The Idea of the University in Korea: A Re-Imagination

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This paper is an attempt to argue for the necessity of thinking about the idea of the university as a precondition for discussing the future of the university in Korea. The prevailing discourse on university reform calls for professionalization of learning and utilization of knowledge, subsuming education process under the capitalist logic of marketization and competition. I argue that this is one-sided and even dangerous as it neglects the role of higher education in formation and cultivation of the mind. Furthermore, it intensifies the sense of crisis in higher education in general and in humanities divisions in particular. Rather than simply accepting the market forces of change as the inevitable future of universities in Korea, this future has to be an open question to be discussed and debated. The work of re-imagining the university in Korea that I present here requires two historical examinations: First, an examination of the history of universities in the West as a history of ideas about the university; second, an examination of the Confucian higher education, embodied through the education at Sunggyungwan, as a model of higher education whose merits have to be discussed and evaluated. I conclude this paper by suggesting that the question of "What Is a University?" is a necessary question and that the future of higher education in Korea has to begin by responding to this very question.

Keywords: University, Sunggyungwan, higher education, Confucian education, Jacques Derrida.

Introduction

The constant debate as to the nature and function of the university is a prominent part of its history. At any given moment in history, we are bound to find those who argue that the university is in a crisis. This sense of crisis can be understood

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easily if we understand the university as standing within two forces: one that understands the nature and function of the university in terms of its goal of pursuing knowledge for its own sake and one that sees it in terms of the larger social forces that make its continued presence possible. This seeming predicament is true of any educational setting but true especially of university education, as it is the highest level of adult education and therefore most immediate to the socio-economic needs of a society. While the idea of the university in crisis is quite normal in the sense of its Western heritage, the way in which this crisis is expressed and experienced is quite different in a country like Korea, where the university exists less as an idea than as an accidental product of history. What follows is less a research on the idea of the university in Korea than a reflection on this idea and what its pursuit in the context of the history of Korea must entail. My aim is to pose the necessity of such a reflection as a question, one that must be responded to prior to any discussion of the future of universities in Korea.

In recent years, the claims of crisis in university education have been frequently heard in Korea. The cause of the crisis is often presented around the issue of "competitiveness" in comparison with universities in the West. The capitalist anthropology that says human beings thrive and flourish under competition, along with the ideology of the market, seems to have taken root in Korea as the chief criterion in determining the worth of a university. Globalization efforts and neo-liberal reforms have reinforced the idea that educational processes should be understood as a market process, whereby the goal of education becomes marketability and productivity. Being competitive now seems to work as an elusive hermeneutical key for self-understanding for the universities.[1] However, the calls for reform based on the idea of competitiveness tend to have goals that are devoid of educational content and, as a result, rely upon visible elements, such as college ranking systems, for their validation.[1]

This exercise in reform has resulted in various proposals: from reorientation of the undergraduate curriculum towards practical application to forming alliances with universities in the West. The majority of such proposals embrace the ever-elusive notion of "going global" as the future of the university.

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* I use the word "hermeneutical" to highlight the fact that competitiveness is a slippery term, whereby its quantifying methods hide as much as they reveal.

1. That ranking of colleges according to predictable criteria distorts the educational processes of higher education is well documented. See, for example, Paul Boyer (2003).

However, even when such claims are not empty slogans without much of any serious content, they often do not amount to an intentional reading of what "global" may mean. What is usually meant is reinforcing English education, sending more students to study in English speaking countries, and applying quantitative standards to measure the productivity of the students and professors. Together with recent suggestions for the creation of graduate law and medical schools modeled after those of the US, some of the recent trends seem like an intensification of the Americanization of higher education in Korea. If so, this would be most ironic. After fifty years of higher education heavily tilted toward the American system and ideas, which has created an educational structure without foundation and identity, one would expect a rethinking of that trend and a genuine attempt to ask about the legitimacy of the present constitution of the university in Korea. Instead, what we see from government funding initiatives and reforming efforts made by the universities seem like a series of improvisational acts, meant only to evade the real questions and issues.[2] While there is a sense of inevitability built into this trend, one cannot help thinking that it has exacerbated the sense of crisis and confusion in contemporary universities in Korea.

While there are numerous books on Korean universities, books that deal with the idea of the university in Korea are hard to find. One can argue that there is a good reason for this in that the university by nature aims at ideals that go beyond the limits of particular nations. One can further argue that such was the beginning of the medieval universities in Europe, whose ideals were redefined in the nineteenth century by the likes of Wilhelm von Humbolt and John Henry Newman. To counter such arguments, it can be claimed that by the idea of the university in Korea, the focus is not so much on Korea as a nation but on the constitution of culture in Korea. So a more precise formulation of the phrase would be the idea of the university in Korean *culture*. I am aware of Bill Readings' important book, *The University in Ruins*, and the debate it generated in the United States (Readings 1997). He insists that the notion of the university of culture—one that reflects and responds to the culture of which it is a part—is anachronistic and the model that replaced it is one of strict market-orientation.

2. One can add to this the recent debate about dismantling Seoul National University from its present constitution and the move by some universities to restructure their systems around graduate programs.

While it is difficult to doubt that this is the trend that American universities have experienced in the twentieth century, the claim has to be taken at face value and understood in the context of the history of the United States. Still further, it is the case that while such notions as nation and culture may not be what the university is meant to honor and preserve--at least not in the twenty-first century--the university in the contemporary West is nevertheless held hostage to the values of capitalism, whose dominance upon the socio-economic fabric of Western culture may be even stronger than those of nation or culture.

Although universities in Korea suffer from much of the same symptoms that ail Western universities, they lack the proper resources for thinking about the future because their history is one of alien importation from the abroad. The universities in Korea have not been a major force in the formation of the national and cultural identities, nor have they been a byproduct of such identities. What is at issue here is that the university as the symbol of higher education came to Korea as a foreign educational system, and the present constitution of the universities still bears the marks of that imposition. One way to think beyond the commonly heard claims of crisis is to critically assess the present situation in the light of history and investigate this history as to how well it has lived up to the possibilities latent in the intellectual and cultural heritages of Korea. In short, what is needed in my view is a conceptual rethinking of the idea of the university in Korea.

Re-Imagining the University in Korea

Properly done, this rethinking requires a reexamination of the relationship between knowledge and education. It is regrettable that much of such thinking in Korea is done in the field of education and not among philosophers because thinking about knowing and learning belongs at the foundation of all philosophical reflection. While it is certainly evident in the Confucian tradition with its central emphasis on the cultivation of the mind, the tradition of the modern West, despite the triumph of technical rationality that characterizes its development, also betrays this understanding. Here we need to begin with Kant whose *The Conflict of the Faculties* was an attempt to locate the work of philosophy in the university and, in turn, the university in his philosophical vision. Since Kant, from Wilhelm von Humbolt and Friedrich Schleiermacher to Karl Jaspers and Martin Heidegger, and to Jean François Lyotard and Jacques Derrida, what we

see is a continuing debate about the university as a problem of knowledge or, to be more precise, a problem of socialization of knowledge. Lyotard's celebrated book, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, for example, was written at the request of the Council of Universities in Quebec, Canada, in the late 1970s (Lyotard 1984). That is, the book was meant to be helpful in thinking about the university in relation to the changing conditions of knowledge. Some of what he foretold decades ago, such as the computerization of society and commodification of knowledge, are very much descriptive of how I would understand the working context of today's universities. Unfortunately, this includes Lyotard's more ominous claim that "the old principle that the acquisition of knowledge is indissociable from the training (*Bildung*) of minds, or even of individuals, is becoming obsolete and will become ever more so" (Lyotard 1984: 4). This philosophical reflection on knowledge takes a postmodern turn in Lyotard, and the task of rethinking that I am envisioning understands his descriptions not merely as analyses but as symptoms of the problem.

Thinking about the university in Korea has to begin with an examination of its very inception. The issue is not what went wrong with its idea in the history of Korea, but how it—bearing unique Western imprints—came to be in Korea in the first place. Whether we think in terms of its Christian missionary beginning or its Japanese imperial beginning, it is hard to deny the fact that it bore colonial interests. The modern European history of the university has its beginning in the Enlightenment ideals of the New Man, who can take charge of his own destiny and is capable of becoming a self-legislator. But the university in Korea began with an implicit interest in a different kind of human being: either an enlightened Christian or a subject of the colonial regime. In both cases, there is an explicit denial of the legitimacy of the Confucian way of being human in Korea. Since the end of World War II, the university in Korea has served as an agent in the Americanization of society in general and intellectual life in particular. That the institution of the university, both as an idea and a form, was imposed upon Korea is easy to discern, but its cultural and intellectual consequences have rarely been fully investigated as they became secondary to the survival and development of the nation after the Korean War. This means that the fundamental question of what a university is or ought to be in Korea was superceded by the questions of how to build bigger universities and add departments, based largely on American models.

What needs to be investigated in this history of the university in Korea is the possibility that the present, confused state of the university might be a logical

consequence of its colonial beginnings and the subsequent failure to take on and assert an independent identity. But any investigation into this history of failure, in my view, would not be adequate until it also deals with the ways in which the Confucian model of higher education, associated for hundreds of years with Sunggyungwan, came to an end in the last years of the nineteenth century and how the Confucian ideals of education have been espoused or rejected since then. Thinking about the Confucian model of higher learning today may be regarded as anachronistic, but this anachronism is well-worth risking in order for such an investigation to take place.

The Confucian Higher Learning

Today, without nostalgia or illusion, thinking about the Confucian ideals of higher education does afford a perspective on what the university has become, that is, a site of market competition led by the mandates of technology. This is far removed from the prevalent notion of the university in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a place of rational pursuit based on the spirit of science and democracy. The idea that the Confucian ideals of education can offer a critical perspective on the present context of the university is a bit ironic, given the fact that for a long time Confucianism was seen as antithetical to the modern spirit and a hindrance to modernizing efforts. While there is always a risk of being irrelevant when trying to apply abstract and formal principles of beliefs into a fluid historical situation, the circumstance here is mitigated by the fact that Confucian values never left the higher educational system in Korea. This is reflected not only in the hierarchical relationships based on age that tend to dominate one's interaction with others in the university but also in such unique sensibilities as the penchant for the national university, traditional popularity of the college of law, student preference for disciplines within the humanities over the sciences, and the positive inclination students acquire towards the possibility of taking government examinations.[3] These are the Confucian legacies inherited by the colonial institutions of higher learning, largely present until today, which should be a subject of examination in any attempt to think about the unique characteristics of the university in Korea.

3. A similar insight can be found in Yumakoshi Toohru's book (2001: 34).

Even with a cursory reading of the Confucian ideal of education, it is possible to put forth a few critical observations about the current state of university education in Korea.

First, the idea of research seems to have replaced that of learning as defining what the university is ultimately about. While the two are not neatly separable, they embody two different human attitudes toward the world and what it means to live in it as human beings. Second, the organization of knowledge according to disciplinary boundaries has created segmentations and specializations which have made it difficult to see human reality in its totality. Third, as the universities take on the corporate model, they tend to become a function of the capitalist system and lose the ethical-critical function in their commitment to human well-being. Fourth, such notions as productivity and competition have become the primary means by which to understand what it means to educate and achieve human flourishing. The understanding of the human being as a form of capital—a means to something else, an ingredient necessary for a product—is behind these characterizations, and it is well instantiated in the renaming of the Ministry of Education to the Education and Human Resource Ministry.

Just because such critical observations are possible, it does not mean there is a neat set of alternative Confucian measures. Nevertheless, I take these observations to be serious issues that need to be dealt with, not merely in piecemeal reforms, but in a reconceptualization of what the university is in Korea. If the task of rethinking the idea of the university in Korea has to include an examination of its relationship with the Confucian ideals of higher education, embodied particularly in Sunggyungwan, then it is certainly worth imagining what such measures might be. What also merits our consideration is the basic question of what would have occurred if Sunggyungwan succeeded in transforming itself into a modern institution and provided a Korean model for other schools of higher learning. It is of course impossible to answer such a question because the fact remains that, under the Japanese control of education in Korea, Sunggyungwan failed to reform itself into a modern institution and the colonial models of higher education came to dominate the educational scene in Korea. The result was not only the appearance of new disciplines and their knowledge, but also the social and human ideals that guided their developments in the West, such as *freedom* and *equality*, which have since been incorporated into the mottos of many Korean universities. Rather than treating it simply as an antiquated and failed Confucian model which made no contribution toward Korea's modernization, we need first to understand Sunggyungwan from the perspective of

the ideals it has set for itself and its own time and space, even comparing it to other models of higher education. Scholarly interest in Sunggyungwan have too often been focused only on its ideological and political functions. That is, instead of seeing it as a model of education with a distinct theory and set of practices, the tendency has been to present it as a political entity whose chief purpose was to propagate the legitimacy of the ruling ideas.[4] This is in sharp contrast to how the Western educational models and theories are understood and in continuity with the Weberian thesis that criticized the Confucian education's focus on cultivation of the mind as a self-justification of the literati class.

Institutional education is always a site of ideological and cultural struggles and performs social and political functions on behalf of the state, but that does not take away from the enduring human values it is meant to teach and the ways in which that takes place in practice. The educational experience of Sunggyungwan, both in its idea and reality, has to be seen as what it was, i.e., the expression of higher learning in a Confucian society. As such, its history reflects all the issues and problems encountered by the society. Whether even an idealized version of its history and practice could provide a model for university education in today's Korea or not would require a serious and in-depth study on the subject. In place of such a study, my point is simply that it is a worthy, perhaps even a necessary, question for our time as we ask about the crisis of university education in Korea.

Sunggyungwan and Oxford

One minor step toward the consideration suggested above is to take a look at some aspects of Sunggyungwan in relation to the pre-modern European model of the university. For example, it is not hard to notice that Sunggyungwan in its idealism and social function is largely comparable to that of the University of Oxford.[5] This includes what is often thought to be unique about Sunggyungwan:

4. One recent attempt to provide a comprehensive look at the various roles and functions played by Sunggyungwan is in Jang Jaechun's, *Joseonjo sunggyungwan gyoyukgwa yusaeng munhwa.* But rather than explaining it in terms of theories and models of education and learning, political and ideological explanations tend to dominate the book.
5. My intention in this section is to think about and even to suggest a way to begin a positive consideration of the educational praxis of Sunggyungwan through a brief comparative analysis.

that it was both the site of the national institution of higher learning and the place where the shrines of Confucius and other later sages were housed and where rites were performed in their honor. While this seems to stem from a uniquely Confucian attitude toward learning as an act of moral performance, a similar attitude can easily be found in the history and practices of Oxford. It is embedded in the very foundation of universities like Oxford as a religious institution, concerned with the education of clergy and leaders of the Christian state. The mandatory attendance of chapel and obligatory prayers were not seen as irrelevant or distracting to the process of learning.[6] Veneration of the saints and offering prayers for them were part of the ritual function of the colleges. In both Sunggyungwan and Oxford, it was well-understood that there was a ritual dimension to learning, that to learn is to remember, to pay homage to the past, and to offer sacrifices through both self-discipline and proper rituals.

This dimension is not entirely lost in modern secular universities. The year of a university's founding is often celebrated as a historical moment that marks a beginning of something new in the history of higher learning. Ritual ceremonies such as commencement and convocation and the wearing of specific academic attires on such occasions serve a legitimating function, claiming the historical continuity of the idea of the university. Also through the conferment of honorary degrees, educational values and meanings are accorded to various forms of human achievement, thereby continuing the self-understanding of the university as a guardian of values. Here one can make a good case that the modern university, despite its claims to secularity, does succeed the church in terms of its function within Western society. The acknowledgement of the past in the university is nowhere more visible than in the buildings. The new buildings are often judged in terms of their continuity with what was already there. So despite the claim for practicality of knowledge and the penchant for new knowledge prevalent in the contemporary university, the desire to understand itself in continuity with the past is ritualized in various forms of ordinary practices in the university.

Certainly both Sungkyunkwan and Oxford reflected the times in which they existed. Both institutions were the training grounds for elite leadership, which

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Given the changes that both institutions went through in their histories, my reflection will be a sketchy generalization about their pre-modern characteristics.

6. The practice of mandatory attendance at chapel, long since given up in most universities in the West, is still practiced in Korea among Christian universities, though much in contention in recent years.

meant an education in the religious and philosophical foundations of the world and the place of their societies within it. While they served the interests of the state to govern, the idealism embedded in both institutions should not be limited to their social and political functions. This idealism is rooted in the very premise of the two traditions: the absolute sovereignty of God in Christianity and moral perfectibility of human beings in Confucianism. The knowledge learned and taught in these contexts aspired to a universal knowledge capable of explaining the nature of the world as well as humanity. The languages of Latin and Chinese made the formal characteristics of this universalism possible, while its contents were made possible through the mediating categories of God and Heaven (天). The question of how this knowledge was practiced through meditation and study belongs to the complicated history of both institutions.

The fact that one succeeded and the other failed to become a modern institution of higher learning obviously has more to do with the success and failure of the larger histories of which they formed a part. But to the extent that the cause of their contrasting fates has something to do with the acceptance of the scientific spirit into the main curriculum, it is possible to find an explanation internal to the core premise of both traditions. The absolute transcendence of creator God in the West meant that scientific endeavor could be argued for as a way to glorify God as grounded in divine illumination, thus paving the way for the argument that theology is the highest form of science. However, it is not so certain how science and technology could contribute toward the moral edification of humanity in the Confucian context.[7] This difference is well articulated in the basic curricula of the two institutions. The Confucian classics curriculum at Sunggyungwan addressed various dimensions of human learning, including the social, historical, and cosmic dimensions, but, unlike the basic curriculum of the Seven Liberal Arts and Three Philosophies in the medieval universities like Oxford, the curriculum did not allow for the study of arithmetic, geometry, or astronomy.[8] While this inability to incorporate scientific disciplines into its curriculum at the end of the nineteenth century contributed toward the demise of Sunggyungwan, the advancement of science and technology today, guided only

7. The reform movement within Sunggyungwan during 1890s was in large measure focused on incorporating the spirit of science into its curriculum—an effort that proved to be inadequate.
8. It is noteworthy that mathematics or physical science in general was always a part of the European universities' curriculum, and since the 17th century became the exemplary model for knowing and thinking in general.

by the logic of cause and effect and marketability, presents a serious challenge to the nature of the university.

The pursuit of knowledge only for the sake of knowing and research only for the sake of researching seem to have become the mandate imposed upon today's university. The consequent loss of capacity for internal critique, not just within the university but also in the wider society, increasingly marked by the commercialization of values, is a central concern for our age. A Confucian model of the university today would not preclude natural science as an object of study and learning but would ask about its implications for humanity in an effort to bring it more into the realm of the humanities. The humanizing idealism of Confucianism is also free of the burden of the question of God, which has in different times both stifled and legitimated the progress of the universities in the West. This burden is embedded in questions of value, resulting in one's having to choose for or against God. In modernity, this is expressed in separations of "is" from "ought" and the finite from the infinite. Having to think about such a Confucian model means to confront this aspect of the history of God in the West. Such a model would also help us put in perspective the larger trend towards determinism assumed by the humanistic disciplines.

Jacques Derrida and the University[9]

Earlier I made a passing reference to Jacques Derrida as one who has continued the tradition of philosophical reflection on the university. In fact, he represents one of the most recent major philosophical voices on the changing forms of the conditions of knowledge and the task of the university. In an essay called "The University without Condition," Derrida asserts the principle of absolute freedom of the university to speak the truth and that it should remain "an ultimate place of critical resistance...to all the powers of dogmatic and unjust appropriation" (Derrida 2002: 2004). The context out of which he feels called to assert this is one that is familiar to people in Korea: that of the digital revolution and martketization. Instead of simply internalizing the values of this radically new context

9. The choice to think about Derrida here is arbitrary because my interest is in establishing the fact that there is a long history of philosophical reasoning about the university and that Derrida stands within this history, as well as in seeing what such a reasoning today might look like.

of thinking about emerging forms and structures of the university as a consequence, he feels justified in reasserting the time-honored, formal, even impossible principle. The process of justification, however, takes a long detour for him: from the initial claim to be concerned largely with the nature of the modern university and its alignment with the Enlightenment ideal of the new humanity, he goes back to the medieval understanding of the nature of the university in terms of the profession of faith and the work of the professor as one who professes.

As a time when the question of humanity is in danger of being superceded by the idolatries of the market and technology, Derrida feels the question of the future of humanity is still tied to the idea of the university as a profession of faith. This faith is not strictly a Christian faith but one that stems from the Enlightenment faith in humanity. For Derrida such a profession of the university grounds its claim to speak the unconditional truth.

There are at least two related observations one can make about this brief description of Derrida's thoughts on the university. First, there is the availability of the long history of debate and reflection on the university in the West for properly framing the issues of contemporary universities. Second, at least for Derrida, there is a need or even a necessity to go back to the tradition, not merely to uphold its virtues, but to reveal the promise that is yet to be kept, prominently hidden in the basic structure of the tradition called "University." This promise is a pledge, an act of profession of faith and an act of giving oneself to responsibility for humanity. It is precisely in this pledge, that the university in its idealism "exceeds pure techno-scientific knowledge" (Derrida 2002: 215).

I would not argue that these two observations on Derrida have a direct implication for the Korean context, but I would say that they are relevant in putting the present dilemmas of the universities in a philosophical framework and in suggesting the need for a rigorous analysis of the university as a step towards envisioning the future of humanity. Derrida's work on the university can be appropriated for the Korean context as a suggestion to resubmit the present crisis of the university to the humanistic ideals of the Confucian tradition of higher learning. In order to profess its faith in humanity instead of the market, the university needs to assert itself as an "ultimate place of critical resistance," perhaps not in the name of freedom and justice but in the name of commitment and responsibility. Perhaps this is an impossibility, but it is one that needs to be dealt with as an essential part of learning to be human.

Conclusion

Perhaps the initial philosophical inquiry might begin by interrogating the genius behind the translation of the word "University" into "Great Learning" (大學) and whether or not today's universities bear any conceptual resemblance to the ideals of the *Great Learning*. Even without the actual history of the translation, one can surmise that the translator was concerned not with how the word originated in medieval Europe (to indicate a union of students) but what it has come to mean in the modern period (a center of universal learning). What it captures is certainly the idealism underlying any process of learning, in this case signifying the human capacity for learning and self-cultivation and management of social affairs. Without this idealism, higher learning is in danger of becoming higher only in the sense of technical difficulty, devoid of any vision of human fulfillment. Today's universities certainly do not bear any resemblance to the ideals of the Great Learning, and that seems to be precisely where the question begins to return to: Are the universities in Korea meant to resemble anything either in practice or in theory? Or are they meant to be merely accidental facts in history?

That the questions about the nature of higher education should constantly be asked is quite obvious as the conditions of knowledge are always in flux. But determining what questions to ask is not always so easy, as they can best be formulated once the basic questions about the relation between higher learning and society are responded to even roughly. Several years ago, when plans for an international conference on the future of universities in Great Britain were being made, the initial title of the conference was going to be "What Is a University?"[10] But this was uninteresting to the Germans who still carried the nineteenth century, Humboldtian conception of what a university ought to be, and it was also problematic to the Americans who feared that such a title seemed to invite only philosophical speculation rather than practical engagement. The title of the conference that was eventually agreed to was, "What Kind of University?" While this may be an illustration of how nations understand the nature of the university differently, the point that I would draw from it is that the title of such a conference in Korea should certainly be, "What Is a University?"

10. The results of the conference are collected in John Brennan, ed., *What Kind of University? International Perspectives on Knowledge, Participation and Governance* (1999).

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