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**The Driving Forces Behind Korean Zeal for Education
from Koryo Dynasty till Nowadays**

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INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of Korean zeal for education is so deeply rooted in the Korean society that it even found its reflection in the Korean folklore. The main objective of this research paper is to find out the reason for Korean zeal for education through a comparative analysis of the phenomenon from the historical and folkloric perspectives from Koryo dynasty till nowadays. In the paper historical facts were deliberately intertwined with their reflection in Korean folk tales in order to emphasize the deep-rootedness of Korean enthusiastic attitude to education. By doing so, this paper tries to demonstrate that a folklore studies approach to the issue can contribute to the understanding of the inordinate fever for education in the Korean society.

Some historians, such as Edward A. Freeman and Leopold von Ranke, argue that the only valid historical sources are written political documents. However, there are historians who are moving towards an expanded view of history. Franz Boas, for instance, considered folktales to be a “reflector of culture”, for all incidents important in the daily life of a people eventually turn up in their tales, either incidentally or as the basis of a plot. (McNeil, 1982)

Vadim Pak argues that a folk tale, being a leading genre of the Korean folklore, is a valuable monument of spiritual culture of the Korean people and has a great educational significance. Korean folk tales are a priceless source for studying everyday life, customs and traditions of the country, because “folk tales of any people carry an imprint of the nation’s soul”. Just like the folklore of other peoples, Korean folk tales are interconnected with real life. Thus, the characteristic features of the Korean nation found their reflection in the artistic form in the folk tales at different stages of Korean history. (PakVadim, 1991)

The paper starts by defining the concept of educational zeal and dwells on the ways of its manifestation in the Korean society nowadays and in the past. It also demonstrates the signs of Korean zeal for education in Korean folk tales.

Next, the paper analyzes the driving forces behind Korean education fever during Koryo, Choseon dynasties, post-colonial period as well as in the folklore sources. The period of the Japanese colonization was not considered in this paper as during that period access to education by Korean people beyond elementary level was restricted.

Finally, the paper makes an attempt to find out what motivates Korean students to study very hard nowadays. For this purpose, high school students of Ganghwa High School were interviewed with the help of an open-ended questionnaire. Further on, to interpret the collected information a qualitative data analysis was employed.

The paper argues that the driving force behind Korean zeal for education has not changed since Koryo dynasty, and the zeal itself is the result of state-introduced and state-managed competitive examination systems.

Paragraph 1

Zeal for education. The ways of its manifestation in the Korean society from the historical and folkloric perspectives.

Educational zeal or education fever (kyoyuk yŏlgi) refers to the phenomenon of a national obsession with education, particularly parents' feverish aspiration and support for their children's educational attainment and achievement (Lan Yu, Hoi K. Suen, 2005)

Educational zeal manifests itself in several ways in the contemporary Korean society. In this paper the most vivid examples will be mentioned. First of all, elementary, middle, and high school students spend a great amount of time studying. After their classes at school, they usually head for "cram schools" (hagwŏns) where they study till late at night. Their weekends are also occupied with studying and their sleeping time is scarce. A popular saying goes: *samdang sarak*, which means pass with three [hours of sleep], fail with four. (Seth, 2002) Next, the education fever also shows through educational spending. South Korean families invest heavily in the education of their off-springs. They may even consider moving to the district with a more prestigious school. The reputation of local schools influences real estate prices to the same extent as the quality of living and location do. (Seth, 2002) Investment into children's education takes 15 per cent of the total monthly household spending in Korea. As for higher education, out of 2.6 percent of GDP spent on higher education only 0.6 per cent is paid for by the government while private households cover the remaining 2 per cent. (Sun-woong). Apart from temporal and financial resources, families make tremendous sacrifices in order to educate their children. Korean families are willing to sacrifice their personal lives. For instance, mothers take on hard labour to be able to pay for cram schools and private lessons, while fathers send their wives with children abroad to give the latter ones better educational opportunities and work hard in their homeland to support their families abroad. (Lim, 2007)

Korean zeal for education is not a new phenomenon in the Korean society. The first Western record of Korea, written in the 17th century by a shipwrecked Dutch merchant who spent thirteen years in the country, also emphasizes the appreciation of formal learning in pre-modern Korea: "The nobles and the free men take great care for the education of their children. They place their children under the direction of teachers to learn to read and write. The people of this country are very enthusiastic about [education]. Teachers constantly cite the example of those who attained fame through high scholarship. The boys devote their time to study day and night". (Seth, 2002)

The manifestation of Korean zeal for education can also be traced in Korean folklore. The folk tale "Ko and Kili-si" is a vivid example of the sacrifices a family could make in order to receive education. It narrates about a poor young man, Ko by name, who served as a farmhand. When he got married to Kili-si, on their wedding night the girl told him that he was a talented young man who could become big one day. She said that she loved him, but wanted to love him even more. That is why she laid down a condition that she would not become his wife until he learnt to read, write and studied all the sciences. Ko tried to object by saying that it would take him no less than ten years to become a learned man. But finally, Ko had to give in. The newlyweds decided to spend only one night together and then Ko

promised to go away and return in ten years when he became such as his wife wanted to see him. Ko endured a lot of hardships before he could find a teacher. But finally, five years later he passed the civil service examination and received the best post. When ten years passed, he returned to his wife and they lived happily ever after. (Pak, 1991)

To sum up, Korean families have gone to all lengths to educate their children since earlier times, even if it involved living separately for considerable amounts of time and investing a lot of energies and resources into education.

Paragraph 2

The driving forces behind the zeal for education during Koryo, Choseon dynasties and post-colonial period

2.1. Koryo and Choseon Dynasties

This paper argues that Confucian ideology and the state-introduced and state-managed examination system played a determining role in the arousal of education fever. The tradition of placing great value on learning is believed to have entered Korea from China together with Confucianism, which became a central ideology of the state after the unification of the Korean peninsula in the 7th century. (Seth, 2002) According to one of the principles of Confucianism any person can become a sage. Self-cultivation to the fullest extent regardless of the birth and class is highly valued by Confucianism. Cultivating oneself in order to be able to govern the people is yet another principle of Confucianism. (Lim, 2007)

In the ninth year of King Kwangjong's reign in the Koryo dynasty, i.e. in 958 A.D., the state examination system (gwageo) was inaugurated in order to recruit able men into the government. It was based on the system developed in China during the Tang dynasty. (Chong, 1986) King Injong played an active role in encouraging his nationals to devote themselves to scholarship. Thus, in order to prepare men for the examinations and promote Confucian learning the Kukchagam – a national academy – was founded in 982. In 1127 each prefecture (chu) and each district (hyon) established a school following the order of the king. (Seth, 2002)

The gwageo system was sustained by the Choseon dynasty, which instituted the state examination law in the first year of its rule – in 1392. (Chong, 1986) As it was mentioned earlier, during the reign of the Koryo and Choseon dynasties, the literati class was given an opportunity to be employed for government positions through the civil service examination system. Passing the examination was a guarantee for getting ahead in the world and a way to bring honour and prestige both to the successful applicant and his family and clan. Passing the examination led to the appointment as a government official, which at that time meant acquisition of power, and was the only road to fame and prosperity. (Lim, 2007) The folk tale “How Kim Son Dal Took the Civil Service Examination – Gwageo” begins with the description of the atmosphere in the Academy of Confucian Sciences, Songonkwan, on the eve of the civil service examination. “It seemed that the literati from all the provinces of Korea arrived here.” Everyone was secretly dreaming of taking the first place in the exam as it conferred a right on a good post. The folk tale puts forward a rhetorical question: “The civil service examination! Who didn't know about it in the old Korea or at least didn't hear about it?” It goes on to say that the future, the whole life depended on the exam. It points out that people spent numerous sleepless nights awaiting that day, went through a lot of worries and anxiety because the issue of being or not being a civil servant was decided, which implied also becoming a well-off person or not. (Pak, 1991)

The evidence of social mobility as a result of passing the civil service examination and the hopes laid on the successful outcome of the exam are well illustrated in “The Legend about a Fair Inspector”. This legend narrates about a son of a well-off district ruler, Toryon by

name, who falls head over heels in love with a poor girl and marries her secretly. Before telling the truth to his father, the young man first decides to pass the civil service examination. In the story Toryon's burning anticipation of the examination's day is described as well as a detailed procedure of the exam itself. Toryon's hard work is rewarded and he passes the civil service examination successfully, which immediately opens a door in front of him towards a high social status, power and realization of his dream to reunite with his wife. The legend is a vivid example of how passing the civil service examination successfully changes a person's life for the better. (Pak, 1991)

Confucianism emphasized the perfectibility of all people and preached that each individual could benefit from education and achieve moral enlightenment. However, some scholars believe that schools and civil examinations were open to all the persons interested only theoretically. In reality, less advantaged layers of society had a limited access to the schools and civil examinations. (Seth, 2002) However, there is research that found evidence of the contrary. Thus, during his research into the civil examination process Edward W. Wagner came to the conclusion that the higher civil service examination was not restricted to the single class of yangban only, but was open to everyone, including people of ordinary social status, i.e. commoners. The vital degree of openness that the examination system displayed allowed for the possibility of social mobility. Thus, many ambitious kin groups in the north strove to receive education and imitate the life style of the southern yangban – the established elite of the traditional Korean society. A lot of them succeeded in entering the elite thanks to the examination success. (Wagner, 1977)

The above phenomenon finds its reflection in the folk tale mentioned in the previous paragraph about Ko and Kili-si which narrates about a poor young man, Ko by name, who served as a farmhand. One day he married Kili-si, who was far-sighted enough to insist on her husband's education. Reluctantly Ko left his young wife and went to study to pass the civil service examination. After passing it successfully, Ko was appointed to the best post despite being a commoner. (Pak, 1991)

Confucianism was the leading religion during the long reign of the Choseon dynasty and it cultivated the tradition of respecting knowledge and letters, thus, forming the cultural climate for worship of the literati. (Chong, 1986) Besides the realistic prospects of achieving social mobility, in the Choseon society the learned man attained an almost sacred status and served as the main source of ethical guidance both at the village and the state level. But not only did scholars enjoy the high status and respect in society. They also possessed the moral authority to speak and air their views even to the powers that be. Scholars could criticize the actions of the government, including the king, on ethical grounds. Students at the National Academy (Songgyun'gwan) organized protest demonstrations when they thought the authority was violating ethical standards and was not performing rituals properly. (Seth, 2002)

To sum up, due to the Confucian ideology and the use of examinations as a social selection device, formal learning was a major preoccupation in pre-modern Korea. (Seth, 2002) As the state examination system was a sure path to the high office and success for people, all educational efforts eventually aimed for this examination. The tradition of state examination made individuals regard education as a means for social success. (Chong, 1986) The interest in education heated by the opportunities of social mobility caused the mushrooming of private academies, which were popular particularly with the elite families, who were lavish with energy and expense to educate their off-springs and prepare them for the exam. (Seth, 2002) If today's excessive educational zeal is projected upon this view, the

underlying motive of education for achieving social success can be easily recognized.
(Chong, 1986)

2.2 Post-colonial period

The introduction of the national examination system triggered Korea's obsession with education in post-colonial period.

Academic credentials – the legacy of the Japanese system of education – turned into state-approved certification and led to overheated competition in the attempt to attain these credentials and climb up the social ladder. Some scholars argue that this social mobility, widely observed from the early 1950s through the early 1960s, was made possible as a result of external and abrupt termination of the traditional class structure due to the Japanese colonization and the condensed industrialization and rapid urbanization after the Korean War and particularly during the Park Chung-hee regime. Absence of significant hindrance from the previous class order and equality of opportunity permitted a rapid class reconstruction process. This in turn caused overinvestment into children's education at the expense of their parents. (Lim, 2007)

Entrance into secondary schools in the late 1940s and 1950s was decided by written subject tests which were prepared by the school staff or a provincial education board. As far as the university level is concerned, university entrants took written entrance exams based on subject areas. The exams were given by each university. (Seth, 2002)

The test-taking trial for South Korean students started with the middle school entrance examination for twelve-year-olds. The middle school examination was more critical and crucial than the high school one, even though examinations were held at both the levels. This can be explained by the fact that a lot of middle and high schools had the same principle and staff and in most cases entering the middle school increased a student's chances to be advanced into the related high school. However, it must be mentioned that this was not automatic. When students sought enrolment into a more prestigious high school, competition could become fierce. Therefore, entrance into a prestigious middle school nearly guaranteed success in life. The students who successfully entered middle school would take the high school entrance exam three years later, and most high school students would participate in the intense competition for the university entrance examination for a desired place in a prestigious university or any other university. (Seth, 2002)

From the above it can be induced that the pressure on students was exercised from elementary school and gradually intensified closer to the university entrance examinations. As long as the latter largely determined the entrance to any university, students spent most of their waking time preparing for them. The preparation involved continuous extracurricular classes at cram schools, which were many even back then, and pricey private tutoring. (Seth, 2002)

Examination pressure was intensified by the informal school ranking system. All schools outside of Seoul were strictly second rank, but each region had its own hierarchy. The pressure to enter prestigious schools increased as the number of primary school graduates soared. Back then universities were also ranked, with Seoul National University, Yonsei and Korea University being in the top of the hierarchy. (Seth, 2002)

To conclude, the entrance examinations were the key mechanism in achieving the coveted success in life. Thus, the examination system contributed to the role of education as a fundamental mechanism for social mobility. (Seth, 2002)

Paragraph 3

The reason for the zeal for education nowadays

3.1 Research design

In order to understand the phenomenon of the immoderate zeal for education in the contemporary Korean society a student survey was carried out, whose goal was to reveal the reasons for the inordinate fever for education nowadays. The survey was conducted in Ganghwa High School and 35 students were interviewed. During the survey the convenience sampling technique was utilized as it is fast, inexpensive, easy, and the subjects were readily available. An open-ended questionnaire was used as a tool for data collection (see Appendix 1). During the analysis of the collected data the qualitative method was applied.

3.2. Data analysis and interpretation

In the process of the survey it was revealed that the students spend from 10 to 20 hours per day studying (both in and out of the classroom). Among the main reasons for studying very hard, the respondents mentioned entering a good university (34%), getting a good job (28%), becoming rich, successful and attaining social status (20%). In some responses there is a tendency to draw a link between education, work and status; education and success; education and money:

We must enter a good university, because only after graduating from a good university one can get a good job and social recognition. It is not a 100 per cent guarantee, but I believe that graduation from a prestigious university guarantees a bright future.

I am studying hard because I need money. On the other side of the earth there are a lot of children dying today. I want to help them and that's why I need money. However, in our country in order to save money education is necessary. I can't change this system, that is why I must study to build a money.

I study to go to a better university. Also, in Korea, graduating from Seoul University is the only way to be a success.

Eight per cent of the respondents answered that social system pushes them to study hard.

In Korea many people judge humans by the college they graduated from. This is the reason why I am studying hard and want to graduate from a famous college.

I am studying hard because in Korea, unless I do more than others, I will be openly ignored by people.

If I don't study well, many people will ignore me.

Only the minority mentioned that they studied to improve their abilities and that studying was very interesting.

The reasons for studying hard

Table 1

Reasons	Number of respondents, %
To enter a good university	34%
To get a good job	28%
To become rich, successful; to attain social status	20%
Social system pushes me to study hard	8%
To find a beautiful spouse	4%
Adults want me to have good grades at school	2%
To improve my abilities	2%
Studying is very interesting	2%

To conclude, for the majority of students the main reason for excessive studying is their desire to enter a good university, or, in other words, successful passing of examinations, which leads to being admitted to a coveted college. Being enrolled into a prestigious university is viewed by many as a sure way to well-being and social advancement. Some respondents view diligent studying as inevitable due to social pressure from outside. Studying per se proved to be of interest to a very limited number of the respondents.

From the above it can be induced that the prospects of social mobility still feed the fire of educational zeal and that the interest of students is not focused on education per se but is exam-centered. Therefore, educational zeal can be redefined as a “fever for success in exams” (Lan Yu, Hoi K. Suen, 2005).

CONCLUSION

The research of the existing literature and folk tales confirmed that Korean zeal for education has been present in Korean society for several centuries. The phenomenon of Korean cult of education is so deeply rooted in the Korean society that its record can be found even in Korean folklore.

The examination of Koryo and Choseon dynasties, the post-colonial period, the present as well as the folklore has revealed that the window of opportunity in the form of state or entrance examinations seems to be the central incentive in striving for education. It was found out that education per se has not been the subject of interest either in pre-modern, modern or contemporary Korean society. Rather the interest has been centered around and all the forces have been directed at the preparation for the entrance examinations.

The research into different epochs showed that it was the government who introduced the examination systems into the state: the state examination system together with Confucianism ideology in Choseon and the entrance examination system in post-colonial Korea. On the basis of this, a conclusion can be made that it was the government who gave the initial impetus to the zeal for education, encouraged it, and involuntarily maintained it by doing its best to present egalitarian opportunities for social advancement through passing the exams to the best candidates.

Thus, the driving force behind the education fever that existed during Choseon dynasty was the government-introduced gwageo examination system, whose main goal was to choose the most talented men for government service. While the driving force behind the education fever of post-colonial period has been the entrance examination system, which is still thought to be the surest way to the material and immaterial welfare.

Even though many in the contemporary Korean society are dissatisfied with the devastating entrance examination system (Seth, 2002), the purpose of this paper is not to criticize the government-introduced and managed examination system. It is rather to pay tribute to the government's ability to allot a special respectful niche to education and the learned men, be it now or several centuries ago. Although it did create the preconditions for people's excessive enthusiasm with education and has been keeping the quota on university enrolment, which adds to the intensity of Korean education fever (Seth, 2002), it cannot be blamed for the phenomenon. It has created the system which attempts to choose the most able ones and at the same time, avert the danger of the oversaturation of the market with advanced degree holders.

Appendix 1

QUESTIONNAIRE

1) How many hours a day do you spend studying?

2) Why are you studying hard? What are the main reasons?

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