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"We'll Be Farmers When We Grow Up": Education for Humanization and the Legacy of Critical Literacy Education in Korea[1]

Yoonmi Lee (이윤미)
Hongik University

Abstract

Purpose: This article explores the literary work of a teacher and activist, Yi O-Deok, as a lens to approach historically and culturally embedded notions of humanization in education in Korea. Anchored in the ethos of "Asia as Method," this study offers a unique perspective that exemplifies the importance of the local sociocultural context in Asia in enriching our understanding of universal concepts.

Design/Approach/Methods: This study adopts a methodological approach centered around the examination of Yi O-Deok's work and his influence on critical literacy education. Key source materials include Yi's extensive five-volume diary and the various literary pieces he edited from the 1950s to the 1980s.

Findings: Yi O-Deok's philosophy on humanizing education, deeply influenced by local contexts, provides a distinct, non-Western perspective. It offers a critical counterpoint to Western-centric educational paradigms and enriches the broader understanding of humanization in education.

Originality/Value: The uniqueness of this study resides in its focus on children's writings, affirming faith in the unfiltered expressions of their pure spirits encapsulated in the raw "languages of the

Corresponding author:
Yoonmi Lee, Department of Education, Hongik University, Humanities and Social Sciences Building C (Room #630), 94 Wausan-ro, Mapo-gu, Seoul 04066, Korea.
Email: yoonmi.lee.edu@gmail.com

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soil," which have persevered through the sociopolitical upheavals of Korea's modern history. This in turn strengthens the call for a nuanced, non-Western interpretation of the concept of "humanization" in education.

Keywords
Children's writings, critical literacy education, humanization, progressive teachers' movement, self-expression, Yi O-Deok

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Introduction

This article will discuss the literary work of primary school teacher and activist Yi O-Deok (1925–2003) as a lens through which to approach the historically and culturally embedded notions of *inganhwa gyoyuk* (or humanization in education). *Inganhwa gyoyuk* has been a key motto in the Korean progressive teachers' movement and has been heavily developed since the late 1980s. This movement is rooted in the country's modern history, which has experienced complex processes of Westernization, colonization, national division, and rapid industrialization (Lee, 2022). The activist motto of humanization in education has not been well defined by its users but has remained open-ended, with mixed origins. Yi O-Deok's work illustrates an endeavor among the multiple strands of this unfinished project.

This study explores the nuanced subject of humanization within the Korean sociocultural context. It focuses on understanding how the concept of humanizing education can be perceived differently within the unique historical and social conditions of a non-Western context, as opposed to the modern Western view of humanity, which emphasizes rationality and enlightenment (Archer, 2002; Odysseos, 2017). The aim is to address its complexities stemming from its intricate historical and cultural origins. The objective is not to propagate an essentialist viewpoint nor to declare inscrutability for those outside this context. Rather, it seeks to provide an "emic" perspective, intended not to reinforce a sociocultural divide but to augment the understanding of humanization by integrating experiences from a non-Western context, particularly those on the societal margins. Significant historical disruptions such as colonization, military dictatorships, swift industrial development, and cultural turmoil—phenomena not unique to Korea but shared broadly across other East Asian societies with comparable historical sociopolitical and economic transformations—have distinctly molded the lived experiences of these marginalized groups. These occurrences have inevitably pushed them toward the societal periphery, often resulting in their estrangement from what is conventionally deemed normal or standard.

This research explores how Yi O-Deok's literary work can be leveraged to unpack and understand complex interpretations related to the notion of *inganhwa gyoyuk*, taking into account its historical and cultural dimensions. Yi O-Deok has served as a teacher and principal for 42 years, primarily in rural primary schools in the southeastern provinces of Korea. A staunch advocate for children's literacy, Yi was an active figure in the teachers' critical literacy movement of the 1980s, employing his unique approach to teaching writing, or "*geulsseugi*"—a term he deliberately opted for over *geuljitgi*, or composition. In addition, as a respected poet and literary critic since his first publication in 1955, Yi's work warrants attention not only because of his influential activism but also because of his rich collection of student writing from the 1950s through the 1980s and his memoirs or diaries, written from 1962 to 2003, documenting his life as a classroom teacher. He implemented critical literacy education in his classroom and shared ideas with the broader teaching community. Yi strived to revive the Korean vernacular as a medium for expressing children's lived experiences, rejecting the soulless writings imposed in schools through standardized literature in the official curriculum. His admiration for rural children's narratives, which exhibited a raw yet genuine unity with nature—expressed by him as "the thought of the soil"—aligns with the Korean idiom of *shintobuli*, suggesting that the body and the earth should not be separated (Yi, 1993/2018, pp. 86–87).

Emphasizing the emic perspective not only amplifies an empathetic examination of this work but also unveils insights often overlooked from an etic viewpoint. This emic viewpoint could elaborate on humanizing education, as it tailors universalistic thoughts according to distinct histories (Burman, 2019a, 2019b; Chakrabarty, 2009; Chen, 2010; Lee, 2019). The subaltern nature of the "language of the soil" is deeply ingrained in the words, as they are perceived and experienced, harboring elements that, while not directly translatable culturally, are interwoven with the intricate wholeness of the speaker's world. This lack of a direct translation does not suggest that outsiders cannot comprehend it; rather, it points to the unique meanings that natives appreciate in their own context. The complexity of a text may reflect an indigenous understanding of humanity. This study explores the significance of the critical literacy movement spearheaded by Yi O-Deok within this framework.[2]

Struggles toward humanization are reflective of specific histories, meanings, and ambitions that require intricate context-specific cultural interpretations. These experiences embody a complex structure of hybridity, resonating with the notion of "Asia as Method," popularized by Chen (2010). This approach seeks to reveal peripheral experiences as potential sources of alternative viewpoints rather than succumbing to nativism or essentialism. Takeuchi Yoshimi, who initially proposed Asia as Method by coining the term, focused on Asia's potential as a method for developing a revised understanding of universality (Takeuchi, 2005). Similarly, marginalized non-Western notions can offer fresh, alternative perspectives, subverting existing universalist claims. The emphasis is on Asia's potential to disrupt rather than on its essence.

This article first establishes the historical context from which "humanizing education" originated in the Korean teachers' movement. It focuses on how this motto, one of the three core principles of the Korean Teachers and Education Workers Union (hereafter referred to as the KTU), served as an overarching theme. This article draws connections between Yi O-Deok's pioneering contributions to the critical literacy movement and the ways in which his understanding of humanity informed his pedagogical approach. Subsequently, by exploring the student writing collected by Yi O-Deok, this study extracts and examines the nuanced perceptions embedded in these works. These narratives provide a contrast between the "human machine" and the authenticity and sincerity encapsulated in the rural children's writings. In conclusion, this study synthesizes these insights and reflects on the broader implications of humanizing education.

The emergence of *Inganhwa gyoyuk*: Advocating for humanization in education

In the late 1980s, Korean society was gripped by an intense controversy related to its education system, provoked by a tragic incident. A student died by suicide, leaving behind a note that read, "Happiness is not in the order of grades (*haengbog-eun seongjeogsun-i anijanh-ayo*)." The incident inspired a popular movie with the same title that featured famous actors and further fueled discussions regarding the pressures faced by Korean students. Amid this heated societal atmosphere, an oppositional teacher organization—the KTU—was established. Upholding social democratic ideals, the KTU championed the pursuit of democracy and equality in education, challenging successive governments to implement legislative and educational reforms (Lee, 2006, 2022; Synott, 2017).

The term "dehumanization" became emblematic of the state of Korean education, as symbolized by the tragic student suicide. Consequently, KTU foregrounded the idea of humanization in education as a central tenet of their movement. Along with the slogans of education for the nation and education for democracy, the motto of humanization, or *inganhwa*, was the main core of "true education," or *chamgyoyuk*, pursued by the progressive teachers' movement. Given the political atmosphere in the late 1980s, the slogans promoting nationhood and democracy were rather obvious as they were responding to the issues of national division between South and North Korea and the military dictatorship at the time. However, the meaning of humanization was not clearly set forth and has remained somewhat opaque, although it has been widely used in educational discourse, implying comprehensive meanings.[3]

The slogan of humanization encapsulates various philosophical principles associated with humanity, such as freedom, personality, subjectivity, and awakening. Although its exact meaning is vague, it underscores the values and ideals perceived as missing from Korean education. The discourse on dehumanization fundamentally reflects a historical narrative marked by conflicts that

pervaded Korean society, reflecting the relentless pursuit of Western modernity and state authoritarianism: Western modernity versus non-Western underdevelopment, imperialism versus decolonization, and state dictatorship versus democratization. This aligns with Paulo Freire's concept of dehumanization, which influenced Korean activists at the time. From this perspective, the act of humanization is a conscious praxis or action designed to engage with and counteract the realities of inhuman conditions (Freire, 1993). In other words, humanization is about asserting one's ability to shape their own world and resist oppressive, dehumanizing forces, a philosophy that resonated strongly with Korean activists.

Critics have asserted the necessity of humanizing education to liberate it from the grip of senseless competition. They proposed that schools should place more emphasis on humanistic values, such as enhancing the meaning of one's life, building solidarity with neighbors, and fostering harmony between the mind and body (Kim, 1997, pp. 16–20). One activist, Park Yong-seong, criticized the societal myth that college education was essential for recognition as a "human" within Korean society. He attributes the dehumanization of teachers, students, and parents to an excessive focus on the zeal for higher education (Park, 1993, pp. 178–183).

There is a consensus that the inhumane competitive culture and the college entrance exam system have distorted Korean education. School is depicted as a battlefield, with students competing against their friends for a place at a reputable university. Another critic, Kim Jeong-hwan, a professor of education, lambasted the Korean education's equation "study = competition = university = success." He critically highlighted the military-style slogans found in schools during the 1980s (Kim, 1997, pp. 16–20):

> Once you fall asleep, you will die.
>
> There are no allies in front of the entrance exam.
>
> Let's win one more point with a fighting spirit.
>
> Learn subjects as if you were smashing them in the first place, and study as if you were attacking the enemy immediately when you see them.

Kim condemned the toll this system took on students, who endured long hours of mandatory after-school studies and were enslaved by exams. Although a small group of winners proceeded to prestigious colleges, those who were unable to adapt to the system were left behind. Some were driven to suicide, while others resigned themselves to their status as stragglers (Kim, 1997, pp. 16–20). Within this context, numerous education activists opposing dehumanization made concerted efforts to "humanize" Korean education. Critical literacy education served as a notable movement in this endeavor.

"The purest state of human mind": Empowering children through writing

By the late 1980s, Yi O-Deok had gained significant influence in literary education and teacher activism. In 1983, Yi spearheaded the formation of a nationwide teacher research forum for writing education (*Hanguk Geulsseugigyoyuk Yeonguhoe*) in collaboration with like-minded teachers. Furthermore, in 1989, while actively participating in the formation of the KTU, Yi also played a pivotal role in establishing the Korean Children's Literature Association (*Hanguk Eorini Munhak Hyeobeuihoe*). Yi O-Deok is prolific in his writings on children's literature and has compiled numerous collections of children's work. His five-volume diary from 1962 to 2003 (Yi, 2013/2018a; 2013/2018b; 2013/2018c; 2013/2018d; 2013/2018e) provides insights into his life with children, teachers, and school authorities in rural areas. His diary also chronicles his engagement with the writers' community: In children's writings, Yi admired their honest expressions of feelings and candid portrayal of reality.

Yi O-Deok was highly critical of the way formal schooling often suppressed children's creativity and innocence, as well as its emphasis on rote learning and adherence to textbook knowledge. He criticized teachers who prioritized traditional literary forms over honest and straightforward narratives. He envisioned teachers as facilitators who help learners reflect on their existence and express their lived experiences. Rather than suggesting a structured program, he encouraged teachers to ensure that children maintain their unique perspectives and voices when interpreting and discussing the world. According to Yi, ideal teachers, or "good adults," are those who can differentiate good writing from bad and respect children's natural curiosity and insight (Yi, 1993/2018).

Yi often expressed his deep disdain for the authoritarian state and corrupt bureaucracy, which he believed were stunting children's natural development through schools. He asserted that an education rooted in humanity could rescue children from the dehumanizing state of "cruelty and ferocity" (April 28, 1970; Diary vol. 1, p. 108). His writings often echoed his concerns, struggles, and hopes for children. Yi was a strong proponent of liberating children from indoctrination and believed that such liberation could not be achieved without broader societal transformation. He attributed the root cause of most evil in Korea to the absence of democracy under a military dictatorship (May 16, 1971; Diary vol. 1, p. 170).

What Yi O-Deok saw as inhumane or dehumanizing was akin to the viewpoints of other critics and activists of the time. Yi O-Deok's ideas profoundly resonated with the true education movement led by the KTU. Yi frequently employed the term "humanization" on various occasions in his writings, yet his belief in treating children with respect was deeply influenced by the *Cheondogyo* (天道教, Religion of the Heavenly Way or *Cheondo*) notion that "children are *Hanulnim*, or God" (Lee, 2014, p. 54).[4] While Yi was a practicing Christian, his perspectives

were significantly shaped by the tenets of *Cheondogyo*, an indigenous religion that claimed that the "child has the image of Heaven" (Lee, 2014).[5] Based on the notion of *Cheondo*-ism, Yi's view of humanization was well reflected in his depiction of the "children's heart" or *dongshim* (童心).

In his essay, Yi described the child's heart as the "purest state of the human mind." According to him, the heart of a child was innocent and honest, inherently free from "vain greed," and rich in human emotions, such as compassion and justice. The child's primitive mind lacked selfish interest or any instinct to harm others but had true beauty within itself (Yi, 1984/2018, pp. 25–27). He wrote:

> Until recently, I thought that *dongshim* (or children's heart) was an idea only in the minds of the adults that glorify it. Now, I have come to firmly believe that it is a real world existing within a child. I believe in Jesus Christ's words that it is only the child who can enter heaven.[6] Living with *dongshim* is never an escape from reality. How can it be wrong to say that Christ was the incarnation of *dongshim*? (Yi, 1984/2018, pp. 26–27)

He said that in his education, he was pursuing a state of mind that was "nameless, honest, and humble," which resembled the hearts of children. Childness may look unsophisticated, clumsy, wild, rural rather than urban, and primitive rather than civilized, yet the hearts of children, he said, were in "the most humanized condition," with none of the greed and ugliness rife in adults (Yi, 1984/2018, pp. 25–27). This idea of a child is in line with the thoughts and views of human beings in *Cheondogyo*, based on the ideas of Choi Je-woo (崔济愚, also known as Choi Suun 崔水云), the founder of *Donghak* (东学, or Eastern Learning), who instructed that humans are equivalent to Heaven. *Donghak* insisted on the unqualified dignity of all human beings, including the liberation of women, and called for the abolition of social class constraints:

> *Suun*'s positive view of the nature of human beings is basically that humans are good, positive and optimistic. Human's fundamental nature is good and beautiful, according to *Suun*. He calls the human being a *Choi-ryoung-ja* (最灵者), literally meaning, a highest spiritual being on the planet among all live beings under heaven. In *Suun*'s eyes, human beings are responsible, dignified and socially communal beings. (Chung, 2007, p. 36; italics added)

Yi O-Deok's focus on real-life expressions also aligned with the Japanese "daily life writing movement" or the *Seikatsu Tsuzurikata* movement (Kitagawa & Kitagawa, 1987; Shorb, 2020). This emerged in early 20th-century Japan as a critical pedagogical movement. Yi held deep respect for the Japanese teacher activists who spearheaded this movement during wartime and highly appraised the activities of progressive teachers. He was particularly interested in their pedagogical practice, which encouraged students to express their thoughts openly and honestly despite living under political authoritarianism (Lee, 2014, pp. 54–55). In 1991, Otsuki Takeshi, a Japanese

scholar-activist, proposed formalizing ties between the Japanese Composition Society (*Sakubun no kai*, 作文の会) and their Korean counterparts. Despite Yi's initial hesitation due to differing societal conditions and the potential for political misuse amid intense suppression (October 17, 1991; Diary vol. 3, pp. 330–336), this interaction paved the way for the exchange of children's poems, leading to their publication in both countries (Lee, 2014, p. 55). Yi curated 100 poems written by Japanese primary and middle school students and published translated versions in a book titled *A Person's Life* (*Han saram-ui moksum*) (Yi, 2001). Some KTU teachers viewed the *Seikatsu Tsuzurikata* movement as overly moderate, asserting that it focused solely on children's literature without proposing any structural or political strategies against the authoritarian state. However, Yi had a different perspective. He advocated for cultural struggles within classrooms and saw the empowerment of children as a viable form of resistance (May 3, 1986; Diary vol. 3, pp. 29–30).

The writing education movement that emerged in Korea appears to share significant qualities with Japanese practices. Although Yi admired the earnest pedagogical efforts of progressive Japanese educators, he also critically viewed the experiences in prewar Korean schools. For him, the "practice of writing back then in schools was unhappy and boring," not only because it was mandated but also because the students had to "think and write in Japanese," a language that was not their mother tongue (October 11, 1986; Diary vol. 3, pp. 58–59). Yi ardently supported education in the native tongue, referred to as "*uri mal*" or "our language," and expressed concern when the Korean government decided to introduce English in primary schools in the early 1990s as part of its globalization initiatives. Yi viewed this move as a potential cultural downfall. He emphasized that native languages, serving as a medium for thought and expression, should never be replaced, as they are the dwellings of the human spirit (July 15, 1991; Diary vol. 3, pp. 324–325).

Yi's approach to literacy education was not bound by traditional literary forms. He maintained that such forms were neither crucial nor necessary for learners to express their feelings and ideas, as children's writing, which reflects their unique experiences and perspectives, could naturally assume a poetic form. This concept is further explored in his book, *Children Are All Poets* (Yi, 1972/2018). However, his perspective on children is not blindly romantic. Reflecting on his understanding of children's nature, he referenced his impressions of A. S. Neill's Summerhill School. While Neill depicted children as pure and innocent, Yi observed that Korean children, burdened by historical adversity and oppression, often did not exhibit these traits. It took him "three decades" to trust in children's inherent innocence. Furthermore, he acknowledged the complexities of children's lived experiences, particularly in rural areas in Korea. Children were often required to assist their parents with work and even engage in hunting wild animals, situations that precipitated maturity and sometimes brutal behavior. He attributed this unnatural state to historical and political

contradictions and condemned an education system that ignored the lives of these children (November 6, 1977; Diary vol. 1, pp. 384–385).

Children's *Geulsseugi*: Compressed modernization and the lives of rural children

Between the 1950s and the 1980s, during his tenure in rural primary schools, Yi O-Deok collected children's writings, which he later published in books. Yi extensively collated the writings of rural children, shedding light on their lives and reflecting the spirit of the times.[7] The number of years he spent teaching in rural schools coincides with South Korea's rapid social transformation. Life in rural areas can be divided into four phases as follows (Yi, 1993/2018, pp. 262–275):

> They were poor but tried to live truly. (The 1950s)
>
> Becoming a farmer was taken for granted. (The 1960s)
>
> The rural life was collapsing. (The 1970s)
>
> Where has the village life gone? (The 1980s)

He held the belief that through writing, children could introspectively engage with their own lives and learn to respect themselves. He anticipated that children would be able to candidly portray their circumstances and employ writing as a means of thinking, arguing, and communicating with others (Yi, 1984/2009). In the following section, I dissect student writings that have been selected to represent various periods and the transformations that rural Korean communities underwent during those times. Although these writings may not precisely reflect the material conditions of rural communities, they reveal the realities of children in relation to schooling, family life, and work.

In the 1950s, the introduction of universal primary education transformed life in rural areas. Schooling expanded new norms that were unfamiliar to rural life. *Precise punctuality* was one such norm. Following holidays, students became lax and tended to be late, despite their best intentions. They struggled to adapt to the punctuality demanded by school, a concept previously absent from their daily lives and home cultures. One piece of student writing reflects the concerns of a second grader caught between two cultures. Yi Yi-gyo, who struggled daily with timekeeping, felt fortunate for his accidental on-time arrival one day while still uncertain about how he would continue to adapt to this norm:

> School time (Yi Yi-gyo, second grade, February 2, 1959; Yi, 1978/2018, p. 403): "After the Lunar New Year holidays, I was late every day. I do not know why I am late. … It's not just me who is late. All our

village kids are late, too. … Today was the first day after the holidays that I was not late. I was so happy. I have never been happier before. I think that being late in school is bad. I always think that I would not be late from home and leave early, but I end up being late when I arrive. …"

For rural children, living at home is inseparable from farm work. Yi O-Deok observed that, at least until the 1960s, it was customary for children to help with family work and that adults naturally expected children to participate in farm work. As revealed in the students' essays, even when children felt tired and in pain from working, adults merely laughed it off and did not take their complaints seriously. Only when children declared their need for study time could they escape work. Child labor at home was necessary for rural families. The school, an external authority, gradually pulled children away from family businesses. For rural children, schooling represented a respite, or "peace," as they put it, from hard manual labor. Nonetheless, as the children engaged in various rural projects, they were aware that they would likely become farmers when they grew up.

My everyday life (Kim Yong-pal, sixth grade, June 10, 1964; Yi, 1978/2018, p. 116): "After eating breakfast, I immediately went out to the field with my sickle. My back hurt while cutting barley for a long time, but my father and grandfather were so patient that they continued to work. When I told them I could not do it any longer because of my back, they laughed at me. I wanted to quit the work and go study, and they finally let me study in the afternoon. I will study harder, keeping in mind that 'working is so hard, but studying is like peace compared to it.'"

We'll be farmers when we grow up (Choe In-mo, fourth grade, May 29, 1964; July 20, 1964; Yi, 1978/2018, p. 118): "Today, I followed my elder cousin to a place where he gathered cattle fodder. … I was surprised. … He was many times better at scythe than me … Today, I went to feed the cows, and I heard the sound of weeding a rice paddy from somewhere. I thought that, when we grew up, we would become farmers like them."

By the late 1970s, with significant migration to cities, the urban population began to outnumber rural communities. Rapid industrialization during this decade led to a transformation of rural life. Although the adoption of electricity and new technologies was changing rural life, not all families could afford their own electronic devices and often had to share them with neighbors. The influx of urban culture widened disparities within villages, while the benefits of new technologies permeated society and sparked new desires. Children were also developing their own ambitions amidst these changes but were often held back from expressing their personal desires and finding themselves ambivalently aligned with their parents. This ambivalence is evident in their concern over matters such as the "electricity bill," as indicated below.

Television (Kim Bok-hwan, fifth grade, November 24, 1978; Yi, 1978/2018, p. 378): "We do not have a television at home. So, I go to Geon-ho's house and watch television there. My father said he would buy

a television next year, but I hope he does not, because electricity bills will go up. … When there was no electricity years ago, it was dark even under the lantern. Nowadays, it is very bright. We can see everything in the room. It was not like that before. I want to buy a television, but I am worried because of the electricity bill."

In the 1980s, as urbanization accelerated, rural households faced labor shortages and the rapid collapse of the rural economy. The dwindling rural population led to the merging and closure of many rural schools. Educational expenses in rural areas exceeded those in cities because of a lack of educational infrastructure, forcing parents to send their children to urban schools. The poverty rate increased, and household debt surged. In the face of his family's financial crisis, a third grader demonstrated strong empathy and bonds with his parents, even as they aspired for their children to lead a different life.

Debt (Kim Hyeong-sam, third grade, June 1985, Yi, 1993/2018, pp. 276–277): "Our family is in debt for some reason. We sold our rice fields but couldn't pay our debts, so we were tried in court. Father came to us crying. 'Hyeong-sam, you must live well [get rich]. Hyeong-sam, when you grow up, help the poor.' He cried as he said it. I cried, too."

While Yi O-Deok's periodization does not particularly highlight the lives of girls, some excerpts from his collection portray their lives in rural schools over the decades between the 1950s and the 1980s. The narratives below illustrate the changes in rural girls' lives over time. Kwon Bun-yi's essay revealed that schooling in the 1950s was a privilege not enjoyed by the generation of uneducated parents. Girls had to assist with family chores and often helped their illiterate parents with reading. Bun-yi's father was a self-learner with his daughter's assistance, but one evening, the second grader, exhausted after washing the dishes, feigned sleep because she did not feel up to helping her father study that night.

Last night (Kwon Bun-yi, second grade, November 18, 1958; Yi, 1978/2018, p. 322): "Last night, … I was studying after I did the dishes. Father called me, 'Bun-yi!' … He said, "Bring any book," and I brought him one. Father faltered. He asked me, "What is this?" I explained it to him. He started reading again. I pretended to sleep. My father still asked me questions, but I continued to pretend to sleep and did not answer. My father said he would go to sleep. … So did I."

With the advent of universal primary education, schooling became common among rural girls in the 1960s and 1970s; however, the role model for many rural girls was often their mother. Ahn Sun-hwa's essay, written in the late 1960s, depicts a girl envious of her mother who did not have to go to school but could stay home all day. The girl sensed that she would one day become a mother herself and yearned to grow up quickly, as her mother's work seemed more appealing to her than school life.

> I wish I could become a mother (Ahn Sun-hwa, second grade, December 5, 1969; Yi, 1978/2018, p. 386): "I wish to become a mother. Then, I will be happy cooking rice and stuff. I want to be my mother instead of going to school. If I were a mother, I would not scold kids even if they hustled in the room. I wish to graduate soon and enjoy cooking and eating at home."

In the 1980s, as secondary education expanded and the demand for democratization increased, the narrative around gender roles also underwent substantial changes in rural children's writing. Kim Eun-jeong, a third grader in the 1980s, exposed persistent gender discrimination in rural families. This contrasts sharply with the evolving awareness among girls.

The preference for sons remained strong in rural families, leading to difficult lives for mothers who could not bear them. The daughter expressed her sympathy for a baby girl who was not treated as a human being due to this preference for males and voiced her resentment against the power dynamics that prevented her mother from having control over her own life.

> The Baby (Kim Eun-jeong, third grade, April 1985; Yi, 1993/2018, pp. 278–279): "Family members swear every day that the baby is not a boy. Each time, my mother wipes her face with a towel and cries. 'Mother, why are you crying?' 'It's nothing. Don't worry.' My grandmother would not even want to see the baby's face. … Be it a girl or a boy, Mom can give birth as she pleases. I said to myself, … [Poor] baby who will grow up only with sorrow. I thought I would raise the baby at any cost."

The children's writings were composed over a 40-year period. Social reality and children's lives have changed significantly over the decades, but a striking consistency can be found in the lives of children in rural schools. They were active participants in many aspects of family life and the larger community rather than focusing solely on their individual lives. The children not only did housework but also assisted with farm work, helped their illiterate parents read, and were even concerned about the family budget. For these children, school represented an unfamiliar public space where norms differed from the family culture. The children's writings exposed the complexity of their experiences along with the tensions and hesitations between new aspirations and deeply embedded norms.

Becoming a farmer versus a human machine: A spirit inherent in the unadorned language

In Korea, the 1970s and 1980s were marked by the rapid expansion of secondary education, spurred by a substantial increase in the student population comprising baby boomers (born between 1954 and 1963), set against a backdrop of swift industrialization. By 1962, the attainment rate for primary education had reached 100%, whereas it was 40.2% for middle school and 22.2% for high school. By 1990, these figures had risen to 91.6% for middle school and 79.4% for high school. By 2005, the rates had further increased to 94.6% for middle school and 91.0% for high school (Lee, 2021).

Although the gap in secondary school enrollment rates between urban and rural areas disappeared over time, rural students often did not receive education beyond primary education, even in the 1970s and 1980s. Korea's competition for entrance exams led to the creation of a unique system called the equalization policy in the 1960s and 1970s; however, this was primarily an urban-centered phenomenon. In the 1980s, the development of the so-called "Gangnam area" came to symbolize an affluent population in Seoul, where intense competition for entrance exams and the increasing cost of shadow education became pressing issues. However, these problems seemed somewhat distant from the reality of rural students. Children in rural areas often had to participate in labor; in most cases, they became workers immediately after graduation and were unable to pursue higher education. Urbanization, which advanced in tandem with industrialization, reached a point where the urban population surpassed the rural population by the end of the 1970s. The proportion of the urban population, which stood at only 32.9% in 1955, increased to 59% in 1975. In 1980, the ratio of farming households to total households had decreased dramatically to 27%.[8]

Compared to children in rural areas, Yi O-Deok said that children in city schools were driven into meaningless drilling, even lacking the chance to reflect on their own cheerless lives. He said that children in the cities were becoming "*ingan gigye*" or "human machines" (Yi, 1984/2018, p. 24). He criticized schooling for killing the children's individuality and character while forcing them to engage in monotonous work. In most city schools, Yi argued that even when children were asked to write about their life experiences, they could not think of anything to say in their own words and only attempted to imitate others. In general, the schools did not encourage students to find pleasure in expressing themselves, and the teachers were busy correcting their grammar and style. He argued that, instead of correcting errors, teachers should be interested in bringing out the true thoughts of the child embedded in that incorrect grammar or style. Yi found examples of natural and honest writing in rural children's work. According to him, rural children's writings were the most honest, as the children had "no cunning" to play with "empty words" as in artificial writing. He preferred to use the word "*geulsseugi* (writing)" instead of "*geuljitgi* (composition)" because of the artificial nature of the latter (Yi, 1984/2018, p. 24).

Yi O-Deok said that children's *geulsseugi* was akin to farming. Both were humble and honest. Peasants have suffered from the tyranny of the powerful, but through their labor, they have played a role as the constructors of history. Similarly, children are dominated by adults but mature into the true hope of humankind. Just as agricultural products suffered from pests and diseases, children would also get hurt in the course of education—that is, "suffering from entrance exams, competitions for grand prizes, and artificial training to make sick little writers" (Yi, 1984/2018, p. 40). He saw that this trampled on children's lives and destroyed the value of genuine writing. For him, the cultivation of land (soil) paralleled the children's lives. If cultivated well, life sprouts from the land and bears abundant fruit. He believed that children's writing deserved the most important place in education because agriculture was the foundation of the country.

He insisted on *geulsseugi* because writing was considered most meaningful to Yi when it was an expression of life and became a creative product. In this sense, for Yi, writing without one's own thoughts was considered a "dead" thing. Schools required students to conform to standardized writing styles in the name of *geuljitgi* (composition), but this had nothing to do with good writing for Yi. Good writing had to be the expression of a free mind. Teachers must trust children's individuality and creativity, and no matter how trivial the subject matter of the writing, children's life experiences should be appreciated. Yi claimed that all children's writing should be respected because it concerns expressing oneself as one is (Yi, 1984/2018, pp. 38–41).

Children's thoughts and word choices represent the emic perception of practices embedded in their local lives. The language may be literally translatable, but the socioculturally nuanced language is not fully translatable, not simply because it is often written in local dialects or obscured by grammatical errors but because it originates from particular histories and is rooted in customs. These experiences and expressions are not only hardly perceivable to outsiders but are also depreciated even by the natives. As schools have emphasized modern rationality, the innocent "pre-modernity" of rural students was often subject to correction, not praise.

Yi O-Deok firmly believed that the epitome of humanization could be discovered in the minds of children. He posited that enabling students to express their thoughts honestly was a crucial element of humanization in education. His conviction in the power of education led him to turn to children's minds, which were best expressed in the purest forms of rural children's writing. He argued that the writings of rural children merited attention not because they illustrated a well-written literary form but because they represented the spirit inherent in their *unadorned* self-expressions. He saw within these writings the power of life, which could defy the system that *enslaved* humans in domination and competition. For Yi, children's writing was valuable because it revealed contradictions. It was considered valuable not because it was unspoiled and pure but because it revealed its unadorned reality, like raw and crude soil. This reality allowed children to face contradictions and empowered them to resolve them. He believed that by exposing these forces without correcting or repressing them, children could grow up to *become themselves*. Yi trusted the potential power of such growth and saw that children raised with this spirit would become true humans and, eventually, the subjects of their lives.

Yi O-Deok's zealous description of the alienation of the marginalized, or the children, can be read as *humanizing* children's lives or spirits inhabiting the writings rather than as expressions of childishness or backwardness, oriented toward a "developmental" end (Burman, 2019a, p. 17; 2019b, p. 146). This line of thought often conflicted with other Korean teacher activists who held developmental perspectives and were more committed to establishing organizational power. Yi frequently voiced his unease regarding the political orientation of his contemporaries in his diary. He documented that he felt the need to "sever ties" with those who could not appreciate

the value of his unique movement (Diary vol. 3, pp. 29–30). Despite his sentiment, he never truly managed to "break away" from them. However, it was clear that he was experiencing difficulties with colleagues who held assumptions and visions of humanization that diverged from his own.

Conclusion: Humanizing education and the "language of the soil"

This study aimed to explore a unique trajectory of thought pertaining to the humanization of education in Korea, as embodied in the work of Yi O-Deok. The notion of "humanization" in education has been a central ethos in Korea since the 1980s. Of the three primary tenets of the KTU, including education for nationhood and democracy, the doctrine of humanization has been most profoundly aligned with the intrinsic nature of education. However, during the educational activism of the 1980s in Korea, the pursuit of humanization was less about the consistent application of values and more about the evasion of dehumanized or inhumane conditions. The demand for humanization in education emerged as a counter-response to the reality of an education system increasingly characterized by intense competition and a lack of regard for students' quality of life against the backdrop of swift material growth.

Yi O-Deok strove to uncover a deeper and more nuanced comprehension of humanity through critical literacy education. As a teacher activist who gained national recognition but had deep roots in rural environments, Yi pondered the reality of a rapidly industrializing and urbanizing Korea, where the simplicity and authenticity of rural life were increasingly overlooked or diminished. He strongly believed that rural students, compared to their urban counterparts, managed to preserve the innate innocence of childhood. This innocence is reflected in their writings, which he deemed valuable for preservation, compilation, and publication. However, his fondness for rural children is far from blind affection. His attachment was grounded in inspiration drawn from his own teaching experiences as well as indigenous thoughts, such as *Cheondogyo* and the *Seikatsu Tsuzurikata* movement in Japan. Through the unfiltered expressions found in the children's writings, Yi sought to delve deeper into the essence of humanity. Although Yi O-Deok never explicitly articulated his perspective on humanization, it can be divided into aspects pertaining to the purpose of this study.

First, his critical perspective focuses on the contrast between human machines and farmers, juxtaposing modern urbanization with rural simplicity. This perspective criticizes the prevailing culture's overemphasis on materialistic values and productivity, calling for a reevaluation of this dominant worldview. In societies grappling with dualities such as urban sophistication against rural simplicity and modern industries against traditional agriculture, Yi depicts rural children as not yet fully integrated into materialistic modern civilization. Within this framework, Yi values and yearns for non-materialistic, essential human qualities while questioning the legitimacy of the dominant materialized culture.

The metaphor of a child as a machine might suggest an individual shaped by a dominant materialistic culture. Like machines, children are expected to function efficiently, adhere to set patterns,

and appreciate their productivity and performance. This mirrors a modern urbanized society in which materialism and progress are prioritized. In contrast, a farmer embodies an individual with deep connections to their natural surroundings, undertaking tasks that are less industrialized and more anchored in nature. Farmers represent facets of life that extend beyond relentless progression and acquisition. They can be viewed as representations of lifestyles that are less materialistic and more aligned with nature. This perspective is reflected in Yi's differentiation between free *geulsseugi* (writing) and structured *geuljitgi* (composition).

Second, Yi's approach sheds light on the complexities of societal change through the lens of rural children's writing. He valued the unfiltered, genuine articulations that these children provided, which often came with inherent ambiguities. These ambiguous narratives and expressions reflect the authentic uncertainties, conflicts, and struggles experienced by children during societal transformation. The merit lies not in the clarity or sophistication of their expressions but in the honesty and unfiltered nature of their narratives, which candidly reflect the experiences of modernization and the encroachment of a materialistic society.

These children's narratives subtly echo the sweeping social transformations taking place around them: the punctuality ushered in by industrialization, the allure of technology-based civilization along with the ensuing disparities, and generational cultural differences. These grand narratives of societal evolution were reflected in the routine details captured in children's daily writings. Yi values these children's writings not for their aesthetic appeal but for their honesty. These texts unmask self-conflicting thoughts, raw desires, and uncertainties, candidly reflecting the perspectives of those experiencing the impact of modernization at the grassroots level. Rather than seeking an idealized version of human purity, Yi finds it in the unvarnished perspectives that these children provide. Their interpretation of the world, though perhaps morally incomplete, represents a "transparent gaze" into the realities of societal transition. Their unadorned viewpoint offers a unique, undistorted perspective on the impact of sweeping modernization.

Third, it presents an approach that counteracts modern education, which traditionally emphasizes concepts such as rationality, subjectivity, and enlightenment. Yi values what can be referred to as holistic, unprocessed aspects, symbolized by terms such as "soil" as opposed to the rationality or consciousness often associated with enlightenment. While his engagement in modern schooling as a teacher may categorize him as a modernist, Yi's perspective offers a notable alternative. In conventional educational settings, children's expressions and emotions, if unrefined, irrational, or illogical, are often the targets of correction. However, Yi sees these pre-rational or pre-enlightenment sensibilities in children as valuable traits that should be nurtured, preserved, and appreciated rather than rectified. This perspective can be affirmatively characterized as a counterpoint to prevailing educational theories, underscoring its innate reverence for the fundamental, unprocessed human state. By cherishing and preserving these pre-rational and pre-enlightenment attributes, Yi's

perspective embraces the whole person in their most natural state, acknowledging the importance of unrefined emotions and thoughts as integral parts of human growth and development.

This study explored the unique trajectory of Yi O-Deok's perspective on humanizing education. Yi's work provides a distinct non-Western perspective that challenges established norms and injects into the discourse a critical consideration of localized experiences and indigenous perspectives. His work underscores the importance of a nuanced approach to understanding the human condition—one that does not shy away from ambiguity but, rather, embraces it as an authentic representation of societal change. Yi's work stands out for its critical exploration of humanizing education in a sociocultural context marred by intense competition and rapid material growth. His perspective resonates deeply with the essence of education, contrasting it with the dehumanized conditions and implications of the prevailing system.

Yi's concept of humanizing education carries significant implications for decolonizing Eurocentric knowledge production, as it confronts dominant Western ideologies that often prioritize rationality and materiality. Instead, Yi champions a more holistic approach that values innocence, authenticity, and the complexities of human growth and experience, a viewpoint deeply informed by his roots in *Cheondo*-ism (based on Eastern Learning) and empathy with Japanese pedagogical movements. This offers an alternative perspective for understanding the human condition. Importantly, Yi's work not only represents a Korean perspective but also resonates with broader East Asian contexts, indicating shared regional nuances. As such, his contributions serve to diversify and enrich the concept of humanization in education, incorporating perspectives imbued in the distinct sociocultural contexts of East Asia.

In terms of the notion of "Asia as Method," Yi O-Deok's approach to humanizing education underscores the importance of local contexts in interpreting universal notions. This perspective emphasizes the necessity of building knowledge that is deeply rooted in local histories, cultures, and social realities. Such exploration also enables the recognition of localized yet universally significant experiences and ideas that can enrich and diversify the discourse on education. This contributes to an ongoing shift toward recognizing and validating knowledge produced outside traditional, Western-centric frameworks, fostering a more balanced global intellectual dialogue.

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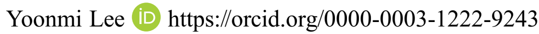
Yoonmi Lee https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1222-9243

Notes

1. All of the translations of Korean sources in this article are the author's. Based on the East Asian ordering of names, the Korean individuals are indicated with their surnames first followed by their given names. The Romanization for the Korean language follows the "Revised Romanization of Korean."
2. The analysis of Yi O-Deok's work draws from primary materials, including his diary, compiled and published posthumously. It has been pointed out that there are few studies on critical literacy education in Korea (Kim, 2012; Kim & Hachey, 2021). Although Yi O-Deok is widely known as a literary critic and educational practitioner, there are few academic studies on his pedagogical activities. In this article, I put forward his work, which aimed at critically reading the world through creative writing, as a distinct practice of critical and political literacy. Most of Yi O-Deok's books were republished in 2018 by the publishing company called *Yangcheolbuk*. I include the years in which his books were first published for clarification.
3. According to Shim Seong-Bo, a scholar and activist responsible for introducing the concept of humanization in the teachers' movement, noted that the motto was to "problematize the oppressive political socialization of the time, and to form human beings who realized their place in history, beyond existential humanization based on Western philosophies. If education to promote nationhood and democracy, other two mottos at the time, were basically political slogans, humanization was a slogan implying a philosophical and educational direction" (Interview on September 16, 2021).
4. This faith evolved from the 19th-century *Donghak* into its modern form in the early 20th century. The *Donghak* idea emerged among peasants and was disseminated as the basis for the massive revolts calling for institutional reforms based on human equality during the political transition in the late 19th century. Yi's interest in the *Cheondogyo* idea was developed through his close relationship with well-known writers such as Lee Won-su (1912–1981), who had been an influential activist during the Japanese colonial period in the children's media and literature movement, a venue for new conceptions of education with voluntary contributions from readers. In the 1920s and early 1930s, magazines were sites for the productive reconstruction of socially anticipated children and often served as alternative textbooks and sources for communication. Lee Won-su was a colleague of legendary activist Bang Jeong-hwan (1899–1931), a writer and literary critic at the center of the *Cheondogyo*-based cultural movement of the 1920s and early 1930s.
5. The same Chinese characters referring to the children's heart ("童心") were also used by Chinese and Japanese writers, but the movement in Korea reflected nationalistic currents in the children's literature movement, which was often criticized by socialist activists for being romantic (Zur, 2017).
6. "Unless you are converted and become like children, you *will* never *enter* the kingdom of *heaven*" (Matthew 18:3).
7. The books *We'll Be Farmers When We Grow Up* (1978/2018) and *Children in Work* (Yi, 1977/2018) are collections of student diaries and poems, respectively, written between the 1950s and 1970s. The writings from the 1980s are analyzed in other books, such as *Yi O-Deok on Writing* (Yi, 1993/2018).
8. "Urbanization," refer to Encyclopedia of Korean Culture, http://encykorea.aks.ac.kr/Contents/Item/E0015742

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