

**Teasing Out the Compressed Education Debates
in Contemporary South Korea:
Media Portrayal of Figure Skater Yuna Kim**

by

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Abstract

In this thesis, I argue that the heated debates about South Korea's education policy consist of problems that arise from different genres of discourses that in turn belong to different historical moments and education values. I engage in a media discourse analysis of the reportage on South Korean international sport celebrity Yuna Kim that highlight the key education debates currently taking place in South Korea. First, I deal with the neologism *umchinttal* (my mom's friend's daughter) as an ideal student type. The use of the neologism suggests that students without familial cultural or economic capital do not have as much social mobility through education compared to the previous generation of students. Second, I look at the changing student-parent-teacher relationship through the controversy about Kim's decision to part ways with her former coach Brian Orser. In the final moment, I point to the changes in the post-nationalist University through Professor Hwang's criticisms on Yuna Kim's teaching practicum.

Keywords: Education; South Korea; Lyotard; Sports celebrity

*To my parents and teachers from all stages of
my life.*

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Chapter 1.

Introduction

Introduction

In summer 2008, after about four years since I moved to Canada from South Korea and when I was just finishing my second year of the undergraduate degree at Simon Fraser University, I thought it was about time to get more involved in the university life and start working harder on my academics. So, I quit my various part time jobs and moved up to the mountain where university residence was located. I was placed in a townhouse residence where four students shared a three level house. The first level was a common area with kitchen and living room, and second and third floor each had two bedrooms and a bath room. Luckily, I shared my floor with a very nice Korean-Canadian girl who sometimes took me out on her car for Korean cuisine. One day after dinner time, I heard a rather unusual sound from the stair case. For about ten minutes, the two housemates who were using the upper level bedrooms went around the house spraying a chemical air freshener. The next day when I went down to the kitchen to cook for dinner, I saw a notice on the fridge to avoid cooking food with distinct smell. A few days later, I was trying to make a seaweed soup. As soon as I started cooking, one of the housemates marched down the stairs. She marched down so rightfully, as if I am a debtor finally caught after a long flee. She lifted the lid of my pot hysterically and said, "Oh, this is just seaweed. I am a big fan of Japanese anime, and I also enjoy Japanese cuisine. I am familiar with seaweed soup. I don't know why it smelled so badly from upstairs." I snapped, "You are in Vancouver, not your small hometown. You will get to smell all kinds of food, so you better get your tolerance level higher." I fought back with equally mean words.

My time on Burnaby Mountain was not merry, and being more “involved” in university life was much more challenging than I thought. Living with Canadian roommates did not extend my social network, but rather reaffirmed a cultural barrier that I already knew existed.

It is from about this time I started following the international competitions of Yuna Kim. I faintly remember reading an internet posting with her competition videos titled “A Korean girl who conquered the world, in an area which used to be dominated by Westerners or developed nations.” I watched numerous competition videos on YouTube ever since, and became a “fan.” Kim’s competition programs are generally considered technically difficult, choreographed well, and quite refreshing to watch because of her fast speed on ice, so she has fans from many countries (Wilson & Browning). I had not previously known much about figure skating -- this is hardly a major sport in Korea -- but I had learned to watch each detail with the eye of a connoisseur. Thus, when a young Korean girl, also apparently adrift in the larger world, found herself on the Gold Medal platform at the Vancouver Olympics just down the street from me, I couldn't help but have an excessive amount of identification with her.

Yuna Kim is a South Korean figure skater and Olympic gold medalist who won the first Olympic gold medal in figure skating for the country. Her two performances in the 2010 Vancouver Olympics, short and long programs, received the highest scores in women’s figure skating under the current scoring system (Longman, 2010). Among figure skating fans, she is considered as one of the best skaters ever, and some critics even argued that she could still have stood in the podium in the Olympics if she competed with men with the exact same programs in the last Olympics (Adams, 2010). Kim gained broader global fame after her Olympic success, but in her home country, she was already embraced as a “nation’s baby sister” long before the 2010 Olympics, perhaps because many Koreans empathized with Kim’s struggles in the earlier stage of her athletic career as “the first ever” in her home country to be able to win in international competitions in her sport (Longman, 2010; Shin-Yun, 2008). Interestingly, despite her status as a national sport-hero, her success was often portrayed through an educational narrative

rather than an athletic one. In this thesis, I will be exploring the discourses of education in contemporary South Korea through media portrayals of Yuna Kim focusing on the education narratives.

Sports nationalism, global higher education, and scholar-fan

My contemplation about Yuna Kim's studenthood started at the time when she was being criticized for betraying her former coach Brian Orser who went to the Olympics with her. Like many other fans, I was also taken aback and unhappy to hear that the seemingly perfect teacher-student relationship ended in such antagonistic terms. However, the way that Kim and her mother were portrayed in the North American media soon became very troubling for me. The representation of Ms. Park as a stringent and ill-mannered lady and Kim as her mother's puppet was far from what I gathered about them through the various media coverage for the last few years. Also, giving the entire credit for Kim's success to the Canadian coach, thus considering her decision to not renew their contract a betrayal seemed unfair for the skater and all the Korean coaches who trained her since age 5. I started making a not so well weaved together argument using very basic race and gender theories I learned from my undergraduate program in sociology. It took me some time even after starting my graduate studies to bring together the different media moments that portrayed Yuna Kim as a student, and connect my interest in education discourses to these moments. Since my initial urge to write began more as a fan than an academic, which has now turned to a Master's thesis, the biggest academic project I ever had so far, it is worth reflecting upon this dual position. Perhaps, even triple, if I consider my position in the North American academy. As my project does not necessarily deal with Yuna Kim herself, but with the education discourses that are attached with the language that is used to portray Kim as a student, that are in turn related to the social, cultural, and political context of contemporary South Korea, the important point of reflection becomes my relation to these education discourses while I admire Yuna Kim.

There are quite a few pop-culture scholars who admit and embrace that they are fans of their object of study. Some of them discuss the trickiness of positioning themselves either as fan-scholar (fans who adopt academic theory to talk about their object of love) and scholar-fan (scholars who study objects that they love) (Lavery, 2004; Schulze, 1999). The anxiety related to being a scholar-fan is well captured in Schulze's article about Madonna studies:

I'd always felt awkward about studying Madonna and her fans (as if I wasn't one of them) Sometimes I worried that my job as an academic cultural critic disqualified me from real fandom... I also knew that being a Madonna fan in the context of the academy, especially as I was working on Madonna, would for some, disqualify me as a member of the real academy. (Schulze 1999, p.47)

Nevertheless, more recent fan studies scholars challenge the notion that the two categories can be strictly divided. For example, Hills (2002) writes that the anxiety about being a scholar-fan is based on "imagined subjectivities" of fans and scholars. Doty (2000) argues there is no benefit in trying to hide our investments in the topic. I agree with these scholars that it is not so feasible or beneficial to reinforce the existing ideals about the objectivity of a scholar or the irrational love of a fan, but at the same time, acknowledge that I stand somewhere in the continuum of fan-scholar and scholar-fan in relation to Yuna Kim will help myself to be reflexive in the process of my analysis of the texts.

I do not engage with the reception side of educational discourses that involve Yuna Kim in South Korea in this thesis. Yet, we can have a glimpse at one of the many possible readings of the fans through my own reflection as a fan-scholar. I was projecting myself to her as an outsider in Canada, and found that I might develop a sense of defensive nationalism. I tried hard to shake off these feelings as it was not something that my politics approved of, but separating this kind of sentiment from the admiration of Yuna Kim became exceedingly difficult. I am still not completely free from the struggle to separate the pseudo-nationalistic sentiments from my liking of Kim as a skater. However, the process made me think about my positionality in the globally stratified

higher education. The language used in the media positioned Kim very similarly to an elite student who is exceling at a global level. Perhaps I, like many young Koreans, was so drawn to her story of success because I shared the desire to succeed at a global – Western, and more specifically North American-- field. I find myself in a dilemma of trying to compose a critique of the current Korean education scene, while also embracing even if not willingly the discourse of global competence and success. This tension as a scholar-fan will persist in various forms as long as I am striving to find my space in the North American academia.

Despite individual sensibilities of scholars toward the unequal relationship of the West and the postcolonial academy, the global knowledge industry, if I could use such a term, is not only diverse but also hierarchical. With globalization of education, the “Western” and more specifically North American academia has increasingly gained value as the place to increase educational capital (J. Y. Kim, 2011). This has affected the meaning and value of both preparatory and secondary education in Korea: Korean scholars are evaluated by the number of publications they have placed in the globally – rather than nationally -- top rank journals (D. R. Hong, 2009). A globally stratified field of higher education exists through power relationship between the individual national fields, a power relationship that is reproduced when students aspire to accumulating global educational capital -- students like me! Hence, an important part of my conflict about being scholar-fan/fan-scholar arises from this position. I am writing about the problematic education discourses in the postcolonial South Korea, while being a fan of the celebrity who has become an embodiment of that discourse, in the North American academia, to be accepted as a part of it: What form of capital does a scholar accumulate when she uses this strategy to write about education discourses?

Korea’s zeal for education

South Korea is known for its intense zeal for education, which in Korea is referred to as “education fever” (Seth, 2002). It may be impossible to point to the exact

reason that Korean students have such intense desire for education, but studies of South Korea's education point to the traditional values that comes from Confucianism that "equalizes learning" with "moral perfection" and success (Seth, 2012; H. Hong, 2010), and the expansion of public education in post-colonial and post-war state-building stage (Seth, 2002) as the general historical and cultural background. South Korea's zeal for education has also made appearances in American news media in the recent years as the US president Obama in interviews and comments juxtaposed South Korean education with American education (that he seems to consider to be more laid back) (Obama, 2009; Obama, 2011). In order to reauthorize the No Child Left Behind Act implemented by Bush administration, and argue for his own extension of educational reform in the U.S. -- named the "race to the top" initiative -- Obama pointed to the Korean system, arguing that Korean students spend at least one more month in their schools than American students (Obama, 2009), and that teachers in Korea are valued as "nation builders" (Obama, 2011).

In contemporary South Korea, however, this intensive education curriculum and the competitive system are heavily criticized as detrimental for young students (Chung, 2008). Many students must seek private tutoring in order to stay ahead of their classmates in the fierce competition, and teachers report that there is a "school collapse" or "classroom collapse" in Korea's public education system because students started to rely on a private education market (Kang & Abelman, 2011). Contra Obama's idealized vision, the competitiveness in Korea's education system has resulted in the loss of the value of formal schooling, except for the symbolic value attached to admission to top ranked universities (S.T. Kim, 2010). Teachers --once honoured so much that according to an old Korean maxim "you shouldn't step on the shadows of your *seu-seung*¹"-- suddenly found themselves before students who were achieving the marks of global success, but who openly fell asleep in their class.

¹ A traditional concept for a true teacher, which means "one who teaches and guides," when translated directly (Encyclopedia of Korean Culture a). The term does not carry as much a sense of profession compared to the term *sunsaeng*, which can be more or less directly translated to a teacher. *Seuseung* is a term used by the student, as an honorific form.

Beginning of the modern education in Korea

This is not the first time teachers on the Korean peninsula suddenly found themselves lost in the sea of abrupt changes. In 1876, Chosun signed Kang Hwa Island Treaty with Japan. The treaty required Chosun to open Wonsan port to Japan, and it is in Wonsan that the first modern school was established in Chosun in 1883. King Gojong of Chosun also decided to support the first secondary school established by American missionary Appenzeller in 1885 and named it Bae Jae Hakdang (Encyclopedia of Korean Culture a). King Gojong also announced the Education Decree stating that the old knowledge is collecting the remnants of old men, and that modern education is the fundamental foundation of protecting the nation (S. W. Lee, 2009). This was at the time when Chosun was struggling between the West, Russia, and Japan, regretting their decision to close the borders to the West while Japan has modernized and developed fairly quickly its military power. King Gojong abolished all previous selection examinations of government officials based on Confucian knowledge system (ibid). The traditional teachers called *Hun Jang* (teaching elder) lost their ground, while the number of modern schools increased rapidly. In the newly established modern schools, traditional knowledge system coexisted with the Western modern knowledge. For example, reading, writing and grammar classes consisted respectively of Chinese classes and Hangul, the modern Korean writing system that was developed for commoners in the 14th Century by King Sejong (ibid). Math, science, geography and history classes were based on the Western knowledge (ibid). After being colonized by Japan, Japanese language was taught as the national language for ten hours a week instead of Korean (ibid).

After liberation from Japan in 1945 due to the end of the World War 2, South Koreans enthusiastically launched a New Education Movement that aimed to leave behind the Japanese colonial education and promote democratic values based on John Dewey's educational philosophy (Seth, 2012). There was a desire among Koreans to reform and reestablish the education system in Korea, as many Koreans were deprived of equal educational opportunity under Japanese colony (Seth 2012; Encyclopedia of Korean Culture b). Further, contrary to Chosun, modern Koreans wanted to abolish the

discrimination in educational opportunities between aristocracy and commoners (Encyclopedia of Korean Culture b). Nevertheless, military government of the U.S. did not make radical changes that the proponents of New Education Movement wanted (ibid). Yet, the number of schools expanded very rapidly, and within a decade after liberation, Korea had hundreds of schools (ibid). The Korean War (1950-1053) interrupted this educational development, but soon after the war, the expansion continued.

After the military coup d'état of 1963, the various dictatorships that ruled until 1988 introduced a range of state centered education reforms. The first president and dictator (although not a military dictator) Rhee Seung Man was unable to make much progress mainly due to the poverty of South Korea, while the first military dictator Park Jung Hee was able to increase the level of primary school enrollment close to 100 percent and improve classroom conditions dramatically (Seth, 2002)². From the 1960s to 1970s, Korea experienced rapid educational development, accompanied by economic development (ibid). By the late 1980s, about 90 percent of youth proceeded to high school (Dong Ah Ilbo, 1986), and the number of university attendees increased gradually from 8.2% in late 1970s to 37% in early 1980s (S. G. Cho, 1989). As South Koreans had a strong desire for education, and because of the exam based entrance policy, the competitiveness university entrance focused education became a social issue as it created a school environment that was too exam focused, and students suffered because of the pressure and work overload (Seth, 2002). In this context, Jun Doo Hwan prohibited private tutoring in 1980 to protect the public education (H.J. Cho, 2009). He also attempted to introduce graduation quota based student selection to alleviate students' burdens on university entrance exams that was too competitive. The policy was abolished in 1987, as it became ineffective in the Korean context since the idea of universities failing students who already passed through the entrance exam was still unacceptable (Y. H. Choi, 2008). By 2013, Korea had become among the highest in the world in terms of

² Look at Table 1 for the timeline of Korean presidents and major education policy changes.

per capita rate of students entering universities, about 80 percent of high school students proceed to university, and 70 percent per capita students are enrolled in tertiary education institutions (MOE).

New generation of students? From mobumsaeng to *umchinttal*

As political “democratization” took place in Korea through the student demonstrations of 1980s and presidential elections in 1992 and 1997, there was also an increased demand for a more flexible education system that allowed for academic success but also the fulfillment of personal desires and individual expression (Kang & Abelman, 2011). Criticisms about the limitation of the authoritative model of education and demand for change heightened, and allowing diversity and creativity in the education system has become one of the most popular discourses about education in South Korea (K. Y. Lee, 2007; H.O. Kim, 2012; J.W. Yun, 2009). The first non-military president Kim, Young-Sam implemented *Suhakneungryuk shihum* -- similar to the American SAT in format but which is supposed to measure student’s *sagoryuk* (ability to think) -- as the main requirement for university admission. Kim Dae-Jung government’s implementation of the 7th national education curriculum in late 1990s signified a big change in the purpose of education, often put as the shift away from indoctrinating education (*juipshik gyoyuk*) toward creativity education (*changeuisung gyoyuk*) (Abelman & Kang, 2011). The 7th curriculum added an essay writing component for the evaluation of students’ ability to think and write critically (H.J. Cho, 2009). In the older university admission policies, students were required to do well in all school subjects, but the reforms recommended giving credit for each student’s talents through diversified admission process. Entering the educational system under this ethocs, Yuna Kim’s achievements in her sport were considered to be one of many special talents a Korean student might present, and she was accepted to Koryo University’s physical education department under this criterion (J. H. Sung, 2008).

In 2000, with the deregulation of private education market in secondary education, *hakwon* (prep-schools) and *gwawe* (private tutoring) market gained further significance (H.J. Cho, 2009). Government control on higher education also declined, while measures of accountability were adopted for the evaluation of teachers and schools (Park, 2009)³. The role of the “manager mothers” who turned to the private education market for their children’s education became ever more present since the reform in late 1990s (Abelmann, Park, & Kim, 2009; H. J. Cho, 2009)⁴. Where earlier criticisms of private education had focused on the intense competition created by the private tutoring market, the new criticism of private education was partially arbitrated through the figure of the mother. Such mothers argued against their children’s blind obedience to the teachers’ authority in the public system, which only represented the undemocratic and incompetent policy, and favoured promoting their young students in the name of the right to “make choices” on their own in the private education market (H.J. Cho, 2009). Studies suggested an emergence of a “neoliberal subjectivity” in this new generation of Korean students (Abelmann, Park, & Kim, 2009; H.J. Cho, 2009). Students are willing to

³ The shifts in the education policy and discourses of educational values in South Korea charted a course similar to that in the West, where the decentralization of the nation state and increasingly eroding boundaries between cultures, challenges to the notion of rationality and universal knowledge which represents modern education, in short “globalization” prompted the debate about the fate of knowledge and education in the post-modern world (Giroux, 2011; Lyotard, 1979; Ong, 2006; Readings, 1996). Some scholars suggest reformulating the purpose of education that is in line with postmodernity. For example, Giroux (2011) sees classrooms as a site of struggle and finds hope in the potential of critical pedagogy for the cultivation of democratic and cosmopolitan citizens in the classroom. Ong considers that globalized higher education produces neoliberal subjects and calls for the cultivation of cosmopolitan democratic citizenship as the new value in American higher education. However, Readings (1996) argue that University as an institution of rationality, citizen-subject, and ethnic identity has now outlived its time. Lyotard argues that with the rise of computer technologies, knowledge will be mercantiled, legitimized only through the criterion of performativity (input/output ratio).

⁴ The role of the fathers in their children’s education have been relatively absent in comparison to the mothers in media. Firstly, this seems to be because the fathers in South Korea are still positioned a breadwinner rather than a nurturing figure. For example, geese fathers support their children’s education staying in the home country while the mother and the child are abroad. Yuna Kim’s father also stayed in Korea while her mother accompanied Kim in Canada. Another example would be the importance of the fathers’ class background in determining whether the children qualify as *umchinttal* or *unchinah* (Chapter 2). Secondly, perhaps mothers are used to represent the domestic/private sector in contrast to the public education. Overall, there certainly is a gendered representation at play in the term “manager mothers” but this positioning is also due to the Korean social context, where most parents strongly embody a gendered role in the nurturing of their children.

“live hard and play hard” and understand that they have to be “productive” to succeed in the globalizing world (Abelmann, Park, & Kim, 2009). They belong to the generation of critical essay writing, capable of articulating their viewpoints: they distinguish themselves from both the *mobumsaeng* (model student) of the earlier generation, perceived to be obedient to the authority (from both family and school), and also from the activist-student generations in the 1980s who were rebellious to authority (H.J. Cho, 2009). The new generation of students have a more strategic relationship to authority, whom they neither follow, nor directly contest.

For most students, however, these changes only increased their burden. The competition now extends beyond national boundaries, and students started to embrace the “autonomous” student-consumer identity to ever develop their human capital (Abelmann, Park, & Kim, 2009). These days, many South Korean teenagers even choose to stay apart from their family for their studies in the hopes of acquiring global educational capital (J.C. Kim, 2000; J. H. Kim, 2011). While in the past discourses pre-college study abroad was often a choice to flee from the competitive education system, these days it is considered more of an extension of South Korea’s education game that incorporates the global level competition (Kang & Abelmann, 2011). The value of Western educational capital became paramount in South Korea, with English language skill becoming a key requirement for secondary school students (Jeon, 2009). Even young children attend “English kindergarten” to get a taste of English before they reach the critical age of language acquisition (Jeon, 2012).

While the notions of critical thinking and creativity first appeared in South Korea’s education discourses in line with the debates around democratic pedagogy, the recent use of the terms seems to be muddier. Creativity is now as often used with innovation, in relation to IT technology and business; while the notion of global competitiveness and educational excellence were declared the key strategies of education policy along with creativity under the past conservative Lee Myung Bak administration (MEST, 2012). And not too surprisingly, Ministry of Education has merged with Ministry of Science and Technology under the name “Ministry of Education, Science,

and Technology” (MEST, 2012). Critical educators, represented by *Jungyojo* (Trade union of national educators, Korea Teachers’ Union), have constantly argued that these reforms decrease social mobility because poor students lack the resource to meet the higher academic demands under this educational curriculum, while the crisis of public education has exacerbated (H.J. Cho, 2009). However, they are also unable to argue that the old system is better as it implies going back to the authoritarian pedagogy (Kang & Abelmann, 2011). They have put effort to show the potential of alternative models of public education by establishing “innovation schools” that operate under critical pedagogy within the public education system. This model emphasizes that education in the era of knowledge-based, life-long learning society should be innovative and “different” (Seoul Innovation Schools). The new Park Geun Hye government from the conservative government shows an interesting move, as she argues for “Happiness School” and is eager to learn from the Innovation Schools that are ran by her political enemies (S.Y. Hong, 2013)⁵. Furthermore, the emphasis on creativity continues and is now in the forefront of the government agenda. Park Geun Hye’s agenda for Korea’s economy is to foster “Creativity Economy,” which triggered debates about what exactly it entails.

Table 1. Timeline of major education policy changes

Year	Government	Policy	Social context	Ideal student
1985	King Gojong of Chosun	• Modern Education	• Imperial powers	• Soldier for the Nation
1948	Lee Seung Man ⁶		• First modern president, New Education Movement	

⁵ The newly elected president Park Geun Hye is the daughter of Park Jung Hee, the first military dictator of South Korea. Her appearance on the election as a presidential candidate itself was considered unacceptable for many of those who devoted to democratization movement in the 1970s and 80s.

⁶ I write all the names of all former and current presidents of South Korea in the order of Surname Given name, which is the standard in Korea. I decided to follow the Korean way for the presidents’ names as their names have acquired a proper noun status in South Korea as a way to refer to the governments under their presidency.

Year	Government	Policy	Social context	Ideal student
1963	Park Jung Hee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expansion of primary education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Military dictatorship • Economic development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Model student • High school girl • Dragons from small streams
1980	Jun Doo Hwan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expansion of secondary and tertiary education • Prohibition of private tutoring, Banned main exam conducted by each university 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Military dictatorship 	
1993	Kim Young Sam	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implementation of S.A.T. • School democratization (e.g. Parents participation in school committee meetings) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The first elected non-military president • I.M.F. 	
1998	Kim Dae Jung	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Retreat of state centered prohibitions, regulations. • “Open education” (e.g. diversification of student selection process in universities; creativity, diversity education) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The first president from the long-time opposition party • Investment in I.T. industry 	
2002	Roh Moo Hyun	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School democratization (e.g. principals can be elected among lay-teachers) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anti-authoritarian reforms • Investment in I.T. industry 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The term <i>umchinttal</i> first coined in 2005
2007	Lee Myung Bak	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Global Excellence • International middle schools • English Immersion education 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Umchinttal</i>
2013	Park Geun Hye	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Happiness School 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Creativity economy?” 	

Methodological framework

Various media texts are my data source for research. Media coverage on Yuna Kim and education policy or values are my key sources. Documents are accessed through online library. I chose them from news reports from daily newspapers in Korea. Yuna Kim's reportage comes from daily newspapers, sports and entertainment newspapers, and internet media. I also draw on texts from these sources that deal with some of the important terms I selected from Yuna Kim reportage like my mom's friend's daughter. Reportage on education policy and values is selected from the major five daily newspapers in Korea. Chosun Ilbo and Hankyure are the two newspapers that represent right wing and left wing politics respectively. Jung Ang Ilbo and Dong Ah Ilbo are on the conservative side, while Gyung Hyang Ilbo is on the progressive side. Except for Hankyure, all of these newspapers have entertainment only versions of daily papers. The political tone of the entertainment papers does not vary from one paper to the other.

Like it is widely accepted in contemporary media theory, I will not approach the media texts as if some are more ideologically ridden and there are others are truer representation of reality (Hall, 1980). Instead, I acknowledge that there is always a discrepancy between "the real" and what is presented in media, and do not claim that my analysis reveals the reality of contemporary South Korea. However, considering that all communication in "real" life is circulated through communication in one way or another, including conversational language and daily interactions, the difference between a firsthand data and media texts are not necessarily that of true and false, or reality and ideology. Further, this perspective also differs from the view that all media is a state apparatus that causes interpellation of subjects (Patton, 2007). I do not attempt to expand the argument to a linguistic philosophical one, but in the Korean case that I will present in the following chapters, it will be recognizable for readers that both the producers and receptors of the discourses of education do not completely understand their political positions. Discourses of education that come from traditionalism, colonialism, economic and political liberalism, and postmodernism appear together in the current education

related debates. In order to work through the complexity of the discourses, I will rely on Lyotard's rhetorical method.

Lyotard

I find Lyotard's rhetorical method to be a good analytical framework to work through the education discourse in the contemporary South Korean context. I am drawing on current media texts but the texts consist of discourses that arise from different historical time frames. However, trying to separate out the education debates into distinct historical periods did not serve well in presenting the complex and compressed nature of the education discourses in South Korea, because as in many other postcolonial societies, traditionalism is much stronger in Korean society than in the West, and modernization and postmodernization is occurring all at the same time (H. J. Cho, 2000). For example, in education settings the traditional value of *seuseung* coexists with discourses of modernization of discipline –as in abolishment of corporal punishment—and postmodernization of education –as seen in the thriving private education markets which includes online versions— competing with one another. For example, in my view, teachers' groups' plea about classroom collapse employ these languages that belong to different discourses altogether. The debate both deals with the loss of a close teacher-student relationship, albeit in an authoritarian form, and the demise of public school authority, which is partly based on statist agenda but also an egalitarian education ideal. Further, I wanted to have a framework that has a moral sensibility to work through the morally and politically charged discussions in South Korea's education debates. In this context, Lyotard's notion of language games, incommensurability, genres and the differend seemed to offer a more suitable framework allowing me to sort out the texts more carefully.

The Postmodern Condition

Adopting Wittgenstein's philosophy on language that differentiates the types of utterances into language games according to their effects, Lyotard (1979) argues that

there are incommensurabilities between each language game. Each type of utterances has their way of positioning the addressor, the addressee, and the referent. For example, in a denotative utterance, “the utterance places the sender in the position of the ‘knower’,” “the addressee is put in the position of having to give or refuse his assent,” and the referent is “something that demands to be correctly identified and expressed by the statement that refers to it” (9). In prescriptive utterances, the utterance is “performative,” producing an effect that the sender wants (10). The rule of language games do not have their innate legitimation, but is established by contracts through players. Every utterance is a move in a game. Games must have rules, and even small modifications in the utterances change the nature of the game. In this sense, every speech is a battle, but the purpose of the game may be not necessarily winning (It could be simply for pleasure). Further, Lyotard adds that all social bonds that are observable consist of language games. Starting from birth, human beings are involved in the social bond through being positioned in language games as a referent, an addressee, or an addressor. Being given a name already positions the baby as a referent (15). In the postmodern world, social bonds are no longer held by the Grand Narratives, whether functional or critical, but this is not necessarily “the dissolution of the social bond” for Lyotard (15). Rather he sees that each person is located at “nodal points” of communication circuits that are much more complex and mobile, and that language games are “the minimum relation required for society to exist” (15). And also writes that the importance of language is escalated as communication has become more significant part of our society. Lyotard adds that in order to understand social relations, not simply a theory of communication but a theory of games is necessary. The rules of the game may be more flexible in conversations between individual interlocutors, but the primary characteristics of institutions can constrain the potential discourses. For example, what should be said in an institutions can be such things like: “order in the army, prayer in church, denotation in the schools, narration in families, questions in philosophy, performativity in business” (17). Nevertheless, these limits should not be understood as a fixed matter.

The Differend

In *The Differend* (1988), Lyotard takes further the notion of the incommensurability by discussing his approach to language in more depth. He still grapples with the question of how knowledge is validated in different contexts, but presents his argument through the notion of *the differend* that arises in the representations of an event. In particular, he is writing to show the moral implications of the assertion that there is no “proof” of Auschwitz extermination camp. A real eye witnesses would have all died in the gas chamber, and for those who are alive it is excruciatingly difficult to prove that they were the victims of the gas chamber (p.5). The victims cannot provide the evidence in the form that the legal system requires them. Lyotard calls this situation that the victims lacking the means to argue for themselves due to the disparity in the genre of the judge and their own as *a differend* (p.9). But more generally, Lyotard sees that any kind of attempt to “represent” the world fails, and that perhaps insisting that there is one way of doing so to inevitably result in the differend— “the unstable state and instant of language wherein something which must be able to put into phrases yet cannot be” (p.13).

The basic unit of analysis is the phrases that are formed according to phrase regimens. For example, there could be a cognitive phrase, ostensive phrase, or a prescriptive phrase, etc. depending on what kind of effect the phrase is meant to produce (xii, p.29). Different phrase regimens can be linked to form genres with their respective purposes. In *The Postmodern Condition*, phrase regimens can be compared to the types of utterances, and genres to the language games. When genres contact each other, the differend arises since each genre follows its own rules/purposes and cannot be translated to one another. For Lyotard, there is no grand narrative that can regulate all the genres, and judgment should consider the disparities between genres.

South Korea’s education scene involves many problems that belong to different genres. For school teachers, school collapse signals the impossibility to “guide” their students, but also nostalgia about their lost power over the students. For students, it means a more democratic pedagogical model, but also the insignificance of public education. For parents, it is a result of their desire to make their children successful, but

also a space that need to be recovered so that they can entrust their children. The changing education policy to a diversity embracing model is both the result of students' desire for more room individual expression and the shifts due to South Korea's changing position in the global political economy. Further, while the strong zeal for educational mobility still persists, the new model that is meant to promote diversity in education does not necessarily benefit students with lower social status. The competing discourses of education in contemporary Korea take seemingly incommensurable notions together. The authoritarian pedagogy is often associated with equality and the virtue of earnest hard working while creativity and diversity often is linked with the notion of excellence. Yet, the following analysis of media's portrayal of Yuna Kim, the demand for equality in education often appears as nationalist and authoritarian claims and in tension with the desire for global competence. As I will identify how these incommensurable notions appear together and tease them out, I hope this project will contribute to the debates about education system in South Korea, and also to the discussions about the changes in public education as citizenship education and knowledge production paradigm in the postmodern world.

South Korean media have been treating Kim's success story as an educational narrative. I engage in the analysis of three media moments that the language used in Kim's reportage and situate them in the discourses of education.

In the first chapter, I deal with the notion of my mom's friend's daughter. Kim Yuna has been portrayed as an ideal student girl, but it is only after she started to dominate the international competitions that she was referred to as my mom's friend's daughter. Unlike the high school girl, which is an ideal female student type of the 1970s-80s under a state centered education system, my mom's friend's daughter is a neologism that belongs to the privatized, postmodern education system.

In the second chapter, I look at the moment when Kim announced to part ways with her former coach Brian Orser. The media portrayal of Kim and her mother Mi Hee Park shows the shifting relationships between student-teacher-and parent in

contemporary South Korea. Teachers no longer hold authority over the private sector. Students are their clients, and manager mothers arose as a key player in the field.

In the final chapter, I point to the changes in the post-nationalist University through Professor Hwang's criticisms on Yuna Kim's teaching practicum. In the state centered system, athletes were a part of the university of national culture, but not the academia. In the current system, athlete-students are one of the many students with excellence. It is in this context that Professor Hwang positioned Kim's teaching practicum as a privilege.

Chapter 2.

The age of *umchinttal*: No more dragons from small streams

Figure skating fairy came back to school: Kim Yuna is working hard for her midterm. She gave flowers to her teachers on Teachers day-Also had an autograph session for her schoolmates. ...Figure skating fairy Kim Yuna (gunpo suri highschool) came back as a yeogosaeng. She is working really hard because of the midterm that began on Tuesday (1st). Frankly, her priority has been her sport not school. She spends more time on ice than sitting in front of a desk. But, if you are a student you cannot avoid exams. Rumours say that Kim Yuna is staking her life to catching up with her studies. (S. W. Kim, 2007)

A perfect girl appeared. She excels in her studies, is pretty, and also seems kind. Simply put, she is *umchinttal*. There must be some dislikable aspects in a person, but she is just not hated by anyone. Rather, she is loved across all ages and genders. Just like when “the nation’s baby sister” Moon Geun Young’s popularity was at its height, no one dislikes her. Her studies is figure skating. Kim Yuna’s age has opened. (Shin-Yun, 2008)

Introduction

South Korean media dealt with Kim’s achievements in figure skating as a success story, not simply as an athletic or commercial one but often as an educational one (SBS, 2010; S.K. Kim, 2007). At this earlier stage of her publicity, she was often referred to as “a flower that bloomed in the desert” who succeeded because of her ingenious talent and strong work ethic. One well-known episode that has been frequently introduced in the media starts with a moment when Kim constantly falls on the ice while practicing a jump technique (KBS, 2007). The skates she was wearing at that time were still new– Kim had to get a new skate every month due to her intense training -- and they were hindering

Kim from performing well as her feet were still getting used to the hard leather. Her mother suggests calling it a day, but Kim insists on a full practice and says, “If I stop just because it hurts, I cannot learn the jumps.” The role of Kim’s mother was also highlighted. Mi Hee Park, Kim’s mother, devoted herself to help her daughter’s dream come true. She even had to learn how to adjust the centroid of her daughter’s skating shoe herself, and did this every night when Kim was going through a growth spurt. Before Yuna Kim, not many athletes no matter how successful were considered as an ideal student figure in South Korea. But Kim was in the generation of students in which diverse talents and qualifications started to be accepted equally as good as academic excellence. Further, in the later stage of her career, her experience in Canada allowed her to have English fluency, which gave her an image of global elite.

You can see from the excerpts above that the way Kim is portrayed as a student quickly switched once she starts to establish herself more dominantly in the international competitions. In the former excerpt, she is positioned as a high school girl (*yeogosaeng*), an ordinary school girl who needs to catch up with her studies because she missed school for skating competitions. In the latter excerpt, she is called an *umchinttal*, who excels in her own “studies”, i.e. figure skating. *Umchinttal* (the abbreviation of *umma chingu ttal* -- my mom’s friend’s daughter) is a widely used neologism in South Korea to describe young women who have achieved success in their careers or excels in their studies/ field. They are not simply successful or talented but are also good-looking, competent, and often come from a higher class background.

In this chapter, I explore the use of the term *umchinttal/umchinah* (my mom’s friend’s son) in media portrayals of Yuna Kim and situate them in the educational discourses that accompanied the social and cultural changes in South Korea. I will provide a short analysis of the of ideal student types of the 1970s and 1980s-- model student and high school girl, then discuss the phrase “dragons from small streams” (*gechon eso nan yong*), and lastly provide a reading of *umchinttal/umchinah* in comparison the previously discussed student types. In comparison to the terms *yeogosaeng* (high school girl) and *mobumsaeng* (model student) which were commonly

used terms of ideal student types in the past, *umchinttal/umchinah* is more prevalently used in contemporary South Korea. While the older versions of ideal student implied a stronger sense of compliance to authority, the new ideal student type tends to be more active, are willing to succeed, and not exclusively in the traditional academy but also in the more “creative” areas.⁷ Furthermore, the recent use of the term implies that *umchinttal/umchinah* have cosmopolitan poise and are able to compete at a global level. Yet, a closer look at the text suggests not simply a difference in their relationship to authority. Unlike *mobumsaeng* who gain their educational capital by thoroughly following textbooks, school work, and perhaps with some help of neighbourhood prep-schools despite their parents’ social status, the newly arising *umchinttal/umchinah* are born into families that can support the acquisition of a globalized educational capital⁸ and fluency in the cosmopolitan culture. This means that students from “small streams,” families with not much educational, cultural, or economical capital, will likely have a more difficult time to acquire upward class mobility through education, as the parents’ cultural or economic capital becomes more significant for their children’s educational success in the current education model.

⁷ In some literature, this kind of self-willingness is referred as the “neoliberal student-subjectivity” that reflects a shift in the mode of governmentality to a neoliberal one (Abelmann, Park, and Kim 2009; Hay & Kapitzke 2009). Here, I am unable to talk about whether this actually can be considered result of shift in governmentality due to the small scope of the project and the difference in focus. The term governmentality was originally used by Foucault in *The Birth of Biopolitics* to work through the different power/knowledge strategies that are related to the state and its people/population in a historical sense. I do acknowledge there is a good ground to speculate that there is some kind of “governmentality” shift happening, but do not want to simply adopt the findings of governmentality studies in other contexts and apply them in the Korean context without actually conducting a historical analysis. However, this question will be kept in mind to inform my future studies.

⁸ By capital, I refer to the various kinds of capitals in Bourdieu’s social theory. Various types of capital have different weight within a field. In *Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (1992), Bourdieu defines the field as “a network or configuration of objective relations between positions” (106). The agents within the field and the distribution of the types of capital within it in turn configure the field. Here, I talk about how different capitals work in relation to each other in the educational field of South Korea.

Model students and high school girl

Kim was in her third year in middle school when she first won a senior level international competition. Because she was the first in South Korea to win a gold medal in an international figure skating competition, a sport that was mostly dominated by the West and only recently by Japan and a few Chinese skaters, and presumably because of the artistic and entertaining character of the sport, she soon started to draw media attention. By the next year, she was already one of the most powerful athletes in ladies figure skating. Commentators predicted that she will become one of the favourites for gold medal in Vancouver Winter Olympics (ESPN, 2007). Yet in the very early stage of her international success, she struggled because of her back injury due to the intensive growth spurt and the bad ice condition of the practice rinks in South Korea. At this point, she was often positioned by media as one of many Korean high school girls in South Korea. She “came back to school” even after winning international competitions, and had to “[work] hard for midterm” like all other students. Her sport is portrayed as something that draws her away from school work, since she “spends more time on ice than in front of a desk” (S. Y. Kim, 2007). She was often referred to as a figure skating fairy, and occasionally as a high school girl. Her sports celebrity status was emphasized with a few other young athletes, but they were not necessarily considered an ideal student.⁹ Nevertheless, *yeogosaeng* (high school girl) in the modern Korean context can be considered an archetype of an ideal female student, while not linked to the notion of academic excellence.

⁹ A comparable male athlete is Tae Hwan Park in free style swimming, who won gold in men’s 400 meter and silver in 200 meter in the Beijing Summer Olympics. Although not as dominant in the international level as Yuna Kim, he already renewed Korean record several times when he was still a high school student. Nevertheless, his student status was not an important aspect of media representation. This seems to be because Park was not as popular when he was still too young to be portrayed as a masculine athlete, thus having to be categorized as a high school student, and when he became popular and was a university student, did not have other qualities that resembled a global elite – like fluent English—in comparison to Yuna Kim. Of course, the category of an “athlete” may be more immediately attached to a male.

Mobumsaeng, a model student, is a student who follows school authority and excels in studies (H.J. Cho, 1996; Y. H. Kim, 2003). The term is in contrast with the term *bullyang haksang* (misconducting students), students who dress un-studently and participate in inappropriate behaviours for students; however, model student also has a slightly different nuance from the term *oodeungsaeng* (excellent student) which is a narrower category as it simply means students who have outstanding grades. Model students are therefore students who embody the school system in a well-rounded way. According to Yung Hee Kim, they were admired and respected not only by adults but even by the student body until the 1980s.

For the post-war generation, school was a space that children could escape from the crowded room at their homes that they shared with younger siblings (H.J. Cho, 1996; Y. H. Kim, 2003). In the early seventies only about 30%, and by the 1980s about 70% of the youth went to high school. Even fewer students went on to university, so a high school degree still gave the youth some social mobility or job security until the 1970s (Y.H. Kim, 2003) Teachers were able to provide them what their parents could not (Y. H. Kim, 2003). Scholars recount that working youth admired student status. The fact that student-style fashion was a trend among those youth in the 1970s shows this very well (H.J. Cho, 1996; Y. H. Kim, 2003). An episode from the famous narrative about the factory worker Jun, Tae Il, one of most prominent figure in South Korea's early labour movement in the 70s who burnt himself pleading that the factory owners should abide by the labour law, illustrates the privileged status of students of the time very well. It is recorded Jun started to think about labour rights by realizing the dire working conditions of younger female factory workers whom he had to manage. He used to say, "If only I had a friend who was a college student," hoping to get help in interpreting the law. Model student is a term that was more powerful when following school authority had more value for the students before it started to lose its admired status with the education reforms in the 1990s that followed the social and political changes of the time. In the nineties, *mobumsaeng* started to become an object of ridicule (H.J. Cho, 1996; Y. H. Kim, 2003). The term *bumsaengi* started to replace *mobumsaeng* as a derogatory term for students who merely follow what they are told to do.

Yeogosaeng literally means a high school girl. The term does not have any additional definition but is an ideal female student type in itself in the age of model students. While access to education was not easy for most youth in the past, female students had faced an extra barrier. There were certainly female model students who became elites, but most of their contemporaries were given less educational opportunity than male students. They had to work to support their family or their male siblings' university education. While searching for the historical accounts of the time, I found stories of young female bus guides (*anneyang*). (Bus guides were all females, as it was an assistive role for the driver, which were almost always male.) Their work was to make sure everything is clear on fully packed buses and no one is left behind. Koreans even in my generation are familiar with the image of young female bus guides shouting, "Orai" (all right) in a melodic tone on the bus where girls and boys of her age are heading to school (Gil, 2006). For those who were lucky enough to go to school, a lot of the very smart female students went to technical high schools and became bank tellers. The rate of 18 year olds going into higher education increased rapidly from 8.3 % in 1978 to 37% in 1985 (S.G. Cho, 1989). In 1988, about 70% of all college students were male. In 2009, the rate of female high school students going into tertiary education was 80.5%, slightly higher than their male counterpart (Choi, 2013). The term *yeogosaeng* (high school girl) in this sense carries the gendered student status of female youth in the 70s and 80s (the equivalent term for male high school students is rarely used), but also represents a desired status compared to others who had to work in factories or buses instead of receiving secondary education. Kim was portrayed as a *yeogosaeng* (high school girl), which seems to be a taxidermied imagery of a pure and desired female student status that belongs to the 70s and 80s, the age of model students.

Dragons from small streams

Dragons from small streams refer to those who moved up to upper middle or higher class from a lower class family background mostly due to their education capital. Families with at least some economic, cultural, or educational capital are not considered to be from small streams. Even if the family was poor, for example, because the father as

a school teacher is the only source of income but had many children, an educational success from this family would not be considered a dragon rising from a small stream. Children from small streams does not have private tutors or parents with good educational background to help them, but due to their natural smartness and hard work, were able to excel at school. These students are model students who relied on text books and the public school system as the public education system is their only source of educational capital. For instance, Jang Seung Soo is a lawyer who became popular for his biographical book titled “Studying was the easiest.” His book instantly became a best seller in 1997, a year after he was entered Seoul National University as the top admittee in law major. His family was not rich, and it is only after four years since graduating from high school that he finally heard the good news. He worked as a construction worker at day time, and studied high school textbooks thoroughly at night. He is often referred to as the last dragon from small stream.

People think that becoming a top admittee at Seoul National University while working as a construction worker is because he is a genius, but his I.Q. measured in high school is 113, which is about average. What made him the top is his straight forward strategy that began with fundamentals even if it takes more time. He said, “as for texts books, you need to carefully read each word and never miss even one illustration.” Until the night before he left for Seoul to take bongosa (the main exam¹⁰), he spent at least one hour per day on studying his math text book. When he looked up the English- English dictionary, he read everything below the main word, even the explanation about the root of the word. This is Jang Seung Soo method, which was popular among students. (G. S. Lee, 2013)

While the authoritarian political system under the military dictatorship heavily controlled the public school system, it allowed for social mobility through the expansion of public education. There was a possibility in the 1970s and 80s for dragons from small streams. These dragons usually become the main source of support for the entire family.

¹⁰ Bongosa was the exam that each university administered for an extra selection process (J. E. Yoo, 2012). It was abolished in the military government of Jun Doo Hwan, revived again with the advent of non-military liberal democracy in 1994, but was finally abolished in 1998. However, the new essay exams administered by each university is considered to have somewhat equivalent effect.

Jang Seung Soo also says that he bought an apartment for his parents, supported his younger brother through his university education (G.S. Lee, 2013). I will clarify the role of educational capital for dragons from small streams more clearly by comparing the two recent past presidents of South Korea. Late Roh Moo Hyun, who killed himself after being investigated for an alleged bribery taking during his presidency, graduated from a technical high school although was extremely smart because of poverty. However, he studied bar exam on his own, and worked as a human rights lawyer, then became a politician (Parklee, 2002). He fell in love to Kwon, Yang Sook, who grew up in the same neighbourhood, and married her (Parklee, 2002). She was a daughter of a long term political prisoner who unconverted from supporting the North since Korean war, and a high school dropout, reportedly because of poverty (Parklee, 2002). Roh inaugurated as a president in 2003, but often faced obstacles because of his low formal educational capital (J. Lee, 2002). During his presidency and after, not having enough social capital among the political elites even within his party made him more vulnerable to political threats, and apparently, this kind of unstable status in the Korean political field affected his choice to end life. On the contrary, the previous former president Lee Myung Bak was also from a very poor family, went to a night time technical high school, but acquired a bachelor's degree from Korea University, one of the top private universities in South Korea. He worked as a CEO of various Hyun Dai group companies before becoming a politician. His wife is from an affluent family, and graduated from Ehwa Women's University, the best women's university and a major private university in South Korea. He was often criticized for confusing presidency as a CEO role, not having the right kind of poise as a political leader (Jo, 2008). Thus, in a way, his embodied cultural capital was a topic for gossip, but unlike Roh, he had educational capital, social capital, and economic capital. For most dragons from small streams, educational capital played a critical role in accessing familial cultural capital through marriage, social capital through networks, and of course economic capital.

While Yuna Kim certainly is far from a typical dragon from small stream, her education narrative shares the self-made success story with the dragons from the 70s in the context of global figure skating.

“I was touched by the story of growing up from an ordinary family, overcoming injuries, and rising above the dire circumstance of South Korea’s figure skating.” Like this, the success narrative of Kim through the support of her mother’s exceptional devotion presents a heartfelt family drama and actualizes the family success myth in reality. Most Koreans can relate to this family’s narrative. (Shin-yun, 2008)

But the beautiful skating of Kim Yuna who was praised as a figure skating prodigy was born through blood, sweat and tears that was too much for a sixteen year old girl. Kim Yuna is known to be a “training bug.” She warms up through running, weight training, and stretching at 8:30 AM and skates for two hours from 10 AM in Taereung ice rink. From 10 PM, she has night owl training sessions because she needs to avoid the day time that the rink is open to the general public. (Han, 2006)

There is not a single ice rink specialized for figure skating in Korea. There are only a few dozen professional figure skaters. That is why Kim Yuna is a flower that bloomed in the wilderness. (Y. J. Lee, 2008)

While Kim did not achieve her current influential status through academic education, her story shares similarities with other dragons from small streams narratives in that they are both a rags to riches narrative not by mere luck, but through inborn talent and hard work. Her family did not possess enough cultural capital to support her properly, but sacrificed themselves for her so that she can reach the furthest she can in her field. In the same vein, model students from low class families could have family members who sacrificed for them, even if the parents often had no idea what is best for the child. Ultimately, dragons-from-small-streams narrative is a family success story rather than an individual one. In Yuna Kim’s case, the good feeling about her success was shared by the entire nation, extending the family success narrative of dragons from small streams to a national level. Korea did not have much figure skating infrastructure, so she had to find her way mostly on her own. Somewhat similar to my discussion above, in an article about the strategies used by South Korean media to portray Kim as a national hero, Nam, Kim and Koh (2010) also noted the role of Kim’s talent and hard work that allowed her to be a national sister. Ultimately, Yuna Kim was accepted as the nation’s baby sister who succeeded at a global level by her born talent and hard work.

My mom's friend's daughter

The term was first coined in a web comic series called *The Corner Room Fantasia* in the eighth episode “The superior one” (Shim, 2005). The male cartoonist portrays the “superior one” as a young male who goes to a top school, is good looking, and fulfills his filial piety to his parents through his success. Even the current difficult job market is not a problem to him as all companies are dying to scout him. The true identity of this powerful being is... my mom's friend's son! The endless postings in the comments section of the web comic refers to the episode as “the holy grail of *umchinah* (abbreviation of *umma chingu adeul* --my mom's friend's son),” showing how popular the term has become. When the comic writer originally coined the term based on a widely accepted notion – children hate to be compared – it represented a sense of discouragement of the youth of this age, “the eight hundred eighty thousand won generation,”¹¹ (Woo & Park, 2007) who cannot expect to have permanent and secure jobs even with university education.

The recent use of the term, however, situates the addressor in a completely different relationship with the referent. Over the last few years since it first appeared in *The Corner Room Fantasia*, the term has acquired a slightly different nuance from its initial usage that is very telling of the contemporary Korean society. While the original term *umma chingu ahdeul* or *ttal* suggests that these ideal students are in close relation with the speaker as they are sons and daughters of the speaker's mothers' friend, these days the term has almost become a noun in itself, with less allusion to the unabbreviated sense of the term. *Umchinahs* and *umchinttals* are not merely men or women who are good looking and successful in their studies or careers. In the recent usage of *umchinah/umchinttal*, they often come from a wealthy and powerful family background,

¹¹ 880,000 won represent a monthly salary amount which is quite a bit less than enough to support oneself. In dollars, we could consider it approximately as \$880, although the exact amount may fluctuate depending on the currency exchange rate. Eight hundred eighty thousand won generation is the title of the book that was published in 2007 that discusses the problems that the youth generation since IMF is facing in South Korea (Woo and Park).

speak a foreign language (English, usually) and even better, got their education from internationally top ranked universities. While the term is pervasively used in the popular culture and media, academic writing on it has not been published yet.

The rise of the private education market along with the mismatch of the claims to school authority based on a statist model of education and the desires of the contemporary students to compete at a global level have changed the educational field in South Korea. In the late 20th Century model students from low class family still appeared in media. For example, in the first season of the famous youth drama series *School* (KBS, 1999) one of the protagonists is a male student from a poor family background. However, he has good academic records and is a class president with an upright character. Contrarily, in the fifth season that aired last year (KBS, 2012), an *umchinttal* appears. She comes from a high class family that expected her to do just as well as her older siblings who went to the top university in Korea. She is not rebellious, but does not necessarily respect her school teachers either. She considers school activities that does not help her to be better qualified for university entrance a waste of her time. Instead, she relies on the resources from an exclusive private prep school. There is another male character who has excellent academic records and is relatively soft spoken and looked less attractive -- a little more like the model student of the past, but he also relies on his manager mother's networking skills to get his hands on exclusive information on the exams. His life is driven by his mother's overwhelming zeal. Both students come from upper class background, where the parents, particularly the mother, have better insider information about exams than public school teachers. The mothers do not necessarily have a deep understanding or sophisticated view on education, but their social capital based on the networks of the mothers who live in affluent neighbourhoods allowed them the access to exclusive information about university entrance exams. These student characters represent one of most prevalent ways the term *umchinttal/umchinah* is used these days. It is not the talent and hard work of the daughters and sons, but their parents' ability to support their children's education that distinguishes them from ordinary students. When people talk about *umchinttal/umchinah*, the focus is now on their fathers' background, not their own achievement. For example, in the bloggers' list of *umchinah*'s in the

entertainment business, all of who made it to the list had fathers who are at least executive board members of a mid-size company (Sports Dong Ah, 2012). Only a few on the list actually had high educational capital themselves. It is in this educational climate that Kim started to be represented as an *umchinttal* rather than a *yeogoseang* or a dragon from a small stream.



*Photo 1. Yuna Kim:
As a High school girl*



*Photo 2. Yuna Kim:
Presenting in front of IOC*

English and cosmopolitan poise

Although the importance of economic and social capital seems to be growing for the acquirement educational capital, the relationship is not so straight forward. There are new attributions that started to act as cultural capital that closely interplays with educational capital: Fluent English and cosmopolitan poise.

In Korea's modern education, America has been an important point of reference since the traditional cultural capital based on Koreanized Confucian knowledge and values that flourished in Chosun lost relevance in the process of colonization, liberation and war. While it may seem funny for us in the 21st Century where the U.S. is often criticized as the corrupt superpower, in the 19th and early 20th Centuries in Chosun, America was positioned as a good empire in contrast to Japan, Russia that fought over the Korean peninsula (S.W. Lee, 2009). Many intellectuals admired American language and the ideas of Western liberal democracy as a breakthrough for Korea to become a strong and wealthy nation (ibid).

In the post-war South Korea, English language continued to maintain its importance in the education system as the country had to rely on the U.S. against North Korea and its allies in the context of Cold War. With the expansion of public education and economic development, Korea established its own public education system, but English was always one of the core courses that weighted highly on the entrance exams along with Korean and Math (H. J. Cho, 2009). Nevertheless, it is only in the last decade that English fluency similar to a “native speaker” became the goal of English education:

No one understands you when you pronounce Orange as Oo-ren-ji in America. You need to say O-rween-Gee.

(Gyung Sook Lee, Head of Ministry of Education, 2008)

Previous Minister of Education Lee suggested that English immersion education is needed for all Korean students, and that this should begin when children are still young. This part of the speech by Minister Lee is one of the most ridiculed moments of the last Lee Myung Bak government, so there were certainly criticisms about this

approach to English education, but the incident shows that the old ways of learning English – learning grammar through textbook-- is no longer good enough¹².

Apparently, Yuna Kim's five years of training in Canada allowed her to obtain a certain degree of English fluency. Media portrayed her presentation for the Pyung Chang bidding team for the 2018 Winter Olympics to have showcased her ability as *umchinttal*. She was not only the top skater in the world, but an internationally recognized sport celebrity, gave an immaculate English presentation, and mingled with representatives and reporters from other countries comfortably. It is not her formal academic achievements, but her English fluency and cosmopolitan poise that mattered in this context.



Photo 3. With reporters after the presentation

¹² The increasing importance of English education does not necessarily mean a growing reliance on the U.S.A. The changing geopolitical relationship of South Korea to non-Western countries like China has certainly influenced the educational field. Many international students from Korea go to China and vice versa. Nevertheless, English is not simply a language of England or the U.S.A. The growing emphasis on fluent spoken English seems to reflect globalization that is certainly more than a simple expansion of American hegemony. Furthermore, when it comes to higher education, a degree from the American academy has significantly higher value in South Korea.

Conclusion

Under the state centered education system, the attainment of educational capital allowed an opportunity, albeit small, for youth without much economic, social, or cultural capital to move up the social ladder. *Umchinttal* discourse shows that the opportunity has become much smaller in contemporary South Korea. Parents' cultural and social capital that is closely related to their economic capital has become increasingly important for the child to succeed even in the public education system. Further, attaining cultural capital that is external to the education field of South Korea (the West) started to function not necessarily as a symbolic violence from a different field, but as an extension of the domestic cultural capital within South Korea's education field in the context of globalization. This fortifies the role of economic capital in educational field. Other than for a few unusual cases, like missionaries for example, parents' economic capital is the key factor that almost determines their children's opportunities to have more experience in the Western academy. The age of dragons from small streams is over. It is the age of *umchinttal*.

Chapter 3.

The end of *seuseung*

It's just as hard to believe that one of the feel-good stories of the Vancouver Olympics, the coach who fell just short of gold in his home country 22 years earlier helping a South Korean win her country's first figure skating gold, has turned so quickly into bitterness and recrimination. (Hersh, 2010 a)

Introduction

As Kim started to attract corporate sponsors, she moved her training base to Toronto, Canada to prepare for senior level competitions. She chose Cricket Skating and Curling Club in Toronto, where she initially visited to work with choreographer David Wilson¹³. Other than the first two years when Kim was still recovering from her chronic back injury, it was not an exaggeration when figure skating fans called her “Queen” Yuna. She won gold at the 2009 World Championships by 16 points margin to the silver medalist Canadian Joannie Rochette, and also at the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics by 23 points margin to the silver medalist Japanese Mao Asada, renewing her own world record in ladies figure skating, the first ever in the ladies skating to get a total score over 200 points. During these years, there was an enormous interest about Kim’s Canadian coaches and training facility. In particular, her technical coach Brian Orser was at the centre of media attention. He was portrayed as the Western teacher who taught Yuna the

¹³ Figure skaters from the “Third World” usually work with a Western choreographer to have a fairer chance at the program component score. I will not go into a full analysis of this aspect of the Yuna Kim success story, but we can see that not necessarily the lack of technical skills but a certain kind of cultural capital is most wanted when skaters from countries without much figure skating history seek to work with a Western choreographer or head coach.

value of a good rest (SBS, 2010). His facial expression right before Kim's routines were captured and circulated as a "fatherly smile," and Orser was awarded an honorary citizenship from Seoul after Kim won the gold medal in the Olympics.

Just a few months after the Olympic glory, the former coach and the athlete announced that they did not renew their contract. The two sides offered different stories about their split: Orser claiming it was purely Ms. Park's decision and Kim responding that she knows "exactly what's going on." Both in North America and Korea, the tone of most news coverage was that this was a "sad ending of a feel so good story (Hersh, 2010 a; J.H. Cho, 2010).¹⁴

On August 24, 2010 Canada's national newspaper The Globe and Mail announced the split between 20 year old South Korean figure skater Yuna Kim, the 2010 Vancouver Olympic champion, and her former coach Brian Orser, a Canadian two-time Olympic silver medalist who launched his coaching career with Kim in December 2006. According to a press release from Orser, Kim's mother had fired him suddenly and without explanation. However the Kim camp claimed that the split was not sudden, and in fact, that the coach and the skater relation had been strained for several months: This was no more than a simple split between a coach and an athlete. For viewers and fans, the split was unexpected since the skater achieved such a success at the 2010 Vancouver Olympics. The Kim-Orser split story was highly controversial and covered extensively in sports news blogs and newspapers in North America and South Korea (Agrell, 2010; Ainsworth, 2010; J.H. Cho, 2010; Hersh, 2010 a; Kim & Lee, 2010; Sarkar, 2010; Smith, 2010). Because the two parties presented completely opposing views regarding the reason of the split, the writers and readers both relied on their own speculations about what happened and why. For Canadians, subject for several years to the "Own the Podium" campaign that promoted the idea that the Canadian winter athletes, supported by the

¹⁴ A little side note here is that Kim herself considers choreographer David Wilson as the most important and reliable person in Canada's training base. They still work together. The most recent competition pieces he choreographed for her are Vampire's Kiss (Short program) and Les Misérables (Free program). Kim won 2013 World Championships by about 20 points margin.

Canadian coaches would sweep the gold—now a tarnished dream—the story had nationalistic tones: “our” coach had been betrayed by a “foreign” athlete, indeed, an athlete who have taken one of our gold medals only because of his help.

In sharp contrast, while Koreans were thrilled to have one of their own win gold in a sport that is quite obscure in that country, the Korean discourse focused less on sports and national identity and instead read the Orser/Kim story as one a failed relationship between teacher and student in a context of larger anxieties about the shifting value of pedagogies.¹⁵ Orser was depicted as a *seuseung*, which in Korean means teacher not in a professional sense but in line with the traditional notion of a lifelong mentor and a guide (Encyclopedia of Korean Culture), and Kim, as a student, who grew under the tutelage of Orser and finally achieved success (Sarkar, 2010; J.H. Cho, 2010). Their separation was described as “the ugly ending of the beautiful alliance between a teacher and a student” (J. H. Cho, 2010). When Orser announced that the decision to part ways was made by Kim’s mother, Mi Hee Park, she was criticized by many Koreans for crossing the boundaries of a proper parent (Inwin, 2010). Soon after, Kim rebutted Orser’s claim by writing on her personal blog that she was “exactly aware of what [was] going on” and that it was ultimately “her decision” to part ways with the coach (Hersh 2010 a, citing Kim)¹⁶. Then speculations were focused around who was truly responsible for their break up: Did Orser sign a contract with a Japanese skater and betrayed Yuna? Or, has Kim grown arrogant and betrayed her teacher? (Agrell, 2010; Hersh, 2010b; On, 2010). While the news reportages underscore conceptualizations of genuine teacher-student relationship, they also convey a very different language. That is, the language of

¹⁵ In North American news blogs and papers, the story immediately became a gossip about the ungrateful “Asian” mother and daughter who fired the coach who supposedly was highly instrumental in Kim’s Olympic success (Smith, 2010; Hersh, 2010 b). Kim’s mother, Mi Hee Park was portrayed as an overbearing and controlling “skating mom” (Smith, 2010). Kim was portrayed as a helpless kid who did not know what was happening until she rebutted Orser’s claim by posting on her online blog that “it was [her] decision” (Hersh, 2010 a).

¹⁶ I decided to use the translation published in Hersh’s article instead of Kim’s own blog posting because I was not confident with translating a lengthy and emotional response. I meticulously checked each sentence to make sure there were no mistranslations or changes in nuance from Kim’s initial blog posting to Hersh’s article.

contract and business. To emphasize that the reason of the separation was not money, Orser himself revealed that he was simply paid on an hourly rate and that his appearances in South Korean commercials with Kim were business contracts independent from his coaching contract with Kim (Hersh, 2010 b). Although the language of business contract was employed to argue that the relationship was a genuine teacher-student relationship, it gives the readers a peek at the contract based relationship between coaches and top ranked athletes that seems closer to a business partnership, far from what the traditional term *seuseung* suggests.

It appears to me that the controversy about this incident conveys different languages about pedagogical relationships. On the one hand, Kim-Orser relationship is conceptualized as that of an incomplete student and a genuine teacher like an apprenticeship. On the other hand, the relationship is conceptualized as a business partnership similar to a private tutorship. The tension between these two languages parallels the current debates about education policies and values in contemporary South Korea. Despite excessive passion about educational success, South Korea has been going through changes in the education system that has been often characterized by terms like “school collapse” and “fall of teachers’ authority.” Yet, these discussions convey diverging and shifting understandings about what education, school, or teacher’s authority should be.

In this chapter, I explore the different languages used in the media portrayal of Kim-Orser split focusing on the contested notion of *seuseung* (teacher) in the South Korean context through theories of postmodern education and gender. I will tease out the different languages involved in the Kim-Orser break up media portrayal and situate them in the education debates in Korea by using Lyotard’s discussion on the postmodern education as an enveloping analytical tool. Further, I will look at how gendered categories like school-girl or mother are employed to invoke the authority of the teacher. I will begin by providing a short background on Korea’s education policy shifts, situate South Korea’s education policy debate in theories on postmodern education, and lastly tease out the different languages used in the portrayal of Kim’s split with Orser.



Photo 4. Brian Orser (left) and Mi Hee Park (right)

The end of the professor and gendered student-teacher relationship

In *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), Lyotard defines postmodernity as “incredulity towards metanarratives” (xxiv) and argues that knowledge no longer legitimizes itself through appeal to philosophical meta-discourses such as the dialectics of the Spirit or emancipation of workers (xxiii). Professors who are tied to the old paradigm of meta-discourses will lose their authority under the postmodern condition. Knowledge will become operational while the way of learning will be simple accumulation of “quantities of information”, and only bodies of knowledge that can fit in to this new form of knowledge would survive (4). Knowledge producers and users will have to translate their knowledge into a form that is compatible with the logic of computer technology. Under this condition, Lyotard hypothesizes that knowledge will be exteriorized to the knower, and will increasingly be evaluated based on its exchange-value instead of its use-value (4), only through the criterion of performativity (input/output ratio).

Although I do not wish to simply apply Lyotardian concepts uncritically to the Korean context, especially since Korea's development of postmodern characteristics—in particular, the significant of the computer industry—is piecemeal and interwoven with her simultaneous post-colonial status— her ongoing reliance on both the U.S. military and U.S. economy-- I nevertheless find his ideas the criterion of performativity and the end of metanarratives useful in understanding the current debates about education. A cautionary note is not to consider this as an attempt to foresee a linear development of history: What happened in the West will eventually happen in Korea (Chakrabarty, 2000). Rather, theory is used as an analytical tool only insofar as it informs what emerges from the textual analysis keeping in mind that the local interacts with the global, yet also keeping in mind the particular social, historical, political and cultural context of South Korean education debates. With this in mind, using Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* as the key theoretical reference will be helpful in unpacking the contested notion of proper student-teacher relationship in contemporary South Korea.

Lastly, in the media portrayal of Kim-Orser split, language of gender, age, and ethnicity is employed to position the coach, the athlete and her mother in hierarchical relationships. As Scott (1986) writes in "Gender, A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," gender constitutes social relationships based on perceptions based on sex categories, and also signifies power relations. McElhinny emphasizes that based on this conceptualization of gender, Scott is able to provide a framework based on the strength of feminist thought that looks at gender categories beyond kinship relations: "Gender categorization can structure nodes of thought whose thematic subject is not explicitly gendered at all" (2007, p.8). For the analysis of the current media text, this theorization of gender has great utility as gender relationship is projected into pedagogical relationship to sustain a sense of power/authority of the teacher through the paternalistic conceptualization of teacher and patronizing view on the student. The gendered relationship is further extended into a colonial discourse (white male teacher guided the Asian student-girl), and also into public/private categorization (the mother who belong to the private intruding into education as public).

In short, on the one hand, this paper raises discussions about the erosion of the authority of teacher in relation to postmodernization of education; on the other hand, the authority is rather arduously held together through gendered categorization of the student, teacher and parent.

Yuna Kim: A powerful client or an incomplete student-girl?

Sharing that top honor is South Korea's Kim Yu-Na, who is also making top dollar for her dynamic aerial skills--but on ice skates. Last year her triple-triple combination jumps helped her earn the titles of World Champion, Grand Prix Final Champion and Four Continents Champion, and brought her nearly \$150,000 in prize money. They also helped the 19-year-old become a marketing darling in her home country, where she earned \$7.5 million from sponsors like Hyundai Motor, Kookmin Bank, Nike, Procter & Gamble, to name just a few. Her Samsung Electronics "Yu-Na Haptic" style phone, launched in May of last year, broke a company record in December when unit sales broke the 1 million mark in less than seven months. (Settimi, 2010)

He recalls seeing a timid girl with braces who spoke no English and was all arms and legs with little control. Kim flew to Toronto to discuss a new dance routine with her choreographer David Wilson, and it was there that she spent three weeks practicing jumps with Orser who won the silver medal in men's figure skating at the 1988 Calgary Winter Olympics. Kim's mother, Park Mi-hee, asked Orser to be the girl's coach when she saw how well the two got together.

(J.H. Cho 2010, citing Brian Orser's autobiography)

Kim's decision to part ways with a coach invoked such a big controversy and criticism, but it is a well-accepted culture in the figure skating world to change coaches from time to time (Ainsworth, 2010). It is not so strange –although inappropriate— that North American media would disapprove of the end of “the feel-good [story] of the Vancouver Olympics” in North America since they often wanted to portray Kim's success in the Olympics as Orser's own, using Orientalist language such as “uncut gem” to the reigning World Champion of the time (Cole, 2009). However, surprisingly, Korean media was not any warmer towards the athlete when the incident first became public. Kim gained broader global fame after her Olympic success, but in her home country, she

was already embraced as a “nation’s baby sister” long before the Olympics, perhaps because many Koreans empathized with Kim’s struggles in the earlier stage of her athletic career as “the first ever” in her home country to be able to win in international competitions (Longman, 2010; Shin-Yun, 2008). Young celebrities who are given the title of “nation’s baby sister” or “nation’s baby brother” usually have a wide range of fans, an innocent yet sexually desirable appearance, a successful career in their field, and may even be good at their studies. These are young celebrities who are considered to be model youth in contemporary South Korea. For Kim, the decision to split with Orser was a controversy that almost threatened her “nation’s baby sister” status.

As the term “baby sister” suggests, Kim was adored by Koreans, but her powerful status as a leading international athlete and a celebrity was not as clearly present in media representations of her. Instead, Kim’s powerful position had been mediated by the portrayal of her as a nation’s baby sister, high school girl, and the more she excelled in international competitions as an *umchinttal* (my mom’s friend’s daughter) (Shin-Yun, 2008). All of these terms to some degree imply the notion of the school-girl, especially the latter two.¹⁷ Orser’s narrative about his first meeting with Kim also resonates around similar conceptualizations. He describes that Kim used to be “a timid girl with braces who spoke no English and was all arms and legs with little control” (J.H. Cho 2010, Citing Orser). This language used in the representation of Kim-Orser relationship has the effect of giving an impression that Kim’s current status is solely the product of Orser’s tutelage, which Kim could not have achieved on her own. Because the relationship between Kim and Orser was portrayed as that between a student-girl and a *seuseung*, Kim’s actions were conceptualized as a bad student’s behaviour against her teacher (H.G.

¹⁷ I have discussed about the difference between high school girl and *umchinttal* (my mom’s friend’s daughter) in more detail in the previous chapter. In short, high school girl is an ideal student-girl of modernity that conveys notions of equality with all other youth under a statist education model, and my mom’s friend’s daughter is a neologism that describes an active female elite who excels in what she does, with a sense of cosmopolitanism and affluence. These terms are also gendered in the sense that male high school students are often not called as “boys”, and while there is the exact counterpart for my mom’s friend’s daughter—my mom’s friend’s son— these figures are sexualized based on binary gender categories.

Kim, 2010). In fact, at the time Orser met Kim, she was still young, transitioning from juniors to senior competitions and her training base from Korea to Canada, so Orser's memory in the excerpt above must be somewhat accurate. However, in relevance to her relationship with Orser as a figure skater and skating coach, Kim was already a Junior World Champion with records that were incomparable to most other athletes of her age, getting famous in Korea and in international figure skating world (Jung, 2006), while Orser, although an exceptional athlete of his days, was just starting as a coach (H.J. Cho, 2010). By the time of the Olympics, Kim was already an international celebrity selected as Times 100 people of the year, as one of top-earning athletes by Forbes magazine, and as UNICEF Good will ambassador (Official Website). Reflective of her established career, in Kim's account of the split, she insisted on a professional approach stating, "A skater and a coach can part ways and there are always reasons for such decisions" and that she does not want the story of the split to be revealed (Hersh 2010 a, citing Kim's blog posting). She positions herself as an athlete and a professional, as a partner of the decision, not a student-girl only competent due to the teacher's supervision.

Here, we see a tension between the notion of the incomplete student and Kim's powerful status as a sport celebrity. Like students who make their choices in the private education market, Kim's own account of the split uses very pragmatic approach to the teaching relationship, not tied to the notion of a lifelong *seuseung*. The tension resonates with the stories in Korean classrooms, where teachers are finding a hard time disciplining the students who do not respect them anymore since teachers could be replaced easily by the various options in the market. At the same time, gendered categories are highlighted in the media portrayals, positioning Kim as a weak student-girl –a timid one— who requires the help of a white male teacher. Even Korean media quoting Orser's narrative Orientalized Kim using irrelevant phrases as "spoke no English." Sex categories are extended to ethnic and pedagogical relationships, positioning the Western male as the rightfully authoritative teacher and Asian girl as the student (Scott, 1986; McElhinny, 2007).

Teacher's authority and the manager mother

Brian Orser says he had no idea he was on thin ice. The Canadian champion who coached an Olympic champion apparently came up against a mother on a mission - and lost. (Smith, 2010)

Both Korean and North American media reported the Kim-Orser split story as a disrespectful insult on the teacher. The headlines in Canadian media were quite dramatic, for example, that Orser was “dumped” by Kim (CTV, 2010). In North America, this was partly because the public and journalists not specializing in figure skating assumed that Kim was like a diamond in the dust, picked up by Orser. Journalism with more background in skating took a more temperate view, stating that if the skater chose to part ways with the former coach, she should be left alone (Ainsworth, 2010). In Korea, bloggers and journalists expressed their concern about how the skater's mother handled the situation (Namoochurum, 2010). Because Orser stated that the decision was delivered by the mother alone against the skater's will, Mi-Hee Park, the mother of Kim was immediately conceptualized as the “skating mom” in North American media (Smith, 2010), and as the usual source of conflict in Korea (On, 2010). While the North American notion of “skating mom” also resonates with the idea of a nosy parent overstepping the realm of the teacher/coach, “the mom” was enough to signify a tension with teacher's authority in South Korea.

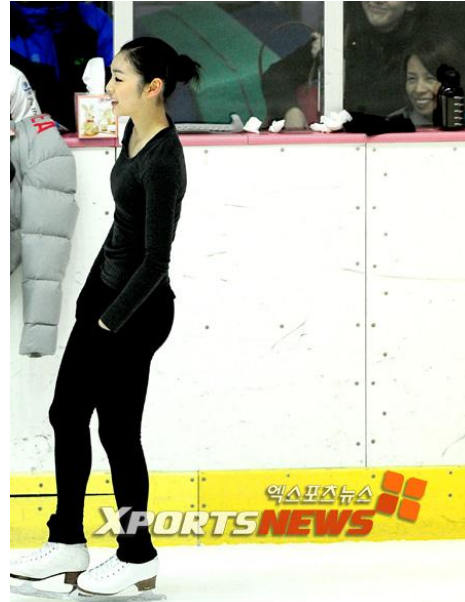


Photo5. Mi Hee Park watching her daughter's practice session

Speculatively, this difference reflects the tendency of parents being much more actively involved in their children's education (not only in skating rinks or soccer fields) in Korea. Park did not comment much when the controversy was at its height, but excerpts from her memoir showed how devoted Korean parents are to their children's education, which in *The Globe and Mail* was quoted to ridicule her as the queen of all skating moms: "I majored in Yu-Na," Ms. Park wrote in a best-selling memoir in South Korea. "For Yu-Na, I studied harder than when I was in school. I devoted myself to her more passionately than when I was in love" (Smith, 2010). However, mother's devotion to children's education is a virtue encouraged and respected in Korea. Old stories about devotional mothers—such as Chinese Confucian scholar Mencius's mother moving three times just to help her child acquire a habit of studying, or the mother of scholar Han in Chosun Dynasty supporting her son's education by selling rice cakes—are well known by most Koreans. Similarly, Park's support for her daughter was portrayed as "shadow" support in Korean media, because she followed wherever Kim went since her daughter started skating as a child (Jung, 2006).

However, the language used in Park's memoir seems to be more than a devotional mother who follows her daughter like a shadow:

Ms. Park is quite cold-hearted. Sometimes people see her as ruthless, but she is not afraid of such views. Her standard of decision is only Kim Yuna, when it is time to make a decision, she is firm. A good example is choosing coaches. Experts say it is important to choose a coach "that matches with the age and growth of the athlete." It is not always easy to say good bye to the coach that you got attached to. But Kim changed her coach several times according to Kim's needs. (Lee & On, 2012)

Like manager mothers who choose what kind of private education their children should receive, Kim's mother does not simply entrust her daughter's training to the coach, but takes an active role in the decision making. Scholars call this new style of parenting as "managing" (Park & Abelmann 2004; H.J. Cho, 2009). In particular, mothers from wealthier regions like Gangnam and Daechidong are considered to be the pioneers of the private education, looking for the new trend ahead of everyone else (H.J. Cho, 2009). Unlike the old generation of parents in the immediate post-War era who had to rely on the public school system only, the parents of today are from the post war baby-boom generation, whom themselves often have achieved university education and feel more entitled to intervene in their children's education. Stories of parents interrupting class and getting in fights with teachers appear quite frequently in South Korea these days:

Last year, a parent marched into a classroom in a small city. The parent jumped into the classroom in the middle of a class, beat up the homeroom teacher of her child, and snatched the hair of the other teacher who tried to separate the two apart... the parent who physically assaulted the teacher was also an ordinary middle class home-maker. To the police she said, "I am not lacking in any way compared to [the teacher]. I also had university education. But the teachers looked down on my child so I got upset." (Chosun Ilbo, 2012)

Here, we see a sense of threat on teachers' authority induced by the presence of overbearing parents who are ready to intervene whenever they feel necessary to the degree of using actual physical violence. In the portrayals of Kim-Orser split, when Orser

positioned himself as a disrespected teacher, Kim's mother Park was counter-positioned by the media as the mother who marches into classrooms without consent and often against educational purposes. In fact, media reportages takes up this representational positioning of the teacher and the manager mother often and in various ways, at times to suppress student demand for more democratic and inclusive classrooms and at other times, to talk about the dismal working conditions of today's teachers (Chosun Ilbo, 2012). The critical tone of South Korean media on Park and Kim parallels with the portrayals of such parents (often mothers) who are incapable of understanding the classroom context their children are situated in, and only want them to be treated specially. In other words, they are portrayed as the subject of the private realm invading the public realm of education (Scott, 1986; McElhinny, 2007).

Conclusion

Lyotard (1979) suggested that the role of professors who lack the capacity to do the work of securing the grand narratives will significantly decrease in postmodern education. Since education is subsumed to the logic of performativity, simple task of relaying information devoid of grand narratives can be easily taken over by others. The "reading" of the media texts above resembles the education debates in Korea where competence for university entrance and the global market became the single most important standard that impacts all relationships within the field of education, including that of teacher, student, and parents. In Korean society, the term *seuseung* is frequently employed to create a sense of nostalgia about the pure relationship between students and teachers that no longer exists in today's education jungle. Likewise, Kim's decision to part ways with Orser invoked similar discourses that regretted the sad ending of "beautiful alliance" (J.H. Cho, 2010).

Nevertheless, the nostalgia on true teacher overrode the gendered and ageist portrayals of the other. As suggested by Scott and McElhinny, gendered categories were extended to the division between private/public, student/teacher, and East/West. In

relation to the coach, Kim was positioned as an immature school-girl, and Park was positioned as the irrational mother. Furthermore, the North American news coverage involved colonial language describing Kim's Olympic glory as Orser's own, and that Kim "owed a lot" to Orser (CTV, 2010). The Kim-Orser story sounded odd only because the power dynamics between the two parties were contrary to the popular belief. The teacher is least experienced of the three in skating tutelage. The student really is a client. She is not only extremely talented and disciplined, but is financially powerful. The mother is not simply a manager mother, but a real manager, who chose Cricket Rink as Kim's training base, which did lead to her daughter's Olympic success.

Likewise, in relation to Korea's classrooms, the notion of the fall of teachers' authority is employed to describe a wide range of changes. Sometimes it is a lament about the long gone virtue of respect and life-long mentorship that *seuseung* provided to their students now replaced by private tutors and institutions. In other times, it is used against students' demand for more democratic classrooms that allow freedom of expression, from the point of the authoritarian model of pedagogy which involves various forms of oppression.

Chapter 4.

Post-nationalist education?

Hwang: Kim Yuna is busy for sure. She is really busy. She appears on commercials, and she is wanted her and there. But she did not diligently attend the practicum. It will be more accurate to say that she put on a show that she will be going for a teaching practicum. Yuna Kim always goes around different countries for official schedule or personal training. But maybe Korea University still allows the students to pass courses and to graduate even if students cannot attend classes?

Kim Mi Hwa: No, no. That's probably not it. I think there is some consideration for national representatives in sports. For example, substitute with report papers or take an online course...

Hwang: Well, I teach at a university. People say "cyber courses", but they are really only pseudo-courses.

(Conversation between Prof. Hwang and
Kim Mi Hwa in radio talk show,
Kim Mi Hwa's Yeorooboon 2012)

Introduction

After parting ways with Brian Orser, Kim competed in the 2011 World Championships and won a silver medal skating to Arirang, a traditional Korean tune, and joined the 2018 Winter Olympics the bidding committee for Pyeongchang city to give a presentation in front of the International Olympic Committee. In Korea, the tone of the media was that Kim's English presentation which highlighted her experience as a figure skater played some role in the success of the Pyeongchang bid¹⁸. After the Pyeongchang presentation, she soon announced that she will stay away from competitive skating. She

¹⁸ Look at figures C and D for the pictures taken on the presentation day.

came back to Korea and spent a relatively quiet year, completing the coursework to finish her university degree. There were various speculations about her future career at that time. The criticism from Professor Hwang came out in Spring 2012, when Kim did not yet announce that she will be coming back to competitive skating. And, apparently, some Koreans considered teaching physical education to be an inappropriate route for her.

In spring 2012, Kim went out for a month-long teaching practicum as a fourth year physical education student in Koryo University, one of the top universities in South Korea. Sang Min Hwang, a professor of developmental psychology at Yonsei University appeared at a radio talk show and criticized her teaching practicum to be “a one day show” that ignored the regular university curriculum (Jung, 2012). Soon after the radio program was aired, high school students whom Kim taught in her practicum tweeted pictures of Kim during the practicum to rebut the professor’s comment regarding Kim’s punctuality, but controversy remained about whether Kim is qualified to go out for a practicum as she completed a huge portion of her degree through distance education or substituted assignments for the school years when she was still training in overseas for the Olympics (Jung, 2012). Prof. Hwang later clarified that his criticism was not directed towards Kim in particular, but rather regarding Korea’s university education policy in general that accepts student-athletes for marketing purposes and allows them to graduate with relatively shallow education (Jung, 2012). Fans were upset about the wrong information used in the show, so the radio host had to make a short announcement of regrets in the following week. The professor, however, refused to apologize or correct his comments, and appeared in a few interviews to appeal his case: It really isn’t about Yuna Kim. His point was something else. He wanted to question the student selection process and integrity of education of universities.

The controversy then became about whether the elitist sports education system is good or bad, whether universities should keep recruiting celebrity students, or whether students whose primary purpose of entering university is not genuinely academic should still pursue a degree. Other lines of discussions were about whether sports stars should have so much privilege based on sports-nationalism. In the end, the controversy

attenuated since the students from the high school where Kim went out for practicum argued that Kim made it to their school every day just like any other practicum teachers, and as the point was made that Yuna Kim was admitted to the university's physical education major due to her excellence in her sport, not because of her fame.

However, given that many athletes have been entering university with the same criteria as Kim, the fairness of the admissions and graduation criteria alone cannot account for the big controversy about Kim's practicum. This controversy seems to convey larger debates about shifting ideas regarding the proper approach to education in Korea, and subsequently, discourses about what it is to be a proper student in contemporary South Korea, not in terms of student-teacher relationship, but in regards to the education policy in the de-centralizing and globalizing education.

Kim was a perfect case for this discussion not only because she is the most famous young athlete in South Korea, as Professor Hwang claimed to be the reason that he picked Kim in particular, but also because the media portrayal of her success has been heavily using education narratives. As discussed in the previous chapters, she was positioned both as a *yeogosaeng* (high school girl) hero who represented the nation, and also as an *umchinttal* (mom's friend's daughter) who is a postmodern cosmopolitan elite. She was a disadvantaged underdog from Korea in the global field of figure skating, but has quickly turned to a powerful and affluent sports celebrity who can easily fire and hire skating coaches. Coincidentally, the debate broke out when Kim was temporarily not officially competing as a national representative. She was walking a fine line between a national girl hero and a commercial celebrity (Nam, Kim, & Koh 2010). These tensions also resonate around the debates that South Korea is going through about education policies. Elite athletes in Korea used to be exempted from the regular academic curriculum for a very long time. Here, Professor Hwang had to pose his question carefully since students who are non-athletes can now also enter college with excellence in one specialty. Instead of asking about the right of the student-athletes to study like other students, professor Hwang problematized –although not very successfully—the current state of university education that only works on the principle of excellence.

University of Excellence

In *University in Ruins* (1996), Readings argue that University as an institution of rationality, citizen-subject, and ethnic identity has now outlived its time. For Readings, the modern University comes from the German model, where the University as a critical institution exist in conflict and balance with the state through the ideology of national culture. With the demise of the nation state, the Western University has reached a posthistorical moment: it is no longer associated with a national culture and is thus no longer the institution as we used to know it. While the idea that education has become globalized and embedded in global politics in which the United States takes dominance in most areas (cultural, political and economic), globalization of education is not necessarily the Americanization of national cultures. Instead, it entails the globalization of the transnational economy that in turn triggers the pursuit of excellence, a notion that is absent of culture but can be generally applied across all realms because of its referential emptiness, is what characterizes contemporary higher education. However, Readings notes that he is providing an analysis of the Western University. Indeed, in South Korea, the adoption of the Western modern education had begun at a dire moment to fight against a physical imperial power. In this sense, the relationship of the University to the “national culture” is somewhat ambiguous in the South Korean context, as even the modernist ideals were actively implemented for very practical reasons. The king of Chosun thought the adoption of modern education was the way to strengthen the nation. Commoners thought it would abolish the aristocratic system. In post-war Korea, university education became the ladder for social mobility. Yet the University in South Korea, while somewhat precariously standing within the traditional ideas of education, did provide a space for the young students and academics to talk about the future of the country and social justice, i.e., the ideals of modern Korea. Of course, I should note that in contrast to the German University, the University as an institution in Korea did not emerge slowly with the development of modern thoughts, but rather abruptly through importing ideas from the West. Nevertheless, contemporary South Korea is going through a similar change as Readings’s discussion of contemporary University in that the

notion of excellence prevails. For instance, while excellence in diverse areas qualifies students for university admission, Korean history is no longer a mandatory course for high school students or university education.

Athlete-students in South Korea

South Korea's sport policy is referred to as an "elite-sport policy" that focuses on success in the international competitions (Park, Lim & Bretherton, 2012). Even silver and bronze medals are considered not good enough compared to gold, and it is only recently that media started to put a conscious effort to support all athletes who participated in the competitions. Elite-sport policy was adopted under the military regimes of Park Jung Hee and Chun Doo Hwan, both as a tool of political propaganda against North Korea—which was in fact economically better off than South Korea until the 1960s, and also to draw the South Korean public's attention away from the political tensions within South Korea (H. Jung, 2009). In short, sport was one of the many state centered projects that took place in the 1960-80s in South Korea (Park, Lim & Bretherton, 2012). As Korea hosted Asian Games in 1986 and Seoul Olympics in 1988, Chun Doo Hwan government invested heavily to athletes who can win a medal in the Games (ibid). Taeneung Athletes' Village, a training facility for elite athletes of all amateur competition sports who are selected as national representatives each year, was established in 1966 (ibid). Athletes can sleep, eat, and train all at the same time in the facility. The facility was first established by Park Jung Hee, after the Tokyo Olympics where South Korea won only three medals (ibid). South Korea has now become a stronger competitor in international competitions, but until today, most of athletes who are qualified as national representatives train intensively in Taenueng.

Under this elite-sport policy, athletically talented young children decide their paths quite early on, and to focus on training, they do not have the time to take part in the regular school curriculum. From middle school, athlete-students are only required to attend minimum hours of classes. In Yuna Kim's case, she was not completely bound to

Taeneung Village as even Taenueng was not apt for figure skating, but she often skipped afternoon classes for practice like other student-athletes:

I don't regret missing out school. I am now used to this. This is what I chose. (Yuna Kim, In KBS documentary Lark Ascending)

University entrance is based on their athletic achievements, too. Until 2000, athlete-students chose whatever major they wanted (J.S. Kim, 2012). Nowadays, student-athletes are required to choose related majors such as physical education. The position of student-athletes in the universities used to be very similar to their position in secondary school. Almost everyone else came in with academic qualifications, but elite athletes were valued for their symbolic value. In a sense, they were not necessarily a student. Academic work was not their main responsibility even as university students. They did not truly belong to the academia but were still a part of the University, the institution of national culture (Readings), or for King Gojong, the institution for the future of the nation (Chapter 1).

Students with excellence

Yuna Kim's training outside the country slightly oversteps the boundary of the national representative as she did not train in Taeneung with other athletes. She appeared in commercial advertisements, trained in overseas with the support of her personal sponsors. It was not too clear whether she was promoting herself or the country. This is not to say that Kim was not understood as a national hero. When Kim won a gold medal in the Olympics, her picture was on the first page of practically all newspapers of South Korea the next morning. Winning a gold medal over her Japanese rival Asada Mao fits in perfectly with the typical imagery of a South Korean athlete-hero. Further, she won the gold medal in the most important international winter sport event. Nevertheless, she is one of a few in the new generation of athletes who were not necessarily bound by the training system of the state.

Until the controversy about Yuna Kim's teaching practicum, athlete-students focusing solely on their athletic training was discussed more as a welfare issue of the athlete-students themselves. One of the main issues was that student-athletes who are unsuccessful in the athletic field have no place in society. However, Hwang's comments suggest that there are larger changes in the contemporary University. Yuna Kim was a physical education major. As the student selection policy of universities became more diversified under Kim Dae Jung government, athlete-students became simply one of the many categories under which students with special talents were admitted into universities. Current policy requires them to have excellence in their own field. The emphasis is on excellence, whether athletic or not. There are several other criteria for special talent, as a single category, analytical writing and English are the most common ones (G.H. Kim, 2013):

This is a category to select students with excellent language skills. Students with official language test scores or awards in relevant competitions can apply... Most schools do not have a minimum requirement for SAT. (G.H. Kim, 2013)

As athlete-students are one of the many "excellent" students, it becomes a little obscure to treat them as an exception in the academia. Athletes are not the only group of students admitted in university based on excellence in some kind of specialty with more leniency on the grades. In this context, for Yuna Kim, missing classes was not considered a privilege in high school, but in University, the situation became different. Even though Professor Hwang's criticism may seem unfair to Yuna Kim as it did not fully reflect the widely accepted practice in physical education departments (students who are national representatives often substitute classes with reports and assignments), the question is raised because the shifts in education policies allowed Kim to be positioned as a part of the University of excellence. Thus, it is not Kim who exceptionally stepped over the boundary of the university policy, but the University itself that is changing into an institution that is different from how we used to know it.

Conflict

As shortly mentioned in chapters 1 and 2, the reformation of the student selection process of universities that was supposed to promote diversity and creativity of students and free the teenagers from suffocating from the heavy burdens of entrance exams eventually became a larger barrier for most students. For example, analytical writing exam was implemented by the department of education during the presidency of Kim Dae Jung, one of the main political leaders of democratization movement in the 1970-80s, for the promotion of critical thinking and writing. However, these days, critics argue that the exam functions as an extra selection process for universities, as the questions in the exam is exceedingly difficult beyond the secondary education curriculum, and for students, simply an extra qualification that they have to learn through the private institutions outside of the public education system (H.J. Cho, 2009). Furthermore, most of the special criteria give advantage to elite students from *teuk soo mok juk godeunghakgyo* (special purpose high school) such as science high school or foreign language high school, or students who finished their high school degree from overseas. These schools are extremely difficult to get in, and students who can afford the special private education for this stream are usually the ones who proceed to these schools. And of course, it is even more expensive to send children as international students to schools in North America. The shift to diversity and creativity education intensified the influence of economic and cultural capitals on educational capital, and education from North American institutions is the most out of reach for the majority of South Korean students from lower status.

In this context, there seems to be a growing sense of animosity against those who came back to Korea after completing their education outside of Korea. *Umchinah*, the sons, are especially prone to the criticism as all young Korean male are required to serve the military for about two years, whereas some of the *umchinahs* are able to acquire a foreign citizenship and avoid the mandatory military service. They are often ridiculed as “black haired foreigners,” criticized more harshly than “real foreigners.” The most striking case of this animosity in the last few years would be Seon Woong Lee, a.k.a.

Tablo, who is a rapper of the hip hop group Epik High. Tablo is a Stanford graduate with coterminal B.A. and M.A. in English, who returned to South Korea to become a professional hip hop musician. Their first album *Map of the Human Soul* was highly rated among hip hop listeners, especially due to the literary and philosophical style of Tablo's rap, but did not catch much media attention (D. Kim, 2004). About six months later, Epik High released their second album *High Society*, an album that was again quite highly rated among critics (S. B. Yoo, 2004). However it is only after Tablo appeared in a TV talk show that his career really started to take off. His elite academic background and reportedly high I. Q. played a critical role in this instant fame (Kim, Park, & Yoo, 2010). Below is a typical media portrayal of his academic background:

Tablo has I.Q. that is almost 180, but strangely quit elementary school because he was unable to memorize multiplication table... He soon left to Vancouver, Canada ... After returning to Korea, he started to study because he felt a little humiliated after getting an F in the International School he went to.

Tablo was admitted to both Harvard and Stanford more because of the poem and play script he wrote than his grades, and graduated his B.A. program with a top notch G.P.A. in three years.

(Lee & Kim, 2007)

The interview report above mentions that Tablo started to work on his academics, suggesting his grades were not that bad either, but in his interviews, his creative writing skills were always emphasized rather than good grades. His education narrative is a perfect model of the creative *umchinah*, who is talented, cosmopolitan, and elite all at the same time. While he gained instant fame because of his unexpected educational capital, eventually it became a shackle for him. In the beginning it was few internet users leaving comments under media reports about Tablo, but the rumour spread out very quickly. The rumour said that his credentials are all forgery.

It is impossible to get both BA and MA in three and a half years, and even his advisor said he doesn't know Tablo. The transcript that Tablo released

last July is counterfeit. There is no thesis written by Tablo in Stanford library. (The argument of *Tajinyo*¹⁹, Noh & Song, 2010)

Due to the gap between the university culture in Korea where students mostly follow the four year curriculum and the difference in official transcript formats, Tablo had a hard time “proving” his own credentials. In the process of proving that he is the one who went to school, Tablo had to disclose his Canadian citizenship, as the name on the transcript had his English first name Daniel. Stanford tried to help him out in various ways -- one day, they even posted a letter stating Tablo is a Stanford graduate on their official twitter— but the rumours did not go away quickly. The long fight ended through lawsuit, after Tablo sued the most active members of his hate group Tajinyo for spreading false

information with mal purpose (Noh & Song, 2010). Critics argued that the case involved all the sensitive topics in contemporary South Korea such as double citizenship, military service, educational prestige, and that Tablo’s admired status fueled jealousy and hatred of some Koreans (Kim Park & Yoo ,2010).

¹⁹ Web based community “Asking truth to Tablo”

STANFORD
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June 10, 2010

To Whom It May Concern:

Daniel Seon Woong Lee entered Stanford University in the Autumn Quarter of 1998-99 and graduated with a BA in English and an MA in English in 2002. Any suggestions, speculations or innuendos to the contrary are patently false. Daniel Seon Woong Lee is an alumnus in good standing of Stanford University.

It is important to us that this information be clarified so that Daniel Seon Woong Lee's good name — and the good name of Stanford University — are restored.

Sincerely,

Thomas C. Black
Associate Vice Provost of Student Affairs
And University Registrar
Stanford University

Office of the University Registrar
630 Serra Street, Stanford, CA 94305-6032

Photo 6. Letter posted on Stanford University's twitter account

While the two cases are not exactly the same, both are closely related to the changing status of the University education in South Korea in the context of globalization. Interestingly, Kim mended this uncomfortable situation by announcing her come back to competitive skating, thus reclaiming her status as a national representative, only a few weeks after the controversy. Also, she also announced that she will be training with her childhood coaches in Taeneung, with younger Korean figure skaters. Had Kim not announced a comeback to competitive training, her position as a commercial celebrity could have been highlighted.

Conclusion

The comments by Hwang evoke the complex conflict of interests and several layers of problems in South Korea's education. On the one hand, students are evaluated based on excellence, regardless of its criterion, and on the other hand, Koreans do not fully trust this idea as an educational value. *Tajinyo's* obsessive doubt about Tablo is based on the disbelief about the new creative umchinah discourse that reproduces the existing structure in a globalized society. Simply put, the state centered, nationalist framework of education is being challenged by the private and globalized one. This does not mean that there necessarily is a unified global culture or cosmopolitan humanist value that guides the new University. Lyotard's performativity and Readings's excellence are very insightful notions for the Korean case. Even the capacity to think "critically" has now turned to simply a criterion of excellence, just like figure skating, or English communication skills.

However, in South Korea where the competition for academic success is fierce, there is quite a strong sense of repulsion against the flexible, excellence focused policy. The state centered system might be undemocratic and authoritarian, but brought more opportunity for students from lower class backgrounds. Perhaps it is not a coincidence that the two unprecedented military dictators in South Korea were the ones who brought most "equality" in the education system. On the other hand, creativity education, when initially implemented, in part embraced the desire of students for a more democratic pedagogy, but is easily transformed to an "excellence" education. These two genres need to be separate out from each other in the education debates, as when left compressed, it is impossible to understand the different layers of discourse.

Chapter 5.

Conclusion

My initial interest in South Korea's education system started to develop as soon as I came back from the Philippines just before turning twelve years old. I left Korea when I was grade one and spent most of my elementary school years in a Montessori School in Manila. The teachers in Montessori gave only a few lecture style instructions, and we were supposed to use the materials in the classroom, sitting in a small group, yet working individually. This was a radically different classroom setting than what my peers in South Korea experienced. When I came back to Korea, I was able to quickly catch up with the Korean curriculum as I felt more comfortable with reading and writing in my mother tongue. However, there were some other aspects of the school system that I never got used to. I easily grew weary of the strict conduct related regulations such as banning coloured hair, socks with too much colour, or the requirement to always wear a name tag. We stayed at school from early morning to late night, and had to take many mandatory courses. I took four mandatory science subjects, advanced math, a few different Korean courses, English, and another second foreign language, Korean and World history, three social studies courses, and a few electives. I heard that the mandatory curriculum for high school students started to lighten up from the following year in 1998. I was among the first students who took analytical writing exam as a supplementary qualification for university entrance. Monthly student analytical writing magazines became popular, as we were warned that the age of critical thinking and analytical writing is coming. The magazines dealt with various social issues and offered some very basic theoretical background. I really enjoyed spending time reading those magazines, as it was a legitimate way to do something interesting in the "mandatory self-study time." In the following years, education policy gradually changed to give more opportunities to

students with excellent writing skills. I was already in college by then, but I was pleased to hear about these changes. I was very sure that the changes were heading towards the right direction, towards a more advanced and sophisticated method of evaluating students. However, the education related news reports I in the following years suggested otherwise. When so many teenagers tried more than their best to fulfill all the qualifications for university entrance, even the most creativity promoting policy only added more burdens to students. Here, it is worth noting that when the student selection process is not so straightforward, cultural capital of the student becomes more important in playing the education game in contrast to simply following textbooks like the model students. The idea of educational reproduction is not entirely new in social theory. The education system reproduces the existing structure not simply because of difference in external resources but because of the ability to play the linguistic game of academics due to each student's difference in familial background (Bourdieu, 1965). But in South Korea, everyone still tries harder in various ways as much as they could. For example, parents send their children to English kindergarten from young age to give them the taste of English language and culture. To meet the large demand for private education, online prep-courses prevail, and to some degree mediate the access to private education. These changes could be simply seen as a result of "competitiveness," or the deregulation of the market for some, but the intensity of the education zeal is possible only because the education dream is still vivid for parents and students. Contrary to the ongoing discourse about the necessity to open other doors for youth instead of making everyone direct for higher education, parents and students are not ready to give up their education struggle. Besides, who can tell them, "You should be content with high school education?" If that happens, it will be because the reproductive function will have dominated the education field. It will be the end of the education dream, the complete exhaustion of dragons from small streams. At the same time, it might relieve the burdened youth from the deadly education struggle, and help them live their lives more happily. Could this irony be ever resolved?

While I am drawn to Yuna Kim and her heroic story of conquering the world with her natural talent and hard work, and strive to succeed in the North American academia,

ultimately reproducing the existing fields of global education, what is happening to the students in Korea? Teenagers are depressed, and children jump off the roofs of the countless high-rise apartments in South Korea to kill themselves. Some are sent away to far countries to get ahead of their peers, some go to universities but not all of them are able to find a comfortable job like their parents in the baby boom generation did (Woo & Park, 2007). Some die of starvation in 21st Century, glamorous Seoul while trying to make their living through creative work (Editorial, 2011). Some become Yuna Kim.

The unclarity of the problem in South Korea's education debates is the reason that I was drawn to Lyotard instead of other possible methods. The notion of the *differend* allows me to engage with the uncomfortable feelings that keep haunting me in the process of my analysis. This feeling struck me in the process of collecting media texts on policy debates when one day I came across an article on the suicide of an elementary school student. The 12 year old (Korean age, 11 year old) child went up to the roof of a high rise apartment and threw himself to the ground – one of the high rise apartments which used to be a symbol of the economic development of South Korea and is the main kind of housing in the metropolitan Seoul where more than hundred thousand inhabitants live. Disturbingly, this was not an isolated incident. Elementary school students' suicides have been reported quite frequently in the last two years while I was following related news. Parents also suffer. In a conversation with my colleague, I was trying to explain why Kim's father is not as present in the educational narrative. I spoke of the "Geese families" that the couple stays apart – the dad as the breadwinner in the home country and the mom as the manager in the foreign country—for the child's educational capital. The next day, while looking for the media coverage on Yuna Kim's participation in the World Championships, I found coverage on the suicide of a geese father. He died in his small apartment by burning ignition coal and gas poisoning himself. I also recall the death of a promising young script writer who died because of starvation in the glamorous Seoul of 2011. A note was posted in the entrance door of her basement room she was renting. It said, "This is very embarrassing, but I have not eaten for days. If you have some left over rice and kimchi, please knock my door" (T.K. Kim, 2011). Interlocutors have commented respectively on the deaths as a matter of peer group bullying, mid-life crisis of the

father/husband who was separated from his family, and the lack of state welfare system that supports artists. For me, these deaths are deaths of persons who are positioned in one way or another in the education discourses of South Korea. I have not found a way to digest the uncomfortable feeling into a coherent argument. Yet, I write with these deaths in my mind. The degree of anxiety found in contemporary South Korea's education debates intense enough to position someone as successful as Yuna Kim in a field outside the formal education as a student figure, and the severe pressure for all stakeholders that is often talked about as the problem of competitiveness make me feel that there must be a bigger wrong in the South Korean education scene that is not captured by the currently available discourse or by this very project. I treat this thesis as a very preliminary step of my attempt to witness and record the wrong, but well knowing that this is a reading that deals with a smaller part of the discourses.

Korea went through turbulences in the last century. The old system was abolished rather abruptly by the King for survival in the midst of foreign invasions. Then, Japan colonized Korea. American military administration came in. Korean War broke out. Military dictatorship lasted through decades of democratization movement. Young students used to throw their lives –whether through life or death—for independence, war, democratization, and social justice. The nation started to celebrate its rapid “development,” parents sacrificially devoted their lives for their children, but just when they thought their children are much more fortunate than they used to be, youth started to give up their lives because of school. When student suicide first became a social issue, it was about high school students who could not overcome the competitive pressure of university entrance process. In 2013, we hear about 11 year olds. They did not shout out “Liberty for Korea!” like the youth in the colony. They did not burn “for democracy” like the youth under dictators. They neither left a note that says “grades are not all that matters.”

What is their story? Can we hear them? We ought to lend ears, and listen.

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