian countries with the humanistic tradition of Confucianism. In other words, educational zeal can be considered an educational phenomenon as a response to an East Asian adoption of western modern education.

However, the very *nature of the East Asian-ness* in modern education in Korea has been more complicated than it appears due to the historical scars left by Japanese colonialism on Korean society from 1910 to 1945. Until the late nineteenth century, Korea was a pre-modern dynasty called Joseon with a strong political ideology of neo-Confucianism. Thus, the East Asian tradition *indigenous to Korea*, especially neo-Confucianism, has occupied a unique place in the formation of Korean modernity, as a source of *moral psyche* deep in the minds of Korean people against both Japanese colonialism and western individualism. Even if highly problematized by early modernizers in Korea, thanks to its very hierarchical and authoritarian elements in its ideology, neo-Confucianism as a basis for everyday morals of the common people in Korea was defended and employed as a cultural resource by other lines of modernizers in mobilizing and consolidating the Korean people for the purpose of promoting Korean nationalism to fight back against the imperial colonizers from abroad. This means that the historical conditions, i.e. the political threat of imperialism from abroad, led progressive intellectuals and people in colonized Korea to take an *ambiguous* attitude toward the western ideal of the Enlightenment mediated by Japanese colonialism. This attitude was carried over to the postwar period of modern education in Korea, which, at least in its practice, if not in its system, has been shaped as a messy constellation from two conflicting inner forces in the minds of Korean people, namely, resistance to modernity with the memory of Japanese imperialism on the one hand, and attraction to (idealized western) modernity detached from Japanese imperialism on the other hand.

Given the recent postmodern critiques of the western Enlightenment from various lines, modern Korea's ambivalent attitude toward western modernity looks like a positive heritage from the unfortunate Korean history under the Japanese colonial rule. Thus, to take a look at how the East Asian traditional thoughts and practices on education have clashed, negotiated and interacted with modern thoughts and pedagogies from the West throughout the process of modernization in Korea will be a good chance to understand the ways in which modern Koreans have understood their educational practices and cultures, as well as to explore an alternative perspective to the troubled practice of the scientific model of teaching and learning dominant in modern schooling.

To help readers better understand the historical contexts in which the articles in this special issue are addressed, let me briefly introduce the modern history of Korea from the late nineteenth century to the present. Having been a neo-Confucian society called Joseon dynasty (1392–1879) for about 500 years, Korea was forced to open its ports in 1876 by Japan, the first Asian country that initiated the rapid modernization of its society modeled after the West. To announce its sovereignty as an independent modern state as a response to the frequent foreign interferences of Japan, Russia, US, and others, the Joseon dynasty turned into the Korean Empire, newly established in 1879. Then it attempted to reform the country through a few radical system changes toward modernization, including so-called the *Gabo* reform of 1894. But the Empire was too weak to protect the country from Japanese interference. Having been forced to make unequal treaties, it fell in the end into Japanese colonial rule in 1910, which lasted until the end of World War II in 1945.

Another culturally more specific context is a heated and ideologically divisive controversy for the last 30 years in Korea among young historians called the 'colony modernization debates'. This has to do with the historical evaluation of Japanese colonial rule in terms of its role in the modernization of Korean society. The debate concerns whether or not 35 years of Japanese colonial rule might have contributed to the success of modernization process in Korea. One side claims that colonial rule in fact contributed to the process of modernization in Korea, speeding its process. But the other side disagrees, holding that colonial rule in fact distorted, and therefore, delayed the process of modernization in Korea. This position sometimes leads into an argument of what is termed 'the internal development theory,' which claims that, even without the historical intervention of colonial rule, Korea would have developed into a stage of modernization out of its own social causes, such as the dissolution of the feudal system and the sprouts of capitalism in the seventeenth century of the Joseon dynasty.

However, the various lines of postmodern critiques of western modernity including post-colonialism today make the controversy look a bit outmoded. For both positions over the controversy seem *too willingly* to take western modernity for granted, rather than taking it as problematic. In other words, the postmodern critiques seem to lead Korean intellectuals to more self-consciously consider the consequences of modernization and its significance upon modern Korean society, leaving them with a new critical task: finding a way of *reestablishing* their relationship with their own tradition as well as with the West. It is because, as John Duncan (2002, pp. 431–462) so acutely shows us, our Koreans' past relation to tradition or the West has been *arbitrarily selective*, shaped by our responses to the historical urgencies constrained by the historical conditions into which we happened to be thrown. For example, in the psyche of the colonial Koreans, the word 'tradition' was taken *either* something sacred for them to *unconditionally* preserve in the form of 'traditionalism' or something for them to radically break off with in the name of modernization, even if the former usage tended to gain a stronger currency for their cultural and political survival against imperial Japan. On the other hand, the psyche of colonial Koreans also tended to take the idea of western Enlightenment *either* as what to model after as their political ideal, or what is to be dismissed as corrupt or untrustworthy since they encountered it through the prism of imperialistic Japanese oppression. As a result, progressive educators in modern Korea tend to highly idealize such political aspirations of the western Enlightenment as freedom and equality, yet distrust its concomitant idea of individual autonomy in conceiving the educated personhood.

Six articles contained in this special issue will deal with new ways of understanding the East Asian tradition of education in Korea, such as Confucianism, or with the nature of its encounter with Western ideas of modernity especially in the educational context of modern Korea. The first article, 'A Critical Dialog with "Asia as Method": A response from Korean education' by Yoonmi Lee will provide readers with excellent overarching reviews not only of the historical context of the East Asian region in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, but also of the educational concerns and questions that are considered critical to East Asian educational thinkers in the region in relation to the issue of modernization. Another interesting thesis of her essay focuses on a post-colonial analysis of exam-obsessed educational zeal and practice in contemporary Korea by employing a well-known Chinese cultural theorist Kuan-Hsing Chen's idea of 'Asia as method.' Her essay seems to give us in the end some hint about what we might mean by a *de-colonized* practice of education, which is East Asian in its nature yet,

going beyond its East Asian-ness. The next two articles attempt to reinterpret quite familiar neo-Confucian practices of education in Korea. Keumjoong Hwang and David Samuel Meyer's essay entitled 'The Relations as the Aim of Education in Joseon neo-Confucianism' reinterprets the educational aim of neo-Confucianism from the perspective of its ethics of the Five cardinal relationships, and reassesses its educational significance quite thoroughly, that is, its merits and its limitations for contemporary education. On the other hand, Jong-Bae Park's essay, 'School Rituals and Their Educational Significance in the Joseon Period' is more historical in its approach and tries to reveal the forgotten pedagogical significance of the neo-Confucian rituals at the royal schools of the dynasty. His thesis is educationally bold, given that the criticism of the ideological function of neo-Confucianism in East Asian society has been so commonly accepted. But, if we take seriously the Foucaultian insight on how power operates in the formation of modern subjectivity through the disciplinary control of our body, the ritualistic approach in pre-modern education offers us much food for our thought, especially on the educational implications of what it would take for a personhood to be shaped.

The next three articles more directly address how the East Asian tradition in Korea encounters western modernity at the turn of the twentieth century. The essay 'The Appropriation of "Enlightenment" in Modern Korea and Japan' by Yeann Lee traces how the western concept of the Enlightenment, which arrived in Japan in the late nineteenth century, was translated and changed in its meaning over the process of its circulation among the intellectuals, while affecting the way the Korean modernizers interpreted the term. Engaging in the history of conception, this article shows how the idea of western modernity was adapted to the cultural soils where it had been imported and planted with different crops of meanings. What is so remarkable about her essay is how the western concept of the Enlightenment, which is translated into 'civilization' in the East Asian region, loses from its connotation its key ideas, such as the modern senses of 'the individual' and 'the public.' Another paper by Ju-back Sin entitled 'Competing Concept of Publicness in the Formation of a Modern People in the Japanese Colonial Rule' also explores how the neo-Confucian concept of the public meets its western counterpart in the turn of the century when Korea was first exposed to western modernity, especially in the face of Japanese colonial rule. He pays attention to the way the concept plays a role in the formation of Korean nationalism, which was meant to fight back against Japanese imperialism. The last essay, 'The Educational Role of *Public* Role of School Teachers in Korea: For its Conceptual Reconstruction through its Historical Tracing' by Jina Bhang and Duck-Joo Kwak returns us to the contemporary college classroom for teacher education, and raises the question of how contemporary youngsters in Korea, who are preparing to be teachers in public schools, understand the term 'public' in the formation of their teacherly selfhood. The essay attempts to show how our self-understanding as educators relies upon our cultural resources, namely, concepts, values, and symbols available historically and contextually, and argues that our ways to develop the decolonized practice of education in the East Asian region can draw upon resources not only from our own regional tradition but also may harvest the western ideas which have already become part of East Asian culture through the past encounters. What matters is whether we can have the courage to take up something *as* our own by way of understanding how our educational culture and practice has been shaped as well as by daring to conceive better alternatives for future practices. I think this is why the intercultural encounter in education is such a fertile idea to explore.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Duck-Joo Kwak is a professor at the Department of Education, Seoul National University in Seoul, Korea. Her research interests are, broadly speaking, in esthetics, postmodern concept of education, and teacher education. She has written numerous articles on Stanley Cavell, especially his existential interpretation of later Wittgenstein and its educational implications. Her recent work is more on civic and moral education in the post-liberal Confucian culture, especially from the east-west comparative perspective. Her current work also focuses on humanistic approach to teacher education and

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