Introduction

A great air of tension hovered throughout South Korea on 17 November 1999. A special task force had spent months planning for that day. The night before, President Kim Dae Jung had appeared on television to announce that the nation was prepared for the event. All nonessential governmental workers would report to work only later in the morning, as would employees of major firms. Thousands of special duty police were on hand in many cities; thirteen thousand police had been mobilized in Seoul alone. Flights at all the nation’s airports had been restricted, and special efforts had been made to halt construction to avoid creating noise or commotion of any kind. It was the day of the national university entrance examinations. For weeks Buddhist temples had been filled with hopeful parents and students; in fact, churches and temples received a large proportion of their annual revenues from the donations of these hopefuls. Shamans and vendors of amulets and “lucky” sticky candy had been doing a brisk business. It would be a day for which young men and women had prepared since elementary school, if not before, and for which parents had sacrificed a large portion of their income.

The college entrance examinations provide a vivid example of what Koreans sometimes call their “education fever” (kyöyuk yölgï). Education is a national obsession in South Korea. Everywhere there are “cram schools” (hagwôn), where elementary, middle, and high school students study late in the evening and on weekends. Every neighborhood has a store selling textbooks, supplementary readings, and guides to the entrance examinations. Adults, too, study at night schools, attempting to advance their education. Real estate prices depend
as much on the reputation of local schools as on the inherent desirability of the location or the quality of housing. South Korean families invest heavily in the education of their children, and children and young adults spend a huge portion of their time studying and preparing for examinations. Education pops up in conversation often, and the success of a son, daughter, or grandchild at entering a “good” school is a source of great pride. Although education is important in every nation, even casual visitors become aware of the intense preoccupation of South Koreans with schooling. This was certainly true of the author, who first arrived in Korea to take a job teaching English at a university in Seoul, with little knowledge of the country and its culture but with experience working in other developing nations. It did not take long to discover how important education was to the Koreans the author met. Later the author participated in a number of in-service training programs for middle and high school teachers and was invited to visit provincial urban and rural schools. It became apparent that the concern for educational attainment was not confined to the urban middle class of the capital but was an all-pervasive feature of South Korean society.

This obsession with formal learning has accompanied a remarkable educational transformation of South Korea in the half century after its liberation from Japan. In 1945, when the thirty-five-year Japanese colonial rule in South Korea ended, the majority of adult Koreans were illiterate. Mass primary education had only recently begun, and less than 5 percent of the adult population had more than an elementary school education. There was only one university in Korea, and most of its students were Japanese. Five decades later, virtually all South Koreans were literate, all young people attended primary and middle schools, and 90 percent graduated from high school. There were over 180 colleges and universities, and the proportion of college-age men and women who enrolled in higher education was greater than in most European nations. The quality of education was high as well—at least judging by comparative international tests. These tests usually rate the math and science skills of South Korean primary and secondary students as among the highest in the world.2

The rapid expansion of state-directed formal education in the second half of the twentieth century is not unique to South Korea. National educational systems developed at impressive rates during this period in both Koreas. The growth of formal schooling in South Korea was part of what has been called the “Educational Revolution,” the global expansion of national education systems that occurred after World War II and was especially dramatic in the developing
world. The post-1945 era saw the emergence of many new independent states and the general acceptance of universal literacy as a national goal in almost every state. Yet even if we place South Korea’s educational development within the context of this Educational Revolution, it stands out in terms of the intensity of its development. Indeed, since the 1950s South Korea has been on the extreme end of the correlation between the general level of education and the level of economic development, with a higher level of educational attainment than other nations of comparable per capita income. As the country advanced economically into a major industrial power, the general level of educational attainment remained higher than in almost all other nations at a similar level of GNP per capita. That is, not only did education keep abreast with the nation’s much admired rapid economic development, but it also kept ahead.

South Korean education also differed from that of most other developing nations in the sequential nature of its development. In other words, the emphasis was on bringing the entire school-age population up to a certain level before building up the higher tiers of the system, and there was greater stress on uniformity of content and quality. Only a few other nations—most notably Japan and the other “tigers” of East Asia (Taiwan, Singapore, and Hong Kong)—so consistently pursued these aims. The nation’s schooling was also characterized by long hours of study, strict discipline, educational advancement contingent on success in competitive entrance examinations, and a high level of competency among teachers, whose education followed a rigorous and rigorously enforced course of training.

While it may be impossible to establish precise causal links among economic, political, and educational development, South Korea’s pursuit of education clearly contributed to its industrial transformation from the position it held as late as 1960 as one of the world’s poorest nations to its membership in 1996 in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), an organization of industrially advanced states. South Korea’s educational system, with its stress on teacher authority and intense competitiveness, driven in part by very competitive school entrance examinations, produced a workforce that was highly literate and disciplined and a society ready for the competition characteristic of a capitalist industrial regime. This was especially true because the sequential nature of educational development and the wide diffusion of the values and goals that universal schooling achieved brought much of the population into this competitive struggle for educational advancement. The relative uniformity of educational standards and opportunity may also have accounted for the
relatively equitable distribution of wealth in South Korea and prevented the creation of an underclass of ignorance and poverty that could breed discontent and social turmoil. South Korea has thus avoided the gaps in educational development that have characterized many developing nations, for the state has always stressed bringing the general population up to a shared standard of education rather than concentrating resources and efforts on creating a well-schooled elite. The uniformity of the educational system and the ability of a strong centralized state to impose uniformity of content at least assisted in adjusting education to developmental goals, as well as creating a sense of shared values.

South Korea’s achievements in education are all the more remarkable in view of its turbulent history. The sudden collapse of four decades of harsh occupation by Japan was followed by the division of the nation by the United States and the USSR and by internal unrest. The emergence of a new state, the Republic of Korea (ROK), after a brief three years of U.S. military government came at a time of widespread poverty and internal tensions, and it presented a government with questionable legitimacy and nationalist credentials. South Korea had to cope not only with the loss of markets and most of its modest industrial structure, which lie in the north, but also with an influx of refugees from North Korea and Japan. Most tragically, independence was soon followed by the horribly destructive Korean War (1950–1953). After a slow economic recovery real industrial growth began only in the early 1960s. But educational development proceeded rapidly from 1945 onward and continued uninterrupted, seemingly immune to the nation’s political turmoil, economic chaos, and warfare that punctuated its history.

South Korea’s educational development has been characterized by other features that are in some ways just as striking as its growth. Perhaps foremost is the pervasive preoccupation with competitive examinations—or as Koreans often term it, “examination mania.” Observers of Japan have widely commented on that nation’s phenomenon of “examination hell.” South Korea too has its examination hell, and it has been no less important in shaping schooling and society. The entire educational system, from elementary school through high school, has focused on entrance examinations into higher levels of schooling. Both the public and officials have widely criticized examination preparation as the center of learning, which has deep roots in Korean history. Yet a half century of reform efforts has resulted in only an intensification of this phenomenon. Perhaps most interesting is the degree to which “examination mania” has come to embrace virtually the entire populace; families from all social or re-
regional groupings make enormous sacrifices and go to great lengths to aid their children in the entrance exams. It could be argued that South Korea has become the most exam-obsessed culture in the world.

Another prominent feature of South Korea’s educational development has been the continual, and to a considerable extent unsuccessful, attempts by the state to coordinate education with economic development needs. While South Korea is often seen as a model of successful state-directed economic development, state planners have been less successful in matching the curriculum with and shaping the school system to the economic development agenda. Although the creation of a well-educated and disciplined workforce was a major factor in accounting for South Korea’s transformation into an industrial nation, educational development often took on a momentum of its own, driven by public demand for schooling and degrees rather than the practical requirements of industrialists and technocrats. As a result, government officials encountered difficulties in trying to promote technical and vocational training and direct enrollment growth in ways that met the assumed needs of the expanding industrial economy. Policy initiatives to coordinate education with economic goals generated tensions and met resistance when they ran counter to popular aspirations for educational attainment. The difficulties the state had in coordinating education with development strategies suggest limitations to its ability to control national development, and they underline the role of popular demand for schooling in shaping the nation’s social transformation.

As striking as the rapid growth of schooling, the preoccupation with competitive exams, and the difficulty of a series of authoritarian, dirigiste regimes to direct educational development to meet economic objectives is the extraordinary cost of South Korean schooling. No nation in the world spends a larger share of its income on education. While this may seem admirable at first glance, less commendable is the fact that this cost has been progressively driven up for five decades by the relentless competition to score well on entrance exams. Competition for educational entry into higher levels of schooling and prestigious institutions has generated huge expenses for private tutoring, cram schools, and under-the-table payments to teachers and school officials. The scale of this problem cannot be precisely measured, but it is certainly enormous and has produced not only great financial hardship for millions of Koreans, but also many anomalies in both the educational system and the general economy. Another prominent feature of educational finance is the unusual degree to which the
state has been able to transfer most of the cost of education directly to the students and their parents. Education has been publicly underfunded. The state instead has relied on the popular demand for schooling to pay for the greater portion of educational development.

Still more paradoxical has been the success of educational development in the face of an authoritarian state headed by a series of oppressive rulers who attempted to use education as a means of legitimizing the state and maintaining their control. Despite a centralized educational system, a highly politicized curriculum, and the regimented, militarized nature of South Korean schooling, the school system has produced dissident teachers and students who have helped to undermine the very regimes that sought to use them as instruments for political control. Furthermore, even though there was a long tradition of authoritarianism that characterized Korea both before and for decades after independence, the nation began a successful process of democratization with students and educators acting as a spearhead for democratic reform.

From the late 1980s, the pattern of educational development began to undergo some significant changes. The era of rapid educational expansion was over, and the emphasis had shifted primarily to improving standards. As South Korea underwent its transition to democracy, the most blatant use of the school system to achieve political objectives ended; schooling became less politicized and less regimented. Nongovernmental civic groups began to play a more significant part in shaping educational policies. Educators, officials, and the public discussed reforms, and in many cases these were implemented to solve some of the worst problems generated by four decades of frantic expansion and political tensions. Yet the national obsession with the attainment of education continued unabated, as much as ever defining the character of South Korean society.

This study argues that South Korea’s “education fever” was the principal force that drove the country’s extraordinary educational development. It further argues that this preoccupation with the pursuit of formal schooling was the product of the diffusion of traditional Confucian attitudes toward learning and status, new egalitarian ideas introduced from the West, and the complex, often contradictory ways in which new and old ideals and formulations interacted. The especially intense nature of the competition for educational attainment was also shaped by institutions and practices introduced by the Japanese and by the political and social turmoil that characterized Korea in the mid- and late twentieth century.

South Korea’s extraordinary educational development and the national ob-
session with education have attracted the attention of many observers, but there has been no systematic treatment in English. This book is intended to fill the void. Educational development has been central to the modern transformation of Korea; it has also been both a part and a product of the complex social and political changes that took place during the mid- and late twentieth century. Therefore, the examination of South Korea’s obsession with education is an important part of its social history and provides a better understanding of the nation’s rapid economic, social, and political transformation. Furthermore, since South Korea has served as one of the developing world’s “success stories,” this topic has implications beyond the Korean Peninsula. This study should add to our understanding of the role of educational ideas and educational systems in economic and social development and in the transition from authoritarian to democratic societies.

To measure and probe the causes of South Korea’s “education fever” this study takes a historical approach. Data are drawn from the secondary literature on educational development in English and Korean, from official government reports and statistics on education, and from formal interviews with more than sixty teachers and educational officials. Some material has been drawn from theses and dissertations on education in English and Korean. Additionally, public discussion of educational matters has been surveyed through newspapers, periodicals, National Assembly debates, and informal interviews with Koreans of various backgrounds. Opinions on education are easy to obtain. The preoccupation with educational matters is reflected in the prominence given to educational issues in the press. It is even more evidenced in conversations with Koreans. Not one out of the scores of Koreans the author interviewed ever displayed any hesitation in discussing educational matters or lacked strongly held views on the importance of education in their lives or in Korean society.

This study begins with a chronological background of Korean education in order to delineate the complex and contradictory inheritance that has shaped educational development in South Korea. Chapter 1 deals with the dynastic and Japanese colonial periods and examines their legacies on educational institutions and attitudes. It suggests that the Japanese colonial regime inaugurated a period of social turmoil that profoundly influenced educational and social development. Chapter 2 deals with the immediate years after the end of colonial rule in 1945, when Korea was divided and a three-year American occupation promoted concepts of education at variance with traditional and colonial concepts. The focus then shifts to the process by which the formal structure of schooling
in South Korea was worked out from 1948 to 1951. The debates that accompanied this process reveal the range of ideas on education and their traditional, colonial, and American sources.

Educational development in the decades after independence in 1948 is then examined thematically. Chapter 3 measures the scope and nature of the rapid expansion of education that took place in the decades after 1945 and explores the social demand that drove much of this expansion. It suggests some of the reasons for the incessant demand for education. Chapter 4 deals with one of the tensions behind South Korean educational development: the often conflicting aims of a state that sought to coordinate educational development with economic growth strategies and parents who in the pursuit of high-status degrees for their offspring regarded technical training as an inferior form of schooling. Chapter 5 looks at the “examination mania” created by the highly competitive examinations that formed the main focus of schooling. Chapter 6 investigates the enormous cost of education, including the near-universal use of private, after-school lessons and tutoring. This chapter also analyzes the state’s use of the public demand for education to shift the financial burden of schooling to students and their families. Chapter 7 describes how a succession of authoritarian regimes used education as a means of political indoctrination and control. In doing so, these regimes often ran into conflict with the goals of Korean families, who resented the time taken away from study. In addition, the discrepancy between the democratic ideals taught in school and the very undemocratic practices of the state generated cynicism and opposition among teacher and students. Chapter 8 examines the changes that took place in the late 1980s and 1990s as South Korea became more democratic and more prosperous. It also looks at the continuing contradictions and tensions generated by conflicting ideals and goals within the Korean public and between the state and society. It concludes by examining the challenges educational development faced at the start of the twenty-first century.

This account hopes to provide a better understanding of how South Korea succeeded in rapidly transforming itself into a well-schooled nation. It also is intended to contribute to our understanding of South Korea’s rise from an impoverished and authoritarian nation to one of the most prosperous and democratic nations in Asia. The author hopes that this study will aid in understanding the connection between education and economic development and between education and democratization. But in addition, the South Korean obsession with formal education is a fascinating story that is worthy of being told for its own sake.