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## **A Statist Political Economy and High Demand for Education in South Korea**

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### **Abstract**

In the 1998 academic year, 84 percent of South Korea's high school "leavers" entered a university or college while almost all children went up to high schools. This is to say, South Korea is now moving into a new age of universal higher education. Even so, competition for university entrance remains intense. What is here interesting is South Koreans' unusually high demand for education. In this article, I criticize the existing cultural and socio-economic interpretations of the phenomenon. Instead, I explore a new interpretation by critically referring to the recent political economy debate on South Korea's state-society/market relationship. In my interpretation, the unusually high demand for education is largely due to the powerful South Korean state's losing flexibility in the management of its "developmental" policies. For this, I blame the traditional "personalist ethic" which still prevails as the *modus operandi* of the agents in the education market as well as state bureaucrats.

### **The Situation in Question**

Remarkable in South Korea's contemporary education is the accelerating speed of its growth. Primary education (Grades 1-6) saw full participation in the late 1950s, about 70 years after its inception in 1886 (Yun et al. 1996, p. 67; MCE 1988, pp. 151-3). From

1960 on, lower secondary education in "middle schools" (Grades 7-9) expanded and reached full participation within 30 years. Then, from 1970 on, upper secondary education in "high schools" (Grades 10-12) followed suit, taking only 20 years to reach a similar state of full participation. (Note 1) From 1990, finally, higher education picked up speed in growth and by 1998 had come to admit 84 percent of the year's high school leavers (see Table 1).(Note 2) Now, thus, South Korea is entering into a new age in which almost all children go through the schooling process as far as universities and colleges.

**Table 1**  
**Graduate Advance to Next-Level Schools (%) (MOE 1998, p. 3)**

<i>Advance Type</i>	<i>1970</i>	<i>1980</i>	<i>1990</i>	<i>1998</i>
Primary to Middle	66.1	95.8	99.8	99.9
Middle to High	70.1	84.5	95.7	99.4
High to University	31.9	44.0	46.0	83.7

What is more remarkable is that the growth of education has been attained largely at the direct financial expense of the students' parents. In 1997, for instance, state grants for private universities and junior colleges covered barely 3 percent of their operation costs although such institutions accommodated 83 percent of all students in higher education. In the same year, state universities too collected over 40 percent of their expenses from tuition and other fees. Even schools for compulsory education (all primary schools and some rural middle schools) raised more than 10 percent of their expenses from their pupils although they did not collect tuition fees as such.(Note 3) The South Korean state, according to Cho (1994, p. 101), "has not given due regard to the importance of education while concentrating its energy on economic growth." The impressive growth of education, in his view, is "the result of the natural course of events" in the education market, in which high demand constantly called for increased supply (Ibid., 101n). South Koreans' demand for education is indeed high and firm is their determination to get education for their children. Evidence is the intensity of entrance competition which drives students in all stages of schooling (even preschool) to costly neighbourhood cramming classes.(Note 4) According to South Korean studies (Kong et al., 1994; Kim YC et al. 1997), parents' miscellaneous educational expenses, of which cramming fees occupy the largest portion, far exceed the costs for operating the nation's entire education system. Such was the situation in 1998 that Kim Dae Jung, the incumbent president installed in February of that year, vowed, as his predecessors did, to solve the entrance competition question as his top priority policy task.

Why is there in South Korea such a high demand for education?

### **Existing Answers**

Possible answers may well be, and indeed the literature points out, that there is in South Korea a culture of valuing education, that the recent economic development has greatly enhanced South Koreans' purchasing power, and that a successful life in their society requires a high level of schooling. While sensible generally, these oft-given answers possess limited persuasiveness.

The point of departure of the cultural account is the phenomenon of "excess demand" in education commonly found in East Asian nations. Evidence is high application rates for entry, low success rates and a large number of repeaters, as a study of the Japanese case aptly puts (James and Benjamin 1988, 56). Since such phenomena are uncommon in non-East Asian societies, it would be fair to associate them to what is unique to East Asia, the culture—the "Confucian continuum" of social life—which respects educated persons (e.g., Tu 1997; McAdams 1993; Smith 1991; Song 1990; Whitehill 1987). Since education earns respect in this culture, anyone desirous of a respectful life would surely seek it. Non-East Asian writers here often jump on to relating East Asia's recent economic rise to that culture, which has transformed the masses to an educated workforce. East Asian writers seldom agree to this favourable observation. While admitting the benefits of the culture, they are generally cynical as to its effect, obviously because they are so familiar with the problems entailed by the culture's thrust for education. They call this thrust "*kyoyungnyol*" (or "*kyoikunetsu*" if they are Japanese), which means a blind enthusiasm *cum* fever for more and higher education. In their view, this cultural thrust generates more evil than good (e.g., Kim YH, et al. 1994; Park NK 1994, and Kim IH 1991).

Let the Confucian culture be more prone to valuing education than other cultures, and let it be more so in South Korea than elsewhere in East Asia. Neither of the cultural accounts actually takes us beyond re-identifying what has already been identified, that is, that there is a high demand for education in a society where Confucian culture remains entrenched. (Note 5) The socio-economic accounts, meanwhile, sound better because they relate the phenomenon to what has enabled the consumers to demand more and higher education, and for what practical purposes. Yet a few points need be sorted out. The enhanced purchasing power account, (Note 6) to begin with, is acceptable in the sense that demand for education would not rise unless money was available for purchasing it, given that education in South Korea was not free. True, South Korea's economic development has greatly improved household finance. Yet economic development may not explain the phenomenon of 1998 unless its fruits had been distributed as equally as to enable almost all South Koreans to pay for education. (Note 7) This is not the case, however. Unequal distribution of the fruits has already caused several social turmoils during the last few decades. Given this, it may be rather reasonable to suspect that the price of higher education, tuition fees in particular, has been kept low enough for most parents to believe that they could somehow afford it if they made self-sacrificial commitment, or that somehow they have been compelled to pursue more and higher education for their children, or both. In a country where demand in education is high and educational institutions seldom have revenue sources other than tuition fees, it is unlikely that those institutions have voluntarily kept their fees low. They might do so, however, if coerced by a certain extra-market element, the state in particular.

The account concerning the purposes of seeking education addresses the society which South Korean scholars characterize by the word *hangnyogchuyi* (just as the Japanese typify theirs by *gakurekishugi*, the same word pronounced differently). This refers to a method of assessing individuals' merit by considering the last school they have attended, preferring university graduates to high school graduates and graduates from a prestigious university to those from other universities. This method is so widely employed that not only the employer who interviews job applicants but also the mother who looks for a bridegroom for her daughter, rely on it. Since *hangnyogchuyi* is widespread and a university degree is "a ticket to the social elite" (Pak 1997), the argument goes, young people cannot but pursue higher education preferably at a

prestigious university so long as they desire entrance to a high and respectable echelon of society (Sorenson 1997; Lee and Brinton 1996, 177-92; Ryoo 1995). Even if it is granted that the practice of *hangnyogchuyi* is more salient in South Korea than elsewhere, none the less, that does not explain the high demand for education, because the practice can as well be an effect of the high demand for education and its competitive pursuit, as it can be the latter's cause. When the great majority of a society's membership competitively seek higher education at a prestigious university, then *hangnyogchuyi* must actually be a dependable way to selecting employees or sons-in-law.

Although the cultural and socio-economic accounts are useful, their weaknesses may not be overlooked. A prominent weakness is their focus on the demand side of the education market and leaving the supply side out, as if the demand side is self-sustaining. Yet in the education market, as in any market, demand is usually interdependent with supply. Its rise becomes sooner or later balanced out by the rise in supply, and its fall results in the fall in supply. So long as this rule stays, demand in education may not persist to rise if supply is left to fluctuate freely. Whereas, if supply is deliberately kept low, demand can surge unusually depending on the nature of the commodity at stake. The situation of South Korea's education market in 1998 was that university entrance competition was intense (meaning that demand was very high) even though universities and colleges had prepared sufficient student places to admit some 84 percent of the year's high school leavers. As a matter of fact, supply in that year was raised well in excess of demand because post-secondary institutions as a whole ended up filling only 94 percent of their capacity (MOE 1998, 3). Even so, entrance competition was as intense as before. If South Korea's education market was not an exception to the general market rule, it would be sensible to assume that, here again, a certain extra-market element was deliberately creating "poverty in abundance" on the supply side. It could, for instance, be making entrance to certain universities more difficult than others, and it could be keeping the price of higher education relatively low to motivate massive applications.

Here, the unusual rise of demand in South Korea's education market seems to warrant an assumption that it is not a "result of the natural course of events" in the education market but rather a market phenomenon due to intervention by certain external forces, especially the state—a state which is in fact well noted for heavy market intervention. In the rest of this article, I shall explore a new interpretation of the phenomenon by pursuing this assumption. In doing so, I shall critically borrow from some of the theses that have emerged from the recent political economy debate on the relationship between South Korea's state and society/market.

## **The Political Economy of the Developmental State**

### **(1) The "Personalist Ethic" and the Statist Account**

The political economy debate on South Korea's state-society/market relationship has been triggered by the fact that the country's society was not as "civil," nor its state as "political," (Note 8) as in Western nations, while its economy achieved incredible development under the state's market intervention. Conspicuous in the not-so-civil society is the prevailing pre-capitalist *modus operandi*, in which business transactions are made not by free and open competition as in more "capitalist" societies, but by such personal connections as clanship, alumni fraternity, regional ties and bribery (which is a method of creating new ties and consolidating existing ones). Free and open market

competition is also severely restricted by the state which controls transactions and allocates important resources. What further complicates the matter is that the intervening state has been under the control of the military elites who, having usurped power by coups d'état, did not abide by public demand and often acted against it. Their governments were less likely than elected governments to function "politically" in the interest of the public. Even so, surprisingly, South Korea's economy has grown to be the eleventh largest in the world. How could this happen?

Some writers seek answers in what appears to be an obstacle to economic development, that is, the traditional *modus operandi* and the state's market intervention. The reason for considering the traditional *modus operandi* to be obstructive is that it leads supply to meet demand by collusion. This type of transaction may well be suitable for in-group distribution of available resources, but not for promoting the wide production of resources and their consumption, while the latter are essential for economic development. Unlike free and open market competition, collusion precludes incentives for such activities. Dore (1980 and 1982) and Chang (1991) side step this commonplace observation by viewing the traditional *modus operandi*—"the personalist ethic" as they call it—in terms of the small *groups* which the colluding persons form, such as the bodies of clan, alumni, and so on, rather than in terms of individual collusions as such. Thus viewed, the semi-capitalist South Korean market appears to be operated by various personally-tied groups, each of which seeking its own group interest collectively internally and competitively externally. Although these groups differ from the "individuals" in other markets, the argument goes; they are legitimate parties in the South Korean market and are as active as individuals elsewhere. Therefore, they conclude, the personalist ethic is as valid a "capitalist" *modus operandi* as the individualist ethic.(Note 9) And if the market which is pervaded by the personalist ethic has grown to be a world-class economy, they argue, this ethic appears to have worked as efficiently in South Korea as the individualist ethic elsewhere.

Market intervention by the state—a "statist state" as it may be called because its interests override private interests or a "developmental state" because it controls the market in order to make it "develop"—has drawn attention from most writers on South Korea's political economy although they are divided over whether to recognize the state's contribution to economic development. Of focal concern here is the period between 1961 and 1979 during which General Park Chung Hi's military regime vigorously pursued economic development. For this purpose, the developmental state planned the economy's development, rigorously invested in the public sector, and supplied private business with massive financial support to promote industries (Lee YH 1997, p. 1). In short, it managed the economy with the specific purpose of promoting planned development. Writers of the "statist" viewpoint—statist, this time, because they emphasize the state's leading role in economic development—link this type of state intervention directly to the economic development that has actually taken place. They thus claim that, had it not been for the developmental state's effective distribution of resources for their maximal utilization, the economy would not have developed as it did (e.g., Amsden 1994).(Note 10)

The personalist and statist theses, thus, emerge as potential explanations for the educational development of South Korea, because should they explain economic development there would be no reason for their not doing the same to the development of education, which also bears economic features. The theses, however, may not squeak by without reservation. First, the state which intervened in the market with the political agenda of economic development was not free from the personalist ethic which prevailed in the market. Government leaders and state bureaucrats very often operated

according to personal ties, such as alumni connections, regional loyalties, military collegiality and bribery. Even state policies sometimes noticeably favoured certain regions and groups while disfavouring others. Important resources, such as loans from the state-controlled banks, foreign loan guarantees and licences for monopoly businesses, were very often allocated through such personal connections. The *political* state of South Korea, therefore, functioned very often as a mere *economic* agent, seeking private interest while intervening in the market in the name of public interest, thus obfuscating the state-society distinction. (Note 11)

This leads to another reservation. If the state in its operation was affected by the personalist ethic while politically committed to promoting economic development, to that extent, one may say, its political commitment to economic development was impaired by the private, economic interests of the personalist market. In this situation, the state's political drive for economic development can hold sway only to the degree that it is unaffected by the personalist ethic. Beyond this degree, the developmental policy which the state pursued might in fact be a personalist manipulation of the economy. Given that the personalist ethic was prevalent in society and even state officials and government leaders were affected thereby, the degree could not be great. Put boldly, the state's political intervention can be rather more exceptional than normal. If so, saying that South Korea's economic development was due to the developmental state's intervention, may be tantamount to saying that the economic development was due to the personalist ethic which held sway over both society/market and the state. The theses about the personalist ethic and the state's leading role in economic development are not separate, therefore.

Can, then, the personalist ethic take credit for South Korea's economic development? The affirmative suggestion by Dore and Chang would be acceptable if the groups emerging from personal ties indeed *competed* with each other for important resources. Yet if they did so, the personalist ethic would no longer be the groups' *modus operandi* because, in spite of their grounding in personal ties, they were actually operating in the *modus operandi* of the individualist ethic, that is, *competition*, as in Dahl's (1967) pluralist society. The groups tied by personal connections did not, however, function *as groups* in the pursuit of important resources, nor did they *compete* for such resources. Although personal ties often developed to alumni associations, societies of regional origin, and the like, it was not the organizations themselves but some members of the organizations who actually reaped benefits. They did so because the state's allocation of important resources was frequently made *via personal* collusion and seldom via competition among organizations. This practice had to do with the lack of popular support for the military elite, not only for the initial Park regime which was born out of the 1961 coup but for the subsequent Chun Du Hwan and Roh Tae Woo regimes which emerged out of another coup in 1979 and lasted until 1992. Through the years of their domination, the military elites sought to ground their support in personal ties rather than in the popular vote (which was simply not there) and allocated crucial resources to that end. This kind of practice was common in the private sector as well, where chaebols, whose monopoly in the domestic market the state endorsed, often awarded contracts to minor enterprises in the same way. The personalist ethic may not claim credit until this mode of transaction is proven to be more effective than free and open competition in the utilization of important resources for economic development.

## **(2) "Structural Problems" and the Institutional Account**

In fact, there are grounds for more persuasively arguing that the personalist ethic of South Korea's pre-capitalist market has impeded economic development as well as the

state's own developmental effort. An exemplifying case for this is the economic crisis which began in November 1997.

The crisis broke out when foreign capital pulled out of South Korea, which immediately placed the debt-ridden chaebols on the verge of bankruptcy and activated a disastrous chain reaction in the economy under their domination. While controlling major industries, the chaebols relied heavily for their operation on the state's favourable financial support and protection of monopoly rights in the domestic market. On the safe grounds provided by state support and protection, the chaebols quickly grew, yet at the same time they lost the ability to survive market competition. Their business organizations invariably grew to be big, bureaucratic and inefficient. In spite of protection, therefore, most of them repeatedly incurred losses; and such losses were made up for by additional favourable loans from state-controlled banks. Justification of such additional loans required further expansion in business operations. The more chaebol businesses grew in size, thus, the more dependent they became on such favourable loans. Then, the sudden depletion of financial resources brought this practice to a halt because it took away from the "strong state" (Kim EM, 1997) the very resources for favourable allocation. The crisis glaringly demonstrates that South Korea's economic development was not development in a solid market economy but growth in the volume of the economy due to the expansion of chaebol monopoly businesses under state protection and support. Yet while the economy grew, "structural problems" continued to be exacerbated, such as: the stifling of private initiatives under state control and chaebol monopoly, the inefficiency of monopolistic chaebol businesses which constantly demanded increased state support, and, finally, the chaebol-bureaucrat collusion.

Central to such structural problems is not that the state controlled the market for economic development but, rather, that, for some reasons, it lost flexibility to move from control to liberalization when the volume of the economy reached a certain level. Liberalization of the market would not only enhance the competitiveness of chaebol businesses but also allow small- and medium-sized enterprises to grow. As a matter of fact, liberalization was considered by post-Park policy makers. But such considerations either did not materialize in concrete policies or materialized only superficially. More seriously, even the policies of controlling and allocating strategic resources for economic development often did not go through as intended. That is, the developmental state actually did not and could not unilaterally guide economic activity in the direction it desired politically. For this reason, non-statist writers say that "there is little reason to call the rapid economic growth 'government-led'" (Yoo, 1997).

Why did the strong state lose flexibility in policy making and implementation and could not even carry out its policies as it intended them? The "institutionalists" point to the existence in society of "a concrete set of social ties which bind the state to society and provide institutionalized channels for the continual negotiation and renegotiation of goals and policies" (Evans, 1992). Due to such social ties (apparently pervaded by the personalist ethic) and the "institutionalized channels" based thereon—so goes their argument—the state allowed for societal input to its policies and frustration of imposed policies, and this while "dominat[ing] over social constituent" (Lee YH, 1997, p. 8). The structural problems of the South Korean market, thus viewed, were caused essentially by the personalist ethic which hampered both the healthy development of a market economy and the statist state's flexible response to market changes for the purpose of stimulating the voluntary activities of supply and demand. And the ongoing economic crisis means the breakdown of the problematic market structure at a time when the globalizing world market drastically reduced the state's ability to control the nation's economy.

It is here to be noted that, in the institutionalist view, the social channels do not originate solely from such social/personal ties, for imposed state policies, when institutionalized through negotiation and renegotiation with societal forces, often turn against new, more efficient state policies. A writer of the same institutionalist persuasion lays down the process in three phases (Rhee 1994, p. 15). First, there are certain institutional structures—state-imposed or indigenous to society—determining "practices, norms, rules, organizational structures, and organizations that guide both internal relationships within groups and interactions among groups." Once implemented, such structures immediately decide on "individual interests (or preferences) and abilities (or capabilities)." Eventually, their impact becomes far greater because they set limits on further state policies as well, because they "limit the range of policy-making and implementation options available to policy makers." Thus, second, institutional structures, which were initially a variable dependent upon state intervention, turn to be independent variables. As a result, finally, they attain "institutional continuity (or persistence)" which readily overcomes challenges by more efficient policy alternatives. The intervening strong state can thus slip into its own trap, continually exacerbating the structural problems of the economy (and society) it controls.

## **Implications for the Education Market**

What kind of interpretation would these conclusions permit about the surging demand in South Korea's education market? Although supply and demand in education too are market phenomena and, as such, susceptible to the state-market/society relationship, differences between education and other markets should not be overlooked. Before proceeding further to address the question, therefore, it is in order to clarify the differences and, on this basis, characterize South Korea's education market in relation to the intervening state. This will facilitate identifying the South Korean state's education policies on the political dimension, their frustration and impairment at the state-society junction, and, finally, the establishment in the education market of certain institutional structures which disrupt the relationship between supply and demand.

### **(1) The State and the Education Market**

The most striking difference between education and many other markets is that, while the latter are generally free and competition is the rule, the former is usually not so: it receives extensive state intervention in most countries. During the last hundred and fifty years or so, this market has been contracting as the state has been taking over an increasingly large part of it, creating a new public sector. While *private education* in the rest of the market is traded for fees, as it had been so ever since Sumerian times (Krader 1963), *public education* is governed by the principle of universality, that the opportunity of receiving educational services should be made available to all. In Canada, for example, public education is delivered free of charge, and with compulsory measures, to all those in a certain age bracket up to a certain level of schooling. Beyond that level, it is provided to all those who are qualified for and desirous of advanced learning and willing to shoulder some necessary financial burden. Private education too is often free or inexpensive, but it does not and cannot afford to satisfy the universality principle. The underlying assumption of this principle is that, unlike other goods and services, education cannot be left entirely to free and open market transactions (West, 1975 and 1970). State intervention commenced on this assumption. Once commenced, however, it did not stop with the creation of the public sector; it expanded over the private sector to regulate educational activities traded there in order to ensure certain standards and often offered financial support as well. In this sense, private education also bears some public



character. Not many other markets evidence such thorough state intervention.

But it is to be noted that the extensive state intervention does not relinquish the education market itself. The practice of selling educational services for fees (and buying them by paying fees) remains in both public and private sectors. Strictly speaking, this practice is absent only when educational services are provided free of charge as in some cases of compulsory education. If compulsory education charges fees, the market practice remains to the extent of the fees, no matter how nominal they are. The consumers in this case are only compelled to buy these educational services at a reduced rate. The market practice is more pronounced in the type of non-compulsory public education where students are selected and fees charged. In that case, the trading of educational services involves fairly active participation by both buyers and sellers. Meanwhile, the educational services offered by private schools go through the market process even when they are subsidised by the state, for state subsidies here only restrict, and do not abolish, the practice of market transactions. The market practice of trading educational services, which remains in many of today's private and public schools, helps us determine the degree and extent of state commitment to education and, thereby, distinguish between the realms of the political state and the market in education. The political economy theses on South Korea's state-society relationship may be looked at in terms of this distinction.

## **(2) A Statist Political Economy of Education**

The situation in the South Korean state's intervention in the education market is reflected in the interesting use of the terms "public education" and "private education" in the country's education literature. In that literature, the former means education provided by any regular grade school or university, while the latter stands for education supplied by small or large neighbourhood cramming classes. Regular private schools—namely, private primary, middle and high schools and universities—are all considered institutions of public education while public schools and state universities, of course, remain so. And since the neighbourhood cramming classes are undesirable, South Korean writers—both professional researchers and occasional commentators on educational issues—argue for the "eradication of private education." In fact, the latter has been a major catchword in state education policies as well since the last years of military rule (surprisingly, in spite of the staunch anti-socialist position).(Note 12) What this uniquely South Korean terminology suggests is the magnitude of state intervention which by virtue of control has transformed *de jure* private schools and universities to *de facto* public institutions.

We are confident of this assertion and base it in part on an examination of South Korea's private schools. These schools indeed appear to be public in the sense that they are subject to the state's extensive control as much as are public schools. They admit students within the quotas set by the state and as allocated by the state (either through direct allocation or through state-administered entrance competition), collect tuition and other fees as set or approved by the state, and teach the same state-imposed curriculum using the same state-made or state-approved textbooks as in public schools. A private school teacher is by law a "civil servant" just as his/her public school counterpart: both are agents carrying out the state's decisions. This legal view is firmly entrenched in state policies, as evidenced by the current policy to "institutionalize teacher rotation between private and public schools."(Note 13) Although universities do not receive direct state intervention in their curriculum, the curricula which they actually employ are fairly uniform because of other state policies (especially the system of state-administered entrance competition as we shall see shortly).(Note 14) In such spheres as student quotas

and tuition fees, they too are subject to rigid state control with no distinction between private and public.

The delivery system of educational services, on the other hand, maintains the market mode of transaction in all schools and universities, private or public. While they are all treated as "institutions of public education," none of them actually provides free educational services. As mentioned earlier, primary schools conducting compulsory education raise more than 10 percent of their expenses from their pupils. Tuition fees of public secondary schools and state universities are only slightly lower than those of their private counterparts. Educational services are invariably traded for fees while the content, volume and price of the services are kept under the state's uniform control.

The origin of these phenomena can be traced to the developmental state's policies. At the time of Park's 1961 coup, the country was still in the ruins of the Korean War, which had ended only eight years before. The state's coffers were depleted. The First Five-Year Economic Development Plan, which Park's regime launched in 1962, required a large portion of the resources under state control for supporting strategic industries. Meanwhile, full participation in primary education in the late 1950s increased pressure on the regime by increasing the demand for education in middle schools and by creating severe classroom and teacher shortages in primary schools. The regime's response was to minimize state expenditures on education and concentrate the secured education budget on primary schools. The regime could employ this strategy in spite of its ambitious economic development plan because manpower requirements from the early stage of industrialization had been basically met by the universalization of primary education (Cho, 1994, p. 101n). In effect, the annual education budget during Park's 18-year rule ranged between 1.9 and 3.0 percent of the GNP and between 14.4 and 18.0 percent of the total state budget. (Note 15) From the education budget, between 70 and 82.8 percent went to primary education, the remainder being split among secondary and tertiary education, as well as the huge education bureaucracy which the statist regime required as an instrument of government (KEDI, 1997b, p. 229).

The secondary and tertiary education policy which Park's regime could work out under these circumstances was mainly to contain expansion in order thus to avoid possible demand for increased state funding (although the regime officially put forward, as reasons, improvement of quality in education) (e.g., Lee IY, 1996). For this, on the one hand, the regime downscaled universities and colleges, restricted licencing of new institutions, controlled student quotas for educational institutions and programs, and intervened in student selection by introducing a state entrance examination (in order to prevent frictions in selective admission of students). On the other hand, it chose to use existing private schools and universities by subjecting them to close supervision and extensive control for the purpose of (partially) meeting the rising demand, instead of the costly option of increasing public secondary schools and state universities.

Tuition fee control—where fees are set by the state rather than by the educational institutions concerned—was more closely related to developmental policies, because it was employed primarily as a measure to fight inflation, important as the latter was for not losing gains from economic development. It also acquired significance as an education policy as entrance competition intensified. Since this competition was basically due to the shortage of supply in student places in secondary and higher education, its intensification aroused public concerns about insufficiency in state funding and heavy financial burdens on parents (e.g., Min, 1963; Chon et al., 1969). The Park regime, in response, more tightly controlled tuition fees and student selection as a way to allaying the discontent. Given that secondary and post-secondary education was not to be available to all but a few, low tuition fees and state-administered student selection

would yield a system of meritocracy, in which those who had successfully survived state-administered competition would be somehow able to pay for the hard-earned opportunity for education. (Note 16)

Such military-controlled developmental state's policy measures pushed demand in education higher than it would have been otherwise. So long as the state held down the supply of education, it was natural that entrance competition intensified. In addition, the uniformity of learning ensured by the uniform teaching materials—state-imposed curriculum and textbooks—laid a common ground for the nationwide entrance competition and turned classroom instruction into rote-learning in state-imposed basics and drills, essential as these were for preparation for the entrance competition. The intensifying entrance competition quickly swept students into the movement toward schools of higher level and caused demand in education to rise further. During the 1960s alone, as a result, the quota-controlling Park regime had to moderate its supply control and raise university student quotas by as much as 43 percent, because the number of applicants to universities had nearly doubled (Kim YB, 1980, p. 271). This moderation took place although university entrance competition at that time was much less serious than the competition for middle school entrance.

Since then, the military regime's typical policy regarding entrance competition was to maintain supply control until the intensifying entrance competition and public discontent reached a critical point and, then, to abruptly modify the control at the level of schooling where applicants were most congested. The measures typically employed for this were to increase student quotas and to loosen conditions for licencing new institutions and programs. Such crises first hit middle schools in the late 1960s, high schools in the late 1970s, and universities in the early 1980s. The increase of student quotas, however, invariably ended up further enhancing demand because the intensity of the entrance competition, which had already become critical, drove students toward higher levels of schooling with an uncontrollable force. The demand which was thus enhanced quickly exceeded the increased student quotas.(Note 17) Thus, while the number of schools, universities and programs increased rapidly, demand for education grew even more rapidly. To a large extent, the incredible speed of growth in South Korea's education can be accounted for by such early developmental policies.

Overall, the Park regime's initial decision to control supply in the education market appears to have been inevitable on the political dimension of policy making. When economic development was to be pursued from scratch and necessary manpower for industrialization was already secured by the universalized primary education, expenditures on not so urgent areas, such as education, might well have to be suppressed. The resultant intensification of entrance competition and even the rise in demand could be reasonably tolerated for a while. The trouble, however, was, as in the case of economic policies, the state's inability to move from the temporary measures to policies which were more viable in the long run. As the growing economy gradually improved the condition of its coffers, the state could loosen its grip on the education market and liberalize private educational institutions in terms of their program development, student admission and decisions on tuition fees. At the same time, it could increase investment in the public sector to expand and consolidate its system. Were freedom restored for private institutions to conduct education according to their own decisions, supply and demand in education would sooner or later be balanced, for the consumers in that case would consider which schools and what programs were useful for them, instead of blindly seeking higher and more education. On the other hand, concentration of financial resources on the public sector would not only enhance public education but also motivate private schools' competitive efforts for survival and

prosperity via marketable programs. But the state did not choose such a free market alternative. Instead, it continued with supply control and further tightened its grip on private education. And as part of this policy, it committed much of the increased education funds to subsidising private schools (if not private universities).(Note 18) Thus, it continued to prop up the rising demand for more supply in education, contrary to its original policy pronouncements.

The failure of the state to make policy changes may not be explained by reference to the political dimension of policy making. It may be more plausibly explained by referring to the implementation process in which state policies met the economic world of the personalist society. Especially notable in this connection are the behaviours of those parties who were involved in the transaction of educational services and of the officials functioning on behalf of the intervening state.

### **(3) The Personalist Ethic and Protection under State Control**

The statist policies of controlling student quotas and tuition fees, and of prohibiting diversity in curriculum and textbooks, were obviously not what schools, especially private schools, would welcome. Quota control and tuition fee control meant constraint on their financial operations. The control of curriculum and textbooks flagrantly violated their fundamental rights to conduct education according to their own philosophy and professional judgment. Nevertheless, when policy makers for the first civilian government of Kim Young Sam contemplated in 1994 "liberalizing" educational institutions, the fiercest opposition came from private institutions themselves. Not so conspicuous yet unambiguous resistance came also from within the state bureaucracy, in spite of the fact that it was the very instrument to carry out state policies. As a result, most liberalizing elements in the government's education reform schedule had vanished by the time it was made public. This irony can be accounted for in terms of the personalist ethic which affected the operation of the parties involved in the supply and demand of educational services.

As regards the private educational institutions, although state control restricted their freedom and violated their rights, it practically permitted them advantages which far outweighed disadvantages on their personalist ethical scale. Most importantly, it guaranteed a secure way of balancing revenues and expenditures. State-set student quotas maintained supply in education constantly short of demand. Meanwhile, the state-administered entrance examination repeatedly invigorated competition among students for entry to higher level schools. In effect, secondary and post-secondary institutions always received more applications than their quotas. Although the state placed limits on the number of students to admit and the amount of tuition fees to collect, the limit was not so low as to bankrupt the private institutions, for the state's policy was to rely on private institutions rather than expand public institutions to cope with the rising demand. The student quotas and tuition fees which were actually granted to private schools and universities, therefore, were usually sufficient to raise necessary funds for running the latter's programs at minimal levels. If private institutions relinquished control over the content of their programs and kept costs of instruction (teacher salaries in particular) at low levels, they could make ends meet and even generate some profit.(Note 19) This way of operating their institutions under state control and with "protection of vested interest" was much easier and safer than trying to draw students by offering attractive programs in an open market.

Many private institutions, in fact, pursued their own interests more actively. Since they mostly relied on tuition fees for their revenues, the key to gainful operation was the securing of as many students as possible. The state's student quota control, however,

practically blocked this avenue. Furthermore, the existing student quotas, albeit under control, had quickly surpassed the level of normal classroom operation as repeated crises in entrance competition compelled the state to raise student quotas. Leeway was found in the increase of education programs (that is, more classes for high schools and more departments and faculties for universities) and affiliated institutions (such as elementary and secondary schools for universities and universities for secondary schools). Many private schools and universities succeeded in this kind of effort, especially between 1980 and 1997. Since entrance competition at universities created a continual crisis during this period, the state repeatedly chose to institute restricted yet large-scale increase in the total supply of student places. Taking advantage of the large sums of tuition fee revenues and the multiplied collateral values of their school properties (due to economic development), private schools lobbied and obtained licences for new programs and affiliated institutions as well as necessary favourable bank loans. As a result, many of them grew to be large educational complexes comprising numerous schools at different levels and accommodating tens of thousands of students. At the same time, they incurred large debts which were payable only when cash kept flowing in not only from tuition fees but, more importantly, from additional bank loans. And, as in the case of chaebols, justification of such loans required continual expansion of the private educational institutions. The vicious cycle of expansion for the sake of expansion could be sustained only when entrance competition provoked demand for more and higher education. Hence, ironically, private schools and universities demanded that the state continue to control their operation, keep supply short, and maintain other policy measures which exacerbated entrance competition.

The grounds for collusion between state officials and educational institutions, then, are obvious. While a strong state controlled educational institutions in all aspects of their operation, concrete decisions in dealing with individual institutions were made by governmental leaders and state officials whose *modus operandi* was as personalist as most others in society. The tighter and broader the state exercised control, the greater became the arena for collusion. And through personalist collusion, new school and university licences were given often to those with no backgrounds in the educational profession, and permits for existing institutions' additional programs and affiliated schools were granted without proper assessment of feasibility. A substantial portion of the state's financial resources as well were wasted through collusion. (Note 20)

Another ironic phenomenon in South Korea's education market is the ambivalence of the consumers. Although they were the victims of the inflexible state policies and personalist collusion, they too were reluctant to support changes to the existing state policies. Generally, they understood that schools and universities were operating as businesses rather than as non-profit bodies as legally defined. They also agreed that state control of student quotas and student selection aggravated entrance competition. Their conclusions, however, were that the state should more strictly control schools and universities in the areas of student quotas and tuition fees, and that the state entrance examination should yield scores which more precisely distinguished between individual aspirants for higher education, although doing so should further exacerbate entrance competition. Underpinning this attitude was undoubtedly the personalist ethic. What was of immediate concern was not the development of a viable education system but their own personal interest in not becoming a loser in the nationwide competition for higher and more education and, in case they won, in not paying high tuition fees even at tuition fee-dependent private institutions.

All these parties turned against the reforms intended to accord educational institutions autonomy and freedom necessary for diversifying the education market and,

thereby, reducing entrance competition and unnecessary demand for education.(Note 21)

#### **(4) Institutionalization of Statist Policies**

The developmental state's educational policy measures, which were initially introduced for the purpose of temporarily containing the expansion of secondary and tertiary education as a way to secure resources for strategic industries, have now become "institutionalized" in the education market although the need for such measures has disappeared. The South Korean state's education budget, which now consumes 5 percent of the world-class GNP, is comparable to those of many advanced nations of similar population. Participation in primary and secondary education is full and in tertiary education it is nearly universal. Even so, the state continues the containment policy, allocates students to schools and universities directly or via state-administered entrance competition, controls tuition fees, and maintains the uniformity of curriculum and textbooks in grade schools. It does so on the statist assumption that private schools as well as universities are institutions of public education. And indeed the South Korean state does not seem to be able to abandon such policies unless it resolves to overhaul the entire education market and risk social and political dislocations.

The main source of such difficulties is obviously the prevailing personalist ethic. The hurdles erected by this ethic are interestingly reflected in the remarks made by the critics of liberalizing policy ideas. For instance, in 1998 a professor of mathematics education at a private university in Seoul criticized the policy proposal to abolish entrance examinations and argued that, should this institution be abolished, the state would have to supply alternative ways of determining whom to accept and whom to reject. The leader of a major parental organization in the same year opposed liberalization of schools—especially the abolition of the student quota system and tuition fee control—for the reason that the "greedy" owners of private schools and universities would immediately raise tuition fees and admit students with no limit.(Note 22) Both leaders of public opinion could not see beyond the statist political economy because they did not consider that, where state control and protection is absent or not as extensive as in South Korea, whom to admit and whom to reject depends on what kind of education the university provides, and that, in the private sector, the tuition fee is one major regulator of the supply-demand relationship. On the other hand, state bureaucrats continually seek to influence policy makers in order to expand the extent of state intervention instead of shrinking it. None of the two civilian governments that have so far emerged since the end of military domination was prepared to confront such obstacles. It was not that they were unwilling to dismantle old institutional structures, but simply that the electorate, divided along personal connections, would not confer on them the clear-cut mandate they needed.

The statist policies, which became indispensable institutions in the state-controlled education market, have now acquired "institutional continuity" and, as such, "readily overcome" challenges by more viable policy ideas. The strong South Korean state has, thus, fallen into its own trap, continually expanding its intervention while seeking liberalization, and exacerbating the question of entrance competition while trying to solve it.

#### **(5) The Demand-Provoking Institutional Structures**

This being said, one last question remains to be addressed. Why, as in 1998, does demand continue to rise and university entrance competition remain intense even when the overall supply in student places has been increased far beyond the overall demand? The answer can be obtained by examining an institutional structure that has emerged on

the supply side over the years of state intervention. This institutional structure is the hierarchy of universities which South Koreans unanimously accept.(Note 23)

This hierarchy ranks universities not on the basis of their performance in teaching and research, nor on the basis of their educational facilities and equipment, but on the basis of a few external conditions. The conditions are (i) whether a university is located in Seoul or elsewhere, (ii) whether it is a state or private university, and (iii) whether it is older or newer than others.(Note 24) Preference is based on the assumption that the university is better if it is located in Seoul not elsewhere, a state university not a private university, and older not newer than others. Superficial though it may appear, this assumption is not groundless. Rather, it is fairly well grounded in a web of institutionalized state policies. Consumer indifference to the actual performance of individual universities has to do with the state policies of keeping supply short of demand and provoking entrance competition. The reason is that a guaranteed supply of students under perpetual entrance competition deprives the universities of incentives for trying to outperform others or to develop unique education programs. Since all universities, thus, tend to provide educational services in money-saving ways, consumers look at conditions other than their programs, teaching and research, or equipment and facilities, when they consider which of them to choose. Preference for universities in Seoul is explained partially by the established state policy of not licencing any new university in Seoul in order to curb the concentration of population, which in turn was prompted by another state policy of seeking industrialization at the expense of agriculture.(Note 25) The higher tuition fees of private universities for larger classes with less than satisfactory facilities and equipment may account for the low popularity of such universities. Licences issued to new universities at times of crisis are part of the reason for preferring older universities. Finally, the personalist ethic which requires useful personal connections to the state bureaucracy and chaebol businesses endorses the status of the universities ranked high because their graduates are already in control of those institutions. Since these conditions are not what individual universities can alter, the hierarchy remains constant and individual universities' ranks fixed, with the state university in Seoul at the top and the private universities springing up in the country at bottom.

The hierarchy's role in accommodating demand in higher education is obvious in the fact that it is a hierarchy based on judgement about which university is preferable to which. The top-ranking university is the most preferred while the bottom one is the least. Most aspirants for higher education follow this rule in seeking admission. This tendency is so strong that it persists even after entry to first-year programs well into advanced levels of undergraduate studies. Each semester universities invite applications for the vacancies created by those who do not register because filling given quotas is vital for revenue generation. This is immediately followed by the breaking out of transfer competitions which are as intense as entrance competition.(Note 26) Since the upper ranks are always taken by a handful of prestigious universities while all aspirants for higher education seek to go to such universities, the actual gap between supply and demand remains great even when the overall supply surpasses the overall demand and lower-ranked universities fail to fill their quotas.

The significance of the hierarchy's role in provoking entrance competition can be considered in connection with the practices of state entrance examination and the uniform curriculum and textbooks in grade schools. The once-a-year state entrance examination gives all aspirants for higher education scores specified down to decimal fractions to sort them into thousands of minute ranks. Its questions are prepared in a multiple-choice format about the contents of the uniform curriculum and textbooks in

selected subjects with minor variations. Since this examination is the only road to higher education while its questions are such that better prepared students perform better, it motivates most students in grade schools to competitive preparation, including those with no serious interest in advanced learning. While schools conduct instruction that focuses on entrance competition, their staying away from the competition means alienation from the mainstream school life. Meanwhile, the hierarchical pyramid of universities lifts the nationwide drive toward higher education up to its apex, the state university in Seoul and a handful of prestigious private universities in the same city. In sum, the hierarchy of universities keeps the preferred student places in short supply while the state entrance examination pushes students toward top-ranking universities, and the uniform curriculum and teaching material makes the procedures of entrance competition a simple and technical matter.

## **Summary and Conclusion**

If the foregoing discussion is not flawed, it may permit a conclusion that the high demand for education in South Korea is a product of the statist political economy which, in spite of its initial "political" commitment to coordinating educational development with state-initiated economic development, has become entangled in the private interests of a society in which a personalist ethic prevails. As part of the developmental strategy, the state initially sought to regulate the growth of secondary and higher education in pace with the growth of resources available for education. It also decided to rely on private education rather than expand public education for meeting the demand. That decision was clearly geared to develop a solid market in education as well as in the economy. The state, nevertheless, could not abandon such initial policy measures even when the changed circumstances no longer required them, and even after it practically dropped "development" from its policy agenda. The four decades of education control have resulted in private educational institutions complacently seeking prosperity under the state's control and protection. Here, the personalist ethic of traditional Korea helped bond the policy measures of control and protection to the personalist ethic of the agents in the education market and the officials of the intervening state.

Thus, even at a time when the overall supply of student places far exceeds the overall demand, the institutionalized policy measures continue to provoke entrance competition and, thereby, demand for education in higher and more prestigious institutions. They do so by freezing student quotas at prestigious universities, by keeping tuition fees low enough to freeze the content of education at low standards, and by selecting students on the basis of scores from state examination in the basics covered in state-imposed curricula and textbooks. All this work together to sweep schools and their students into the nationwide entrance competition, thus producing the rising demand. Meanwhile, the hierarchy of universities maintains the intensity of entrance competition by keeping supply of student places at higher ranking institutions always short and by directing the drive toward higher education to the high-ranking universities.

Undoubtedly, the near universalization of higher education in South Korea is a remarkable feat. But there are serious problems as well. The most serious one is that the selection of university students by competitive entrance examination. Although this method has been a vital factor in the achievement of near universal higher education, it prevents what UNESCO (1998) calls "diversification of higher education" and makes it impossible for higher educational institutions to be "a lifelong source of professional training, updating and recycling." The former is due to the guaranteed supply of students which weakens incentives for developing unique programs; the latter comes from the



fact that competitive entrance examinations block the existing workforce from returning to institutions of higher education. Moreover, the fact that almost all South Koreans are about to become university-trained professionals suggests a serious weakness of the future workforce, for a healthy workforce includes not only professionals but also skilled and semi-skilled workers. Such weaknesses will place South Koreans in a very difficult situation given that the globalizing world market requires well-trained, versatile workers who can nimbly adjust to the changing world of work.

The "structural problems" must be addressed soon. The institutionalized statist policies must be changed and ways explored to develop the personalist ethic to a *modus operandi* which is more viable in the new world market. Will lessons learned from the South Korean case not cast light on other East Asian nations where statism and the personalist ethic still prevail?

## Notes

1. In 1997, participation rates were 98.6 percent for primary schools, 101.0 percent for middle schools, and 94.6 percent for high schools (KEDI 1997a, 32). Primary schools' participation rate was 96.4 percent in 1959 and stayed above 100 percent for most years since then. Dropout rates in South Korean schools are negligible, e.g., 2.1 percent for high schools in 1995 (Ibid., 126) while that for American high schools was 5.3 percent in 1994 (Fetler 1997).
2. The rate rose very quickly in recent years. It was 60 percent in 1997 and 51 percent in 1995 (KEDI 1997a, 34). The non-mature students who were admitted in 1998 to day-time university and junior college programs alone accounted for 73 percent of all high school leavers. This is comparable to Japan's 35-38 percent between 1988 and 1998 (Mombusho 1988-1988).
3. The proportion of fees other than tuition fees in the operation costs was 17.9 percent in 1980 and 14.4 percent in 1995 respectively (KEDI 1997a, 59).
4. Regarding the *juku* cramming classes in Japan, Simmons (1990, 90) writes: "[The *juku* phenomenon] is a further measure of Japanese enthusiasm for education, or Japanese anxiety about educational achievement, and it is certainly a sign that the Japanese are willing to pay for educational assistance and advantage."
5. There should be a limit in the Confucian culture's contribution to educational and economic development. Lie (1992, pp. 295-6) points out that the Confucian culture has been around in Korea for centuries yet Korea's rapid economic and other development is a recent phenomenon. Long before, Weber (1967) expressed his skepticism about Confucianism's possible contribution to development.
6. This view is frequently found in South Korea's press.
7. This condition is not met in South Korea. In 1997, out of 2,792,410 students in higher education only 126,075 (4.5 percent) were recipients of a scholarship, of which values were mostly far short of paying necessary expenses (MOE 1997, 578, 592). Student loans are virtually unavailable.
8. For the concepts of "civil society" as a society of capitalist market economy and "the state" as a political entity overseeing civil society, I follow the long-established yet essentially controversial tradition in social science. See Marx (1975).
9. Chang (1991) goes further to say that the development of capitalism does not require the individualist ethic. Favourable interpretations of the personalist ethic in Asian countries are also found in Smith (1991) and De Vos and Hsu (1985).
10. This is a South Korean application of Gerschenkron's thesis that "a developing

country tends to establish its industrial structure differently from the advanced countries and . . . the higher the degree of backwardness, the stronger will be the role of the government." Cited from Cho (1995, 7). For Gerschenkron's own account, see: Gerschenkron (1961 and 1989).

11. The Germany-based Transparency International's transparency index (TI) for South Korea is lower than Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Japan while higher than Indonesia, Thailand and China. TIs for East Asian nations are generally lower than those for Euro-North American nations. See [Http://www.gwag.de/~uwvw/cpi1998.html](http://www.gwag.de/~uwvw/cpi1998.html).
12. It was at that time that researchers have started to compound public and private education. The earliest example is Yun and Park (1977).
13. "*Kongsaribkan kyosasunhoanje*" (Teacher Rotation between Public and Private Schools), *The Chosun Ilbo*, 7 Sept. 1998.
14. See below under the heading of "The Personalist Ethic and Protection under State Control." While state-administered entrance competition enhances the drive towards higher education and, thus, guarantees universities' filling student quotas, the universities which have no trouble in filling student quotas do not need to recruit students by attractive education programs. Most universities, therefore, copy the programs of the top-ranking university (less bits of something as theirs do not have to be as good as the latter's).
15. For comparison, the size of the 1998 education budget was 5 percent of the GNP and 24 percent of the total state budget. Given that the economy during the Park years was much smaller, it is obvious that state funding of education was much less than adequate for balanced development in schools of all levels.
16. Later on, the state allowed private schools and universities to "autonomously decide" on their tuition fees. Yet the "autonomously decided" tuition fees had to fall within the state's expectation in order for the schools and universities not to be retaliated against.
17. Choi (1996) pointed out that as a result of the Chun-Roh junta's policies, the number of university entrants increased by 30 percent and reduced young university graduates' wages down to the level of young high school graduates.
18. See Note 20.
19. Up until the late 1980s teachers' salaries were very low while their teaching load was very heavy. In 1989, disgruntled teachers unionized against the law prohibiting such an activity. The military regime discharged those teachers who joined the illegal union and arrested their leaders. At the same time, it decided to increase state funds for teacher salaries. This decision was applied not only to public schools but also to private schools. The purpose of this was to mollify private school teachers' discontent while maintaining the existing arrangement for minimal-cost school operation under state control and protection.
20. An administrator whom I interviewed in May 1998 gave me his estimation that at least a quarter of the state education budget was wasted in corruption.
21. The narrow perspective of the political state and class-dominated civil society is apt to lead to overemphasizing the "political" role of the state while overlooking the dynamics in which state policies protect class and other interests in civil society. An example of this is Chung and Armer (1997), which emphasizes the developmental state's role "in shaping policies to expand and limit education to meet political and economic objectives rather than class interests." In this account, the inability of the strong state to carry out its political decisions is simply ignored.

22. The former was found in a newspaper article and the latter in proceedings of a public forum. I withhold documentation in order to avoid possible injury to the persons concerned.
23. The existence of hierarchy in East Asian universities is partially noted in Hayhoe (1995).
24. The general background description of this hierarchy can be seen in Kwon (1991).
25. As of 1997, for instance, only 39 out of 169 universities were located in Seoul although a half of the whole population resided in that region (MOE 1997, pp. 580-9).
26. Each year, more than 7 percent of university students migrate upward in the hierarchy. The number of registered university students in 1997 was 1,368,461. At the beginning of the Second Semester of the 1998 academic year, 42,468 of them moved to another university. Those to be transferred at the beginning of the First Semester of the 1999 academic year are expected to be well over 50,000. "Sasang choedae-yi taehag pyoniphag" (The Largest University Student Migration in History), *The Chosun Ilbo*, 17 January 1999. The transfer application rate at major private universities in Seoul for the First Semester of the 1999 academic year ranged between 12 for 1 and 66 for 1.

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