



The formation of the South Korean identity through national curriculum in the South Korean historical context: Conflicts and challenges

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how the South Korean identity has been formed and transformed by examining the Korean national curriculum in its historical context. The study first examines how the Korean identity, previously formed by traditional ethnic values, has been transformed during the period of national modernization. It then describes the efforts to form a Korean identity through national curriculum reform amid globalization, a phenomenon that has rapidly progressed in Korea since the 1990s. It also discusses the conflicts within and challenges to Korean identity in the Korean curriculum reform process.

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1. Introduction

A nation's identity can be considered a position of similarity and continuity as well as that of difference and rupture (Hall, 1996). The former position defines identity as a kind of culture that people with the same history and ancestors share, and does not change as time passes. According to this position, each nation has a stable and definite identity despite its tumultuous history. This nation's essential identity is based on the past and is expected to be rediscovered and recovered by various representations (Hobsbawm, 1983; Anderson, 1991). On the other hand, the position of difference and rupture considers identity as something that has changed over a long history and that will continue to change, rather than a fixed essence that transcends time and culture. Therefore, according to this sense, identity is a matter of not only "being" but also "becoming" and the process is never completed; that is, it is an "ongoing process" (Hall, 1996; Richardson, 2002).

Considering the fact that a nation's identity is based on the past and starts with the narratives of the past, we should think of similarity and continuity as an axis of identity. However, because this identity can be influenced by discourses formed within history and culture, we have to consider difference and rupture as the other axis of identity. In other words, identity is thought to be formed through dialogue and negotiation between the axis of similarity and continuity and the axis of difference and rupture (Hall, 1990). This dialogue and negotiation is always political because there are conflicts and tensions over balancing power between both the axes.

Regardless of these positions, identity itself is a political concept and contains the politics of difference and exclusion. Identity is constructed by distinguishing it from what it is not and excluding the other. The processes of differentiation and exclusion are political because they are accomplished through the actions of the dominant power. The unity or internal homogeneity that the identity usually assumes can be constructed out of the politics of this difference and exclusion (Bhabha, 1994; Hall, 1993, 1996; Butler, 1993). The politics of difference and exclusion that plays a part in the formation of a nation's identity is difficult to avoid, regardless of the position of identity. According to the position that there is an essential identity that is based on the past, this identity can be recovered and rediscovered through the narrative, imagination, fantasy, memory, and myths of the past. The identity that is recovered and rediscovered in this process tends to be fictional rather than factual, and can thus contain the politics of difference and exclusion on what we should be. On the other hand, according to the position that identity changes through time, this identity is constructed through discourses formed on specific historical and institutional contexts, where something that seems to be definite in a specific period can be abolished or transformed. The process of difference and exclusion in discourses on identity is affected by power relations in society. Hence, identity, constructed in the specific historical and institutional context, is the product of the politics of difference and exclusion that are implied within the discourses in context.

How can we know who we are and who we should be? After the popularization of school education, these questions can be answered through the curriculum. A curriculum is not just an aggregate of courses taught in schools but also the arena in which various positions struggle for representation in the public sphere (Mao, 2008). The debate on what should be taught in schools is closely related to the question of identity: "who are we, and who

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should we be?” In terms of this point, the school curriculum can be an effective tool in creating national identity. In many countries, the school curriculum plays an important role in forming government-mandated identity (Anderson, 1991; Feinberg, 1998; Hobsbawm, 1983; Lee, 2002; Smith, 1991; Mao, 2008; Popkewitz, 2009). The identity embodied in the school curriculum is defined through discourses that are constructed in the historical and cultural contexts. These discourses related to identity are political, in the sense that they require a sort of dialogue and negotiation. Therefore, by reviewing the conflicts and struggles that are related to the identity implied in the curriculum debate of a nation, we can understand not only national identity but also the politics of identity.

South Korea has arrived at its present state after going through the formative process of becoming a modern democratic nation, a process that has spanned the last two centuries of its 5000-year history. Korea's contemporary history is a tumultuous journey that stretches through the dynastic era to the present age of globalization. Throughout this period, Korea's national identity has developed through conflicts between the traditional values of the past and the newly accepted values of the present. Conflicts over national identity continue, amplified by globalization. The Korean identity is now defined through a struggle between ethnic powers that strive to maintain traditional values and ideas and global powers that have emerged through the new social changes brought about by globalization. In other words, the conflict between the position of similarity and continuity and that of difference and rupture which is related to the construction of national identity has intensified.

The purpose of this study is to explore the South Korean identity as it is revealed in the national curriculum reform process. Reform in Korea's national curriculum has transformed the Korean identity several times. Therefore, by analyzing the process of Korean curriculum reform, this study reviews how the Korean identity has been formed and identifies several of the conflicts and challenges that this identity has faced. The following section examines how the Korean identity, initially formed through traditional ethnic values, has transformed through the period of modernization; this identity change is placed and reviewed in its historical context. Section 3 examines the efforts that have been put into transforming the Korean identity through national curriculum reform amid globalization, a phenomenon that has rapidly progressed since the 1990s. Section 4 discusses the conflicts within and challenges to Korean identity that are revealed by the Korean curriculum reform process.

2. Historical context: formation and transformation of Korean identity

National identity is formed and continuously transformed within historical, social, and political contexts (Hall, 1990). The identity of Koreans has continuously evolved throughout the long period of the nation's history. Korea was ruled by a royal dynasty until the early 20th century. It was then under the colonial administration of Imperial Japan from 1910 to 1945. In 1948, a republican system, which continues to the present day, was established. During the dynasty period, education was mainly centered on Confucianism, which eventually took root as the society's dominant value system. Thus, the origins of “Koreanness” among Koreans are based on Confucianism. Korean identity, rooted in Confucianism, has been retained and restored despite Korea's tumultuous history. Of course, the Confucian tradition has been challenged by antagonistic discourses and practices over time; because of this, it is difficult to state that these traditions are the same as the original traditions. However, the assertion that Confucianism is the origin of “Koreanness” and that it should be

reflected to the national curriculum conflicts with the construction of a new identity in the modern context. This section describes the formation and transformation of Korean identity through the national curriculum, ranging from early traditional Confucian education to the contemporary post-liberation education of the early 1990s.

2.1. Traditional education: Confucianism

The long royal dynastic history of Korea comprises the Period of the Three Kingdoms (BC 57–AD 918), the Goryeo Dynasty (AD 918–1392), and the Chosun Dynasty (AD 1392–1910). Confucian ideas formed the core political beliefs of these dynasties. Confucianism emphasizes such values as loyalty to the king, filial duty to one's parents, abstinence from sexual relationships, reverence of the young for the elderly, and keeping faith between friends. These Confucian precepts operated as ideological tools for the strengthening of royal authority and constituted a system that dominated people's daily lives throughout the long period between the beginning of the Three Kingdoms and the end of the Chosun Dynasty. It ultimately developed into Korea's fundamental value system.

The educational system of the dynastic era also centered on Confucian ideas. Formal education was provided only to an elite male minority, and the main educational content was based on Chinese scriptures containing Confucian ideas. This formal Confucian pedagogy was called *Yuhak*. The main educational method of *Yuhak* was interpreting and memorizing Chinese scriptures. Through *Yuhak*, a *Seonbi* (classical scholar) was developed, who was a person equipped with the kind of knowledge and character specified by Chinese scriptures (Jeon, 2006). However, since formal education revolved around reading and interpreting Chinese scriptures, and since its main objective was the training of bureaucrats, the original purpose of Korean identity formation, as pursued through *Seonbi*, vanished after a number of generations. Greater value came to be placed on document-centered theoretical knowledge than on practical or functional knowledge, and many people assiduously accumulated theoretical knowledge to enter the ranks of the social elite. This aspiration for theoretical knowledge established the high zeal for education that can be observed in Korean society today (So et al., 2010).

Confucian values were emphasized not only through formal education but also through non-formal doctrinal structures, such as families. During the Chosun Dynasty, the children of elite families learned Confucian values mainly through the Chinese *Sohak*. The education provided through the *Sohak* was intended to foster the basic Confucian lifestyle. The *Sohak* is comparable to the Jewish Talmudic education or the noble education of European societies (Son, 1998); it was regarded as training in the appropriate social norms and manners. Meanwhile, working class children learned Chinese characters and basic Confucian values through the Chinese (so-called) *Cheonjamun*.

As observed above, Confucianism, by being imposed as the core of institutional education as well as the dominant social norm, played a critical role in establishing Confucian values in the lives of Koreans during the Korean dynastic eras. Confucian values remain alive today and serve as the foundation of the Korean identity.

2.2. Modern education after opening doors to the West

Modern schooling was introduced in Korea in the late 19th century. Traditional Korean society experienced significant external and internal changes after the mid-19th century, which affected the field of education as well. During this period, Korea suffered free trade and military threats from Western powers, which inevitably led to the opening of its doors to the West in 1876,

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