

The Origin and Evolution of Education Fever in South Korea : In Terms of the Cultural History of Korea

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Abstract

This article examines the origin and evolution of education fever in South Korea in terms of the cultural history of Korea. To discuss this study systematically, three research questions are stated. First, what is Korean education fever in contemporary South Korean society? Second, when is the origin of Korean education fever in Korean cultural history? Last, how Korean education fever evolved in the history of Korean culture? In order to defend the research questions, the author uses a content analysis method. As for the limitations of this study, Korean education fever will be reviewed from the Three Kingdoms to the Chosun Dynasty eras, that is, discussed by dividing it into three periods: ancient, medieval, and pre-modern times. At the education level, elite or higher education will be limited. The main topics to be discussed in this paper will be national higher education institutions and civil service examination systems related to Korean education fever. The significance of this study is to provide worthy resources and basic theories regarding the origin and evolution of Korean education fever for the educational theorists and practitioners of the West and the East.

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*Key words: Korean higher education, Korean education fever, Korean education, elite education, Buddhism, Confucianism, capitalism, cross cultural approach, Korean history, Korean culture, Korean civil service examination systems

I. Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine the origin and evolution of education fever in South Korea in terms of the cultural history of Korea. In the history of modern Korea, Korean education fever has been a core driving force for the rapid politico-economic development of South Korea. On the other hand, meritocracy centered on examinations has been rooted in the vested interests of Korean politics and society. In this context, it is important to clarify the origins of Koreans' enthusiasm for education from the perspective of Korean cultural history.

To discuss the study systematically, three research questions were addressed. First, what is Korean education fever in contemporary South Korean society? Second, when is the origin of Korean education fever in Korean cultural history? Last, how Korean education fever evolved in the history of Korean culture? In order to defend the research questions, the author uses a content analysis method.

As for the limitations of this study, Korean education fever will be reviewed from the Three Kingdoms (18 BC– 668 AD) to the Chosun Dynasty (1392 AD – 1910 AD) eras, that is, discussed by dividing it into three periods: ancient, medieval, and pre-modern times. At the education level, elite or higher education will be limited.

In reality, Koreans' enthusiasm for education has been the subject of interest and research by politicians, educators, and scholars from various fields around the world since South Korea quickly achieved amazing advancement and industrialization economically and politically in a short period. From this standpoint, the topic of this study can be given research importance. The main topics to be discussed in this paper will be national higher education institutions and civil service examination systems related to Korean education fever. Therefore, the significance of this study is to provide worthy resources and basic theories regarding the origin and evolution of Korean education fever for the educational theorists, planners, and practitioners of the West and the East.

From the end of the 20th century to the present, a great number of studies related to Korean education fever have been researched by numerous domestic and foreign theorists (Anderson & Kohler, 2013; Cawley, 2023; Chai, 2014; Choi, 1994; Chung, 1984; Dittrich & Neuhaus, 2023; Hyun et al., 2003; Kim, 1985; Kim, 1992; Kim, 2013; Kim & Bang, 2017; Kim & Hlasny, 2024; Kim, et al., 1993; Kim, et al., 2005; Lee, 1997; Lee, 2001; Lee, 2002a; Lee, 2002b; Lee, 2003; Lee, 2006; Lee, 2010; Lee, 2017; Lee, 2018;

Lee, 2025a; Lee, 2025b; Lee & Park, 1993; Oh, 2000; O'Malley, 2023; Seth, 2002; Shin et al., 2019). The majority of them have been analyzed Korean education fever as a determinant factor in explaining the national development of modern South Korea politically, economically, and socially.

In addition, numerous domestic and foreign public mass-media and newspapers have mentioned Korean education fever (BBC, Oct. 22, 2013; Centro Español de Investigaciones Coreanas, Jan. 2018; James J. Kim Center for Korean Studies, April 11, 2024; Korea JoongAng Daily, April 9, 2024; PBS, August 2023; Research Gate, Oct. 22, 2024; The Economist, Oct. 26, 2013; The Guardian, June 7, 2023; The Korea Herald, Mar.13, 2023; The Korea Times, Mar. 9, 2023; The New York Times, Aug.1, 2014; The PIE News, May 24, 2023; Time, July 7, 2023). Some praised Korean education fever positively, while others critiqued it negatively. Koreans' fervent enthusiasm for education is also proven by the following statistical surveys and media reports.

According to *The New York Times* (Sep.11, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/11/>; Hankookilbo, Sep. 12, 2014, <https://www.hankookilbo.com/News/Read/201409121491119555>), among the member countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), South Korea ranked the country with the highest level of educational enthusiasm among major nations globally.

When comparing the educational level of adults (ages 25-64) in 23 major countries, 96% of Korean children (25-34 year-olds) had higher or equal educational levels than their parents (Sep.11, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/11/>). In 25-34 year-olds who have completed tertiary education, South Korea showed the 1st place (69.7%, rank 1/46 , 2023) among major countries (EAG 2024, Education GPS the World of Education at Your Fingertips, https://gpseducation.oecd.org/CountryProfile?primary_Country=KOR; OECD, *Education Indicators 2021*, https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/2021/09/education-at-a-glance-2021_dd45f55e.html), and in 25-64 year-olds who have attained a general upper secondary or post-secondary qualification is the 2nd highest among OECD and partner countries (38.1 %, rank 2/39 , 2023) (Overview of the Education System, EAG 2024, Education GPS the World of Education at Your Fingertips). In addition, *World Population Review* reported 'The Top 10 Most Educated Countries' in the world: Canada ranked the 1st (Tertiary Total 2022: 63%), and South Korea the 4th (53%) (World Population Review, <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/most-educated-countries>).

In particular, according to *OECD Education Indicators 2021*, the school enrollment rate

for 3-year olds in South Korea was 97.0%, which was higher than the OECD average (76.0%) (*Education at a Glance 2021*, https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/2021/09/education-at-a-glance-2021_dd45f55e.html). This means that there is a lot of demand for private education, that is, out-of-home care services and early childhood education such as daycare centers, private pre-schools or kindergartens. Additionally, *Education GPS the World of Education at Your Fingertips* reports:

In 2022, 66% of children under the age of 3 were enrolled in early childhood education and care (ECEC) programmes in Korea, the highest across the OECD. Then 96% of children aged 3-5 in Korea were enrolled in educational institutions, 13 percentage points above the OECD average. <https://gpseducation.oecd.org/CountryProfile?primaryCountry=KOR&treshold=10&topic=EO>

As the author has reviewed above, Koreans' enthusiasm for education is among the top group in the world from early childhood education to higher education in adulthood. In this context, most studies have described and analyzed the reality, phenomena, outcomes, and problems of Koreans' educational fever in many ways, but they have hardly researched the origin of Korean education fever in terms of Korean cultural history. Therefore, the author in the following sections intends to simply describe the definition of Korean education fever, and next to discuss the origin and evolution of educational enthusiasm from the perspective of Korean cultural history.

II. What Is Korean Education Fever in Contemporary South Korean Society

The author intends to briefly define the concept of Korean education fever from two perspectives: one is a cultural historic viewpoint, the other is a socio-educational standpoint. The former as a pre-modern aspect regards Koreans' enthusiasm for education as a historical and cultural product, and has inherited the Confucian bureaucracy and scholar-oriented traditions as a cultural heritage derived from the long history of Korea. On the other hand, the latter as a modern aspect regards the Koreans' passion for education as a socio-educational phenomenon, and has a social and institutional legacy derived from the modern history of Korea, it inherits not only Western mammonism and capitalist spirit, but also the elite educational tradition and ethics of Confucianism. If the former is the

politico-social passion of the privileged class for education in order to produce bureaucrats in pre-modern Korea, the latter can be regarded as an excessive educational enthusiasm for all citizens to enter the socioeconomically privileged class through prestigious universities or professionals who graduated from law school or medical school in modern South Korea.

In this vein, it can be seen that Koreans' enthusiasm for education has developed into different concepts depending on the historical and cultural background. However, if we were to define Korean education zeal simply, it could be said that it is Koreans' excessive and persistent desire for education in order to enter the society where they are compensated for socioeconomic privileges due to historical and cultural influence, and enjoy vested privileges and preferential treatment in the socio-political system. In other words, a general definition of Korean education fervor can be defined as the fervent passion of Korean parents to devote their spiritual and material resources to the socioeconomic success or sociopolitical advancement of their children through public and private educational means and methods. In particular, in contemporary South Korean society, enthusiasm for education is recognized as the optimal ladder for rising socioeconomic status and entering the privileged class (Lee, 2002a; Lee, 2006; Lee, 2025a). Thus, Koreans' enthusiasm for education is defined not only as a socio-educational phenomenon, but also as a cultural and historical product of the educational desire for rising the socio-political status as well as for entering the privileged class that can guarantee socioeconomic stability and prosperity in contemporary South Korean society.

In current Korean society, Koreans' enthusiasm for education is practically showing a Janus-like aspect. It is recognized as the driving force behind Korea's amazingly rapid industrialization and democratization, and on the other hand, it is recognized as the main culprit behind the pathological phenomenon of Korean education. If the former can be seen as having the following main elements: the government's expansion of public education, the general public's ease of access to education following the national economic policy, the expansion of universal education, enthusiastic passion for education, the promotion of the nation's industrialization and democratization, the diversification of occupations and gender equality, and the society of materialism and mammonism, the latter is mainly due to the elitist and competitive social structure, the prevalence of credentialism based on excessive academic background, educational and income inequality due to overheated education, conflicts over entry into or occupation of socioeconomic superiority, providing causes for declining birth rates and increasing private education, parents' desire to increase

their socioeconomic status and obtain background effects, and parents' compensation psychology through their children's education.

III. The Origin of Korean Education Fever: National Educational Institutions in the Three Kingdoms and *the Dokseo-Sampung-gwa* of the Unified Silla Period

The author intends to review the origin of Korean education fever in terms of Korean cultural history. First, in order to examine the origin of Korean education fever, it is divided into three major periods as the author mentioned in the previous section. The ancient times focused on the Three Kingdoms period (18 BC – 668 AD), especially the Unified Silla period (668 – 935 AD); the middle and the pre-modern times centered on the Koryeo Dynasty (918 -1392 AD) and the Chosun Dynasty (1392 – 1910 AD).

In terms of Korean history, the origin of Korean education fervor is based on Korean culture. Accordingly, the Korean education fever of the ancient, middle, and pre-modern eras is inseparable from examination systems for selecting officials based on Confucian education. In this context, the author intends to review and discuss the examination systems and educational fervor of those eras. In particular, in the pre-modern era, the author will review the relationship between elite education and the civil service examination system on the basis of Confucian education in order to discuss educational fervor at that time. In ancient times, according to *Samguk-Sagi (The History of the Three Kingdoms, 1145)*, one of the oldest historical records remaining in Korea, Confucianism was introduced in the Three Kingdoms of Koguryeo, Baekje, and Silla, and national education institutions were established in the Three Kingdoms to cultivate national officials or elites.

In accordance with historical sources such as “*Samguk Sagi (The History of the Three Kingdoms, 1145)*,” “*Dongguk Tonggam (History for Governing the Eastern State, 1485)*,” “*Dongsa Gangmok (Eastern History Outline, 1778)*,” the first national educational institution in ancient Korea was *Taehak*, which was established in the second year of King Sosurim of Koguryeo (summer, 372 AD) for the children of nobility, and taught Confucian classics, literature, martial arts, etc. (Section 6, Koguryeo Bon-ki, Book 18, *Samguk Sagi*, <https://db.history.go.kr/ancient/level.do>; *Encyclopedia of Korean Culture*, <https://encykorea.aks.ac.kr/Article/E0059090>). However, the beginning of selecting officials through national civil service examinations or quasi-civil service examinations was recorded in the Unified Silla period.

Thus, with reviewing the national educational institutions of Silla Kingdom, the author intends to discuss civil service examination systems on the basis of Confucian and ancient Chinese classics in the Unified Silla.

In the Unified Silla era, according to *Samguk Sagi* (*The History of the Three Kingdoms*, Kim), the *Dokseo Sampum-gwa* (the Three Levels of Reading, also called the *Dokseo Chulsin-gwa*, the Three Products of Reading) is a system for selecting government officials that was implemented in 788 AD (in the Spring of the 4th year of King Wonseong's reign in Volume 10 of the Annals of Silla 10), and it is considered to be a system with a certain degree of connection to the Confucian educational institution, *Gukhak* (National Institution or National Studies) (*Gukhak, Upper-Jik Gwan Ji*, Section 7, Volume 38, *Samguk Sagi; the Encyclopedia of Korean Culture*, <https://encykorea.aks.ac.kr/Article/E0016013>).

The Samguk Sagi records the *Dokseo Sampum-gwa* (the Three Levels of Reading) as the following:

In the spring of the 4th year (788), the first three levels of reading were established and officials were selected. Those who read 'The Chunqiu Zuo Zhuan [The Spring and Autumn Annals of Zuo], 'The Book of Rites,' and 'The Selected Writings' and were fluent in their meaning, and who were also well-versed in 'The Analects of Confucius' and 'The Classic of Filial Piety' were selected as upper-rank officials; those who read 'The Quli [in the Book of Rites], 'The Analects of Confucius,' and 'The Classic of Filial Piety' were selected as middle-rank officials; and those who read 'The Quli' and 'The Classic of Filial Piety' were selected as lower-rank officials. Furthermore, those who were well-versed in 'The Five Classics,' 'The Three Histories,' and 'The writings of the Hundred Schools of Thought' were selected and appointed regardless of rank.

-In the Spring of the 4th year of King Wonseong's reign in Volume 10 of the Annals of Silla 10-
https://db.history.go.kr/ancient/level.do?levelId=sg_010r_0020_0210

In addition, the *Samguk Sagi* records *Gukhak* (National Academy or National Studies) and the books used for education in this institution as follows:

[National Studies], it belonged to the Ministry of Rites and was established in the second year of King Sinmun (682). King Gyeongdeok changed the name to Taehakgam, but King Hyegong Reverted it to the old name...

The teaching method was divided into 'Zhouyi [The Book of Changes], 'Shangshu [Shujing or Classic of History], 'Maoshi [the Book of Songs], 'Liji [The Book of Rites], 'The Spring and Autumn Annals of Zuo,' 'Choengchun [Anthology], 'etc., and was to be used as a profession. One doctor or teaching assistant taught with 'Liji [The Book of Rites],' 'Zhouyi [The Book of Changes], 'The Analects of Confucius,' 'The Classic of Filial Piety,' or with 'The Spring and Autumn Annals of Zuo,' 'Maoshi,' 'The Analects of Confucius,' 'The Classic of Filial Piety,' or with 'Shangshu,' 'The Analects of Confucius,' 'The Classic of Filial Piety,' and 'Anthology.'

Many students read [the above] books and [were divided into three grades according to their grades to enter government services]. Those who could read 'The Spring and Autumn Annals of Zuo,' or 'The Book of Rites' and 'The Anthology of Wen' were able to fully understand their meaning, and were also well-versed in 'The Analects' and 'The Classic of Filial Piety' were placed in the upper grades. Those who read 'The Quli [in the Book of Rites], 'The Analects,' and 'The Classic of Filial Piety' were placed in the middle grades. Those who read 'The Quli [in the Book of Rites]' and 'The Classic of Filial Piety' were placed in the lower grades. If they were well-versed in The Five Classics, The Three Histories, and The books of the Hundred Schools of Thought, they were promoted beyond the grades.

- Gukhak, Upper-Jikgwanji (Intuition), Jabji(Section) 7, Volume 38, *Samguk Sagi*, https://contents.history.go.kr/mobile/hm/view.do?levelId=hm_039_0010; <https://db.history.go.kr/ancient/level.do>

Comparing these two records, the educational content of the *Gukhak* (National Studies or National Academy) and the books covered in the *Dokseo Sampum-gwa* are almost identical. Thus, the *Dokseo Sampum-gwa* may be an institution linked to the *Gukhak* as a national Confucian educational institution. According to the records of *Samguk Sagi*, *Dokseo Sampum-gwa* is considered to be a system that has considerable relevance to *Gukhak*, a Confucian educational institution. In the past, when selecting government officials in the Silla Kingdom, people who excelled in *Hwarangdo* activities or martial arts such as archery were mainly selected, but by establishing *Gugak* and implementing *Dokseo Sampum-gwa*, people with Confucian and classical Chinese studies knowledge were selected as officials through tests that measured their proficiency in Chinese or Confucian classics.

It is viewed as the first civil service examination system to select bureaucrats in Korean history, but several historians generally evaluate that it was implemented as a method of selecting local government officials rather than recruiting high-ranking central

government officials in the bone rank-centered society of Silla Kingdom that monopolized high-ranking government officials. Thus, the *Dokseo Sampum-gwa* as a government official selection system implemented during the Unified Silla period cannot be evaluated as a general civil service examination system for selecting comprehensive national administrative positions implemented during the Koryeo and the Chosun Dynasties.

Nevertheless, on the contrary, it has been argued that the *Dokseo Sampum-gwa*, which was implemented during the Unified Silla period, was widely applied not only to those from a certain class of *National Studies* who were interested in becoming bureaucrats in Silla Kingdom, but also to people from the general class who had studied Confucianism on their own, and that people from various social classes, from the *Jingol* (*True Bone*: a high-ranking noble class without the right to the throne) to the 4th head class that had the privileged class, would have taken the exam. From this standpoint, the *Dokseo Sampum-gwa* can be evaluated as the origin of a civil service examination system in the history of Korean.

However, since there are no accurate historical records, this may be nothing more than the author's individual opinion, but considering the status characteristics of Silla's monopolizing high-ranking central government positions, the author claims that the *Dokseo Sampum-gwa* was an epochal national examination system that allowed the king to seize state power and select state officials encompassing various classes.

At that time, the people that could access to letters and learning was mainly the class with vested interests in religion, socio-political power, and learning, so it is assumed that this class naturally led the interest and enthusiasm for education. From this perspective, the author thinks that the current enthusiasm for education in Korean society cannot be compared to that of the Unified Silla period. Nonetheless, it cannot be denied that the *Gukhak* (National Academy) can be the origin of Korean higher education or elite educational institutions, and the *Dokseo Sampum-gwa* can be the origin of civil service examination systems. Therefore, the origin of Koreans' enthusiasm for education can be seen as being in the same context historically and culturally. Accordingly, it is not too exaggeration to say that the beginning of the National Academy and the *Dokseo Sampum-gwa* in the Unified Silla era is the seeding period of Korean education fever. In particular, it can be evaluated that the *Dokseo Sampum-gwa* (*the Three Levels of Reading* or *the Reading*

Three Products) became the cultural and historical genes of the Korean people's enthusiasm for education.

Finally, if *Hwarangdo* (A youth training group led by *Hwarang*) of Silla during the Three Kingdoms period was the driving force behind the unification of the Three Kingdoms, *Dokseo Sampum-gwa* along with *Hwarangdo* can be seen as the driving force that led the Unified Silla period to its golden age. If *Hwarangdo* is the flower of the military class based on Buddhist and Taoist ideology, the bureaucrat scholars from the *Dokseo Sampum-gwa* can be seen as the flower of the literacy class based on Confucian ideology. Indeed, the Kingdom of Silla, which was a Buddhist country, is evaluated as having achieved a good harmony among Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, which enabled the civil and military strongly, and flourished a golden culture that lasted for an approximately thousand years.

IV. The Evolution of Education Fever in Korea: Centering on National Confucian Elite Institutions and National Civil Service Examinations

As discussed in the previous section, in order to examine how Koreans' education fever evolved through the seeding period of the Three Kingdoms, the author in this section regards the Koryeo and the Chosun Dynasties as the periods of evolution of Koreans' enthusiasm for education, and intends to discuss them based on these periods. Furthermore, the author would like to focus on the national educational institutions and civil service examinations of the Koryeo Dynasty (918 – 1392 AD) and the Chosun Dynasty (1392 – 1910). In the medieval and pre-modern ages, the author intends to discuss Koreans' elite education system and enthusiasm focusing on national academies and *Kwa-geo* examination systems in Koryeo and Chosun eras. First of all, he will review the national elite institution and *Kwa-geo* examination systems in the Koryeo Dynasty period, and then the national Confucian elite institution and the *Kwageo* examination systems in the Chosun Dynasty era.

A. A National Elite Academy and Civil Service Examinations in the Koryeo Dynasty

According to historical records such as *Koryeo-sa* (*The History of Koryeo*, 1452 AD) and *Koryeo-sa Jeolyo* (*The Abridged History of the Koryeo Dynasty*, 1452 AD), a number

of schools were established, and education was encouraged to train officials and to educate Confucian Scriptures and Chinese classics during the Koryeo Dynasty. In December, 992 (11th year of King Seongjong's reign), a national elite institution called *Gukjagam* (National Academy Sciences) was established to adopt the Chinese Tang Dynasty system and to educate the children of the ruling class in order to reorganize bureaucracy, and to select suitable talents in the central government (Ji Gweon #28, *The History of Koryeo*, <https://db.history.go.kr/goryeo/level.do>; Book 2, of Koryeo, *The Abridged History of the Koryeo Dynasty*, <https://db.history.go.kr/goryeo/level.do>; *Encyclopedia of Korean Culture*, https://encykorea.aks.ac.kr/Article/E0006422#:~:text=)).

Although historical records state that the *Gukjagam* (National Academy Sciences) was established in 992, 74 years after *the founding of Koryeo* by Wang Geon (King Taejo, 918 AD), a few historians assert that the national institution may have already existed during the reign of King Taejo. It is based on the following historical record, that is, in accordance with *The History of Koryeo*, King Taejo established a school in the western capital, Seokyeong, in 930 AD (the 13th year of King Taejo's reign) (*Saega*, Book 1, *The History of Koryeo*, <https://db.history.go.kr/goryeo/level.do>). However, it is presumed to be a public educational institution established in a major provincial city, not an elite higher education institution built in the capital. During the reign of King Seongjong, he paid great attention and interest to educating talented people to be selected as government officials by expanding to local areas including the capital, and set up or rebuilt the *Gukjagam* (National Academy Sciences) on a large scale in the capital in 992 AD. According to Preface, [Election 1], 「Ji」27, Volume 73, *The History of Goryeo [(Koryeo)]*, the *Gukjagam* and the civil service examinations are described:

Before the Three Kingdoms, there was no law on civil service examinations. Although King Taejo of Goryeo was the first to establish a school, he did not have time to hire scholars through the civil service examinations. King Gwangjong [reign 9th, AD. 958] adopted the words of Ssanggi and selected scholars through the civil service examination, and from this, the trend of revering learning began to emerge. In general, the law of the “civil service examination” used the [Chinese] Tang's system. The National Academy of Sciences was composed of the National Academy, the Great Academy [(university)], the Four Gates, Nine Schools, and Schools. Legal [(law)]

studies, calligraphy, and mathematics were all learned at the National Academy of Sciences. In civil service examinations, there were two professions, Jesul-eop and Myeonggyeong-eop, and Jab-eop [(miscellaneous professions)] such as medicine, divination, geography, law, calligraphy, mathematics, the three rites, the three transmissions, and discussion. Each profession had its own examinations to determine its rank.

Gukjagamsi and Seungbosi were also systems to encourage and advance the next generation of scholars. Even if one was a renowned minister or high official, it was not necessarily the case that one entered office through the civil service examinations. In addition to the civil service examinations, there were also methods such as recommending the elite, using the family affiliation system, selecting and supplementing “seongjung-aema” [(the horses loved by thee people)], and promoting and transferring the Southern Class and Miscellaneous Ranks, so there was more than one path to becoming an official. Originally,... the prosperity of Eastern civilization was comparable to that of China.

However, since the powerful ministers privately established [their] government offices, personnel management was carried out through bribery, and the law of personnel management was greatly broken, and the selection of scholars through the civil service examinations also became corrupted. As a result, the slander called Heukchaek [black books: this is a metaphor for the extreme disarray in personnel administration] and the scolding called Bunhong [pink: this is an expression that metaphorically refers to the evil practice of selecting many young children of the powerful through past examinations] spread widely at the time, and Koryeo's Dynasty eventually declined....

-Preface, *Seonkeo-ji* (Election 1], 「Ji」27), Volume 73, *The History of Koryeo*;
<https://db.history.go.kr/goryeo/level.do>;
https://db.history.go.kr/KOREA/item/compareViewer.do?levelId=kr_073_0010_0010;
https://contents.history.go.kr/front/hm/view.do?levelId=hm_047_0020;
<https://encykorea.aks.ac.kr/Article/E0048207>

The important fact mentioned in the *Seonkeo-ji*'s Preface of *the History of Koryeo* is that the *National Academy of Sciences* as a national elite or higher education institution is inseparable from civil service examinations, which teaches Confucianism and Chinese

classics. Additionally, although the National Academy of Sciences was the central educational institution for producing and selecting national officials, the two axes of national education were Confucian education and technical education. Thus, the civil service examinations also included various tests centered on Confucianism, such as the *Jesul* and *Myeonggyeong* exams, and various miscellaneous exams centered on technical subjects.

Above all, it is important to note that the selection system for government officials was not limited to the civil service examinations, but also included recommendations and nominations based on blood and regional ties, and there were various examinations within the civil service examinations, such as the *Gukjagam-si* which were given special ranks and *Seungbo-si* which was an entrance examination for promotion to the *Sangsa* (the highest level of the National Academy Sciences curriculum). Additionally, the *Seungkwa-si* as one of civil service examinations for Buddhist monks, which has two types: the *Gyojongseon* and the *Seonjongseon*, and has been practiced regularly since the late 11th century, and the military service examination for military officers was practiced from 1109 AD [Yeongjong's 4th year of reign] to 1133 AD [Injong's 11th year of reign] for 24 years)(https://contents.history.go.kr/mobile/nh/view.do?levelId=nh_023_0060_0040_0030; <https://encykorea.aks.ac.kr/Article/E0032198>; https://contents.history.go.kr/mobile/tg/view.do?subjectCode=tg_age_40&tabId=01&levelId=tg_002_0720&ganada=&pageUnit=10).

In the reign of King Munjong (1046 -1083), the *Gukjagam* had two main Schools, Confucian and technical Schools: the former had *Gukjahak*, *Taehak*, and *Samunhak*, and the latter had *Yulhak*, *Seohak*, and *Sanhak*. The children of civil and military officials of the 7th rank or higher were admitted to the Confucian School, and the children of officials of the 8th rank or lower and commoners were admitted to the technical School. In addition, *Hyanggyo* as Confucian schools were established in the province to educate the children of local officials and commoners (<https://contents.history.go.kr/>; <https://encykorea.aks.ac.kr/Article/E0029204>).

During the Koryeo Dynasty, the name of the *Gukjagam* (National Academy Sciences) has changed several times: In 1275, it was renamed *Gukhak* due to the intervention of the Mongolian Yuan Dynasty; In 1298, King Chungseon reorganized the *Gukhak* into *Seongkyungam*; In 1308, the name of it was changed into *Seongkyunkwan*; In 1356 (the 5th year of King Gongmin's reign), it was restored as the *Gukjagam* as part of the anti-Yuan politics; but in 1362, it was renamed

Seongkyunkwan, which lasted until the fall of the Koryeo Dynasty in 1392, and then passed on to the Chosun Dynasty (*Koryeo-sa /The History of Koryeo*, 1452; *Koryeo-sa Jeolyo /The Abridged History of the Koryeo Dynasty*, 1452; *Dongguk Tonggam (History for Governing the Eastern State)*, 1485; <https://contents.history.go.kr/>; <https://encykorea.aks.ac.kr/Article/E0029204>).

Despite its several name changes, the *Gukjagam* (the National Academy of Sciences) during the Koryeo Dynasty was a national elite education institution that had the main goals for training and selecting state officials, teaching Confucian and Chinese classics to strengthen royal authority, and establishing socio-political ethics for the state and its people. Accordingly, the major functions of the National Academy were as the following: national elite education and civil service examinations became inevitably linked; *Gukjagam-si* [(preliminary examination) held at the *Gukjagam*] for the Ministry of Rites held at the National Academy of Sciences; the national institution was composed of the Shrine of Confucius and the Academy, as part of the strengthening of Confucian education; the Seven Classes [(*Chilje*)] were established as specialized courses for teaching Confucianism; special privileges were provided to the students of the Seven Classes taking the civil service examinations; and due to the implementation of the national civil examinations, the main function of national educational institutions became to focus on selecting elite bureaucrats through academic examinations based on Confucianism and Chinese classics.

As a result, elite education at the National Academy became focused on Confucian learning and Chinese classics. Falling into toadyism that revered Chinese learning, which eventually led to the decline of the Buddhist nation of Koryeo, and the emergence of the Confucian nation of Chosun, where Confucian scholars made a major contribution as founding fathers. In particular, the historical fact that cannot be overlooked is that the national elite education centered on the civil service examinations was deteriorated by various absurdity and corruption, leading to the prosperity of private educational institutions, and then to the distrust and devastation of government education.

In the mid-Koryeo period, along with the poor quality of government education and various other problems, the 12 private schools including Choi Chung's *Munheon-Gongdo* flourished. As students educated at private schools achieved good results in civil service examinations, the government-run education of the National Academy of Sciences was further weakened. Accordingly, the government enhanced several policies to promote government-run institutions: during the reign of King Yejong, the Seven Classes were

established in the National Academy Sciences to provide specialized Confucian courses, and a scholarship foundation was set up to strengthen the economic foundation of the national institution, and further strengthened Confucian education. Even during the military regime, national education activities were greatly suppressed, but during the reign of King Chungnyeol, the name of the national institution was changed to *Seongkyunkwan*, and a new Confucian shrine, *Munmyo*, was built to promote Confucian education. King Gongmin further strengthened Confucian education by reorganizing *Seongkyunkwan* into a purely Confucian educational institution (<https://encykorea.aks.ac.kr/Article/Search>).

In the late Koryeo Dynasty, the relationship between examiners and successful candidates in the civil service examination system gave rise to many evils and eventually led to the formation of factions, which caused great harm to the nation and society (*Taejo's Enthronement Edict, Jeongmi 3rd article, Taejo Year 1, July 28, 1392, Taejo Sillok Volume 1, The Annals of the Chosun Dynasty, 1392 -1863*, https://sillok.history.go.kr/id/kaa_10107028_003). Of course, even if we consider the differences in the aspects of social and epochal situations between the Koryeo Dynasty and the present South Korea, the implications of the situation at that time for the current Korean society can be considered significant.

To summarize what the author has reviewed above: Koryeo's elite-centered higher education not only provided educational opportunities and accessibility to the privileged class with socio-political power rather than to the commoners, but also provided them with special privilege and compensation through various civil service examinations. From this perspective, simply speaking, Koryeo's higher or elite education institutions practiced Confucian and classical Chinese education for the privileged class, with civil service examinations.

Therefore, the author can assume that the educational enthusiasm of the Koryeo people could arise from the privileged class on the basis of the poor quality of higher education and the rise of private schools in the mid-Koryeo period. Of course, local schools (*hyanggyo*) and miscellaneous civil service examinations provided educational accessibility to the commoners, but it is believed that the commoners lacked the universality and generality of higher education, because the accessibility for higher education and civil service examinations was limited socio-economically.

Although the qualification requirements for the civil service examination system were gradually relaxed according to national regulations, allowing ordinary citizens to

take the civil service examination, in reality, access to the civil service examination was almost impossible due to lack of economic power, poor educational environment, difficulty or inaccessibility to higher education, and restrictions in various social systems such as relationship between masters and successful candidates in the civil service examination system.

Furthermore, as the civil service examinations were repeated, and competition became fiercer, it became advantageous for the privileged class with good socio-economic status. Since the socioeconomic conditions of the family had a great influence, not only was it impossible for individuals to fairly demonstrate their abilities, but also because their blood ties, school ties, etc. were weak or disadvantageous, and they rarely had the opportunity to be recommended to become officials.

In this context, it can be evaluated that higher education and civil service examination systems during the Koryeo Dynasty were the belongings of the privileged class, and that education and civil service examinations were also the means of success for them. Therefore, the source of educational enthusiasm can be also educational institutions and civil service examinations for them.

The resulting products and educational phenomena were expressed as their enthusiasm for education, and there was a time when private educational institutions flourished to prepare for the civil service examinations, so public educational institutions were neglected. It is no exaggeration to say that higher education and civil service examinations during the Koryeo Dynasty were like clouds hanging over high mountain peaks that were difficult to climb or inaccessible mountains for the commoners.

In particular, it is noteworthy that Koryeo's uniform elite education system centered on Confucian and Chinese classics and the civil service examination-oriented education not only promoted servility and meritocracy, but also rejected military personnel and on the contrary favored Confucian scholars and Buddhist monks, which failed to strengthen national power, hindered the balanced development of the country, and prevented social integration and harmony between or among classes. Accordingly, the ruling class of the Koryeo Dynasty consisted of bureaucrats who had passed the state examinations and civil officials with bloodlines, connections, and Buddhist monk origins, but the military class was not given preferential treatment.

In this vein, we can deeply think about the excessive prevalence of private education and early childhood education due to the deterioration of public education in current

Korean society, the evils and problems of competitive education centered on memorization and examinations implemented under the banner of egalitarianism and meritocracy, and the excessive educational enthusiasm for elite-centered, prestigious universities, and professional majors that arises due to these socio-educational phenomena.

Moreover, in current South Korea, there are universal societal phenomena or problems: the society where money reigns supreme, the social structure focused on excessive competition, the prevalence of credentialism focused on academic background, unreasonable income inequality based on occupation and status, and meritocracy through national civil service examinations including high-rank administrative or judicial examinations as well as the emergence of a new class of people from top prestigious university graduates and professional fields. It can be evaluated that the national educational institutions and civil service examinations of the Koryeo Dynasty were the determinants that stimulated educational enthusiasm among the privileged class in order to secure or maintain socio-political power. Thus, the Koryeo Dynasty can be seen as the sprouting period of Koreans' education fever.

B. A National Confucian Elite Academy and Civil Service Examinations in the Chosun Dynasty

In the pre-modern age, the author intends to discuss Koreans' elite education system and enthusiasm focusing on *Seongkyunkwan* (National Confucian Academy) and *Kwa-geo* examination systems in the Chosun Dynasty on the basis of historical sources. In this section, considering the purpose of this study, *Seongkyunkwan* as a national elite education institution will be discussed with a focus on its educational purpose and content, and then the civil service examination system will be discussed from a perspective of Korean cultural history. The author will discuss civil service examinations in terms of the form and implementation method related to education enthusiasm rather than describe the specific system or history of civil service examinations during the Chosun Dynasty. In Taejo's *Enthronement Edict*, *Seongkyunkwan* (*Sungkyunkwan*/ National Confucian Academy) and civil service examinations are described as the following:

Taejo Sillok Volume 1, Taejo Year 1 (1392 AD), July 28, Jeongmi 3rd article
Taejo's enthronement edict

He issued an edict to all the high and low officials, idlers, the elderly, and the military and civilians at home and abroad. ...

Since you cannot take only one of the two civil service examinations and discard the other, you should place more students in the national academy in the center and in the local hyanggyo to focus on teaching and nurturing talented people. The original purpose of the civil service examination was to select talented people for the country, but they call the master of the seat and their students, and treat it as a private favor with public recommendations, which is not the intention of establishing a law. From now on, in the central Seonggyun Jeongrokso [(A place where Sungkyunkwan staff selected and recorded current affairs and stored them)], and in the local regions, the Annyeomsa [(a minister in charge of overseeing provincial affairs)] would select from their schools those who were well-versed in the classics and had cultivated virtue, record their age, clan, three generations, and knowledge of the classics, and submit them to the Seonggyungwan Jangyeeso [(Seongkyun Curator's Office)], and give a lecture on the knowledge of the classics. Those who had mastered the Four Books [and] Five Classics, and Tonggam [(The Mirror of History/Chinese history book)] or more would be ranked first based on the amount of the classics they had mastered and the precise and brief nature of the principles they had understood, and those who had passed would be ranked first. When a person is sent to the Ministry of Rites, the Ministry of Rites will examine the Pyomun [(a letter addressed to the king)], Jangju [(documents submitted by subjects to the king)], and Gobu [(a book containing the old poems and commentaries)] as the middle stage, and examine the Chaekmun [(strategy questions asked by the king)] as the final stage. After passing the three stages, 33 people will be reported and sent to the Ministry of Personnel, and the Ministry of Personnel will evaluate their talents and employ them appropriately, and the surveillance examination will be abolished...

Taebaeksan Sagobon, 1 book, volume 1, 43 pages, page A, National edition, 1 book, 22 pages, Taejo Sillok Volume 1, *The Annals of the Chosun Dynasty*, https://sillok.history.go.kr/id/kaa_10107028_003

According to *Taejo Sillok*, *Seongkyunkwan* as the national Confucian elite academy continued to exist even after the Chosun Dynasty was established. The year after King Taejo, who founded the Chosun Dynasty, moved the capital from Gaeseong to Hanyang

(present-day Seoul, South Korea) in 1395 AD (the 4th year of When King Taejo's reign)(1rd article, *Moojin*, August 1, *Taejo Year 3 [1394 AD]*, *Taejo Sillok*, Volume 6, *The Annals of the Chosun Dynasty*), the *Seongkyunkwan* was preserved and rebuilt in Hanyang, a site was set near *Soongkyobang* in the northeastern part of the new capital (present-day Seongkyunkwan University campus in Myeongryun-dong, Seoul) (<https://encykorea.aks.ac.kr/Article/E0029204>). After three years, there were several buildings, such as the *Munmyo* (Confucian shrines), *Dongmu* and *Seomu* joining rooms to the *Daeseongjeon* (the Confucian temple of the Great completion), *Myeongryundang* (the lecture hall of students), *Dongjae* and *Seojae* (two dormitory buildings), *Jeongrokso*, *Yanghyeongo* [(an institution that supplied food to the students of Seongkyunkwan)], and restaurant were completed, having new buildings with a new exterior (Lee, 1984; Lee, 2000). Additionally, *Jonkyeongkak* (the library) and *Bansu*, an essential element of the Bankungje, were installed in 1478 AD (9th year of King Seongjong's reign) (<https://encykorea.aks.ac.kr/Article/E0029204>). Therefore, the *Seongkyunkwan* was not just a national Confucian elite institution but also the supreme Confucian sanctuary to offer up Confucian sacrifices and rites (Lee, 2000). The *Seongkyunkwan* means 'the Hall of Harmony,' and the name of *Seongkyun* comes from the Rites of Chou (Chou Li, in Chinese) (Galt, 1929; Lee, 2000). The original meaning of "Seongkyun," that is, "seong" means completion and "kyun" means to tune (<https://www.skkuw.com/news/articleView.html?idxno=22306>). The word (*Seongkyun*) is a musical metaphor for the moral perfection of a person, and symbolizes the cultivation of a balanced individual (An, 1996; <https://www.skkuw.com/news/articleView.html?idxno=22306>).

On the basis of *The Annals of the Chosun Dynasty and Kyungkuk-daejeon (The Great Code of State Administration)*, the educational objectives of *Seongkyunkwan* are: to set Confucian ethico-political principles upright, including the Three Bonds, the Five Codes of Ethics, and ethico-legal codes; to cultivate oneself, with building an ideal moral gentleman as a man of virtue (*Gunza* in Korean); to harmonize with one's family, with achieving the ideal social order and reciprocal relationship; and to foster the virtuous and royal Confucian bureaucrats, with keeping moral political principles and rectifying names.

According to the *Kyungkuk-daejeon (The Great Code of State Administration)*, the organization of the *Seongkyunkwan* was changed several times during the Chosun Dynasty. The organization structure of the *Seongkyunkwan* as specified in the *Kyungkuk-daejeon* was: one *Ji-sa* (governor, the 2nd rank among the 18 official position-rank), two *Dong-ji-sa* (vice governors, the 2nd rank), one *Daesaseong* (president, 3rd rank), two *Sa-seong* (vice

presidents, 3rd rank), three *Saye* (curriculum managers, 4th rank), four *Jikgang* (lecture leaders, 5th rank), 13 *Jeon-jeok* (they take charge of the education of Confucian students, and were also dispatched as teaching staff to other schools, 6th rank), three *Bak-sa* (teachers or professors, 7th rank), three *Hak-jeong* (the position was in charge of the practical work of *Seongkyunkwan*, the management and supervision of students, and the receipt and disbursement of books from the library, 8th rank), three *Hagrok* (the position that oversees *Seongkyunkwan*'s practical affairs, 9th rank), and 13 other faculty members (<https://dh.aks.ac.kr/sillokwiki/index.php/%EC%84%B1%EA%B7%A0%EA%B4%80%E6%88%90%E5%9D%87%E9%A4%A8>; Lee, 2000).

Those who were eligible to enter and become the students of *Seongkyunkwan* were generally limited to the siblings of the *Yangban* officials or nobility. According to *Gyeongguk-daejeon*, those eligible for admission are as follows: *Saengwon* those who passed the Four Books and the Five Classics, and *Jinsa* those who passed the Chinese classics including *Sibu* (poetry and proverb); *Sahakdo* (the students of private schools) who were 15 years or older, and had mastered the *Sohak* (elementary learning) and one of the Four Books and Five Classics; the legitimate sons of meritorious retainers and government officials of the third rank or higher who had mastered the *Sohak*; those who had passed the *Hanseongsi* (a test conducted by *Hanseongbu*, Capital City Hall) and *Hyangsi* (a test that administered regionally in each of eight provinces), which were the preliminary examinations for the civil service examinations and the *Saengwon* and *Jinsa* examinations; and Government officials who wished to enroll (<https://encykorea.aks.ac.kr/Article/E0029204>; https://contents.history.go.kr/mobile/ta/view.do?levelId=ta_p42r_0040_0030_0040_0040#).

The curriculum of *Seongkyunkwan* was closely related to the content of the civil service examinations which were oriented on *Kangkyeong* or *Jesul*. The former is an oral examination that asks about the broad meaning of the Confucian and Chinese classics, while the latter is a written exam in which students isolate and interpret a classic text and present their own arguments. These two educational methods had a great influence on the study of *Seongkyunkwan* students. If the *Kangkyung* approach was adopted, education would be centered on the Four Books and the Five Classics, and if the *Jesul* approach was naturally adopted, education would be centered on essay. The *Kangkyung* mainly had students memorize the Four Books and the Five Classics, and answer questions about them with or without books, while the *Jesul* had students write essays based on their own

arguments while interpreting the classics (https://contents.history.go.kr/front/km/print.do?levelId= km_002_0040_0010_0030_0030&whereStr=). Therefore, the study method was mainly rote learning focused on memorization. It can be evaluated that this educational method is maintaining the typical form of contemporary South Korean education.

The educational subjects and contents of the *Seongkyunkwan* included: the Four Confucian Books, namely the Analects of Confucius, the Mencius, the Great Learning, and the Doctrine of the Mean; the Five Chinese Classics, namely the Book of Rites, the Spring and Autumn Annals, the Book of Poetry, the Book of Documents, and the Book of Changes; in addition, *Geunsarok* (*Reflections on Things at Hand*), *Seongri-daejeon* (*the Great Compendium on Nature and Principle*), *Tonggam* (*The Comprehensive Mirror of History*), *Zuo Zhuan* (*The Commentary of Zuo*), *Songwon Jeolyo* (*Song Yuan Festival Summary*), *Kyungkuk-daejeon* (*The Great Code of State Administration*), and *Dongguk Jeongun* (*The Standard Rhymes of the Eastern State*), but these varied depending on the subjects of the civil service examination (Lee, 1984; <https://encykorea.aks.ac.kr/Article/E0029204>). Furthermore, these subjects were taught how to write poetry, poetic exposition, songs, and policies, as well as the calligraphy of Wang Xizhi and Zhao Mengfu (<https://encykorea.aks.ac.kr/Article/E0029204>).

Simply put, the main curricula of the *Seongkyunkwan* included *Gu-je* (Nine Subjects), that is, the Four Confucian Books and the Five Chinese Classics, which were instructed by several teaching methods: *gangdog* (reading), *ui* (composition), *non* (argument), *pyo* (persuasion), *song* (praising), *myong* (calligraphy), and *cham* (epigrammatic poetry). Any heretical books other than Zhu Xi's teachings were thoroughly rejected, as explicitly stated in the school regulations (<https://encykorea.aks.ac.kr/Article/E0029204>; Lee, 2000).

In the period of the Chosun Dynasty, as previously discussed, the *Seongkyunkwan* was the best elite higher education institution aimed at training state Confucian officials, while the civil service examination system was another significant method for selecting state officials. In this context, both as two pillars of Confucianism can be seen as inseparable. Although the civil service examination was nominally accessible to anyone regardless of social class, it is no exaggeration to say that in reality it was the exclusive domain of the *Yangban* class. During the Chosun Dynasty, a Confucian state, there was not just a strict hierarchical order, ranking relationship, and discrimination between ruler and subject,

father and son, old and young, man and woman, husband and wife, friends based on the Confucian ethical principles of the three bonds and five relationships, but mutual relationships between father and son, couples, and friends were also emphasized.

Accordingly, national education and civil service examinations were also male-dominated, with women excluded from the male-dominated society of Chosun. Commoners and the lowest class had difficulty accessing national education and civil service examinations because of their poor socioeconomic conditions, so in reality, they were discriminated against national education and examinations.

The *Kwa-keo* was the national civil service examinations on the basis of Chinese classics that determined the selecting of Confucian bureaucrats. Like the Koryeo Dynasty, the rulers of the Chosun Dynasty adopted the Chinese civil service examination system to strengthen their sovereign power. Namely, even though the civil service examinations were opened to all people, the *Kwa-geo* examinations practically belonged to the privileged class, as the same as the Koryeo Dynasty.

According to a historical record, *Taejo Sillok*, the system of the *Kwa-keo* was mentioned as the following:

*Taejo Sillok Volume 1, Taejo Year 1 (1392 AD), July 28, Jeongmi 3rd article
Taejo's enthronement edict*

He issued an edict to all the high and low officials, idlers, the elderly, ...

Since you cannot take only one of the two civil service examinations [(civil and military, two service examinations)] and discard the other, you should place more students in the national academy in the center and in the local hyanggyo to focus on teaching and nurturing talented people. ... Those who had mastered the Four Books [and] Five Classics, and Tonggam [(The Mirror of History/Chinese history book)] or more would be ranked first based on the amount of the classics they had mastered and the precise and brief nature of the principles they had understood, and those who had passed would be ranked first. When a person is sent to the Ministry of Rites, the Ministry of Rites will examine the Pyomun [(a letter that a subject submits to the king, it must be formal and have substantial content)], Jangju [(documents submitted by subjects to the king)], and Gobu [(a book containing the ancient poems and commentaries of various figures)] as the middle stage, and examine the Chaekmun [(a

statement of a strategy for questions asked by the king)] as the final stage. After passing the three stages, 33 people will be reported and sent to the Ministry of Personnel, and the Ministry of Personnel will evaluate their talents and employ them appropriately, and the surveillance examination will be abolished. As for the method of teaching martial arts, the training officer in charge will occasionally teach the techniques of the Seven Books of the Martial Arts [(Sun Zi, Wu Zi, Sima Fa, Wei Liao Zi, Huang Shigong Sanryeok, Six Secrets, and Questions and Answers of Li Weigong)], and archery, and based on the amount and degree of the classics they have mastered and the degree of skill in the techniques, they will be ranked by grade. The 33 people who pass will be given a certificate of origin and a list will be sent to the Ministry of War to be prepared for employment.

Taebaeksan Sagobon, 1 book, volume 1, 43 pages, page A, National edition, 1 book, 22 pages, Taejo Sillok Volume 1, *The Annals of the Chosun Dynasty*, https://sillok.history.go.kr/id/kaa_10107028_003; <https://encykorea.aks.ac.kr/Article/E0055677>; <https://www.kci.go.kr/kciportal/ci/408>; <https://jsg.aks.ac.kr/dir/view?catePath>

As mentioned in *Taejo's enthronement edict*, the two axes of the *Kwa-keo* examinations were the civil and the military service examinations, and the two examinations were conducted in three stages: the first, middle, and last stages. In the civil service examination system, there are practically divided into three categories in broad: the civil, military, and miscellaneous service examinations. Of the three exams in the *Kwa-keo* examinations, the core one was the civil service exam.

Legally, anyone above the commoner level could take the *Kwa-keo* examinations. According to the *Gyeongguk-daejeon* (*The Great Code of State Administration*), the qualifications for taking the examinations are as follows: only those of the third rank or lower could take the civil service examination, those of the third rank or lower could take the military service examination, and those of the fifth rank or lower could take the *Saengwon* and the *Jinsa* examinations (<https://encykorea.aks.ac.kr/Article/E0004562>; https://kyudb.snu.ac.kr/contents/content_detail.do). In reality, there were many restrictions and conditions for commoners including farmers socio-economically and systematically, and the lowest class such as lowly people and slaves were not even given the opportunity to take the exam. Therefore, it can be said that the civil service examinations were the system for the privileged class, the *Yangban*.

However, Han (2013) claims that during the Chosun Dynasty, the civil service examination was open not only to the *Yangban* class, but to the low social status, the middle class *jungin* and commoners. According to Han's (2013) assertion, the total number of successful candidates in the civil service examinations from the reign of King Taejo (1393-1396) to King Seonjo (1567-1606) in the early Chosun Dynasty was 4,527 persons. Of these, 1,100 were from low social status, accounting for 24.3% of all successful candidates. Of the 1,100 from low social status, 306 were high-ranking officials of the third rank or higher. He argues that this phenomenon shows that the civil service exams served as a ladder for social mobility. The scope of the lower class he claims does not include general commoners, farmers, who made up the majority of the population. Without defining the exact scope of the low social status, it included at least the classes lower than the *Yangban*, that is, the middle-class to which technical and professional officials belong, central scribes, *hyangri* (a class that was in charge of the lowest level of local administration), and even the sons (*Seo-eol*) of aristocrats' concubines.

In reality, the commoners who had nothing more than sufficient private property to prepare the examinations, and who were exempted at the time were prohibited from taking the *Kwa-keo* examinations. Additionally, the *Seo-eol* in the Chosun Dynasty were allowed to take only military and miscellaneous examinations, but prohibited from taking civil service examinations (Our History Net, https://contents.history.go.kr/mobile/nh/view.do?levelId=nh_025_0020_00_40_0020).

Actually, even in the early Chosun period, the *Yangban* only accounted for 3-5% of the total population, and the majority were commoners (mainly farmers), *cheonmin* (the lowest class), or slaves. Considering this reality, Han's claim, that is, the *Kwa-keo* examination in the Chosun Dynasty played a dynamic role or functioned as a channel for social mobility is not a general phenomenon during the Chosun Dynasty, but can only be applied after the mid-Chosun era when the number of civil service examination passers and of the *Yangban* increased dramatically.

The civil service examinations (*Munkwa*) were held on two levels: a preliminary and main exams. The former consisted of minor (*Sokwa*: lower level) and major (*Daekwa*: higher level). The *Sokwa* was classified into *Saengwonkwa* (the Confucian classics examination) and *Jinsakwa* (the ancient Chinese classics examination). These two examinations were not merely a preliminary exam for the civil service examination, but a qualification exam to enter the national academy, *Seongkyunkwan*. Those who passed the

two exams could apply for the main exam (*Munkwa* or *Daekwa*) which was a gateway to high officialdom. The *Munkwa* as a higher level main exam was composed of three exams: *chosi* (the first exam), *boksi* (the second exam), and *jeonsi* (the final exam in front of the King). The first exams were comprised of three tests (*Chojang/the first stage*, *Jungjang/the second stage*, and *Jongjang/the last stage*) and called *Hyang-si* (Provincial test), *Hanseong-si* (Capital city test), and *Jeon-si* (Palace test). The test subjects were writing the Chinese classics, history, and poetry. The second exams were also given three tests to 33 successful candidates who passed the first exams. The subjects were reading and writing the Chinese classics and history. The final exam was called the palace test that was held in front of the king at the royal court. The successful candidates were divided into three groups: 3 *Gapkwa* (the first class), 7 *Eulkwa* (the second class), and 23 *Byungkwa* (the third class) (Lee, 1984; Lee, 2000). The top of the three persons in the *Gapkwa* group was called *Jangwon* (the highest distinction/the top winner) awarded the 6th rank position, followed by *Bang-an*, and *Tamhwarang* (Lee, 1984). The men who finally passed the *Munkwa* examination were appointed as government officials (https://contents.history.go.kr/mobile/ta/view.do?levelId=ta_p42r_0040_0030_0040_0020; Lee, 2000).

In addition, the military service examinations (*Mukwa*) were also divided into three stages: provincial, capital, and palace tests, similar to the civil service examinations. The subjects of the tests were the Chinese classics, martial arts, and military skills and knowledge. In the military service examinations at the palace test, 3 people including the top winner (*Jangwon*) were selected for the first class, 5 people for the second class, and 20 people for the third class. The first class was given the 7th rank (<https://encykorea.aks.ac.kr/Article/E0049506>).

Moreover, the miscellaneous examinations of the Koryeo Dynasty were also implemented during the Chosun Dynasty. The miscellaneous examinations for the selection of technical or vocational affairs, such as medicine, law, foreign languages, geomancy, and astronomy, were held. While those who took the civil service or the military service examinations were mostly the upper class (the *Yangban* as the civil or the military class), most of the applicants for miscellaneous service examinations were the middle class, called "*Jung-in*" people working in professional or technical positions.

The Encyclopedia of Korean Culture defined the *Yangban* as follows:

Yangban is the ruling class of the Goryeo [(Koryeo)] and Joseon [(Chosun)] Dynasties. When the king received a court, the civil servants standing to the east and the military servants standing to the west were collectively called Yangban. Until the early Goryeo Dynasty, Yangban literally referred to civil and military officials. However, as the Yangban bureaucracy gradually became more organized, the patriarchal family structure and communal kinship relationships led to the families and relatives of Yangban officials also being called Yangban. The Yangban class gradually solidified into a closed class due to the generational transfer of official positions through the Eumjik and Gwageo [Kwa-geo] exams, and closed marriages among them, and the term Yangban itself changed to a concept meaning the ruling class.
<https://encykorea.aks.ac.kr/Article/E0035521>; https://blog.naver.com/hi_nso/130151255491

In the Chosun Dynasty, Confucian young learner (*Yusaeng*) was the most common job title for the *Yangban* as well as one of the official duties of the country (<https://kiss.kstudy.com/Detail/Ar?key=3072151>). Therefore, the proportion of *Yusaeng* in the *Yangban* class was the largest. In reality, the *Yangban* were the privileged class as well as the intellectual class that monopolized learning and knowledge.

Comparing the civil service examinations of the Chosun Dynasty with those of the Koryeo Dynasty, Koryeo's civil service examinations were centered on Confucianism and Buddhism, while Chosun's civil service examinations were oriented on Confucianism. Thus, Koryeo's feudal power centered on Buddhism and Confucianism was transformed into Chosun's two privileged classes, civil and military aristocrat power on the basis of Confucianism. As a result, Chosun's national education and civil service examination system also shifted to centering on the civil and the military aristocrats.

The civil service examinations, which were generally held every three years, called *siknyon-si*, administered three kinds of tests and sometimes special civil service examinations such as *Jeungkwang-si* given to commemorate national major events and *Daejeungkwang-si* given to the most important national event. Additionally, there were several irregular examinations, such as *Byeolsi* (an exam conducted when there is a celebrate event or when civil arts is performed), *Alseongsi* (after visiting the Shrine of Confucius, the king held a civil service examination for the students of *Seongkyunkwan*),

Jeongsi (a Garden test: an exam conducted when there was a national or royal celebration or when the importance of civil service was implemented), and *Chundangdaesi* (an exam conducted when the king visited *Chundangdae* in person to celebrate national events), in the case of these exams only the civil and the military service examinations were administered (<https://encykorea.aks.ac.kr/Article/>; https://contents.history.go.kr/mobile/ta/view.do?levelId=ta_p42r_0040_0030_0040_0020).

As time passed, the types and frequency of the civil service examinations increased, and the number of successful candidates also increased. In fact, the number of successful candidates compared to the number of applicants for the civil service examination was almost like trying to reach for the stars in the sky. It is no exaggeration to say that not only the test takers but also their families and entire clans poured all their socio-economic capabilities and passion into passing the civil service examination. In order to pass the *Kwa-keo* examination, examinees generally began studying around the age of five and took the examination approximately 30 years of study invested most of their days, and sometimes after several attempts, they luckily had the opportunity to pass and obtain a government position (<https://news.mt.co.kr/mtview.php?no=2012032110254372553>). It was general for the entire family members to make socio-economic sacrifices for a long time in order to pass the exam and to become a bureaucrat.

According to the data from the *Comprehensive Information System for Korean Historical Figures*, from the founding king of the Chosun Dynasty, Taejo (1392 AD - 1398) to King Gojong (1864-1894), who abolished the *Kwa-keo* examinations, a total of 804 civil service examinations were held over a period of approximately 500 years, and according to the information of 15,151 top successful candidates (*Jangwon*), 2,200 *Jangwons* came from five families, accounting for 14.5% of the total. This assumes that certain powerful families by bloodline, school, or regional connection, and political factions had a major influence (<https://monthly.chosun.com/client/news/viw.asp?nNewsNumb=200012100053>). From these results, we can see that the entire family and clan had been dedicated and had not spared any support for their descendants who are taking the civil service examination. It shows that not only blood ties, which are the most important link, but also school ties, regional ties, and even political factions were the useful means and worthy methods for passing the civil service examination and for obtaining a government position.

As the types and frequency of special and irregular examinations increased, the number of successful candidates and the *Yangban* gradually increased, while the number of bureaucrats remained stagnant, especially those from the military during non-wartime periods. In reality, various civil service examinations were held several times a year in the mid and later Chosun era.

For example, in the civil service examination of the Chosun Dynasty, the first civil service examination was held under the reign of King Taejo (1392-1398), with 66 top successful passers in two sessions; 61 times held during the reign of King Seonjo (1567-1606), 1,129 top successful candidates were produced; 126 times held during the reign of King Yeongjo (1725-1776), 2,179 people came out; and 81 times held during the reign of King Gojong (1864-1894), 1,780 people passed the exam. The number of civil service examinations and the number of successful candidates increased rapidly in the latter years of the dynasty (<http://people.aks.ac.kr/front/dirSer/exm/exmKingExmList.aks?classCode=KM&className=%EA%B3%A0%EB%A0%A4%EB%AC%B8%EA%B3%BC&isEQ=true&kristalSearchArea=true>).

The *Kwa-keo* examinations, especially the civil service examination, were extremely difficult and highly competitive. and required several cumbersome rounds of testing and a long period of preparation. In order to prepare for the *Kwa-keo* exams, it was necessary to study Chinese classics in its characters for a long time, so from the early age, they had to read, memorize, recite, write calligraphy, and practice writing endlessly for more than 30 years in general. Therefore, test preparer needed sufficient financial support for a long time, of course, their own efforts and passion, they desperately needed the support and dedication of their entire family, as well as the practical and mental help of their clan. Therefore, financial power was essential for the long exam preparation period, and family support and connections were needed to obtain valuable exam information.

According to the statistics for those who passed the civil service exams (the *Munkwa*) from the Academy of Korean Studies, the competition rate for the *Munkwa* was approached between approximately 3000:1 and 16000:1, even though the competition rate was different in accordance with examination kinds, forms, times, and places (<https://namu.wiki/w/%EA%B3%BC%EA%B1%B0%20%EC%A0%9C%EB%8F%84>; https://m.weekly.khan.co.kr/view.html?med_id=weekly&artid=202111221342361&code=#c2b). Comparing with the current civil service examination in South Korea, it was really hard to pass the *Kwa-keo* exams, especially in the civil service exam. Unless

someone who had extremely talented or outstanding abilities, it was too difficult to pass the exam even after studying for several decades, and even after taking it several times. So, a collection of the *Kwa-keo* exam questions from the past several decades were passed down through generations so that descendants could refer to them.

In addition, after the mid Chosun Dynasty, various irregularities and corruption, such as proxy examinations and bribery of test scorers or supervisors, were rampant. Only socio-economically powerful and influential families or clans could afford to do so, but even for those who could not afford to do so, it was extremely difficult to pass the civil service examination. Considering this aspect, it was as difficult as picking a star in the sky for commoners who were not sufficient economically to pass the civil service examination. Thus, over a period of approximately 200 years between 1392 AD and 1600 AD, there were only 12 cases of commoners passing the civil service examination (http://contents.history.go.kr/mobile/nh/view.do?levelId=nh_025_0020_0030_0030_0020, Our History Net / National Institute of Korean History).

The *Yangban* status was hereditary from generation to generation, so it was indeed very difficult to rise in status. However, after experiencing long wars such as the *Imjin* War (a series of two Japanese invasions of Korea: an initial invasion in 1592 AD) and the *Byeongja* War (The Chinese invasion of Chosun occurred in the winter of 1636 AD), the number of *Yangban* increased rapidly due to the issuance of public notices, that is, an appointment document with a blank name issued by the state to receive property and confer nominal official office, the buying and selling of official positions, and the falsification of genealogical records (<https://encykorea.aks.ac.kr/Article/E0004276>; https://blog.naver.com/hi_nso/130151255491).

According to the results of the census in Daegu, Kyungsang province, in the mid and late Chosun Dynasty, the number of households belonging to the *Yangban* class gradually increased over time. Based on this data, starting from 1690 (Sukjong's reign), the *Yangban* class comprised 9.2%, the commoners 53.7%, and the slaves 37.1%; from 1783 to 1789 (Jeongjo's reign), 37.5%, 57.5%, and 5.0%; and from 1858 (Cheoljong's reign), 70.3%, 28.2%, and 1.5%, respectively (https://blog.naver.com/hi_nso/130151255491). By the mid-19th century, the proportion of the *Yangban* reached 70%. However, this is a statistic from the Daegu area of Gyeongsang Province. In other regions, the increase in the *Yangban* class was also seen overall, but there were differences in the proportions (https://blog.naver.com/hi_nso/130151255491).

In The Korean Cultural Encyclopedia, the term *Yangban* is briefly defined as follows:

Yangban is the ruling class of the Goryeo and Joseon Dynasties. When the king received a court, the civil servants standing to the east and the military servants standing to the west were collectively called Yangban. Until the early Goryeo Dynasty, Yangban literally referred to civil and military officials. However, as the Yangban bureaucracy gradually became more organized, the patriarchal family structure and communal kinship relationships led to the families and relatives of Yangban officials also being called Yangban. The Yangban class gradually solidified into a closed class due to the generational transfer of official positions through the Eumjik and Gwageo exams, and closed marriages among them, and the term Yangban itself changed to a concept meaning the ruling class.

<https://encykorea.aks.ac.kr/Article/E0035521>

In the above, we can see that in the Chosun Dynasty, the term *Yangban* referred not only to people in government positions, but also to their families and all members of their clans. In particular, ‘young learning’ (*Yousaeng*) was a person who believes in Confucianism makes it his profession, and it was the most common job title for the *Yangban* at the time (<https://kiss.kstudy.com/Detail/Ar?key=3072151>). With the *Yousaeng*, “*Seonbi*” was an important title in the Chosun Dynasty. The term “*Seonbi*” (a Confucian scholar or scholars) is a title for a person with both learning and character, and is a Confucian term that refers specifically to a person or class that embodies Confucian ideology. The *Seonbi* ethically cultivates his character, and polishes his knowledge through constant study and officialdom, he intends to carry out his will, and to realize his Confucian cosmic beliefs: first of all, self-cultivation and realization, next, family's harmonization, last, the country's peace (<https://encykorea.aks.ac.kr/Article/E0028737>). Accordingly, “the spirit of the *Seonbi*” can be defined as "a sense of integrity that constantly cultivates learning and virtue for the perfection of a holistic personality, and is willing to give up personal glory and even life for a greater cause"(<http://www.yjinews.com>). This scholarly spirit is the Confucian spirit that supported the Chosun Dynasty, and is recognized as a noble spirit representing moral and righteous intellectuals who are spiritually revered in the current Korean society.

However, the cause and justification were indeed grandiose though, in reality, a number of them used learning as a tool to rise to positions that gave them vested politico-economic interests, and to maintain their power and status. They formed factions, and discriminated

against or oppressed others, often falling into selfishness that put their own power and interests ahead of the realization of Confucian cosmic belief.

Simply put, the Chosun Dynasty was a society centered on the *Yangban* class on the basis of the Confucian socio-political system. Accordingly, it can be evaluated as a Confucian feudal society that revered officials and looked down on commoners, had hierarchical occupational discrimination among or between scholars, farmers, artisans, and merchants, had discrimination and prejudice against women based on the superiority of men, and believed in and followed the unequal, unfair, and discriminatory Confucian doctrine principles in which hierarchy and discrimination between king and subject, between the old and the young, and between the sexes were customary.

In a Chosun society, where such various discriminations were institutionalized, it is impossible for national or public education and civil service examinations to be provided and implemented fairly to all people. In reality, the door to public education was not open to women, and they were not even given the opportunity to take the civil service examinations. Even among men, the fact that the vast majority of farmers, who made up the vast majority of the population, could not read or write, especially Chinese characters, proves that there were almost no opportunities for public education. Although they did not know how to read or write and were excluded from the field of learning, they lived by the ethical code and doctrine of being filial to their parents, obeying their king faithfully, getting along well with their neighbors, maintaining harmony in their families, being trustworthy with their colleagues, and building in their own conduct ethically and uprightly. It is no exaggeration to say that Confucian doctrine was passed down from generation to generation as the golden rule, their faith, and lifestyle customs. It was the driving force that sustained the Chosun Dynasty for approximately 500 years.

To summarize the previous section comprehensively, the national education institutions and civil service examination system based on Confucianism can be evaluated as the optimal tools and methods for operating and maintaining these Confucian principles and dogmata.

In the Chosun Dynasty period, it can be judged that the Korean people's enthusiasm for education was centered on the powerful *Yangban* and low-level officials, rather than the common people, and that there was fierce competition among them with the goal of being appointed to government positions through the civil service examinations. To achieve this

goal, not only passing the civil service examinations, but also blood lineage, academic background, and regional ties were important determining factors.

Therefore, it is evaluated that the educational fervor at that time was a social class phenomenon led by the *Yangban*, especially among the classes that had access opportunities to the civil service examination. The examination was a mechanism to promote the idea of reverence for the government and contempt for the people, and was the gateway and main channel for the advancement of the *Yangban* class.

In particular, in a Confucian Chosun society, women were not only excluded from national education and civil service examinations due to the male-dominant and female-inferior ideology, but also commoners and the lowest class had difficulty or were unable to access national education and civil service examinations due to socio-economic deprivation, farm work, and various other types of labor required by the state. Furthermore, people living in local or rural areas had difficulty obtaining information on the dates of special or irregular civil service examinations that were frequently administered.

Judging from the facts above, it can be said that the educational fervor of the Chosun Dynasty was not a general or universal educational fever based on the egalitarianism and ability-based principles (meritocracy) of the current liberal democracy in South Korea, but rather a partial or limited educational fervor limited to the privileged class steeped in a sense of privilege and discrimination on the basis of Confucian principle in the Chosun Dynasty. Particularly, without understanding the socio-cultural characteristics of the Chosun Dynasty, we cannot properly understand the educational fervor of the time. From this perspective, examining the characteristics of the Chosun Dynasty is of great significance.

The Chosun Dynasty was characterized by a society in which the principles and tenets of Confucianism were the golden rule, and the ruling class was made up of elites who revered Confucianism and Chinese classics, memorized and studied for a long time, and obtained official positions through the civil service examinations or blood connections. From a critical point of view, it was a Confucian state ruled by elites who valued the dark and biased learning of practicality.

Accordingly, it was a society of strict inequality and discrimination, with various types of discrimination such as the subordination of government officials to commoners, the subordination of men to women, and occupational discrimination between or among scholars, farmers, artisans, and merchants, and with strict hierarchy and order such as the

relationship between the ruler and his subjects, between the old and the young, and between men and women. Under this rigid social structure, human, social, and educational equality could not be achieved. In this context, national educational institutions and *Kwa-keo* examinations for recruiting talented people to bureaucratic positions were namely only for the sake of everyone, but in reality, they were systems that further solidified the privileged class. This ruling class did several negative socio-political affairs as the following: monopolized political power, economy, academia, and culture; created factions and partisanship (Wagner, 1974); formed blood, school, and region ties; seized their exclusive interests and power; and ended up becoming their own property, not political and academic development for the benefit of all, that is, not for the common good.

Summing up, as examined in this study, Confucian education and civil service examinations based on Confucianism have become the roots of current college or university entrance examinations and contemporary several national examinations such as Judicial, administrative, foreign service examinations, etc., the major source of the current Koreans' enthusiasm for education, and the birthplace of various unequal social systems and discriminatory consciousness structures, such as the current extreme partisan politics based on factions, academic background and educational credentialism based on nepotism, cartelization between occupations or job types, and occupational discrimination on the basis of misanthropy, are deeply rooted in the current Korean people and society.

V. Summary and Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to examine the origin and evolution of education fever in South Korea in terms of the cultural history of Korea. In the history of modern Korea, Korean education fever has been a core driving force for the rapid politico-economic development of South Korea. In light of this importance, the origin and evolution of educational enthusiasm in Korea were studied as research topics, and the following research questions were set, reviewed, and discussed.

To discuss the study systematically, three research questions were addressed. First, what is Korean education fever in contemporary South Korean society? Second, when is the origin of Korean education fever in Korean cultural history? Last, how the Korean education fever evolved in the history of Korean culture? In order to defend the research questions, the author has used a content analysis method.

As for the limitations of this study, Korean education fever has been reviewed from the Three Kingdoms to the Chosun Dynasty eras, that is, discussed by dividing it into three periods: ancient, medieval, and pre-modern times. At the education level, elite or higher education has been reviewed.

In reality, Koreans' enthusiasm for education has been the subject of interest and research by politicians, economists, educators, and scholars from various fields around the world since South Korea quickly achieved amazing advancement and industrialization economically and politically in a short period. From this standpoint, the topic of this study can be given research importance. The main topics in this paper were national higher education institutions and the civil service examination system related to Korean education fever. Thus, the significance of this study is to provide worthy resources and basic theories regarding the origin and evolution of Korean education fever for the educational theorists, planners, and practitioners of the West and the East.

The research findings of this study are as the following:

In the first research question, the author defined Korean education fever as not just as a socio-educational phenomenon, but also as a cultural and historical product of the educational desire for rising the socio-political status and for entering the privileged class that can guarantee socio-economic stability and prosperity in contemporary South Korean society.

Second, the author viewed that *Dokseo Sampum-gwa* along with *Hwarangdo* can be seen as the driving force that led the Unified Silla period to its golden age. *Hwarangdo* was evaluated as the flower of the military class based on mainly Buddhist and Taoist ideology, while the bureaucrat scholars from the *Dokseo Sampum-gwa* was considered as the flower of the literacy class based on Confucian ideology. This study evaluated that the beginning of the National Academy and the *Dokseo Sampum-gwa* in the Unified Silla era were as significant seeds in the sowing period of Korean education fever. Additionally, it was found that the *Dokseo Sampum-gwa* (*the Three Levels of Reading or the Reading Three Products*) became the cultural and historical genes of the South Korean people's enthusiasm for education.

Third, in the medieval period, the author reviewed Koreans' elite education system and enthusiasm focusing on national academies and civil service examinations in Koryeo

era. This study found that the national educational institutions and civil service examinations of the Koryeo Dynasty were the determinants that stimulated educational enthusiasm among the privileged class in order to secure or maintain their socio-political power. Therefore, the Koryeo era was evaluated as the actively sprouting period of Koreans' education fever. In addition, the study found that Koryeo's civil service examinations were centered on Confucianism and Buddhism. Thus, Koryeo's feudal power centered on Buddhism and Confucianism was transformed into Chosun's two privileged classes, civil and military aristocrat power, on the basis of Confucianism.

Finally, in the Chosun Dynasty as a growing time of Korean education passion, this paper evaluated that the Korean people's enthusiasm for education was centered on the powerful *Yangban* and low-level officials rather than the common people, and that there was fierce competition among them with the goal of being appointed to government positions through civil service examinations. To achieve this goal, not only passing the civil service examinations, but blood lineage, academic background, and regional ties were important determining factors.

Thus, the study found that Korean educational fervor at that time was a social class phenomenon led by the *Yangban*, especially among the classes that had access opportunities to the civil service examination, and that the examination was a mechanism to promote the idea of reverence for the government and contempt for the people, and was a gateway or a main channel for the advancement of the *Yangban* class.

Summing up, the author simply put from this study: the educational enthusiasm of Koreans as a seed began in the Three Kingdoms period, that is, it was a time when the national educational institutions and the *Dokseo Sampum-kwa* of the Unified Silla period became seeds for some privileged classes to sprout. It was diagnosed that these were further systematized and evolved through the privileged class of the Koryeo Dynasty, and further heated up and intensified through the national elite education institution and the civil service examination system centered on the *Yangban* class of the Chosun Dynasty. However, it did not evolve or become the universal and general educational enthusiasm of the entire nation as it is today.

Moreover, the Chosun Dynasty was an agricultural society where the only social path through education and civil service examinations was to become bureaucrats or officials in order to gain socio-economic wealth and power, and there were no other occupations

that allowed individuals to demonstrate their diverse abilities and talents. On the other hand, contemporary South Korea has been a liberal, democratic equality-oriented society that operates a free democratic political and economic system and advocates equality and fairness (Lee, 2018). Thus, there are various occupations where one can utilize one's abilities and talents and advance into them through various paths, and the social conditions and structures are diversifying.

Accordingly, South Korea has now become a society in which people can develop their various abilities and talents without necessarily going through higher education, passing national exams, or becoming bureaucrats. From this perspective, the goals and functions of higher education inevitably change according to the socio-political circumstances of the times. The current phenomenon of excessive educational fervor in Korean society can be evaluated as a contemporary social phenomenon or a product based on a very Korean cultural and historical background and structure.

If an individual's learning ability is measured through a state-led test (e.g. College Scholastic Ability Test) using an unfair or unreasonable education system, and the results are judged as if they are the entirety of an individual's ability, and the results are ranked according to superiority and inferiority, and it additionally has a continuous and profound impact not just on qualifications for college admission but also on future jobs, marriage, and even overall social life, could there be anything more unreasonable and unfair than this?

In practice, the College Scholastic Ability Test score is an evaluation of academic ability, but it cannot be an evaluation score of an individual's overall ability and aptitude. Isn't it true that there is no examination system that can, in principle, fairly and completely measure the abilities and aptitudes of various individuals? This social phenomenon of people with excellent test scores advancing into high-paying and well-treated jobs can be evaluated as a product of the current era's mammonism and materialism as well as the power-oriented and career-oriented ideology of the dynastic era. In today's South Korean society, along with the diversification of occupations and abilities as well as the excellence of individual abilities and talents is also defined and recognized in various ways. The superiority of academic performance does not necessarily mean the superiority of life, and it does not even measure the superiority of quality of life and happiness.

As with the civil service examinations of the dynasty states, the national examination system that advocates meritocracy has characteristics that make it impossible to be

implemented fairly and equitably. In other words, it fails to provide everyone with opportunities to participate and a preparation period under socioeconomically fair conditions and circumstances. Privileged compensation leads to excessive competition and the absurdity of the examination system, which encourages excessive educational enthusiasm and causes social evil and inequality.

Currently, a South Korean society is reaching the limit of test-taking meritocracy (Lee, 2023, <https://gspress.cauon.net/news/articleView.html?idxno=30048>). There are a few signs of this: competition is getting more and more intense with fierce enthusiasm for education; it is trouble to adjust the difficulty of the exams; the excessive prevalence of private education is causing deepening educational cartels and social disharmony; a new privileged class with excellent academic background and credentials is being formed and inherited; and thus the exams are losing fairness and reasonable recognition. Moreover, even though it is the author's individual opinion, the current South Korean society does not want to recognize the differences in individual abilities, especially individual excellence, while denying individual discrimination. A great number of South Koreans prefer a meritocracy based on fair tests, and want to reject the seniority-based system that is practiced in most organizations in the current South Korean society that values age and academic background.

In this way, if education creates a new class of people, and if this class enjoys privileges, reigns as the vested class, and even becomes hereditary, aren't these problems and phenomena new social ills that need to be reformed or innovated?

In conclusion, based on the research findings of this paper, the researcher suggests as the following:

First of all, the current South Korean society, where the examination system has reached its limit, needs to improve the system to suit the flow of the times and the social structure, recognizes the diversity of people and jobs, selects and supports the right talent for the right position in a reasonable and fair manner, and designs and practices various selection methods so that anyone can be reasonably accepted.

Next, as examined in this study, the origin of Koreans' enthusiasm for education lies in the fact that specific classes have acquired power and privileges as well as socioeconomic benefits and compensation through national or public education and various examination systems. In order to maintain and enhance these vested interests and privilege, the enthusiasm for education has gradually progressed and become more heated over time, in

line with the national political, social, and educational systems. Accordingly, the author suggests that we need to develop diverse and fair talent selection methods that are suitable for today's society and that everyone can relate to.

Lastly, South Koreans' enthusiasm for education was mainly based on religious and academic Confucianism, and promoted political power-oriented Confucian officials and factional politics. In accordance with Confucian principles and dogmata, the discrimination against humans, which respected bureaucrats and looked down on the people, respected men and looked down on women, and emphasized the hierarchy and order of the feudal class system, took advantage of the worship of learning and the priority of Confucianism, inheriting historical and cultural influences, and further deepening Koreans' enthusiasm for education. From this perspective, South Koreans' enthusiasm for education was a social phenomenon of the times as well as a cultural and historical product.

In this context, the author believes that the Korean people's enthusiasm for education can avoid overheating if they break away from the uniform social and educational system centered on customary Confucianism, and establish a diverse and specialized social education system suitable for the present era. To do so, the author proposes two priority solutions: first of all, the current unfair and unreasonable wage system based on occupation, job type, and educational credentials should be reformed to be rational and fair; and then the uniform test-based talent selection method in schools and workplaces should be reasonably changed to various methods.

For future study, it is recommended that this study should be undertaken to examine South Korean education fever from the Japanese colonial rule period to the contemporary South Korean times with quantitative or qualitative research methodology culturally and historically. Furthermore, the author expects that there will be research that can suggest specific and reasonable policies or measures that can calm the excessive educational enthusiasm of Koreans.

Finally, the researcher hopes that this academic paper will provide basic theories and useful resources regarding the origin and evolution of Korean education fever for the educational practitioners and theorists of the world.

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I as the author dedicates this academic paper to my beloved family members: wife (*Okhee*), daughter (*Kirym*), and grandson (*Theo*), with love, hug, and happiness on

April 20, 2025. Celebrating our 46th wedding anniversary with a wonderful spring.

***Author:**

Jeong-Kyu Lee (1950-), educational scholar, the 2017 Albert Nelson Marquis Lifetime Achievement Award Winner, Marquis Who's Who in America 61st Edition (2007), and Marquis Who's Who in the World 24th-33rd Edition (2007-2016) listed educator with a degree of Philosophy of Doctor (Higher Educational Administration at The University of Texas at Austin), former President of Central College, Canada, Guest Scholar of the University of British Columbia, Canada, Research Fellow of Korean Educational Development Institute (KEDI) under the Korean Government, Joint Professor of Hongik University in Seoul, former Columnist at University News Network (UNN) in South Korea, and reviewer or editor of several international journals, such as The Cambridge Journal of Education, Higher Education, Educational Administration and Policy Studies, etc. Dr. Jeong-Kyu Lee's academic articles and books have been published in domestic and many foreign countries, and international organizations such as Canada, the U.S.(ERIC), the U.K., France, Germany, Italy, Mexico, Spain, Australia, South Africa, Brazil, India, China, South Korea, OECD, UNESCO(IAU/HEDBIB), and the UN(UNPAN). A number of academic articles and books were written in English and Korean, and translated into French, German, Spanish, Chinese, and so on. There are four poetical works: *The Songs of Nature and Spirituality*; *The Songs of Mountain Villages*; *The Song of Life*; and *The Songs of Nature, Human, and Spirituality*.

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