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The English Wave: Foreign Language and Class Conflict in South Korea

Alienation is the precise and correctly applied word for describing the major social problem ...today. People feel alienated by society. In some intellectual circles it is treated almost as a new phenomenon. It has, however, been with us for years. What I believe is true is that today it is more widespread, more pervasive than ever before. Let me right at the outset define what I mean by alienation. It is the cry of men who feel themselves the victims of blind economic forces beyond their control. It's the frustration of ordinary people excluded from the processes of decision-making. The feeling of despair and hopelessness that pervades people who feel with justification that they have no real say in shaping or determining their own destinies (Jimmy Reid, University of Glasgow, 1971).

Introduction

South Korea has become famous for its national commitment to English language education leading many to characterize the nation as being overtaken by English “fever.” Is it really a fever that has captured the passions of Koreans? Or does this fever refer to an anxiety about the future? To be sure, South Korean political leaders and government has been committed to English language since, at least, the US occupation of the southern portion of the peninsula in 1945. As formal Chinese education was deeply connected to the structure and function of the bureaucracy during the Choson period (1392-1905), English became central to the nation’s postwar modernization project that has become popularly lauded as the “Miracle on the Han.”

Despite this connection between English and Korea’s economic development, it was during the mid-1990s that the current English language boom began in earnest. The government’s commitment to English language education coincided with its attempt to define the “second version” of the economic miracle (J. Lee 2011) in the post-dictatorship era. To be sure, since the

1990s English education has become an increasingly important part of the national curriculum – as it has been included as one of the core subjects of Korea’s all-important university entrance exam. This focus on English language has ignited a vast network of private academies that seek to prepare students for the all-important university entrance exam. Motivated by fear and anxiety about their children’s ability to compete for limited spots at Korea’s prominent universities in Seoul, parents sacrifice family fortune, not to mention their childhoods of their children. Children as young as four are thrown into private academies as fear and anxiety about English begins to be inculcated.

This heightened concern about English language education must be connected with the overlapping transformations that reworked Korean society: the much celebrated democracy movement of the late 1980s that toppled the military dictatorship and the rise of neoliberal ideology and its myths of globalization that followed the International Monetary Fund’s (IMF) multi-billion dollar intervention in 1997. In its early stages the democracy movement certainly threatened Korea’s political elite and its favored ally in business the chaebol. Despite its initial fears about the democracy movement, the chaebol has increased its power and control during the era of democracy resulting in more sophisticated ways in controlling labor and popular protest, not to mention a greater capacity to influence economic policy (Koo 2000, 2007). The increased power and control of the chaebol illustrates an important dynamic: underneath the romanticism of the popular overthrow of dictatorship has been the manner in which Korea’s dominant corporations have drawn upon the rhetoric of liberalism and freedom in order to push through policies that sought to liberalize markets and escape government regulation (See Harvey 2005). Creatively, Korea’s economic elite successfully connected its interest in market liberalization

with the rhetoric of freedom and democracy that organized the popular struggles of the democracy movement.

English language education has played a crucial symbolical role in knitting together these disparate, and mutually conflictive political positions, into a nationalist narrative of progress and modernization called “Segyehwa.” Beginning with the Kim Young-Sam administration, the Korean states has crafted an image of “Segyehwa” (globalization) policies that connected democratic reform with liberalization of markets through a narrative that presented the contemporary period as novel, representing a radical break with the past. In this new age of globalization, Korea, it is argued would have to renovate its society in order to stand up to ever increasing global competition. In this way, the proponents of Segyehwa argued for a new outlook toward international sphere of economics. In this sense, English has been presented as Korea’s key to national competitiveness in this age of globalization (Shin 2001). Proficiency in English is presented as a vehicle which will bring prosperity and allow an increase in GDP (J. Lee 2011).

Underneath the slogan of globalization, and the newly fashioned international ambitions of Korea ruling elite, lay a complicated picture of a society riven by class conflict and struggle over diminishing public resources. Despite English language’s ideological role in pulling these various programs together, it provides a window into the way in which class conflicts are being transformed in Korea. Despite the conventional idea that Korea is raptured by English mania, the issue of English education represents an arena of conflict and displays many political differences. In this paper I use English education as an ethnographic window into the ways in which Koreans struggle for power and social prestige in the post dictatorship period. Since the implementation of Segyehwa program, and its emphasis on English education, class disparity among Koreans has greatly increased. Like in other parts of the world, some Koreans have resisted and protested

certain aspects, often in piecemeal fashion; of this increasing polarization and consolidation of corporate power (see Baca 2011). However, the more legitimate pattern to deal with this context of economic vulnerability has been to sacrifice large amounts of family wealth and the childhood of youngsters before the mantle of education represented by the hagwon. In this way, many Koreans have accepted the political and economic problems as a “natural” effect of “globalization” rather than a concerted effort by decision-makers to redistribute wealth in radically regressive ways. In this way, English education contributes to the legitimization of the decision-making processes that has affected these changes.

Fever, Mania, and Other Misleading Metaphors

When I first came to Korea, the presence of English language academies was overwhelming. At every street-corner, bus-stop, and subway station I was bombarded with advertisements for English language academies and “cram schools.” The pervasiveness of English language schools, not to mention the use of language in other advertisements, gave me the impression that indeed English represented a contagious cultural force that represents an educational “fever” (Seth 2002) or an English “mania” (Park and Abelmann 2004). As I began to become acquainted with Korean students, I began to see a social situation that was far more complex – not to mention troubling. Such metaphors that emphasize Korean enthusiasm to learn English gives the slightly inaccurate impression that Korean youth and university students are uncontrollably clamoring to learn English as if it were akin to a fad in rock-n-roll or style of dress. I quickly learned that most Korean students actually dislike English. For them studying English is dictated by a highly competitive exam system where practical ability doesn’t count.

Instead public school teachers and private academies focus on improving their students' ability to conquer exams. In Korea, this is domination by the Test of English for International Conversation (TOEIC) and Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOFEL). Rather than being a reflection of Korean defined agenda in education, TOEIC and TOFEL exams are the creation of the U.S. based company American Educational Testing Service. These exams are a cause of great anxiety.

Following this exam-based education regime, students have very little experience or motive for learning to use English in a practical manner. Accordingly, many students loathe the moments in which they have to speak English. Speaking with a native English speaker produces great levels of anxiety as students are afraid to make mistakes. Part of this difficulty stems from the extremely stringent view of speaking English, as many Koreans presume one must speak without any mistakes. Indeed many students have told me that they are waiting until they can speak perfectly before actually engaging in English conversation.

These pressures led me to criticize the belief that Korea has been over taken by English fever. Such a view doesn't focus enough attention on the manner in which English education has been imposed on Korean families. Instead of a having a fever, Korean students are driven to spend many hours in study rooms and private academies as they commit themselves to a rather joyless regime of language training that emphasizes results on standardized test scores instead of practical language competency. As Josephine Lee has pointed out, naturalized assumptions disregard the manner in which English language has been imposed on Koreans (J. Lee 2010).

Imposition of English language emanates from the institutions of the State have redefined Korean education in terms of modernization. To be sure, the connection between English and

national progress began with the birth of the Republic of Korea; and these efforts to connect English to modernity were redoubled with Park Chung-Hee's development program of the 1960s and 1970s (Chang, Kim, and Vogel 2011). However, the massive explosion of the private English language markets emerged along with the metaphors of globalization and its explicit commitment to market liberalization during Kim Young-Sam's administration (1993-1998). With the policy transformations associated with Kim Young-Sam's explicitly democratic regime, the government brought greater emphasis to English language as a necessary skill that each Korean would need to navigate in the new world that President Kim characterized as "globalization" (Kim 2000). This rhetoric of globalization was used to connect the dissolution of the authoritarian regime with the rise of democratic world.

Indeed these political interests were able to conjure an image of an anti-democratic government interfering with individual choice. Indeed, the Korean government had rigidly controlled the education system. Since Park Chung-Hee's coup d'état in 1961, the Korean government vastly expanded the nation's primary and secondary education – along with his expansion of university education. His administration carefully created an education system that would support his ambitious economic development program (Sorensen 1994). Park's program was rooted in the ideal of "educational equality" that sought an educational policy that attempted to limit the advantages of wealth in order to poor and working class Koreans more opportunity to succeed as they could not afford pricey private academies and tutors. In one of the military dictatorship's last gasp of power, Chun Du-Hwan implemented the "July 30 Educational Reform" in which he banned after school programs and reformed college entrance exams in order to limit the advantage accrued by wealthy Koreans.

With the Kim Young-Sam, the first democratically elected president in 1993, he proposed major policy changes with the intention of creating a “new Korea.” Against the backdrop of the dictatorship, and its overthrow at the hands of the democracy movement, he focused on “normalizing state-civil society relations” with high-profile prosecutions of the previous dictator generals Chun Du-Hwan and Ro Tae-Woo in order to “liquidate” the nation’s authoritarian past (Kim 2006).

This confluence of market liberalization and anti-authoritarian rhetoric allowed a crucial opening for advocates of private education. Wealthy Koreans and private education academies had been seeking to liberalize the private education markets since the early 1980s. Middle-class Koreans felt that public education did not provide their children the necessary preparation needed to score high on the national entrance exam – in order to get into Seoul National, Korea University, Yonsei or one of the top Technical Universities like KAIST or POSTECH. These parents expressed their interest in terms of having the “freedom” to use private education to enhance their children’s ability to compete in Korea’s all-or-nothing national entrance exam that has such a determining effect on the students’ education as well as future employment. With an increasing anxiety about the likelihood of gaining lucrative and prestigious employment for their children, parents – and their allies in the private education market -- seized the rhetoric of liberalism associated with the democracy movement to free up government regulations that limited their ability to use their resources to bolster their children’s education.

This sense of anxiety felt by many middle class Koreans was heightened by a context of economic vulnerability that followed the liberalization policies that attempted to deal with the declines of growth. As these new economic policies, largely influenced by neoliberalism were being implemented, the Korean economy tanked. The IMF came in with \$ 55 billion package, at

the time the largest in history. Along with the economic crisis, and new conditionalities, Korean parents looked to the future with more gloom and in this precarious economy the value of an elite education became an increasingly valued commodity (Song 2012), which meant that students were in “dire need” of English language competency in an increasingly competitive field for university positions and job placement(Ibid).Rather than responding to the decision-making processes that contributed to the economic crisis, Korean families viewed this outcome as if it were a natural outcome of “globalization.” This condition has been viewed as one that requires new sensibilities, in addition to proficiency in English, and necessitates liberalization of the education market.

This push to liberalize private education markets has resulted in an arms race in which the competition has steadily escalated and wealthy Koreans have had a clear advantage. Wealthy families have been able to use their sizeable family resources to enhance their children’s education. Meanwhile poorer families have been tempted to go into debt and spend their retirement accounts in a vain attempt to assure their children’s academic success.

Teachers in the public school have had to face the problems in terms of having huge gaps between students. Teachers have complained that this felt need to go to private academies has under-mined their authority in class and has made class differences among the students more visible. It is routine for the wealthier kids to ignore the lesson plan, or even sleep, with the idea that their most important lesson will occur many hours after public school is over. For students who have the privilege to attend private academies, and hire private tutors, the lessons are not challenging. These students do not take class seriously. Sometime they even sleep in class. Such an attitude is premised on not only many are tired from late nights at the hagwon, but that they

focus their energy on the hagwon; they see that is the place where the important work will take place and they view the basic curriculum at public school as insufficient.

With the seeming demise of public education, private academies have gained great status. Indeed, the private education sector has not only boomed, it has become a political powerful lobby that has contributed to the belief that English education is fundamental to one's future (Prey 2005). From hagwon owners, to star English teachers, the private education sector has stressed the importance of English learning for Korea's political and economic future. Such large institutes like YBM, Hackers, and Pagoda advertise that their speaking classes will guarantee employment in the prestigious corporations. It is this lucrative industry that helps create anxiety among Koreans about their future education.

In the context of this powerful industry, it has become common for most Koreans students to attend a myriad of private academies, cram schools, and private tutors in addition to public school. This has made educating one's child quite a complicated, and anxiety producing, process. Parents have to look beyond the public curriculum as they have to develop a study regime that will enhance the basic education. To meet this perceived need, parents enroll their children in additional after school programs which include Saturday instruction. It has come to be understood that academic success requires students to go far beyond the basic curriculum in public school.

Enhancing education, is a complex process, is captured by the idea of "managing education." Management of education points to a series of changes that have occurred in terms of the organization and structure of the family. In terms of education in South Korea the image of the caring Korean mother who selflessly commits herself to the greater good of the family and

her children's future. This image of the loving and selfless mother is consonant with the Confucian image of the ideal family: one in which the father is the king and his authority is rooted in his submission to the larger sovereign body (See Agamben 1998). With the traditional role of the husband as the breadwinner, the Korean mother is in charge of the household which includes the education of the children. This doesn't imply that there has been little change in family structure. Indeed changes in the family structure can be evidenced by the way women have taken a central role in educating children. As one school teacher, in explaining her difficulties of having the dual role of being a public school teacher and mother, that the role of the mother as central to the intellectual formation of children is relatively new. She explained that in the older days it was the father who took this role, with it the strict nature of dealing with kids. But she argues that now wives play the role of enforcing the educational regimen on children.

This change, which seems to allow women new positions of power, however, is understood in ways that reinforce the view of man as the primary authority in the household. As she explained: "But these days, the husband goes to work and comes home late. Mom stays home with children. So mom is main source for education. Working mom is same like husband. In Korea, mothers usually educate children and became influential to children because most husbands come home late and don't have any time to share with their children... and men like to drink after work so usually mom takes care of children... In old days, the wife followed the husbands ideas ... But these days women have lots of rights."

In this regard, women have a role in society that transcends education and is central to legitimizing broader organization of power. It is common for Koreans to extoll the virtues of education. But in this context of neoliberal transformation of society, education is deeply

connected with this reconfiguration of power. Following the ideal pattern, defined by Confucian ideals, woman – even professionals – manage the education of their children. Parents view their futures as being linked to the successes of their children. In this sense, children are priority number one for the mother (while the father presumably handles the material conditions). Framed by the logic of globalization, many Korean parents do not critically question the focus on the English language. Instead, the main question families seek to answer is how they are going to find the resources necessary to send their children to private language institutes (and study abroad in the US) and manage (교육관리) their children's education in order to successfully negotiate the highly competitive, maze-like, path to the country's elite universities. In Korea this ideal of 교육관리 is idealized in terms of the selfless mother committed to her children's future.

In this sense, education is the key to attaining this higher status. A successful child can raise the status of the entire family and improves marriage possibilities. Reinforced by the myth of the sacrificing mother giving up everything to make sure that her child can attain academic success – rooted in the Choson Dynasty era where exams were central to achievement.

Sacrifice for What?

With this overarching sense of economic vulnerability, Koreans parents have, in addition to sacrificing their wealth, have surrendered their children's childhood. After an eight hour day in the public school, students – often as young as seven years old – are exposed to several hours at the private language academies in addition to private language lessons. What seems like a draconian regime of language study, a child at the age of four and five begin their race for

English proficiency. The government's move to make English language part of primary education has created a huge boom in the preschool and kindergarten education. From Teun-Teun Young-Oh to kindergartens, parents feel that their children need to be prepared.

This intense involvement in children's education is conditioned by the importance of highly competitive exams to enter the more competitive universities. Korean society is dominated by the presence of three universities – Seoul National, Korea University and Yonsei University – in addition to technological universities (Kaist and Postech). Since the 1990s, English proficiency has become crucial for admission to elite universities. This race to raise one's test scores does not end with University.

On the surface, it would seem that the more than ten years of English education, which most Korean students have experienced, is a waste of not only public resources but family treasure. This view doesn't take into account that English is an extremely difficult language for Koreans to learn. Moreover, it doesn't take into account the manner in which English language has been institutionalized in South Korea. English education, for the most part, doesn't have practical purpose for Koreans. Despite the common cliché's, emanating from government narratives of national struggles in the age of globalization, most Koreans do not have a need for using English. Instead, the need they have is to achieve high scores on TOIEC and TOEFL.

This points to English's symbolic role in terms of class relations. Coming from an anthropological position, I take symbolism seriously. This doesn't mean that English is unimportant or useless. The reality is that it plays an important role in regulating and legitimizing opportunity structures of Korea. To be sure, English serves as significant criteria for the selection of university students and job applicants. Speaking English is very difficult for Koreans. Being

very distant from Korean, in terms of vocabulary and syntactic structure, it takes great effort of Koreans to learn it. Moreover, it is regimen of great discipline. In this sense, it symbolizes “diligence” on the part of the student of English.

With the election of Lee Myung-Bak in 2007, the inequality in education has been exacerbated. He came into office with the promise that he would re-ignite the Korean economy and initiate the “Second version” of Korea’s economic miracle. As a powerful CEO from Hyundai’s division of land development, he presented himself as the agent of the “second version” of Korea’s economic miracle. In this way, he built upon the legacy created by the administrations of Kim Young-Sam and Kim Dae-Jung. Even though his conservative party Han-Na-Ra was in conflict with these two veterans of the democracy movement, he build on the idea of Segyehwa and its premise that English language was necessary for Korea’s ongoing development and to increase its competitiveness in global markets.

Yet he came at this shared view of English with harsh criticism of Korea’s English education system. He argued that despite all of the money and efforts invested in English education, most Koreans were unable to use English conversational. He argued that he would produce an English education policy that would make Korea more English friendly with the eye on encouraging international investment and tourism. Lee’s administration laid out an English education project that aimed to ensure that every high school student would graduate with the ability to speak English at a conversational level. Though this general goal seemed plausible to most Koreans, the specifics of his plan created much anger as it set off conflict along class lines. Specifically he would invest \$4.25 into this project. He stated the goal was to increase national competitiveness. Yet, he was sensitive to the fact that English education had submerged working and even middle-class families into spiraling debt. This large investment on behalf of the

government was supposed to take the pressure off of families and decrease their need to spend money to make sure their children would become proficient in English. Even more controversial, President Lee believed that these goals would be enhanced by a primary education equality program that would make all non-English courses taught in English.

His plan was doomed. First, this intensification English language in the national curriculum created a boom in the private market. The possibility that public education would be taught in English created new levels of anxiety that sent wealthy and middle class families heading for the doors of private academies to ensure their children would meet the new challenges of this twist in completion. Moreover, it inspired groups who oppose the growing importance of English language to question the manner in which this would impair Korean children to command Korean language.

Even though the Lee administration abandoned the idea of implementing English as the primary language in schools, he continued to make the issue of English fluency as an important priority. Moreover, this push for English fluency has had the opposite effect of curtailing the amount of money expended on private education and equalization. As recently criticized by a lawmaker from Korea's opposition United Democratic Party, Chung Cheong-Rae, President Lee's English education policy reforms have been poorly planned in they have contributed to the increasing polarization as wealthy Koreans have benefitted. With the change in the University entrance exams, the private education industry has responded strongly. Playing on the anxiety of parents and their children, the private education providers have aggressively developed curriculum to meet these new criteria. Once again, wealthy families with large amounts of discretionary income can send their students to the hagwons to receive the proper guidance to

deal with these new English exams, which have an increased focus on speaking and reading as opposed to grammar of the past exam system.

This follows a well-developed trend whereby Korean families are outspending the government in terms of English Education. The National Statistical Office has reported that in 2009 the wealthiest 20% of Korean society spends average Korean family spends 715,308 won in sharp contrast to the 165,842 won for the bottom 20 percent (Citation ??).

Globalization and English

Instead of question these policies and changes, Korean families legitimize these changes by transforming themselves in the image of a new Korea. This illustrates the manner in which “globalization” works as a political discourse rather than an analytic category. Though the social science literature is replete with many examples of how the idea of globalization is taken at face-value as an inexorable set of forces that demand new forms of government, society, economy and the self– globalization is analytically specious (Cooper 2009; Trouillot 2003). The concept of globalization first emerged as a marketing slogan invented by corporate interests interested in legitimizing policies that liberalize markets, privatize resources, and cut back on governmental regulation (Trouillot 2003). In the face of a new world of competition, where the nation-state was presumed to no longer be necessary or significant, capital had to operate in new ways. In this sense, we must not look at globalization as an analytical category. Instead it operates a discourse that seeks to present and frame the world in a strategic manner.

In this paper I have pointed out the ways in which the English language industry in Korea has helped naturalize neoliberal social reforms in terms of globalization. Korean politicians, academic leaders, parents, and students have come to believe that the success of the nation is tied

to the acquisition of English. Governmental focus on English language has helped propel a vast political economy related to learning English and taking standardized language exams like TOEIC and TOFEL. Korean students have been influenced by ideas of globalization to focus large amounts of wealth, time and energy in order to learn English.

It has become routine for Korean scholars to romanticize the democracy movement. In doing so, these scholars have hidden disturbing social and economic policies that took root during this period of democratic transition. Most important of these policy tendencies has been the liberalization of markets that have allowed Korean capital to follow the neoliberal policy agenda of the multilateral organizations like the IMF, OECD, WTO, and other organizations that have shifted to a doctrinaire position toward liberalization markets and privatization. Unwittingly, the Kim Young-Sam administration helped formulate an approach whereby Korean capital used the rhetoric of democracy to liberalize Korean Markets and escape the regulations and policies that integrated into a national economic policy.

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