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History 292: The Two Koreas

Origins and Conflicts in South and North Korean Higher Education (1945-1975)

Introduction

As with much of the history of Korea, foreign influence and intervention played a significant role in the development of higher education. In the pre-modern period, the state developed a series of schools of higher learning known as *sungkyunkwan,* which were heavily influenced by the state schools of China.[1] Their curriculum was largely based around the Confucian classics, and they were designed to prepare members of the elite (and only the elite) for joining the civil service.[2]

Starting in the late-nineteenth century, Christian missionaries began to import Western-style education to Korea, providing the first institutions of higher learning for members outside of the ruling *yangban* families. Their influence was cut short by the rise of the Japanese colonial government in 1910, which denied access to higher education for Koreans (except for a handful of exceptions such as at Keijo Imperial University in Seoul).[3] Thus, by the end of the colonial government, only a handful of Koreans had been educated in universities.

With the fall of the Japanese empire in 1945, both North and South Korea began a process of rapid expansion of their universities. This expansion, though, must be understood in the context of Cold War politics. Universities on both sides were heavily

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[1] Lee, Sungho. (2006), p. 16-17

[2] Lee, Jeong-kyu (2002)

[3] Lee, Sungho. (2006), pg. 21-23

influenced by the politics they confronted. South Korean universities took their designs largely from the American model, and many academics took part in academic exchanges to the United States with assistance from the American Military Government. Similarly, the education provided by Kim Il Sung University reflected communist values influenced by the Soviet Union, emphasizing both practical training and the need for ideological indoctrination. Thus, external powers played a crucial and decisive role in the formation of higher education in the immediate post-colonial period.

However, beginning in the 1960s with the rise of Park Chung-hee in the South and the 1950s with the consolidation of power by Kim Il-sung in the North,[4] there was a growing conflict between embracing the modern from the Cold War centers and developing an indigenous system of education. Both leaders stressed the desire to create more independent universities, with particular emphasis on strengthening national ideologies.

The study of universities is crucial, since they offer a lens into understanding the formation of a country's cultural and intellectual identity. They reflect the values of society, but they also shape those values through teaching and research. This is particularly the case in developing countries, where these values and identities may be quite fluid.

This paper traces the development of the conflict in the immediate post-colonial period, with close attention to the ties between the American Military Government and South Korea. It then analyzes the visions of the two Korean leaders, Park Chung-hee and Kim Il-sung, on higher education, and it argues that both leaders desired to engage

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[4] It should be noted that the origins of these conflicts began with the end of the post-colonial government. However, this essay will focus on the 1950s and 1960s when these changes became more visible.

the modern while negotiating the changes within the frameworks of their respective national ideologies.

Korean Higher Education in Post-Colonial Korea (1945-1960)

Following the end of the Japanese occupation in August 1945, both Koreas received significant foreign assistance and direction from the Cold War centers. The American Military Government (AMG) played an outsized role in the development of South Korea's politics and economy, and the Soviets played a similar role in the development of North Korea.[5] This section will look at their influence in the development of higher education.

Jeong-kyu Lee has extensively documented the the involvement of the AMG in Korea's higher education development. He notes that the reestablishment of the pre-occupation system of higher education came swiftly in September 1945 – just weeks after the colonial government had dissolved. Shortly after, the American administrators under General John Hodge began establishing several bureaucratic mechanisms for developing the system, including the development of the National Committee on Educational Planning,[6] which provided Koreans a platform to discuss changes to the university system.[7]

Later, the United States facilitated the travel of Korean professors and students to America for study and research and also provided funding for Korea's burgeoning system. From 1945 to the early 1960s, millions of dollars of U.S. aid was provided to

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[5] See Cumings (1981) for South Korea and Lankov (2002) for North Korea. The extent of the Cold War centers' effect is disputed by historians, but in the context of education, their effect is relatively clear.

[6] Unfortunately, the makeup of this committee is not clear, but it is believed to include "senior social and education leaders."

[7] Lee, Jeong-kyu (2006)

the Korean higher education system, and the U.S. also worked through the United Nations's UNESCO program to provide educational funding. American universities also played an important role. One notable example is a program sponsored by the University of Minnesota to provide millions of dollars of aid and extensive programs to train Korean professors at Seoul National University.[8]

More importantly, though, were the philosophical changes that underpinned the system. The *sungkyunkwan* schools that had provided education for the *yangban* ruling class families in the past were by and large eliminated, and in their place came new, more democratic institutions like Seoul National University that were open to all students. Furthermore, the emphasis of the curriculum moved away from the Confucian classics and toward a Dewey pragmatist philosophy typical of American academia.

Lee notes that the Americanization of higher education in South Korea was not complete. Centralization was a major theme in the new system in contrast to the decentralized nature of U.S. higher education, and Korea's new universities granted admission based on entrance examinations instead of the holistic system.[9] Seth takes a decidedly more negative view, arguing that Americans were largely unable to democratize educational administration and instead reinforced the system of administration designed by the Japanese occupation authorities to control the Korean population.[10]

While South Korea's higher education system certainly retained some decidedly Korean elements, it is clear that the system's Americanization remains a major theme in

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[8] Lee, Sungho (1989)

[9] Ibid.

[10] Seth (1998). Seth's analysis is in line with the narrative developed by Cumings (1981)

the immediate post-colonial period. The power of the Cold War center over the periphery can also be found in North Korea and its relationship with the Soviet Union.

Armstrong writes that "the centrality of education in creating the new society resembled revolutionary China in many respects, but as in other areas the USSR was by far the most important external influence on North Korean education, both as a model and as a source of advice."[11] This assistance was much in the same vein as the United States toward the South: the USSR provided extensive financial and logistical assistance in building up North Korea's university system. This assistance was provided in both the sciences and the social sciences, assisting the North Koreans with both the practical and intellectual needs of the new system (a theme that will be seen in the next section). In addition, they sponsored research and study trips for faculty and students to the USSR, imprinting a foundation for the professors that would become the educational elite in the coming years.

Also like the South, the North Koreans borrowed more than just money and books. They built the system around Leninist ideas of social revolution, and organized the universities to be an extension of the government's propaganda campaigns. Kim Hyung-chan argues that North Korea borrowed much from the Soviets in terms of ideological educational approaches.[12] Armstrong notes that the Soviets were clearly the most important model, but he concludes that "higher education in the American zone was if anything closer to the American model than North Korean education was to the Soviet model."[13]

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[11] Armstrong, p. 178

[12] Kim, Hyung-chan (2005).

[13] Armstrong, p. 179. It is difficult to analyze this point without greater access to North Korean archives.

Thus through the 1950s, both South and North Korea's higher education systems were heavily influenced by their respective Cold War centers. Large numbers of students traveled to the center for education, and the senior members of the professoriate often had degrees from there as well. This foreign influence would eventually be targeted by the leaders of both countries as they negotiated the changes underway in their educational institutions.

Negotiating the Modern: Korean Leaders and the Rise of Indigenization

The higher education system continued to develop in the 1950s and 1960s in both North and South Korea, only taking a pause during the difficult years of the Korean War. As we have seen in the previous section, external forces – largely from the Cold War centers – played an instrumental role in this development. However, the leaders of both countries began to stress a notion of independence in their rhetoric. Understanding the rhetoric and why it was used is crucial to understanding the development of universities in this time period.

Park Chung-hee, a military officer who led a coup d'état against the Korean government in 1961 and became president in 1963, faced more difficulties with the issue of independence than Kim Il-sung. He was a Japanese military officer during the occupation, and may have been part of military operations against Korean nationalists in Manchuria during the 1930s.[14] Furthermore, Park faced strong domestic pressure, particularly from students, over the signing of the Normalization Treaty with Japan in

[14] Cumings (2005), p. 354-356

1965.[15] Like many on the right in post-colonial Korea, his rhetoric of independence must be understood in the context of his personal background.

Outside of his background, a primary element of his desire for independence was the Cold War context. Communism became code for the enemy in South Korea,[16] and independence was a rhetorical phrase designed to strengthen the notion of the Other in the South Korean imagination. We can see the development of this approach in Park's writings from 1962: "Culture must be a part of the daily lives of the people to hasten the renaissance of our national culture."[17] Education is the means to develop this culture, and he emphasizes that it "is a bulwark against communism only when it is strong."[18]

Park's concept of independence can be summarized as "self-help, self-dependence and self-reliance," a phrase he used in his New Year's Day speech in 1970.[19] The rise of South Korea's universities was concomitant with the country's vast industrialization project, and universities were considered an important component of technical capacity-building for the economy. Park Chung-hee argues strongly that education provides a means for reconstructing the fatherland, "... I stress the indispensable importance of education for training in the productive capabilities virtually essential to industrial modernization and economic reconstruction."[20]

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[15] Ibid. p. 318-321

[16] Lee, Namhee, p. 70-109

[17] Park, Chung-hee (1962), p. 242-243

[18] Ibid.

[19] Park, Chung-hee (1973), p. 83

[20] Park, Chung-hee (1962), p. 246

Park thus faced a tension here between fully engaging the modern while also negotiating the domestic opinions that were carefully managed by the regime. America and its universities offered perhaps the best evidence of the possibility that higher education could have on the development of the nation. For instance, the development of the Korea Advanced Institute of Science and its related university KAIST, undertaken by the Park regime in the 1970s, was based off of the academic-industrial model pioneered at American universities.[21] At the same time, Park could not appear to be supporting continued influence of external forces on core Korean institutions given these politics.

Thus, Park embarked on a process of Koreanizing higher education, while continuing to use the American model. We can see this approach in a speech by Park delivered to the National Convention of Educators on March 24, 1972. In the speech, he notes obliquely to American influence in the initial passages, focusing on the rise of democratic education and the increase in access to higher education for all students.

However, this focus on the individual has led to a decline of traditional Korean values. Park continues, “In other words, we have only endeavored towards a bourgeois education producing worldly-wise men seeking a life of ease and pleasure; it must be admitted that we have fallen short of achieving national education deeply rooted in our tradition in a firm concept of the nation.”[22] He argues that South Korea must develop an independent view of its own history (a connection to historical subjectivity)[23] while continuing to educate people for industrial production.

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[21] “Survey Report”, 1970

[22] Park, Chung-hee (1973), p. 163

[23] For this concept, see Lee, Namhee Ch. 1

Park provides an anecdote of his ideal: he notes that British students from Cambridge and Oxford willingly joined the armed forces in World War II, "...saying in effect that colleges and academic life can exist only when there is a fatherland."[24] In his conclusion, Park argues that colleges do not just transmit information, but train virtuous workers for society. "Therefore, true collegians should not harbor the illusion of being abstract 'cosmopolitans,' but accept the reality and the external and internal developments confronting the fatherland as something which concerns themselves."[25] Thus, Park developed a political rhetoric that balanced the need for engaging with the modern while also negotiating the desires of Koreans to develop their own approaches to higher education.

In many ways, Kim Il-sung developed a rhetoric similar in goal if not in language with that of Park. Kim's background was quite the opposite from Park's - a freedom fighter who developed his reputation fighting the Japanese around Manchuria.[26] This background would weave its way into Kim's political narrative on numerous occasions, most notably with the rise of his *juche* ideology in the 1950s and 1960s. The ideology was wrapped in the mythos of the Korean resistance to the Japanese occupation,[27] but also provided a platform for Kim's consolidation of power.

Given the politics of North Korea (and its particular goal of self-reliance from imperialists), university education had to be Korean from the very start. Nonetheless, North Korea faced an enormous worker shortage, especially in the technical specialties,

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[24] Park, Chung-hee (1973), p. 167

[25] Ibid. p. 169

[26] Armstrong, p. 31-32

[27] Ibid. p. 222

that demanded a level of pragmatism from the regime. We see this tension in the early years as Kim negotiates the balance between importing technical knowledge and developing ideological education. In one of his earliest speeches on higher education from November 1945, Kim discusses the need to build a university for Korea that provides, "...practical knowledge that can be applied in building the new Korea," while also developing a "national pride" in students that would undo the structures of Japanese imperialism. This university must develop the technical skills required by the economy, and "being the first, it will serve as the foundation for building many colleges in the future in quick succession."[28]

While Kim actively embraced the Soviets in the early years, the need to develop a degree of independence in ideological formation began early. One of the advantages of the large corps of speeches by Kim Il-sung is that we can track the development of this self-reliance in his rhetoric. One example of these origins comes from the graduation of the first graduates in Physics (on Dec. 28, 1949), during which Kim states that education in technical skills is not enough for these students. "All our specialists must be equipped with advanced theories concerning their fields and, at the same time, become faithful Marxist-Leninists who know the law of social development and can use it skillfully."[29]

Kim's desire for independence would continue to develop with the conception of his *Juche* ideology. In a speech on July 1, 1955 to the faculty at Kim Il Sung University, Kim notes the university's success in creating strong cadres with technical skills, but

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[28] Kim, Il-Sung. Vol. 1, p. 340

[29] Kim, Il-sung. Vol 5., p. 295

that more needs to be done. "[The university] should train a larger number of excellent cadres armed firmly with our Party's ideology and equipped with advanced science and technology, so as to contribute positively to the successful carrying out of our revolutionary tasks."[30] Kim's language has changed from discussing Marxism-Leninism to the Korean Workers Party's own ideology, indigenizing the political formation of North Koreans while still engaging with the modern advances of science and technology that continued to be supplied by the Soviet Union.

However, the paths of Kim and Park would diverge over time, as Kim increasingly focused on ideological independence over Park's focus on economic reconstruction. This development arc toward self-reliance would be complete by the early 1960s. In a speech in April 1963, Kim described the bureaucratic system of higher education, emphasizing the importance of the Party Committee of Kim Il Sung University in building the ideologically-capable cadres needed for the economy. Nearly the entire speech is devoted to emphasizing the need for more ideological training for cadres, particularly the need for graduates to actively partake in the social and political spheres of the country. Only in a small section at the end does Kim lament the current state of graduates from the university, arguing that greater discipline needs to be put in place to ensure that graduates are receiving the practical training needed.[31]

Together, these sources show that while both Koreas developed higher education with strong external influences, their leaders began a process of indigenization in their negotiations of modernity in higher education.

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[30] Kim, Il-sung. Vol. 9, p. 306

[31] Kim, Il-sung. Vol. 17, p. 183-209

Summary

Universities play a central and critical role in the cultural and intellectual formation of their home nations. Unfortunately, too little research has been conducted looking at the influence of ideologies and policies from foreign governments on developing nations through the lens of higher education institutions, despite their outsized role.

This paper has attempted to address this deficit in the literature by looking at the ideological formation of the higher education systems of North and South Korea in the post-colonial period. Both systems received significant and long-term external support from the Cold War centers, support that helped to shape the direction of the intellectual cultures of both nations. As this support became more robust, the leaders of both countries began to indigenize their higher education systems, negotiating the politics of the time while continuing to borrow models and concepts in their quest for modernity.

Further research is needed to fully understand the nature of the relationship, both in the Korean context and in the greater Cold War context. Heonik Kwon argues that "the history of the global cold war consists of a multitude of these locally specific historical realities and variant human experiences..."[32] A more local approach toward individuals and institutions would provide a robust lens to study the cultural dynamics analyzed in this paper. The development of higher education – which happened in many countries in simultaneity with the Cold War – is a crucial element of understanding these variable experiences and the current natures of their politics.

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[32] Kwon, p. 7

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