

Research Article

Korean Educational Exceptionalism and the Past: The *Education in Korea* Series

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Abstract:

South Korea's remarkable educational performance is sometimes attributed to an enduring cultural zeal for learning, widely described as 'education fever'. Yet despite this narrative's prominence in public discourse and official publications, little research has been done on how and when the idea of a historically rooted educational exceptionalism first emerged in state-sponsored accounts. This study addresses this gap by analysing the *Education in Korea* white paper series, published by the South Korean Ministry of Education from 1962 to the present. The article systematically compares the historical chapters and ministerial forewords across all thirty-eight volumes of the series, tracing shifts in terminology, narrative emphasis, and rhetorical strategy. The analysis shows that a nationalist reinterpretation of the history of education began to take shape in the late 1960s and gained momentum in the 1970s and 1980s. During this period, premodern educational traditions were increasingly portrayed as the foundation of Korea's rapid postwar modernization, producing a retroactive projection of contemporary educational achievements onto the past. I argue that the notion of Koreans' historic educational zeal crystallized in the late 1970s as an expedient nationalist explanation for the country's economic growth, prompting a broader reinterpretation of Korea's educational history as inherently exceptional.

Keywords: South Korea, education, history of education, education fever

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Introduction

The education system of the Republic of Korea (hereafter South Korea) is often lauded as one of the most successful in the world (Fenton 2015), consistently achieving high rankings in international assessments of learning outcomes and educational equity (OECD 2023: 3–4; Yoo 2020: 206). However, domestic perspectives tend to adopt a more critical stance, and the structure, curriculum, and strongly exam-centred orientation of the national school system are frequent subjects of intense political and social debate (Oh 2011; Park 2013; Seth 2022). Both positive and negative aspects of South Korean education are often linked to a distinctive national preoccupation with learning, frequently discussed under the term ‘education fever’ (*kyoyugyŏl* or *kyoyuk yŏlgi*). While the existence of this educational zeal is widely acknowledged, its historical origins and underlying causes remain the subject of lively discussion within and beyond South Korea. Some scholars view it as a modern development that emerged due to experiences directly before and during the colonial period, whereas others regard it as a long-standing passion for learning that can be traced back to the beginnings of Korean history and that has become a deep-rooted cultural trait of the Korean people.

The latter interpretation can be found in official government publications, including English language materials issued by the Ministry of Education (MOE), where it is often paired with a related narrative asserting that, given Korea’s limited natural resources, the country had no choice but to cultivate and rely on its population as its principal asset.

At the same time, Korea is a country with almost no natural resources. And the Korean War in the early 1950s left the country in ruins. But Korea overcame the despair and rapidly grew economically to create the Han River Miracle in the 1970s. The miracle was possible thanks to the education fever that has been handed down for several hundred years. (MOE 2015: 3)

The modern Korean passion for education is thus projected backwards onto Korea’s past and appears as a direct continuation of longstanding premodern attitudes. In this framing, South Korea’s contemporary successes then become an almost inevitable outcome of the Korean people’s enduring focus on education.

The present article seeks to answer the question of when this discourse of a historical educational exceptionalism first emerged in official state narratives and for what reasons it may have developed. Rather than adjudicating the historical validity of claims about long-standing educational zeal, this article examines how such claims were produced, institutionalized, and repurposed in official state narratives. To answer the research question, this article analyses the government white paper series *Education in Korea*, a publication aimed at foreign audiences that reflects the state’s evolving perspective on the history of Korean education. First produced in 1962 and then published almost continuously from 1966 to the present, the white paper serves as an annual or, at times, biennial report detailing educational policies and achievements. In addition to contemporary educational data, most issues also include

a brief overview of Korean educational history, references to historical educational institutions, and a foreword by the minister of education. Together, these elements offer valuable material to trace narrative shifts about the history of education in Korea across the series.

First, the article will briefly introduce some representative scholarship on the origins of Korea's education fever to provide context and situate the analysis of the *Education in Korea* white paper series within the broader discourse. It will then shortly outline background information on the series and explain the methodological approach before proceeding to the analysis itself. In the conclusion, I argue that a discourse of educational exceptionalism begins to emerge in the white paper series in the late 1970s and becomes increasingly pronounced in the following decades, reflecting broader shifts in nationalist historical narration and modes of national self-assertion.

Education Fever, Confucianism, and National Self-Assertion

Korean education fever has been widely discussed in academic scholarship and by the public. The term has become synonymous with both the strengths and flaws of the South Korean educational system, all of which are understood to stem from the population's intense passion for education (Seth 2012a: 22–23). A major point of contention, however, concerns the origins and causes of the phenomenon. Although this question is rarely the primary focus of studies on education fever, it is nevertheless addressed in most of them. As a result, since the 1980s, when Korean social scientists and historians first began to engage with the topic extensively (Shin 2009: 57–60), a substantial body of scholarship with diverse and often contrasting opinions on the issue has accumulated.

Views on the roots of the Korean passion for education range from interpretations that emphasize a longstanding traditional preoccupation with learning to studies that regard education fever as a distinctly modern development. For example, educational historians Chŏng Sunu (1999) and Lee Woojin (2013) have argued that traditional Korean education was primarily focused on personal self-cultivation, whereas the modern zeal for learning is a form of credentialism rooted in Social Darwinist ideas that only arrived in Korea during the opening period (1876–1910) and the colonial period (1910–1945) and then intensified during the industrialization of the 1960s and 1970s. In contrast, Kim Yŏngch'ŏn and Cho Chaesŏng (2024: 53–79), also scholars of educational history, view the existence of educational institutions in the early states on the Korean peninsula as evidence of a continuous cultural passion for learning that extends into the present and now represents a 'cultural gene' (*munhwajŏk yujŏnja*) of the Korean people.¹

1 Although Kim and Cho do not state this explicitly, the passage does not necessarily imply an essentialist genetic predisposition of Koreans toward education. Rather, it most likely alludes to Richard

However, between these two poles, the discourse surrounding the origins of Korea's education fever is quite complex and often intertwined with broader evaluations of the phenomenon itself. Seoul National University of Education Professor Oh Sŏngch'ŏl (2015), for example, views it as a predominantly modern development and interprets education fever as an 'energy' that, despite the heavy burden it has placed on individual families, has nevertheless driven economic growth and improved educational standards nationwide. While Oh acknowledges a historical influence, namely Confucianism, he associates its role as the primary cause for the social immobility of premodern Korea. This immobility, he argues, ultimately fostered the status consciousness and credentialism that fuel modern educational fervour, which in turn facilitated greater social mobility in South Korea in the 1970s and 1980s. Such a positive assessment of education fever, however, is not necessarily always paired with a negative view of traditional educational processes and values. For example, former Minister of Education Yi Tonhŭi and others (2015) understand the modern development of education in South Korea as a success story, but attribute this success to a traditional Korean respect for the humanities and learning, which cultivated a 'will to education' (Yi et al. 2015: 211).²

Kang Chang-Dong (2008) interprets this historical respect for education rather as an obsession with status achieved through academic credentials, which he views as a persistent negative force in Korean history. In Kang's understanding, Confucian culture encouraged the intense pursuit of success in the government service examinations for the attainment of social position and status; a pattern that he sees as persisting to this day (Kang 2008). At the same time, there are also some voices in contemporary South Korea that argue for a return to Confucian values in education, viewing them as a remedy for the overheated and overly competitive nature of the current educational system (Paek 2015).

A similarly wide range of opinions on the matter appears in contemporary South Korean media and educational material. From newspaper editorials that condemn excessive education fever as a legacy of colonial oppression (Kang 2007) to public broadcasting programs that trace its origins back to the *hwarang* 花郎 order of the Silla kingdom 新羅 (57 BCE–935 CE) and to the civil service examinations of the Koryŏ 高麗 (918–1392) and Chosŏn 朝鮮 (1392–1897) periods (KTV Kungmin Pangsong 2023). The discussion also appears in educational materials on Korean history, for example historian Han Young Woo 韓永愚 (1938–2023) viewed educational zeal as a central force in Korea's historical development, asserting that

Dawkins's concept of the meme, introduced in his book *The Selfish Gene*. A similar approach to understanding Korean education fever is presented by Suh Ghun-won (2008: 198–199).

2 It is worth noting that positive assessments of South Korea's contemporary enthusiasm for education often avoid the term education fever, opting instead for expressions such as "passionate desire for education" (*kyoyuk ŭi ttŭgŏn yŏlmang*) or the more promotional label "K-Education" (*k-edyu-k'eisyŏn*).

“even today, Koreans, whether they have Korean nationality or not, have the highest education fever in the world” (Han 2007: 38).

The topic of Korean education fever has also been discussed in academic scholarship outside Korea. The most well-known and widely cited study on this phenomenon is Michael Seth’s book *Education Fever: Society, Politics, and the Pursuit of Schooling in South Korea* from 2002. While Seth primarily examines the modern development of Korea’s educational system, he also dedicates a chapter to education in Korea prior to 1945, including a brief discussion of premodern educational traditions. Seth highlights Confucian ideals of self-cultivation and the competitive nature of the government service examinations as significant influences on contemporary South Korean attitudes toward education (Seth 2002: 9–12). However, while Seth acknowledges the Confucian tradition as one contributing factor to the emergence of education fever, he attributes its primary causes to developments in the twentieth century. In particular, the restricted access to education for Koreans under the Japanese colonial regime is seen as the main reason (Seth 2002: 6; Seth 2012b: 13).

A more recent contribution to the topic is a 2023 special issue of the journal *History of Education*, edited by Klaus Dittrich and Dolf-Alexander Neuhaus. In their editorial, the authors explore the origins and potential definitions of the term education fever and provide a concise overview of Korean educational history. They argue that the phenomenon should primarily be understood as a symptom of modern struggles to reproduce social status, compounded by South Korea’s unique geopolitical position (Dittrich and Neuhaus 2023: 550). They also state that “Korea-related educational and social sciences portray ‘education fever’ as a contemporary phenomenon and largely neglect historical depth” (Dittrich and Neuhaus 2023: 546). However, as seen above, many Korean publications do connect the success of the modern Korean educational system to cultural characteristics of the Korean people or premodern Confucian traditions.

Confucianism is certainly one keyword that reappears in most discussions surrounding the origins of Korean education fever.³ As Dittrich and Neuhaus point out, modern understandings of Confucianism in Korea are often based on a rather ‘fuzzy’ interpretation (2023: 547–548). Since at least Japanese colonization, Confucian thought had largely lost its legitimacy in Korea as many scholars blamed it for the country’s downfall and even those who continued to engage with its doctrines called for substantial reform. It was only in the 1960s and 1970s that certain strands of Korean Confucianism were rehabilitated, but selectively reconstructed and reinterpreted to support state narratives of modernization and patriotism (Han 2016; Hunjoo Kim 2024). With new economic prosperity, public

3 Some studies from the early 1990s also pointed to Buddhist influences on studying and attitudes toward education (Park 1990), though this line of argument has largely disappeared from recent scholarship and now survives only within broader accounts that locate the roots of education fever in Korean tradition as a whole.

attitudes toward Korea's Confucian tradition also shifted, partly giving way to renewed appreciation (Moon 2011: 90–91). In state publications, the term Confucianism has now come to signify a long, continuous history of diligent teaching and learning in Korea, regardless of how dramatically the content, methods, and aims of education have changed from premodern times. Contemporary discourse about it today often mirrors the language of Korea as a 'Nation of Propriety in the East' (*Tongbang yeüi chi guk*), which Eunseon Kim has described and analysed as a "recognizable cultural trope which epitomized the nation-bound notion of ethno-national tradition" (2022: 151).⁴

In this sense, Confucianism has entered the official state narrative as a marker for a national tradition of educational excellence that runs through Korean history and is even credited with enabling Korean intellectuals to adapt to new circumstances during encounters with Western imperialism (Lee 2000: 126). Originally promoted by the South Korean government as part of the developmentalist narrative in the 1960s and 1970s, it has since evolved into a key element of South Korea's post-developmental nationalism (Charles R. Kim 2024), which interprets Korean diligence and educational zeal as both the drivers of economic development and defining features of Korean identity. The history of Korean education thus becomes part of a broader narrative of self-assertion in which contemporary achievements are explained through reference to an honoured past (Han 2003: 328).

As can be seen in the quote above, the narrative of an affinity for education as a defining trait of the Korean people strongly features in current official state publications. However, much like how contemporary state policy shapes official historiography, depictions of Korea's educational history have evolved in response to current contexts. This analysis of official publications on the history of education reveals not only how premodern educational institutions and traditions are interpreted – either linked to or distanced from present-day educational concerns – but also how social, economic, and cultural developments are framed in relation to Korea's educational heritage. Moreover, this survey sheds light on when the narrative of Korea's educational exceptionalism first emerged and in what context it gained traction. Before moving into the analysis, the paper will first outline some general details about the source material, the *Education in Korea* series, and why it is a suitable primary source for this research.

4 That is not to say that criticism of Confucianism and its legacy, as well as its instrumentalization by the military regime, was or is absent in contemporary South Korean public discourse. A well-known example is Kim Kyöngil's influential 1999 book *Kongja ka chugöya nara ka sanda* (Confucius Has to Die for the Nation to Live), in which he argues that Confucianism is responsible for a range of societal problems in South Korea today, including the excessively high authority accorded to school-teachers which stifles students' creativity (see also Lee 2022: 154).

The *Education in Korea* series

The first issue of the white paper series *Education in Korea* was published in 1962 by the Ministry of Education (MOE) and the National Commission for UNESCO of South Korea. The reconstruction of South Korea's educational system was supported by the United Nations through the United Nations Korean Reconstruction Agency (UNKRA) from 1950 to 1958 and subsequently by UNESCO, which provided experts in various fields such as education. As a result, the inaugural issue of the *Education in Korea* series reads much like a report summarizing the outcomes of this international support. The primary goal of the white paper is briefly outlined as "to give foreigners an idea of the state of education in Korea today, with its historical background and development" (MOE 1962: 94). A similar sentiment is expressed in the foreword of the issue, written by Pak Ilgyöng 朴一慶 (1920–1994), who served as the minister of education from October 1962 to March 1963 (MOE 1962: 5). To ensure accessibility for an international readership and to promote South Korea's educational initiatives and achievements abroad, the series is published in English. While the white paper series has been used by successive Korean regimes and administrations as a soft power instrument, it is difficult to determine whether these publications reflect only the views of the MOE or a broader state consensus on Korean educational history. For the purposes of this analysis, the series is understood both as a driver and as a reflection of official state perspectives on Korean history.

The *Education in Korea* series presents a valuable corpus for scholarly research, as most of its issues include a concise overview of Korean educational history. In the span of more than sixty years of publication, differences in structure and shifts in emphases across the series' annual or biennial issues reveal changes in the narration of this educational history. No comparable resource exists in Korean-language reference works on education, such as the *Statistical Yearbook of Education* (*Kyoyuk t'onggye yǒnbo*) series or in other publications issued by official South Korean institutions. All issues of the *Education in Korea* series were published under the auspices of the Ministry of Education (MOE), although the responsible institutions changed over time (see Table 1–5). While each new volume naturally reflects contemporary political developments, provides updates on recent changes, and includes up-to-date survey data, many other materials are often reused across series. In total, thirty-eight separate instalments of the *Education in Korea* series were published, all of which were included in the corpus for this analysis.

Relevant for this survey are three elements that appear in most issues of *Education in Korea*: an introductory chapter providing general historical information about Korea (historical chapter), a chapter devoted specifically to the history of education on the Korean peninsula, and a foreword/preface authored by the sitting minister of education. For the purposes of the analysis, these chapters were systematically compared across different issues in order to identify changes in structure, thematic emphasis, and narrative strategy. The comparative examination was grounded in comparative close reading, while drawing on document analysis and its

methodological framework for working with white paper materials as outlined by Salheiser (2019: 1122–1125). This approach, partially rooted in qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2015), incorporates not only the explicit content of the documents but also the contextual developments they reflect. It particularly focuses on changes in periodically published series, analysing even minor revisions in relation to this broader context. To implement this method, I organized the relevant chapters across all published issues of the series into thematic categories and then examined each for shifts in terminology, rhetorical patterns, and substantive content. Because the chapters adhere to a chronological structure and often reuse existing materials with only few revisions, these thematic sections could be clearly delineated according to the historical periods they discuss. The sections were analysed for changes in thematic keywords (e.g. ‘foreign influences’, ‘national spirit’, and ‘human resources’), as well as for rhetorical shifts that emphasized or downplayed particular historical influences and developments. This method made it possible to identify both gradual adjustments and more abrupt changes in the presentation of Korean educational history throughout the white paper series. In the following, the key passages identified through this analysis and relevant to the research question are presented according to the different publication phases of the *Education in Korea* series.

Education in Korea 1962

The inaugural volume of the series from 1962 opens with a historical chapter titled “Historical Background”. This chapter begins by emphasizing the ancient origins of Korean civilization, underscoring this point with the claim that Koreans adopted Chinese script over three thousand years ago (MOE 1962: 6). Subsequently, the chapter highlights several ancient educational institutions, including the T’aehak 太學 (Highest School) of Koguryō (37 BCE–668 CE), the Sōnggyun’gwan 成均館 (National Academy), the Sabu Haktang 四部學堂 (Four Schools of the Capital), and the *hyanggyo* 鄉校 (Local Schools) of Chosŏn.⁵ These examples are presented to emphasize the long-standing tradition of formal state education on the Korean peninsula. Of particular interest is the statement that the “Kwa-go [*kwagō* 科擧] system (national examination for civil servants and military officers), was transplanted from China mainly during the Ko-ryo [Koryō] Dynasty (A.D. 918–1392). The following Yi Dynasty (A.D. 1392–1910) adopted and maintained these Chinese systems” (MOE 1962: 6).

The description then briefly notes that in premodern times, education was monopolized by the noble classes with no opportunities available for girls or commoners. Simultaneously, the text highlights the role and influence of Confucianism on the curriculum. The narrative then shifts to technical achievements,

5 Both *hyanggyo* and the Sōnggyun’gwan already existed during Koryō times where the highest school was called Sōnggyun’gwan from at least 1308.

highlighting the use of movable type in 1403⁶ and the invention of the Korean script, *han'gŭl*, in 1443. The text continues on to discuss Korea's opening to the outside world after 1872 and the establishment of modern schools by Western missionaries. Moving on to the Japanese colonial period, the text focuses on the discrimination faced by Koreans within the colonial education system. However, it also briefly acknowledges improvements in school infrastructure initiated by the Japanese colonial administration (MOE 1962: 7). The post-liberation period of the Korean peninsula is marked as including the introduction of democratic education, facilitated with assistance from the United States.⁷ This, combined with the strong educational zeal of the Korean people, is described as having led to an impressive increase in the number of educational institutions and student enrolment. The chapter then discusses the Education Law of 1949,⁸ which established the framework for modern education in South Korea and enshrined the concept of *hongik in 'gan* (弘益人間, "the greatest service for the benefit of humanity")⁹ as the nation's educational motto.

Overall, the tone of the historical chapter is sober and descriptive, focusing on an overview of the major educational institutions in Korean history. It acknowledges the exclusivity of premodern education while recognizing its achievements and provides a candid discussion of the role of foreign influences in shaping Korean education. Confucianism is only indirectly associated with the exclusion of women and other groups from education, reflecting an ambivalent stance toward the legacy of the Confucian tradition in Korea. The 1962 edition thus serves as a useful starting point for tracing changes in the representation of Korea's educational past across subsequent decades of publication, while also remaining a historically situated text whose narrative reflects the ideological and historiographical attitudes of its own moment in time.

6 This refers to the moveable metal type of the *kyemi* year 1403 in which several Confucian classics were printed. See Ch'oe Wall 1999, 1093. The now famous book *Chikchi* 直指 was only rediscovered in the 1970s.

7 This so-called 'democratic education' was a euphemism by the Park Chung Hee regime that masked autocratic policy under the guise of anti-communism (Lee 2021: XXV–XXVI).

8 The text mentions 31 December 1948, but the law was passed and promulgated only a year later on 31 December 1949.

9 This concept is often connected to Tan'gun and appears in the *Samguk yusa* 三國遺事 (*Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms*). Both the first minister of education, An Hosang 安浩相 (1902 – 1999), a well-known follower of Taejonggyo, and his successor, Paek Nakchun 白樂潛 (1895 – 1985), are sometimes credited with designating it as Korea's official educational motto.

Table 1.

Issue	Relevant Chapters/Sub-chapters on Korean History of Education	Keywords/Quotes	Remarks
1962	• Foreword • Historical Background	• ‘Chinese writing introduced’ (p.6) • ‘education monopolized by noble classes’ (p. 6) • ‘Hongik In’gan’ (p. 7-8)	• published by MOE and the South Korean National Commission for UNESCO
1966	• Foreword I. Introduction A. Background of Korean Education B. History of Education	• ‘Chinese culture refined and adapted’ (p. 8) • ‘Hwarang’ (p. 16–17) • ‘Recitation of Classics principal method of teaching’ (p. 20)	• series published by Central Education Research Institute¹⁰
1967	• Foreword I. Introduction		• no historical or history of education chapter • introduction of ‘Charter of National Education’ in 1968/69
1968/1969			
1970			
1971			
1972	• Foreword I. Introduction A. History of Education	• ‘filial duties and loyalty to the clan’ (p. 1) • ‘noble spirit of chivalry’ of Hwarang (p. 2) • ‘Confucian morality’ (p. 3)	• same text as 1966 with some omissions • less discussion of foreign influences on Korea
1973	• Foreword I. Background of Korean Education A. Historical Review of Education	• in old ‘suspicion towards innovation’ (p. 132) • now ‘Innovation as educational policy’ (p. 132) • ‘developmental orientation’ (p. 132)	• series published by Korean Educational Development Institute¹¹ • history of education same text as 1972
1974/1975		• ‘increasing demand for qualified human resources’ (foreword)	

10 The Central Education Research Institute or CERI (Chungang kyoyuk yŏn’guso 中央教育研究所) was established in 1953 and was tasked with providing surveys on educational issues and supporting curriculum and educational planning. The institute was disbanded in 1973.

11 The Korean Educational Development Institute or KEDI (Han’guk kyoyuk kaebalwŏn 韓國教育開發院) was founded in 1972 and effectively replaced CERI in its tasks. It established the Educational Broadcasting System (EBS) television station in 1990.

Issue	Relevant Chapters/Sub-chapters on Korean History of Education	Keywords/Quotes	Remarks
1976		•‘long history with unique tradition’ (foreword) •‘education is driving force of national development’ (foreword)	

Education in Korea 1966–1976

In the foreword to the following issue that was only published in 1966, then-Minister of Education Kwŏn Obyŏng 權五柄 (1918–1975) made it clear that the “present edition has little continuity from the 1962 edition of *Education in Korea*. This departure was necessary because of the various changes which have taken place in the many phases of education in Korea since then” (MOE 1966: foreword). Although this claim opens the new issue, the content of the historical chapter remains rather similar. This chapter first provides an overview of Korea’s geographical, historical, and economic background before moving on to the history of education. A clear shift from the 1962 issue is that the 1966 historical chapter takes great care to emphasize the independence of Korean civilization and culture from those of its East Asian neighbours. While acknowledging cultural exchanges within East Asia, it firmly asserts that these interactions did not influence the intrinsic national character of the Korean people.

During the period of the Three Kingdoms, Chinese culture began to be introduced into Korea to undergo further refinement and adaptation to Korean life. This culture was in turn transmitted to Japan where it became known as the culture of the Asuka period. Chinese culture and civilization were steeped in the age-long traditions of Korea without ever affecting anything vital or basic to the Korean individual. The Korean scholar may have followed Chu His’s [*sic*] teachings but he never wore a Chinese pigtail; the Korean woman may have bound herself to the Confucian place for her but she never bound her feet (MOE 1966: 8–9).

When discussing Korea’s cultural heritage, the text expresses a similar sentiment and asserts that when the Korean people adopted foreign ideas such as Buddhism or Confucianism, these ideas developed more fully in Korea than in their countries of origin and ultimately “contributed to fostering a distinct native sense of activity” (MOE 1966: 7).

The actual chapter “History of Education” starts its discussion of ancient education with an introduction to the *hwarang*, who played a significant role in the propaganda efforts of the Park Chung Hee 朴正熙 (1917–1979) regime (Jager 2003: 84–86). The text then lists various state educational institutions, with a noticeable shift in focus toward the Silla state compared to the 1962 issue. In the section on the Koryŏ period (918–1392), the examination system is again discussed, but any mention of Chinese influence on its adoption is now conspicuously absent. Regarding modern education,

the text provides more detail on the first Western-style schools established by missionaries. These schools are credited with laying the foundation for democratic education and instilling Koreans with a ‘spirit of national independence’ (MOE 1966: 22). The remainder of the chapter largely follows the same structure as in the previous issue.

From 1967 to 1971, chapters dedicated to the history of education, along with all sections addressing historical developments, are entirely absent in the annual volumes. The series transitioned to a biennial publication format for the first time in this period, combining coverage of the years 1968 and 1969. This 1968–1969 issue for the first time prominently features “The Charter of National Education”, which had been promulgated by Park Chung Hee in December 1968, at the beginning of the text, indicating the regime’s increasing control over all aspects of public life (Seth 2002: 210). In October 1972, Park Chung Hee staged a self-coup, ushering in the Fourth Republic and solidifying his dictatorial powers under the Yusin Constitution. The 1972 issue does not yet address these developments, but a subchapter titled “History of Education” reappears in the introductory historical chapter. The text is similar to the chapter of the same name in the 1966 issue, but with some omissions: the preceding subchapter on the geographical, economic, and cultural background, as well as the section on future developments emphasizing democratic education, were excluded.

The format of the chapter then remained unchanged until 1977, with only minor adjustments made to the organization of paragraphs during this period. While the historical chapter stayed consistent, the appendix of the 1973 edition includes two significant additions: “A Guide to Study in Korea” and an address by then-Minister of Education Min Kwansik 閔寬植 (1918–2006) titled “Korea’s Changing Role in Asia”, originally delivered at the East-West Center in Hawai’i in January 1973. The study guide for Korea includes a brief overview of the country’s history and highlights significant achievements such as the creation of the *Tripitaka Koreana*, the invention of movable metal type for printing in 1234, and Koryŏ celadon. Notably, the guide also mentions Yi Sunsin 李舜臣 (1545–1598) for the first time in the series, emphasizing his pivotal role in Korea’s resistance against Japanese invasions. Under the Park regime, Yi Sunsin was widely celebrated through various monuments and commemorative events (Park 2010). The historical overview then transitions directly from describing the Japanese invasion of the late sixteenth century to Korea’s colonization by Japan.

Minister Min’s speech primarily addresses the shifting geopolitical landscape of the early 1970s and South Korea’s proactive policies in response to these changes. One factor he credits for the economic successes of the 1960s is a transformed societal attitude toward education.

Instead, let me state simply that the change of greatest significance in Korean education took place in the widespread acceptance of innovation as an ongoing process of educational policy. There was a time when education was regarded

simply as a means of transmitting the existing body of knowledge from one generation to another. Innovation then was naturally looked upon with suspicion, if not downright disapproval. But the developmental orientation which the Koreans have adopted in the sixties meant that education had to be linked to the future, not to the past. (MOE 1973: 132)

This statement is important as it reflects a then-common dichotomy: premodern education was perceived as stagnant and tautological, whereas modern education was viewed as innovative and reflective of current circumstances, embodying the notion of progress.

However, within just three years, this paradigm began to show signs of dissolution. In the 1976 issue, Yu Kich'un 柳基春 (1922–1982), who served as minister of education from 1974 to 1976, moved away from his predecessor's earlier dismissal of premodern education. He instead acknowledged its relevance to the economic development of the 1970s, signalling a shift toward a more appreciative perspective on Korea's educational heritage.

Living through a long history which stretches back scores of centuries with unique tradition, the people of Korea have acquired a belief that education is the driving force of national development and the surest means of realizing ideals of mankind. The government and the people of Korea, therefore, have been directing unceasing efforts with ardor on the development of education, based on recognition on the importance of national education as means of reaching the state of prosperity, and such efforts are playing a role of building the foundation for fast growth of economy in Korea today. (MOE 1976: 5)

The volumes for 1974–1975, again a biennial issue, and 1976 show no changes in the historical chapter, aside from an update to the transcription system.

Overall, the volumes published between 1966 and 1976 exhibit a heightened sense of nationalism in their discussion of Korean history and the history of education. The increased emphases on Silla, the *hwarang*, and Yi Sunsin reflect the Park regime's propaganda efforts and underscore a negative attitude toward foreign influences on Korea's historical development (Palais 1995). At the same time, the Park Chung Hee regime's drive to present South Korea as a technologically advanced and scientifically modern 'developed' nation (Kang 2021: 78) also prompted a more nationalist re-evaluation of Korean premodern education. While Korean Confucianism is not explicitly credited with the country's contemporary educational achievements, this period nonetheless saw a shift in perspective that recognized premodern education as a contributing factor to Korea's modernization and as a foundation for its technological development.

Table 2.

Issue	Relevant Chapters/Sub-chapters on Korean History of Education	Keywords/Quotes	Remarks
1977	- Foreword I. Background of Korean Education A. General Background B. Historical Review of Korean Education	'education for spiritual revitalization' (foreword) 'confrontations with China spurred cultural exchange and solidarity of Korean people' (p. 15) 'indigenization of Chinese culture influx' (p. 15) 'pragmatism school as innovative movement' (p. 20) 'educational innovation flickered in the face of Japanese annexation' (p. 20)	historical chapter based on 1966/1972 text, some changes
1978		'From earliest times, education in high esteem' (foreword) 'high respect for scholarship embodied cultural heritage' (foreword)	
1979/1980	- Foreword I. The Background of Education in Korea A. Historical Development Process B. Cultural and Ideological Tendencies C. Direction of Educational Policy	'cultural bridge between China and Japan' (p. 9) - Hwarang 'patriotism, filial duty' (p. 12) 'refusal of imitation, infusing with native elements' (p. 14) 'education with national imprint' (p. 22)	- series published by National Institute of Education¹² - new historical chapter - no separate chapter on history of education - first mention of T'oegye and Yulgok 'Charter of National Education' moves from beginning of volume to end of subchapter C and has introduction - stronger focus on <i>han'gŭl</i>

12 The National Institute of Education (Chungang kyoyuk yŏn'guwŏn 中央教育研究院) was formed in 1974 by merging several different agencies under the MOE.

Issue	Relevant Chapters/Sub-chapters on Korean History of Education	Keywords/Quotes	Remarks
1981	• Preface I. Background of Education in Korea A. General Setting B. Educational Development in a Historical Perspective	• <i>hwarang</i> ‘patriotism, filial piety, valor for unifying the land’ (p. 13) • ‘Education in feudalistic society to serve nation’ (p. 14) • <i>sirhak</i> ‘led people to foster nationalism’ (p 14.) • ‘modernization of education was interrupted by colonial rule’ (p. 15)	• series published by National Institute for Educational Research and Training¹³ • historical chapter again based on 1978 issue, slight changes • new separate chapter on history of education

Education in Korea 1977–1981

Subsequent volumes show that this shift in attitude by the Ministry of Education toward premodern Korean education was not an isolated opinion. While the contents of the 1977 issue are largely based on the historical chapter from the 1966 issue, the text was partially reformulated – perhaps newly translated into English – and includes several additions. For instance, in the discussion of the *hwarang*, the text now concludes that scholarship within this organization laid the foundation for the unification of the Korean peninsula under the Silla state (MOE 1977: 16). Another notable addition emphasizes that during the Chosŏn period, enthusiasm for education was already strong. This widespread passion for learning is said to have then created fertile ground for the adoption of new Western educational methods in the later part of the dynasty (MOE 1977: 18–19). However, the most explicit expression of the attitude shift appears in the foreword to the 1978 volume, written by the then-Minister of Education, Pak Ch'anhyŏn 朴瓚鉉 (1917–1991).

No one can possibly doubt that education is the corner stone of national development and prosperity, something absolutely essential for progress in all areas of human endeavor. From earliest times, Koreans have maintained education in the highest of esteem as the most efficacious means of achieving national as well as personal goals. This high respect for scholarship and great interest in the science of pedagogy has long been embodied in our rich cultural heritage as well as personified in the acts of our noble leaders and revered forefathers. (MOE 1978: 3)

The introductory chapter in the 1978 issue is identical to that of the 1977 volume. However, even though it retains the title “Background of Education in Korea”, the subsequent issue for the years 1979–1980 presents a complete overhaul of the chapter. The revised chapter begins with basic geographical information before

13 Chungang kyoyuk yŏnsuwŏn 中央教育研修院, also in English as the National Education Training Institute.

transitioning into Korean history, placing particular emphasis on the frequent foreign invasions that the states on the Korean peninsula endured in ancient times (MOE 1979–1980: 11). Simultaneously, the text highlights the transfer of ‘continental civilization’ from Paekche and Kaya to Japan (MOE 1979–1980: 12). While the familiar educational institutions listed in earlier issues are once again included, the updated chapter places greater emphasis on patriotism as a shared value cultivated through these early schools. Moreover, it underscores that the Korean people did not simply assimilate foreign cultures but instead infused them with ‘native elements’, enabling them to adopt new ideas while maintaining their national spirit. This notion of national spirit is elaborated further through a discussion of cultural traits unique to the Korean people (MOE 1979–1980: 17–20). The “Charter of National Education” is moved from the beginning of the volume to the end of the first chapter and is now preceded by a brief explanatory note.

The Koreans have traditionally had a high regard for learning and scholarship, and this propensity has enabled them to achieve great progress in education in the modern times. The rapid economic development in the 1960s and ’70s would not have been possible without the Koreans’ ingrained high regard for knowledge. The realization in the late 1960s that education is not the concern of students and teachers alone but a matter of immediate *[sic]* concern to people of all walks of life led to the promulgation of the Charter of National Education on December 5, 1968. (MOE 1979–1980: 21)

The chapter concludes by asserting that South Korea has developed “education with a national imprint” (MOE 1979–1980: 23). This achievement, it argues, lies in the successful incorporation of an originally incompatible Western education system into Korea’s culture to create a modern and uniquely Korean educational model.

By the time of the following issue in 1981, the introductory chapter had already undergone another complete revision. The section titled “Educational Development in a Historical Perspective” is once again included as a subchapter, following a general introduction to Korean history. The discussion of education in the ancient period is significantly abridged, offering only a brief mention of the *hwarang*, an outline of the educational institutions from the Three Kingdoms era, and a cursory overview of education during the Koryŏ and Chosŏn periods. The chapter concludes with the assertion that:

Education in this feudalistic society prepared men to serve the nation. Examination in the Chinese classics was the basis for qualification to serve in the government bureaucracy. This tradition survived strongly into the twentieth century, helping form the matrix within which modernization of education has been carried forward. (MOE 1981: 14)

The subsequent subchapter titled “Advent of Modern Schools” opens with a discussion of the so-called *sirhak* (practical learning) movement, which is credited

with facilitating Korea's modernization and fostering a sense of nationalism.¹⁴ In contrast, the colonial period is described as having "interrupted" this process of modernization (MOE 1981: 14). The narrative then shifts to summarize the successes of educational policies in the 1960s and 1970s, before addressing contemporary developments. For the first time, the new political context following the establishment of the Fifth Republic is acknowledged. The controversial crackdown on private tutoring is defended on the grounds that it curbs the "negative side effects" of an overly "high enthusiasm for education" (MOE 1981: 19). Ultimately, the proposed educational reforms are described as reintroducing moral values in order to address the confusion in Korea's value system caused by the massive influx of Western technology (MOE 1981: 23).

The changes in the *Education in Korea* series during this period clearly reflect the turbulent political developments of the time. The assassination of Park Chung Hee in October 1979, the subsequent military coup, and the violent suppression of the Kwangju demonstrations in May 1980 prompted the Chun Doo-hwan 全斗煥 (1931–2021) regime to implement reforms in the educational system. These reforms were aimed at improving Chun's tarnished reputation by expanding access to tertiary education and introducing policies focused on moral rectification (Lee and Jeong 2018: 95). The series also reflects growing confidence in Korea's historical trajectory, further projecting recent economic successes onto the past. Premodern education is thus reinterpreted as the foundation of an endogenous modernization process that was unsuccessful, or delayed, due to its disruption by Japanese colonial aggression.

14 The *sirhak* movement is a modern designation for a native Korean tradition of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that promised to contain the seeds for an internal modernization of the Chosŏn state and therefore was heavily discussed and studied in the 1960s and 1970s (Hunjo Kim 2024: 93–95). The *sirhak* movement appears in the 1977 and 1978 issues, but only as the 'pragmatism school' (MOE 1977: 20).

Table 3.

Issue	Relevant Chapters/Sub-chapters on Korean History of Education	Keywords/Quotes	Remarks
1982	• Preface I. Korea – What Kind of a Country? II. Education – Developmental Process	• ‘national spirit education’ (preface) • ‘external influences blended with native mores of the race’ (p. 10) • ‘domesticated versions of Buddhism and Confucianism’ (p. 10) • ‘primary trait of Korean culture synthesis of various external influences in the native mold’ (p. 10) • ‘high scientific achievements a prominent feature of Korean culture’ (p. 10) • every state ‘promoted science and learning’ (p. 16)	• new historical chapter
1983	• Preface I. Introduction to Korea II. Education – Developmental Process/Historical Review		• same content as 1982, some light adjustments • more complex introduction to <i>han'gŭl</i> writing • ‘Charter of National Education’ again before Preface
1984			
1985/1986			
1987/1988		• ‘high educational zeal of the Korean people’ (preface)	

Education in Korea 1982–1988

In the 1982 volume, the historical chapter was once again completely revised but then remained unchanged until the 1987–1988 edition. The chapter on the history of education was reintroduced as a separate section following the introductory chapter that discusses basic geographical facts as well as the history and culture of the Korean people. This portrayal of the Korean people emphasizes their homogeneity as a single race and their ability to “blend external influences with native mores”. The *tonghak* (eastern learning) movement of the late 19th century is highlighted as a key example of this “domestication” of foreign ideas. The text identifies Korea’s “high level of scientific achievement” as the second most defining feature of its culture. It cites early developments such as metal-type printing, the *Tripitaka Koreana*, the *Royal Annals* of the Chosŏn period, Koryŏ celadon, turtle ships, and the world’s first rain gauge (*ch’ŭgugi*) as notable examples (MOE 1982: 10). For the first time, the Korean alphabet, *han’gŭl*, is more extensively promoted as a scientific

writing system. The volume also includes a short table introducing a selection of Korean consonants and vowels (MOE 1982: 11–12).

The new chapter on the history of education in Korea is shorter than in previous volumes, but it now begins with a brief introductory paragraph highlighting its overall significance.

The history of education in Korea is quite long. Over a period of 15 centuries from the ancient age, everyone [*sic*] of the ruling dynasties has made great efforts to promote science and learning. Since the introduction of the western educational system at the end of the 19th century, common education in Korea based on this long educational tradition, has made tremendous strides. It will be worthwhile to take a brief glance at historical records of education as practiced in ancient times before attempting a general overview of the education system in present-day Korea (MOE 1982: 16).

The description of education in the ancient era, spanning from the fourth century to the nineteenth century, is limited to just half a page. It briefly lists premodern educational institutions alongside four prominent scholars of the period: the Buddhist monk Wŏnhyo 元曉 (617–686) and the Neo-Confucian scholars An Hyang 安珦 (1243–1306), T’oegye Yi Hwang 退溪 李滉 (1501–1570), and Yulgok Yi I 栗谷 李珥 (1536–1584). The text also includes a concise table categorizing the schools of various historical Korean states into state and private institutions. The chapter then swiftly transitions to modern education, covering the period from the 1880s to Korea’s liberation from Japanese rule in 1945. This section primarily emphasizes the role of missionary activities in establishing new schools and the Japanese suppression of Korean education, particularly during the final phase of colonial rule. The final part of the chapter discusses educational developments since 1945, covering democratic education, the *hongik in’gan* concept, the Charter of National Education, reforms in entrance examinations, and, for the first time, a new focus on technical education. All following volumes until 1988 use the same content for both the introductory chapter and the historical overview of education on the Korean peninsula. The only changes are a more complex introduction to the Korean alphabet that is included starting from 1983 and a chronological chart of historical changes in Korea included in the 1987–1988 volume that lists the founding dates for most historical kingdoms as well as a few inventions, such as the rain gauge in 1442. For the 1987–1988 volume the historical chapter now also ends with a look at the “Contribution of Korean Education to National Development”, which particularly points out how the development of education has contributed to democratization and the economic development of the country (MOE 1987–1988: 22–23). Starting from 1985, the series fully adopts the biennial publication rhythm for all volumes until 2008.

Overall, in the 1980s, the *Education in Korea* series was characterized by an emphasis on moral and ‘whole-person’ education which, like the earlier concept of democratic education, served as a euphemism for anti-communist education in

schools (Seth 2002: 221–223). Pride in the scientific and technical accomplishments of the past is much more pronounced during this period, particularly evident in the laudatory descriptions of the invention of the Korean script. This rise of script nationalism strongly reflects the climate of the time (King 2007). While democratization is not explicitly linked to premodern attitudes toward education, there are clear indications that education is understood as a contributing factor to modernization, with democratic reform being its most recent stage.

Table 4.

Issue	Relevant Chapters/Sub-chapters on Korean History of Education	Keywords/Quotes	Remarks
1989/1990	• Foreword I. Introduction II. Development of Education	• ‘Koreans are famous for a high degree of eagerness for the education of their children’ (foreword) • ‘What is unique about the Korean culture is the intricate web of foreign and intrinsic values as they are witnessed today’. (p. 17) • ‘Confucianism shaped the ideals of formal education’ in Korean history (p. 24)	• revised and condensed historical and history of education chapters • small changes between issues • ‘Charter of National Education’ just mentioned, not full text included
1991/1992		• traditional culture ‘unusually high degree of enthusiasms and belief in education’ (foreword)	
1993/1994		• ‘Most typical of Koreans’ folk customs are shamanism and ancestor worship. Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism, originating from China, made a harmonious match with traditional religions and developed into unique rituals and norms that became an integral part of Korean way of life’. (p. 16)	
1995/1996		• ‘high educational zeal of the Korean people’ (foreword)	
1997/1998		• ‘innate yearning for education’ (foreword) • ‘human resources production’ (foreword)	

Issue	Relevant Chapters/Sub-chapters on Korean History of Education	Keywords/Quotes	Remarks
1999/2000		• ‘nation of few natural resources’, ‘national development through educated labor force’ (p. 28)	• series published by National Institute for International Education Development¹⁵
2001/2002	• Foreword I. Introduction II. Development of Education	• ‘no people in the world have a great passion for education than do Koreans’ (foreword) • ‘Korean culture has developed through its interactions with diverse exogenous cultures’ (p. 4)	• new introductory texts in historical and history of education chapters

Education in Korea 1989–2002

While the series had already undergone a design update for the 1987–1988 edition, the subsequent volume for 1989–1990 now also saw a content revision. The foreword to the volume, written by then-Minister of Education Chŏng Wŏnsik 鄭元植 (1928–2020), discusses the educational enthusiasm of the Korean population as a social and political challenge. Chŏng acknowledges that education reform must “explore measures to meet the burgeoning demands for education” (MOE 1989–1990: 3). The division of chapters in the volume remains largely unchanged, though the content is somewhat condensed. The section on Korean history in the introductory chapter swiftly moves through the various states of the Korean peninsula before highlighting the scientific acumen and ingenuity of the Korean people, citing the *Tripitaka Koreana* and the invention of movable type predating Gutenberg’s by two centuries as key examples (MOE 1989–1990: 18). Yet, the historical overview concludes without acknowledging the political transformations of the recent years, offering only a brief mention of newly granted union rights that were previously denied (MOE 1989–1990: 22).

The chapter on the history of education on the Korean peninsula retains a structure similar to previous editions but has been rewritten in an even more condensed form. It briefly lists the most significant historical institutions, but now only names T’oegye and Yulgok as key historical figures, emphasizing the spread of their teachings to Japan and beyond. In the subchapter on the “Advent of Modern Schools”, the portrayal of Japanese colonial rule as a disruption to Korea’s educational development is slightly more pronounced, yet the discussion is shorter compared to earlier versions. The text then moves on to education after 1945, presenting it in a somewhat less euphemistic manner than before. For instance, while the term democratic education is still used, it is now clarified as essentially being anti-communist indoctrination (MOE 1989–1990: 28). Additionally, the chapter

¹⁵ Kukche kyoyuk chinhŭngwŏn 國際教育振興院.

now includes a table outlining key developments in education since 1948. However, it still does not address the changes to the educational system following the establishment of the Sixth Republic in 1988.

The volume covering the years 1991–1992 saw the return of the subchapter on education's contributions to national development at the end of the introductory chapter, while the overall content remained largely unchanged. Some sentences were rewritten for clarity. The historical chapter now includes a discussion of Parhae, characterizing the period as the “Two Kingdoms” era on the Korean Peninsula and thereby acknowledging Parhae's simultaneous existence in the so-called Unified Silla period (MOE 1991–1992: 16). This is also the first volume in the series published after the Ministry of Culture and Education (Mun'gyobu 文教部) was renamed as the Ministry of Education (Kyoyukpu 教育部) in December 1990.¹⁶ In the 1995–1996 volume, the passage on key historical figures highlights only the spread of T'oegye's teachings to Japan (MOE 1995–1996: 25). In 1997, South Korea witnessed its first peaceful transfer of power from ruling party to opposition. However, this political shift had no noticeable impact on the content of the 1997–1998 issue of the *Education in Korea* series, apart from another design update. This may be because most of the volume was edited before the government transition, as its foreword is written by Yi Myŏngghyŏn 李明賢 (1942–), the last minister of education under the outgoing Kim Young-sam 金泳三 (1929–2015) administration. In his foreword, he portrays enthusiasm for education as an essential characteristic of the Korean people.

Koreans put an uncommon degree of emphasis on education and their innate yearning for education has fueled an eye-catching change and development of the educational system, resulting in the production of abundant human resources with the requisite skills for economic and national development (MOE 1997–1998: 3).

It is during this period that the natural versus human resources narrative appears in the *Education in Korea* series. A newly added short introduction to the chapter on the history of education in the 1999–2000 issue states: “Being a nation with few natural resources, Korea owes its national development to its abundant educated labor force. In this respect, education is one of the prime movers of Korea's national development” (MOE 1999–2000: 28). This new emphasis on education as a means of leveraging resources is also reflected in another renaming of the Ministry of Education which, starting in 2001, became the Ministry of Education & Human Resources Development (Kyoyuk injŏk chawŏnbu 教育人的資源部). This notion is also reflected in the foreword to the 2001–2002 volume, written by then-Minister of Education Han Wansang 韓完相 (born 1936–present).

Education has a very special meaning for Koreans. It is hardly an exaggeration to state that no people in the world have a great passion for education than do

16 However, the English name has always been the ‘Ministry of Education’, so there is no change in the English name of the publisher.

Koreans. It is this enthusiasm that has been the driving force behind Korea's rapid economic growth and democratization (MOE & HRD 2001–2002: foreword).

A similar passage is inserted in the introductory chapter before the discussion on education's contribution to national development, emphasizing that Koreans' zeal for education is the driving force behind the country's political, economic, social, and cultural progress, particularly in the absence of other resources (MOE & HRD 2001–2002: 10). There is also yet another revision to the list of countries where T'oegye's teachings are studied, which now is expanded to include the United States (MOE & HRD 2001–2002: 12).

The 1990s witnessed the continued democratization of South Korea, the country's drive toward internationalization, and the ongoing commercialization of the education sector (Sorensen 2021). While economic growth remained steady in the first half of the decade, the latter half was marked by the Asian financial crisis, which plunged the country into recession, triggered mass layoffs, bankrupted major conglomerates, and forced the restructuring of the labour market. These shifts are reflected in the *Education in Korea* series, most notably in the evolving perception of education as a tool for human resource allocation and the connected narrative about a traditional focus on education to alleviate the problem of few natural resources on the Korean peninsula.

Table 5.

Issue	Relevant Chapters/Sub-chapters on Korean History of Education	Keywords/Quotes	Remarks
2002/2003	1. Introduction 2. Development of Education	• 'Among many features which make Korean culture unique and distinguished, the most notable is its complexity, arising from the combined influences of Shamanism, ancestor worship, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism' (p. 8)	• new historical timeline • shortened historical and history of education chapters • no more reference to Chinese or foreign influences on premodern education
2005/2006		• 'Typical Korean folk customs comprise shamanism and ancestor worship. Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism, blended harmoniously with traditional religions has developed unique rituals and norms that became an integral part of the Korean way of life' (p. 9)	• longer historical chapter • text reverts in part to 1999/2000 text • reference to Buddhism, Confucianism and Daoism originating from China omitted in 2005/06 (see

Issue	Relevant Chapters/Sub-chapters on Korean History of Education	Keywords/ Quotes	Remarks
2007/2008		• ‘Typical Korean folk customs are deeply rooted in shamanist beliefs and ancestor worship. Influences such as Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism were introduced from outside Korea’. (p. 4)	1993/1994 issue), ‘from outside Korean’ in 2007/08
2008		• ‘Buddhism and Confucianism from China also took root in Korea’ (p. 5)	• series published by National Institute for International Education¹⁷
2009			• reference to Chinese influence reappears
2016	I. Introduction to Korea A. Introduction to Korean Education 1. Overview of Korean Education	• ‘Then, how could it be possible for a poor country with meager natural resources to achieve such a remarkable growth within a short period of time? The secret lies in its investment in human resources through education’. (p. 7)	• series only published online • no larger consistency between issues
2017		• ‘Education held an important place in Korea’s Confucian tradition, which reveres learning. Parents’ interest in and passion for their children’s education was tremendous’ (p. 6; p. 9)	
2018			
2019			
2020			
2021		• ‘Korea created rich cultural and intellectual heritage by inventing its own writing system and the world’s first printing technique over the course of its five-thousand-year-long history. What’s been behind Korea’s development over the past hundreds of years are Korean people who have always been passionate about education. In a country with virtually no natural resources, education was the	

17 Kungnip kukche kyoyugwŏn 國立國際教育院.

Issue	Relevant Chapters/Sub-chapters on Korean History of Education	Keywords/Quotes	Remarks
		driving force behind its rapid economic growth and democratization. As a result, Korea is now one of the world's most powerful countries' (p. 5)	
2023		• 'Third, along with the government efforts, Korea's deep-seated passion for learning, instilled by a culture rooted in Confucian values played a pivotal role in the development of education' (p. 15)	

Education in Korea 2002–2023

The next volume of the *Education in Korea* series overlaps with the previous volume, as it covers the year 2002 again. This overlap may be linked to the transition from the Kim Dae-jung 金大中 (1924–2009) to the Roh Moo-hyun 盧武鉉 (1946–2009) administration, although the latter only took office in early 2003. Unfortunately, in the 2002–2003 volume, the series also discontinued the practice of including a foreword by the sitting minister of education, leaving no official explanation for the decision to cover 2002 twice across two separate volumes. Adding to the confusion, there is no issue for the year 2004 at all, raising the possibility that the 2002–2003 volume was originally intended as the 2003–2004 edition, yet it contains no data for 2004.

In any case, the 2002–2003 volume introduces some changes in content again. The introductory chapter now begins with a one-page timeline of Korea's educational history, summarizing the key points that were traditionally covered in the dedicated history chapter. This is followed by the introduction to Korean geography, history, culture, and society, which is significantly shorter than in previous volumes but features more illustrations. All references to the influence of Chinese ideas in premodern times are now omitted, and the introductory chapter merely states that the complexity of Korean culture stems from a combination of shamanism, ancestor worship, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism (MOE & HRD 2002–2003: 8). A

separate chapter on the history of education remains, though it is also greatly condensed. For example, the section on education during the Japanese colonial period is entirely absent, while other subsections are reduced to bullet points listing major developments, such as educational reforms and newly established institutions. This is improved in the subsequent volume for 2005–2006, which acknowledges educational efforts during the colonial period as laying the groundwork for the struggle for national independence (MOE & HRD 2005–2006: 12). The 2005–2006 edition also provides a slightly more detailed cultural overview, once again highlighting the creativity of the Korean people and the advancement of science in ancient times as “outstanding features of Korean culture” (MOE & HRD 2005–2006: 9). Overall, the content remains largely unchanged, apart from minor revisions and corrections, such as the removal of an earlier explanation that Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism originated in China (MOE & HRD 2005–2006: 9). Interestingly, the 2007–2008 volume further expands the introductory and history of education chapters by largely reverting to the content used between 1989 and 2000, but now refers to the three teachings as having been “introduced from outside Korea” (MOE & HRD 2007–2008: 4). This omission of the Chinese origins of Confucianism may be connected to the ‘history wars’ of the early 2000s between China and South Korea (Ahn 2008). The passage on T’oegye also reappears, now describing him as a “giant figure in the history of philosophy in Korea” whose theories are studied in Korea, Japan, and the United States (MOE & HRD 2007–2008: 13).¹⁸

The following volume saw two major changes. First, there was a return to an annual publication schedule. Second, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Science were merged into the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (Kyoyuk Kwahak Kislubu 教育科學技術部) in 2008 as part of the “small government” downsizing plan implemented by the newly inaugurated administration of Lee Myung-bak 李明博 (born 1941–present). It appears that this ministerial restructuring influenced the decision to also publish a separate volume for the year 2008, despite the fact that it had already been covered in the 2007–2008 issue. The content of both volumes is largely identical, but the 2008 volume includes some additions such as a discussion on Korea’s democratic development in the history and culture subchapter (MEST 2008: 5) and a brief note on the ministry’s reorganization at the end of the history of education chapter. However, the latter only vaguely references “synergetic effects” as the rationale for the restructuring (MEST 2008: 26). The 2009 volume is essentially a carbon copy of the 2008 volume.

The 2009 volume marks the final physically published edition of the *Education in Korea* series before it entered a six-year hiatus in its publication. The next issue did not appear until 2016 and since then, all editions have been published exclusively

18 The text then inserts, in brackets, an unexpected and somewhat bizarre discussion of the influences and differences between Zhu Xi and T’oegye and their positions on vital energy *ki* 氣 and patterning principle *yi* 理.

online via the Ministry of Education's website. Volumes published after 2016 are significantly shorter, resembling informational pamphlets rather than comprehensive reports on the state of the education system. Their structure varies from issue to issue, often focusing on contemporary topics, such as the challenges faced by schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. While most editions still include a brief section on the history of Korean education, their primary emphasis is on developments after 1945. Remarkably, the historical narrative and the achievements of the Korean education system are now frequently framed in explicit relation to Confucianism.

Education held an important place in Korea's Confucian tradition, which reveres learning. Parents' interest in and passion for their children's education was tremendous. (MOE 2017: 6)

Third, along with the government efforts, Korea's deep-seated passion for learning, instilled by a culture rooted in Confucian values played a pivotal role in the development of education. (MOE 2023: 15)

The former quote reappears in nearly every issue between 2016 and 2023 with only slight changes. At the same time, the narrative of human resources as the remedy for the meagre natural resources available to South Korea is also still emphasized in the volumes of this period (MOE 2016: 7).

Conclusion

Historian of Korean education Manabu Watanabe 渡部学 (1913–1991) described how Japanese scholars depicted premodern Korean education as stagnant in order to justify Japan's forced 'modernization' of Korea (Watanabe 1969: 1–14). Confucianism, in particular, was portrayed as the root cause of Korea's backwardness at the end of the nineteenth century. After liberation in 1945, the narrative of premodern education as static and repetitive persisted among Korean historians, although it was framed as something to be overcome through endogenous modernization efforts. With the successful reconstruction of the school system in the 1950s, education emerged as one of the earliest fields in which this modernization saw palpable success. At this stage, the new education system was widely understood as the antithesis of premodern education.

The analysis of the *Education in Korea* series shows the shift away from earlier dismissive attitudes toward Korea's educational history. Under the authoritarian Park Chung Hee regime, a new narrative emerged – one that continued to emphasize modernization but that also increasingly relied on nationalist reinterpretations of the past for political legitimation. As education came to be seen as the foundation of the country's economic achievements, premodern education and its historical accomplishments were reassessed more favourably. Through a nationalist lens emphasizing the uniqueness and historical continuity of the Korean people, premodern education came to be reinterpreted not as stagnant or derivative of foreign influences, but as a precursor to Korea's modern success. By the 1970s and 1980s,

it came to be regarded as a historical driver of Korean modernization, with its trajectory interrupted only by Japanese colonization. Pride in contemporary accomplishments prompted a retrospective reinterpretation of the past through the lens of present-day achievements, a shift that also affected interpretations of Confucianism, which was reduced largely to a spirit of scholarly diligence and loyalty to the state. Educational excellence and exceptionalism became the defining characteristics of the Korean people, which were then projected onto history. This perspective was sometimes coupled with a deterministic explanation, emerging in the early 2000s, that Korea had little choice but to prioritize education, as the nation's only true wealth was understood to lie in its people.

The reinterpretation and narrativization of the past in line with contemporary self-perception is an ongoing process that is not unique to Korea. It is intriguing, though necessarily speculative, to consider how historical interpretations may continue to evolve in the future. The global recognition now enjoyed by South Korean cultural and entertainment products may suggest a trajectory in which national self-assertion, alongside ongoing reassessments of the past, increasingly foregrounds Korea's cultural history over scientific and educational achievements.

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