

Education Fever and Happiness in Korean Higher Education

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Abstract

This article discusses relevance between education fever and happiness from the viewpoint of Korean higher education. To review this study systematically, three research questions are addressed. First, what is education fever from the viewpoint of the Korean people? Second, what are relations between education fever and happiness? Last, can education fever make a happy life? In order to defend the questions, the researcher utilizes a content analysis method. As for the limitations of the study, education fever will be discussed in terms of contemporary Korean higher education. The significance of this study is to provide valuable resources and basic theories regarding education fever and happiness for the contemporary policy makers and theorists of the West and the East, finding relevance between education fever and happiness in Korean higher education. One of research results of this paper is that education fever in Korea has sometimes provided the minority of Koreans who belong to the lower social class with an opportunity to upgrade socio-political position through higher education. On the contrary, the majority of Koreans have rarely attained their socio-economic success through higher education. Therefore, Korean education fever has not made a happy life to all of Koreans. For future study, it is recommended that this study be broadly undertaken to examine the merits of education fever in East Asian countries such as Korea, China, and Japan. Finally, the author insists that excessive education fever should be appropriately controlled by parents, societal cooperation, and national policy for a healthy individual and a harmonious society.

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The significance of this study is to provide valuable resources and basic theories regarding education fever and happiness for the contemporary policy makers and theorists of the West and the East, finding relevance between education fever and happiness in Korean higher education.

What is Education Fever?

Education fever or educational fever is literally regarded as the strong zeal for education. This terminology is also called as educational enthusiasm, educational thirst, education obsessed, or educational zeal. In the cultural history of Korea, the educational fever of the Koreans has its origin in the tradition of Confucianism, which transmitted from China in the Three Kingdoms period (57 BC-AD 935)(Lee, 2002a; Lee, 2002b; Lee, 2006). From the Three Kingdoms to the Koryo Kingdom (918-1392) periods, along with Buddhism, Confucianism was not only a means to the maintenance of power and privilege for the governing class, but also a core ideology for the upper class to sustain collectivistic familism and to establish the fundamental principle of the state. In the Choson dynasty (1392-1910), Confucianism as a national ideology and religion largely determined politics, economy, society, culture, and education (Lee, 2006). In the history of Korea, the Koreans following the tradition and value of Confucianism have had much respect for learning since ancient times.

Confucianism generally provided a proper way of training morally perfect gentlemen, involving constant self-cultivation through learning. This Confucian cultural influence made it difficult for the Korean to industrialize her country and to evolve a modern system of higher education on the basis of scientific technology and pragmatic methodology in a Western sense (Lee, 2006). Nonetheless, according to the reports of OECD (2016) and the World Bank (2017), the Republic of Korea has rapidly achieved an industrially advanced nation and the universalization of higher education not only because of education fever based

on Confucian values, but also because of national economic development plans. Confucianism was generally regarded as an obstacle for westernization after Weber's assertion (Weber, 1962), whereas Confucianism, particularly the positive values such as the adoration of learning and sincerity, has been viewed as a motivating force for enhancing East Asian society, especially South Korean society and higher education (de Bary, 1996; Berger & Hsiao, 1988; Hart, 1993; Hofstede, 1980; Hofstede and Bond, 1988; Lee, 2002a; Lee, 2002b; Psacharopoulos, 1984; Suen, 2005; Tu, 1996; The World Bank, 2000).

In the Analects, Confucius emphasizes learning which is broadly interrelated with education and virtue. He mentioned that "I have spent the whole day without eating, and the whole night without sleeping in thought. It was useless. It is better to learn" (The Analects, Book 15, Chapter 30, Legge trans. 1971, pp. 302-3). He is also aware of the importance of learning as follows: "Learning without thought in vain; thought without learning is perilous" (The Analects, Book 2, Chapter 15, Legge trans. 1971, p.150). Confucius highlighted learning as an essential tool or a means to achieve self-cultivation and a harmoniously moral society.

Several Korean and foreign theorists (Choi, 1994; Kim, Lee & Park, 1993; Lee, 2001; Lee, 2002a; Lee, 2002b; Lee, 2005; Lee, 2006; Lee & Park, 1993; Oh, 2000; Seth, 2002) have reviewed education fever as a significant factor in explaining the economic and educational performance of South Korea, but they did not discuss the relation between education fever and happiness. The author in his article (Lee, 2006), "Educational Fever and South Korean Higher Education" analyzed between education fever and Korean higher education from the perspectives of Confucianism and human capital theory, but he did not discuss the relation between education fever and happiness. In this paper, the author intends to focus on education fever and happiness in Korean higher education.

From the standpoint of Korean cultural history, the education fever of the Korean people is determined by two significant factors: one is the accessibility of higher education that changed the privileged social class into all classes with changing epochal situations and circumstances politically, economically, and socially; and the other is the eruption of educational thirst toward rising a socio-economic condition and achieving a successful career or life (Lee, 2002b, p. 178).

The tradition of Confucian elite education is the root of the present academic values or ideology: an academically-oriented doctrine based on Confucian elitism, educational instrumentalism on the basis of the Confucian upper class'(*yangbans*) education values seeking for socio-political success, a doctrine of occupational discrimination on the grounds

of a respect for Confucian *literae humaniores*, academic toadyism originated in the Chinese and Confucian learning oriented education, factionalism rooted in school, region, and family, and *Kwa-keo* national examinations (the state examinations for the recruitment of public officials in the old kingdom era) regarded as the matrices of civil service examinations and university entrance examinations in contemporary Korea(Lee, 2006).

Summing up the above reviewing, the excessive education fever in the contemporary South Korean society mainly derives its origin from academic attainments oriented doctrines as well as from elitism based on the tradition of Confucian *Kwa-keo* driven education.

What are Relations between Education Fever and Happiness?

Education fever of the Korean people has much influenced on Korean society and education both positively and negatively. Positively, education fever has dedicated the political and socio-economic development of Korea, the easy access of educational opportunity, upgrading a socio-economic position through higher education, the attainment of human capitalization, and the universalization of higher education directly and indirectly, whereas it has negatively brought lots of social and educational problems such as academically oriented society, egoistic elitism on the basis of academic factionalism, egoistic familism for successful career and life, excessive educational expense, instrumental education values, college examination oriented education, competitive education system, excessive private tutoring, unitary thinking and uniformity education, trespass on students' right due to excessive education enthusiasm, oversupply of higher education, mass-production of jobless young graduates, and social disharmony between the classes (Lee, 2002b, pp. 183-86; Lee, 2006).

As reviewed in the above, education fever has provided the Korean people with advantages and disadvantages like a double-edged sword. Supposing that humans are imperfect beings who seek after perfection, education would be a worthy means to live a happy life or one of important tools for human beings to become perfect beings, while happiness would be an ultimate goal or an ideal aim of them (Lee, 2012).

In this standpoint, to study of happiness and education is a valuable assignment. From ancient times to the present, a number of sages and philosophers have explained happiness, and some of them have discussed or illustrated relevance between education and happiness. For example, in classical China, Confucius and Mencius viewed education as an

essential means for achieving self-actualization, a harmonious society, and a righteous state. In addition, Plato and Aristotle in ancient Greece regarded education as a significant tool for obtaining an individual's happy life and for building an ideal nation (Lee, 2006).

In this vein, on the positive side, education fever has provided the Koreans with opportunities of more abundant westernized life socio-economically and politically. The expansion of higher education and the accessibility of universities are mainly caused by education fever in terms of national development. Education fever has generally given much benefit to the privileged people who have attained excellent educational credentials as well as higher socio-economic or political positions. The advantage of education fever is close relation to the conditions of happiness. On the negative side, however, education fever has offered a large number of Koreans unfair, inequality, disharmony, and unhappy. Especially, a number of people who did not achieve excellent academic credentials or powerful socio-economic positions in Korean society are far away from happiness in the aspect of western capitalism or utilitarianism.

The contemporary Korean society is already westernized under western democratization and industrialization due to pervasive memonism or capitalism. Considering the happiness theory of Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), "the greatest happiness of the greatest number," education fever in Korea has not given happiness to the majority Koreans, but given its benefit to only the minority Koreans. All people have human rights to pursue happiness. According to the United States Declaration of Independence, "Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness" shows three examples of the "unalienable rights" to all human beings (<https://en.wikipedia.org/> Retrieved on May 8, 2017). The phrase is specifically narrated in The Virginia Declaration of Rights as the following:

That all men are by nature equally free and independent and have certain inherent rights, of which, when they enter into a state of society, they cannot, by any compact, deprive or divest their posterity; namely, the enjoyment of life and liberty, with the means of acquiring and possessing property, and pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety (<https://en.wikipedia.org/> The Virginia Declaration of Rights, "Retrieved on May 8, 2017).

The Virginia Declaration of Rights is based on the political theory of John Locke who declared in his Essay(1689), *Concerning Human Understanding*, as "the highest

perfection of intellectual nature lies in a careful and constant pursuit of true and solid happiness" (Book 2, Chapter 21, Section 51).

In terms of the above Declaration of Rights, Korean education fever is not a suitable means to obtain or pursue happiness. In practice, almost all of Korean university students who had experienced severely competitive education under excessive education fever could sufficiently neither enjoy their school life nor pursue their liberty and happiness. Considering the negative impact of education fever on the Korean people who did not attain excellent academic credentials or higher socio-economic positions in Korean society, the relevance between education fever and happiness is not significant. On the other hand, however, considering the positive impact of education fever on the privileged people who have obtained excellent educational credentials as well as higher socio-economic or political positions, education fever and happiness are partly positive correlations.

Can Education Fever Make a Happy Life? From the Perspective of Korean Higher Education

As the author mentioned in this article, education fever has provided the Koreans with advantages and disadvantages like a double-edged sword. On the positive side, education fever can make part of a happy life, while on the negative side, it can make an unhappy life. Like Aristotle's assertion, supposing that happiness is the highest end of virtuous life or ultimate goodness, Korean education fever on the positive side would be far from this ethical or spiritual proposition. In the *Politics*, Aristotle insists that education (*paideia*) is a significant means for achieving a happy life. In this vein, Korean education fever on the positive side may pragmatically become an important tool to make part of a happy life.

From the perspective of Korean higher education, education fever has dedicated not only national development economically and politically, but also the expansion and universalization of higher education. In addition, education fever has provided the majority of Koreans with socio-economic benefit because of national industrialization and democratization. From an ethical standpoint, however, Korean education fever has not offered Aristotle's happiness (*eudaimonia*) to the majority of Koreans. In terms of pragmatic capitalism, education fever has been an active role for the elite Koreans to be happy socio-economically and politically.

On the contrary, most of Korean students and parents are obsessed with private education and competitive education system. Furthermore, education fever has brought serious educational and social problems as the author mentioned in the previous section of this paper. In particular, excessively competitive education system has brought educational inequality between the rich and the poor, socio-economic difference between highly educated people and uneducated or lower educated people, academic credentialism and factionalism among school, region, and family-ties, and egoistic elitism and familism for successful career and life.

In the lenses of individualism and favouritism, education fever in Korean higher education can be regarded as an effective tool for the minority who achieved highly well educated Koreans to enhance egoistic elitism and familism. Particularly, in terms of capitalism and pragmatism, Korean education fever can be considered as a motivator to make a happy life. On the contrary, from the aspect of idealism and moralism, Korean education fever may be regarded as a significant factor to make an unhappy life, especially, trespassing on students' right due to excessive education zeal and competitive education system. Furthermore, education fever on the basis of egoistic familism generally pursues egoistic elitism and favouritism rather than common good and prosperity.

In a certain case, education fever in Korea has sometimes provided the minority of Koreans who belong to the lower social class with an opportunity to upgrade socio-political position through higher education. On the contrary, the majority of Koreans have rarely attained their socio-economic success through higher education. Therefore, Korean education fever has not made a happy life to all of Koreans.

Summary and Conclusion

The purpose of this article is to discuss relevance between education fever and happiness from the viewpoint of Korean higher education. To review the article systematically, three research questions are given. First, what is education fever from the viewpoint of the Korean people? Second, what are relations between education fever and happiness? Last, can education fever make a happy life? To defend the questions, the author uses a content analysis method. As for the limitations of this paper, education fever will be reviewed in terms of contemporary Korean higher education.

The significance of the article is to provide valuable resources and basic theories

about education fever and happiness for the educational policy makers and theorists of the West and the East, finding relevance between education fever and happiness in Korean higher education.

The research findings of this article are as the following. First of all, educational fever or education fever is literally regarded as the strong zeal for education. The excessive education fever of the South Korean people mainly derives its origin from academic attainments oriented doctrines as well as from elitism based on the tradition of Confucian *Kwa-keo* driven education. Second, Korean education fever is not a suitable means to obtain or pursue happiness. In practice, the majority of Korean university students who have experienced severely competitive education under excessive education fever could sufficiently neither enjoy their school life nor pursue their liberty and happiness. Considering the negative impact of education fever on the Korean people who did not attain excellent academic credentials or higher socio-economic positions in Korean society, the relevance between education fever and happiness is not significant. On the other hand, however, considering the positive impact of education fever on the privileged people who have obtained excellent educational credentials as well as higher socio-economic or political positions, education fever and happiness are partly positive correlations. Last, education fever in Korea has sometimes provided the minority of Koreans who belong to the lower social class with an opportunity to upgrade socio-political positions through higher education. On the contrary, the majority of Koreans have rarely attained their socio-economic success through higher education. Thus, Korean education fever has not made a happy life to all of Koreans.

In conclusion, based on the research result of this paper, the researcher suggests that happiness and education fever are important factors and doctrines to design the new educational policy of future higher education. For future study, it is recommended that this study be broadly undertaken to examine the merits of education fever in East Asian countries such as Korea, China, and Japan. Finally, the author insists that excessive education fever should be appropriately controlled by parents, societal cooperation, and national policy for a healthy individual and a harmonious society.

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