Comparison of the Current Educational Status in China and South Korea

Ye-eun Kim

School of Chinese Language and Literature, Beijing Normal University, Haidian District, Beijing, China

Abstract. China and South Korea are neighboring countries with the closest geographical and cultural proximity. From ancient times to the present, social exchanges between China and South Korea have been highly active and extensive across a wide range of fields, resulting in significant mutual influences in various aspects of society. This includes areas such as philosophy, culture, education, and technology. The educational systems of both countries have their origins in Confucianism, hence there are similarities in their current educational states. However, there are also differences in aspects such as educational systems and environments. This paper aims to compare the current educational status in China and South Korea.

1. Introduction

As the information society develops, knowledge and human resources become increasingly important. The cultivation of talent relies on education; thus, "education" today is one of the key factors affecting society and overall national strength. Since China's "Education Revolution" from 1958 to 1960, its education system and structure have rapidly developed, significantly enhancing the quality of education. After the end of the "Cultural Revolution" in 1977, the educational sector underwent a comprehensive reorganization in a series of regulations, systems, requirements, and practices. Since 1979, Chinese education has undergone various reforms and explorations, leading to significant developments in the field.

In modern times, South Korea, having gone through a history of colonial rule and war, faced stagnation and regression in education. It was only after the armistice in 1953 that formal education laws began to be established in Korea, including the implementation of educational self-governance, the institutionalization of compulsory education, and the initiation of long-term comprehensive educational plans, leading to a complete overhaul of the educational system. The "7•30 Educational Revolution" and "Lifelong Education System" announced in 1980 are among the most representative policies in the modern history of South Korean education.

China and South Korea, being the closest neighbors geographically and culturally, inevitably influence each other in the development of their educational systems. This paper aims to compare the current educational status in China and South Korea.

2. Main Body

2.1. Commonalities in the Education Systems of China and South Korea

The concept of 'education' encompasses not only the nurturing of students' physical and mental development but also the instruction of theoretical and practical knowledge. Both China and South Korea are particularly focused on 'teaching'. These countries place greater emphasis on examinations and their results compared to other nations, resulting in similarities in their examination systems and educational structures. First and foremost, the most representative example is the 'college entrance examination.' The 'Gaokao' in China is similar to South Korea's 'College Scholastic Ability Test,' with students gaining admission to universities based on their scores in these exams. Consequently, secondary education in both countries tends to be predominantly geared towards preparing for these entrance examinations, leading to the current prevalence of rote learning (spoon-feeding education) in these systems.

Secondly, both China and South Korea have the same duration for compulsory education, as well as the same educational structure for primary and middle schools. Both China and South Korea, in pursuit of equal educational opportunities and the development of the quality of societal members, legally guarantee a certain period of compulsory education. The duration of compulsory education in both countries is nine years, including six years of primary school and three years of junior high school. The grade system for primary and secondary education consists of six years in primary school, three years in junior high school, and three years...
Thirdly, the education in both China and South Korea is rooted in Confucianism, and current educational philosophies still bear the influence of Confucian thought. For instance, Confucius emphasized the importance of being 'eager to learn and not ashamed to ask questions', where 'eager to learn' refers to studying diligently and with keen interest. 'Not ashamed to ask questions' means not only listening to the teachings of teachers and elders but also actively seeking their guidance without feeling ashamed of doing so. Confucius' principle of 'not ashamed to ask questions' manifests in two ways: firstly, it is reflected in learning from his own students, a practice of teaching and learning simultaneously, as recorded multiple times in the 'Analects'. Secondly, it involves learning from the general populace; in his view, there is much to be learned from the masses, a concept also supported by numerous instances in the 'Analects'. His advocacy for the attitude of 'not ashamed to ask questions' has had a profound impact on scholars and literati in subsequent generations. Furthermore, Additionally, Confucian teachings such as 'Reviewing what has been learned and acquiring new knowledge from it, one can become a teacher for others', 'As heaven’s movement is ever vigorous, so a gentleman should constantly strive for self-improvement', and 'Being so engrossed in study that one forgets to eat and finds joy beyond worries, unaware of approaching old age', continue to have a significant influence on current educational philosophies and methodologies. Besides these positive impacts, Confucianism also has some negative effects on modern education. For example, due to the Confucian ideals of 'the dignity of the teaching profession' and the worship of 'ritual', the educational approaches in China and South Korea tend to be more hierarchical and vertical. Additionally, the spirit of 'Being so engrossed in study that one forgets to eat' has led to an overly competitive educational environment in Confucian countries.

Fourthly, the fervor in education in both China and South Korea is linked to their historical 'Imperial Examination Systems'. Both countries had a system of examinations that was directly related to the social status of the common people. Therefore, over more than a thousand years, the desire for social advancement through education has been ingrained in the consciousness of the people in both countries, leading to the current competitive nature of their educational approaches. As mentioned above, due to the shared origins of traditional thought and the joint process of social development, the current educational situations in China and South Korea share several similarities. However, aside from these commonalities, there are also many differences due to rapid social changes and differences in educational environments. The differences in the educational status between China and South Korea are as follows.

2.2. Differences in Education between China and South Korea

2.2.1. Educational Philosophies of China and South Korea

The term "educational philosophy" refers to the ideal concepts and principles that education should ultimately achieve. The ten major educational philosophies of China are as follows: People-Centric (promoting the development and perfection of individuals), Comprehensive Development (focusing on national education for all citizens, emphasizing the overall development of the nation, and aiming to significantly enhance the ideological, moral, and scientific-cultural quality of the entire population), Quality Education (helping students develop learning competencies and strengthen their qualities as the basic educational goal, aimed at fully developing the various potential qualities of students), Creativity (guiding, inspiring, and training students' creative talents as a fundamental goal), Subjectivity (transforming education from being centered around teachers and textbooks to an active process centered on the learners), Individualization (emphasizing respect for individuality, acknowledging individual differences, celebrating uniqueness, and encouraging individual development), Openness (internationalization, industrialization, and socialization of educational methods; expansion and informatization of the educational process; diversification of educational resources; globalization of educational content; modernization of teaching materials, among other aspects.), Diversity (the diversification of educational needs, the diversification of standards and criteria for talent, the diversification of educational objectives, the diversification of management systems, as well as diversification in educational forms, methods, and the varied standards for assessing education and talent quality, among other aspects.), Ecological Harmony (viewing educational activities as an organic ecological whole, forming a unified educational ecological chain to achieve ecologically harmonious education), and Systemicity (forming a broad social education system to promote the healthy operation and orderly development of the overall education system).

In contrast, South Korea's educational philosophy, "under the principle of 'benefiting all mankind broadly,' sets its objective as 'the perfection of citizen personalities, the acquisition of autonomous living capabilities and civic qualities, thereby contributing to the development of a democratic state and to the common prosperity of mankind.'" The six major educational philosophies of South Korea include: Inclusiveness, Universality, Basicness, Consistency, Sustainability, and Affirmativeness.

2.2.2. Examination Systems in China and South Korea

As previously mentioned, both China and South Korea have a 'college entrance examination' system, but the
formats of these exams differ. In South Korea, the questions, timing, and requirements of the college entrance exam are the same nationwide. However, due to China's vast size and the varying conditions in each city, the questions of the national college entrance exam differ in each province, and in some provinces, even the subjects tested vary, despite the exam being held simultaneously across the country.[8]

In terms of examination systems, there is a significant difference: South Korea does not have an equivalent to China's 'Hui Kao'. The 'Hui Kao' is the Academic Proficiency Test for regular high schools in China, essentially serving as the graduation exam for Chinese regular high schools. The 'Gaokao' is taken by students in their third year of high school, whereas the 'Hui Kao' is administered during the second year. Passing the 'Hui Kao' is necessary to obtain a high school diploma and to qualify for the 'Gaokao'. The 'Hui Kao' mainly measures the extent to which students meet national educational requirements and is an important system for ensuring the quality of education and teaching.[9] The general high school graduation examination, or 'Hui Kao', is organized twice a year, typically in July and December. It consists of written, closed-book tests, with each province setting unified requirements, formulating questions, scheduling exams, and grading papers. Therefore, the subjects and questions of the 'Hui Kao' vary from province to province, generally including about 10 to 13 subjects such as Chinese, Mathematics, Foreign Languages (English, Japanese, French, Russian, Spanish, German), Ideological & Political Education, Physics, Chemistry, History, Geography, Biology, Information Technology, and General Technology.[10][11]

Furthermore, in China, admission to universities is largely determined by a 'once-in-a-lifetime' college entrance exam. The outcome of a single college entrance exam shapes a student's future educational environment.[12] In contrast, in South Korea, students submit their mid-term and final exam scores from all three years of high school[13], as well as their overall academic performance during this period, when applying to universities. Korean high schools conduct mock exams every 2-3 months, but these mock exam scores are not included in the university admission process. [14][15]

2.2.3. Status of Extracurricular Education (Private Education) in China and South Korea

Due to the exam-oriented and competitive nature of education in both China and South Korea, the fervor for extracurricular education in these countries is particularly intense. Extracurricular education includes various tutoring classes and private coaching outside of school. China’s extracurricular education market has been experiencing rapid growth, with a compound annual growth rate of nearly 47% from 2016 to 2020.[16] (See Figure 1)

The three representative types of extracurricular education in China are tutoring classes, private tutoring, and online tutoring. Before the pandemic, private tutoring accounted for the largest share, approximately 45%[17], but due to the pandemic, online tutoring has grown rapidly. Online tutoring, being immune to the risks of infection, cost-effective, and offering a wide range of choices, is gradually expanding. However, it also faces challenges such as the lack of regulatory frameworks, an overabundance of platforms and formats, and difficulties in managing or controlling students.

Since 2021, China has been implementing the "Double Reduction" policy to reduce school homework and after-school tutoring. Profit-driven extracurricular tutoring in subjects such as Chinese, English, and Mathematics has been illegalized. However, this has not dampened parents' enthusiasm for education. The stock prices of related companies only fluctuated by about 10%, and according to interviews with foreign teachers and other tutors, private tutoring remains prevalent.

However, the fervor for private education in South Korea is even more intense than in China.[18] The investment in private education in South Korea accounts for 2.96% of its GDP[19], ranking first in the world. In 2009, the participation rate in extracurricular education among South Korean primary school students reached 87.4%. While extracurricular education can provide quality education to learners, a significant issue has recently emerged in South Korea’s private education: the imbalance and disparity in educational levels. The participation rate in private education is 62.8% for regular high schools and 26.1% for vocational high schools. Students in the top 10% in academic performance have an 87% participation rate in private education, while the bottom 20% have a participation rate of 50.4%. In families with a monthly income exceeding 7 million KRW, the participation rate in private education for their children is 91.8%, whereas it is only 34.3% in families with an income less than 1 million KRW. The disparity in private education is also linked to many economic factors, including parents’ education level and profession. This imbalance in educational opportunities is a serious social issue, and the aforementioned trend of overheated private education has led to the neglect of public education.[20][21]

Around 2009, the necessity to curb extracurricular education for reducing educational inequality was a significant point of focus in South Korea. However, the related legislative efforts were either shelved or failed to
achieve effectiveness.

The participation rate in private education is highest in Seoul (79%), but it also reaches about 75% in other medium and small cities, with not much difference between cities.\[22\] In China, however, there is a relatively larger disparity in extracurricular education participation rates between cities.

In China, the gap in participation rates in extracurricular education between different types of schools (such as regular and vocational high schools) is not particularly large, but in South Korea, the gap between school types is significant.

2.2.4. Educational Disparities Across Regions

Due to China's vast size and the significant differences in natural environments, development levels, and economic conditions of each city, there is a considerable disparity in education levels across various regions.\[23\] This disparity is especially pronounced between mountainous and urban areas, and in comparison with more developed regions. For example, in the year 2000, the number of people per 100,000 with junior college degrees or above was 16,843 in Beijing, compared to 1,262 in Tibet\[24\], with the former being more than ten times higher than the latter. Furthermore, the average years of education per person in Beijing were 1.9 times that of Tibet. Tibet has the lowest average years of education in China. The consequences of these educational disparities are primarily manifested in polarization and a vicious cycle of 'income inequality - educational inequality - income inequality'. Quantitative research on the educational development of various provinces has found that the education level in provinces in Eastern China is generally higher than that in the Central and Western regions; there is a significant positive correlation between the level of educational development and economic development. In recent years, the disparity in education between regions has become increasingly pronounced, leading to gaps in talent cultivation. These educational disparities have significant impacts on social stability and welfare.

In 1989, the Central Committee of the Communist Youth League of China and the China Youth Development Foundation initiated the "Project Hope" to address these disparities. "Project Hope" is a charitable educational initiative dedicated to the mobilization of social support, financial aid for education, the reintegration of out-of-school children from impoverished areas into classrooms, and the assurance of their fundamental right to education.\[25\] Project Hope has changed the destinies of numerous out-of-school children and improved the conditions of schools in impoverished areas.\[26\][27]

South Korea also experiences disparities in educational levels between regions. For example, Gangnam and Bundang districts, being more economically developed than other areas, have the most active private education markets and higher rates of admission to key schools. However, due to the smaller size of South Korea and the relatively small differences in environmental conditions nationwide, the disparities in education between cities are not significant, with only a few regions being exceptions.\[28\]

In the 21st century, an era of increasingly intense technological and economic competition, education is a vital driving force for economic development and social progress. Therefore, pertinent institutions should focus on effective initiatives involving enhanced financial contributions to education, equitable distribution of educational costs, the steady diminishment of educational gaps between regions, the attainment of educational fairness, the interruption of the 'income inequality - educational inequality - income inequality' cycle, and facilitation of cohesive growth in education, the economy, and society.

3. Conclusions

Due to thousands of years of increasingly frequent social exchanges between the two countries, China and South Korea share many similarities in their current educational situations. As previously mentioned, these include the influence of Confucianism on both countries' education systems, the education methods primarily focused on preparing for college entrance exams, the resultant rote learning approach, and the similarity in the duration of compulsory education.

Furthermore, the differences outlined in the main text are some of the most prominent and typical disparities. Beyond these highlighted distinctions, there are numerous other disparities, such as in educational administrative systems, the ratio of school types, and the rate of university student leave of absence. (In China, typically, most university students complete their studies within 4-5 years. However, in South Korea, due to various reasons, there is a particularly high rate of student leave of absence. For example, since South Korean males over 19 are required to serve in the military, the average graduation age for male students is around 26 years under normal circumstances.)

The author believes that both China and South Korea need to address the issue of educational inequality. China should resolve the imbalance in educational environments across different regions, while South Korea should tackle the problems caused by the overheating of private education and the resulting inequalities. The author also thinks that the burden and pressure of the college entrance examinations in both countries are excessive, hindering the physical and mental development of students. There have even been cases in both countries where high school seniors have committed suicide due to the stress of these exams. Therefore, both nations should utilize a variety of admission schemes and continuous assessment scores to address the 'one exam determines your future' issue and alleviate the excessive burden and pressure of the entrance exams.\[29\]

There are both positive and negative aspects in the current state of education in each country. The author hopes that China and South Korea can learn from each other's positive aspects and gradually develop.
References