Education and National Identity

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ABSTRACT Mankind experienced a tremendous vortex of changes during the last century, and the world changed toward a knowledge-based society. It is also true that the eagerness for constant improvement and growth has deprived us of time to reflect and to judge whether we are moving in the right direction. There are many educational problems in Asia, and considerable parts of the problems are also common in many countries of the world. What should be taken into account here regarding education is that it was established on a strong foundation, and that it should be considered more carefully. The additional points required are a new establishment of the right direction and the provision of a vision about national identity so that the educational boom can make a great contribution toward the mutual prosperity of mankind. In this respect, ‘mutual prosperous globalization’ is the password to the future of education in the twenty-first century. Mutual prosperous globalization is a possibility, where everyone cooperates and prospers mutually to live with equal rights and privileges. The author calls this ‘Symbiotic Globalization’ for the twenty-first century. The future is not something that is taken for granted, but is something that we create. If we really have hopes and desires for an ideal future, we are obliged to make every effort and take every pain to accomplish it. Therefore, it is very important to reexamine education and national identity and to make every effort in the search for a desirable education for the twenty-first century.

The Relationship between Education and National Identity

‘I am at the center of the world.’ This was allegedly declared at a ceremony of a Native American tribe, simply but firmly embodying the notion of ‘identity’. This desire to look at the world with oneself at the center is a human instinct. And identity, when extending beyond an individual to a country or a people, or a group, changes into the identity of a country or people. It is human nature to wish to have an identity not only for that of the individual but also for that of the group. In other words, just as primitive man or contemporary man, whether Occidental or Oriental, has a strong urge to place
himself at the center of the world, the desire for identity also comes from a country in its national determination to place itself at the center of the world and for a people to put itself above any other. This is a collective instinct desired by nearly every country or people.

If perceived from the viewpoint of personal identity, the history of human beings is the history of the struggle between individuality and plurality and the struggle between inclusion and establishing one’s identity against a larger one. Those who are stronger wish to continue to expand by including the weaker ones as part of their own and to create unity and oneness, while those who are weaker struggle to establish their identities while resisting expansion and inclusion by those who are stronger, and to finally establish their own individuality.

Such an instinctive will to establish one’s identity is of keen interest to those people, countries and racial groups who live today during this ‘postmodern’ age, which began at the end of the last century.

People today make more of an effort to put themselves and their groups at the center of the world than people have done at any other time. This is because people tend to expect, at the turn of the century, a newly formed order, different from that of the past century, which will draw the roadmap for the current century. Such expectation brings to the individual or group anticipation and excitement. However, while the direction of expectation for the next century is determined and while plans are made and put into practice, some individuals or groups seek their own identity, but other individuals and groups become insecure about their impatient desire to join the new order of the world.

Take Korea for example. The history of agony of the Korean people over trying to verify their identity as Koreans started amidst a longing for a kind of Sino-centralism in their relationship with China. In the modern age, Korean people have felt shame over the loss of their country to Japan and more recently, when dealing with the United States, Korean young people and educated people now feel their identity being shaken by their English language complex. With these experiences, an increasing number of Koreans long to know more about other countries, and hesitate to proclaim their homeland of Korea and themselves as at the center of the world.

Further, Asia is eager to keep abreast of globalization efforts and has notable instances of identity problems. Culturally, Asia is one of the four cradles of civilization and is home to some of the main religions of the world: Confucianism, Buddhism and Christianity. At the same time, it has developed a long history and a splendid tradition and culture, and those in Asia may well have pride in their culture but also have respect for politics and the economy, and suffer from a sense of relative poverty and difficulty. Nowadays, most countries in Asia have set ‘development’ as their national goal and worked to transform themselves from ‘poor countries’ into ‘affluent countries’.

In order to achieve these goals, various countries in Asia pursue an economic open-door policy and accept Western principles of the market
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economy to remove whatever elements might get in the way of development. They have adopted various approaches to the development of their countries by cultivating talented people through education and preparing them for jobs now emerging or to emerge in the future.

As seen above, Asia today is running along the road of development quickly and it seems that countries in Asia have ‘a sense of crisis’ that they might drop off the economic world map if they do not implement various necessary measures of their own. I would like to term this longing and desire for development sweeping across Asia, and its social phenomenon, the ‘anxiety for development’.

The Asian anxiety for development refers to the trend that people feel they are lagging behind in development and that they are anxious or impatient to work out countermeasures to stay ahead and not ‘fall behind’. Those individuals or countries preoccupied with such anxiety for development fail to observe, due to their anxiety, the reality embracing the base of their lives as it is; they cannot relate ideal development properly to the reality that exists.

Under these circumstances, the desirable level of development they may have achieved will, in a real sense, bring about destruction of nature and human crises or the suffering of unrecoverable identity problems. Ultimately, if this anxiety for development comes from lack of proper understanding of development or of reality, appropriate measures to remove or alleviate such anxiety in advance would be to provide some solutions to these problems. That is, the understanding to be gained through education – in particular, educational efforts to pursue cooperation rather than competition, and commonality rather than individuality in viewing the world as it should be. I would like to cite development of comparative education as an example of an effort to this end. The development of comparative education is to contribute to opening a way to respecting the values of countries or constituent members and promoting mutual understanding of the peoples of the world.

Accordingly, the purpose of this article is to raise the issue of identity as an independent entity of a nation and to establish, from the foregoing perspective, the attitude of persons who carry out research in comparative education.

For this purpose, I would like to examine national identity and try to understand it from the perspective of rationalism, based on the Western tradition, and ecology, based on the Oriental tradition. I will also examine from what perspective we understand national identity.

Significance of National Identity

What are the intentions of various countries of the world when they try to secure a common period for national education? Even though intentions may vary with different countries, national education contains the intention to homogenize the constituent members comprising a nation or a country. Through the compulsory education of children and young people, various
countries such as Korea, China and Japan wish to lay the foundations for their people to live as their own people as Koreans, Chinese or Japanese. The intention of compulsory national education is to homogenize its people and thus form the nation’s identity. This perception of countries or their people in which the constituent members form during compulsory education leads to the identities of their countries or their people.

The formation of identities of individuals or groups requires historical entities. Human beings form various identities such as home, religion, gender, region and class identities. The unit that provides the highest sense of belonging has been either nation or country (Ignatieff, 1994).

What, then, is national identity?

Scholars who have studied ‘nations’ include Carlton B. Hayes, Hans Kohn and E. Gellner, and I would like to borrow their arguments to further explain the significance for national identity.

Hayes (1933) was of the view that just as human beings with various languages, customs and traditions have existed, so have nations been in existence in the history of mankind, even though some particular nations were repeatedly created and destroyed. According to Hayes, perception of a nation was a combination of patriotism and the consciousness of that nation. Patriotism is an attachment to one’s hometown and one’s concrete living space and, when expanded nationwide, turns into nationalism or national identity.

Kohn (1965) did not see a nation as a clan, a tribe or a group of races which were based on common blood lineage or similar areas of residence but saw the nation as volatile and not fixed, and as products of a living force, in both conceptually historical and political terms. From this point of view, he emphasizes vivid and positive common will as an essential element together with common blood lineage, language, territory, political entity, customs, tradition and religion as elements comprising a nation. He further said that what comprises and forms a nation in the modern age was not a blood lineage but ideological power. He also stated that a nation was based on blood lineage and race and more than anything else, national spirit and the soul of the nation was an entity binding people together as a nation.

Gellner (1983) linked perception of nationalism and national identity to modernization. The industrial society, replacing the order of medieval times, which was maintained by the closed nature of the feudal society with authority delegated to the nobility and the Church, established a new centralized authority based on nations, especially nation-states, with economic growth achieved by industrial development as its foundation. Through education, races fragmented and dispersed in localities that were then unified into nation-states. Such centralized political community brought about new economic and cultural communities, and nationalism, and here, national identity in the modern sense of the word was formed.
National identity is a sense of belonging to modern nation-states and it may be defined as a concept of one’s own country or nation formed at the onset of the modern age and a sense of belonging thereto.

The concept of national identity as described above may be defined from three perspectives in more detail in addition to the explanations of Hayes, Kohn and Gellner.

Firstly, this concept was formed against the backdrop of the modern age when nation-states were established. Accordingly, interest in national identity has become fully fledged in the modern age and modern thought has affected the mode by which individuals or groups understand and accept this concept.

Secondly, the concept of national identity has been the combined concept of nation and country since the modern age began. Strictly speaking, understanding national identity before and after the modern age requires examination of other concepts related to nations. In other words, the concept of a nation meant a tribe before the modern age and since the modern age, the concept has meant a country and concept of a group and consciousness of a group or national identity, which creates a somewhat delicate discrepancy in understanding national identity before and since the modern age. If a tribe is defined as a hereditary group, a country can be defined as an artificial group. If a tribe is based on blood lineage, a country should be based on a blood pledge. Accordingly, a nation was referred to as a tribe before the modern age and since the modern age, a nation has extended and expanded to a unit comprising a country. Modern nation-states add to the identity of the nation and even an imperialist color to that of the country.

Thirdly, national identity refers to a sense of belonging which its members feel toward the group and at the same time, the self-awareness of that particular group. Identity is an instinctive phenomenon that human beings pursue, and it is a concept inclusive of similarity and subjectivity. A sense of being similar to members of a group and further, the group pride that members of that group feel, are both expressed as identity. In expressing national identity in terms of similarity and subjectivity, understanding national identity may require two approaches. One approach is to try to understand the identity of one’s own people in comparison with that of other peoples. The other approach is to take the perspective of understanding and accepting the identities of other peoples by acknowledging the values of those peoples in and of themselves. When understanding national identity of one’s own people in comparison with that of other peoples, one naturally comes to understand the identity of one’s own people as being either superior or inferior to that of other peoples. Thus, national identity is formed in such a way as to emphasize one’s sense of superiority and in trying to recover from one’s sense of inferiority concerning other peoples. Compared with the former, the latter adopts the approach of accepting and understanding other peoples and national identity is formed in such a way as to accept coexistence.

In conclusion, national identity is expressed in various forms, depending upon the times, characters of the group and the approach to understanding
when national identity is required. In this sense, the traditions of Western and Asian countries are similar in forming and understanding national identity but different in their approaches.

**National Identity Based on the Western Tradition:**

**rational national identity**

The modern age in the Western tradition opened with the rationalism of human beings. Rationalism is a systematic research method to develop the power of reasoning rather than merely a method of thinking and discussion. Rationalism has applied to all domains of the modern age (Oakeshott, 1972). Rationality keeps the possibility of making errors to a minimum when pursuing reality, while also eliminating superstition and self-centeredness, and aims at solving complex issues. In the eyes of rationalists, traditionalists seemed to be a group wielding religious dogma. Therefore, rationalists increase the importance of human intelligence, rather than religious mysticism, to ensure authentic knowledge for human beings and society.

When speaking of rationalism as a paradigm of the modern age, we support human-oriented and ration-oriented rationalism. Rationalism based on human rationality has created an enormous material culture for the modern age and has affected modern life in many ways. It has become the universal method of reasoning for people who live in the modern age.

Ultimately, national identity in the Western rationalistic tradition was formed on the basis of human rationality-oriented, Western material culture. From this point of view, non-Western countries were, in the eyes of Western society, places of superstition and ignorance and it was its job to awaken non-Western societies, and liberate them from ignorance and further civilize them. In other words, countries based on rationalism, usually called ‘advanced countries with a strong national identity’, have become the target of envy. Western countries regarded underdeveloped or developing countries as those in need of dismantling their traditional identity and further building a rational identity. This in turn caused underdeveloped countries to have trouble with their national identity. Such consciousness helped most Western countries to follow the imperialist line of thought and justified their expansion and extension, often leading to a distorted sense of nationalism. As most of us are already aware, the colonization by Western countries of Asian countries and the harsh treatment of the Jews since the beginning of the modern age can be cited as clear examples of this. As a result, the concept of national identity based on rationalism gave stronger nations a sense of superiority and caused serious identity problems in the weaker ones, thus resulting in fragmentation and violence.

What I would like to point out is that rationalistic approaches based on the Western tradition explain to the peoples of most Asian countries and moreover, to developing and underdeveloped countries and their peoples, that Westernization is equated with rationalistic civilization and refers to
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ecologically wealthy nations, and is the standard national identity they are seeking. These peoples accepted rationalism and worked in this Westernization process and tried harder to become economically and politically advanced when trying to establish their identities. In such a process, their national identities were marred in one way or another. And in the course of seeking an alternative approach, they ended up feeling antagonistic towards those countries or their peoples which they had targeted for their standards.

Under such circumstances, where would they find national identity?

Fortunately, from the perspective of postmodernism, attention is drawn to the identity of individuals, countries or nations as individual entities. There has also been an increasing tendency to accept the subjectivity of Asian thought and culture. Postmodernism, and consciousness of, and interest in, Asian thought and tradition, does not attempt to examine the significance of their existence against the overall solidity surrounding them.

National Identity Based on the Oriental Tradition:
ecological national identity

Orientalism, or the thoughts of the Orient, is more mysterious than rationalism from the Western point of view. From the Oriental point of view, significance is given to existence itself. In Buddhist thought regarding the transmigration of life, emphasis is placed on the rotation of life and in this sense the concept of harmony, as represented by the harmony of Yin and Yang, is considered important. One recent argument which embodies such a viewpoint is a discussion of ecology.

Ecology is defined as a series of thoughts and discussions to understand human beings and their relation to the ecosystem rather than as a systematic technique to develop human beings and the ecosystem separately. Ecology starts by pointing to the limitations in modern Western thought as represented by anthropocentrism or logocentrism and common points in the discussion of ecology are pointed out as follows.

Firstly, even though all independent entities seem to be independent and monadic beings, they exist in a symbiotic (win/win) relationship, and are all interconnected. Ecology starts with accepting the existence of others. All things are significant when they exist in the overall interconnected relationship. Even though rationality-oriented human beings seem to see themselves at the center of the world, all human relations with all things exist in a symbiotic (win/win) relationship.

Secondly, ecology puts significance on understanding the individual relationship to the whole. This is called dialectical reasoning (Bookchin, 1999) because thought exists in another context rather than with existing rational thought. Accordingly, it is an approach to understanding human beings in the context of the environment, the environment in the context of the ecosystem and the ecosystem in the context of nature.
Thirdly, life is attained through coexistence and harmony. When such relations are destroyed, the imbalance imperils harmony. Ecologists take note of this and firmly believe that human beings oriented around development, progress, or achievement for mankind cannot be the absolute ideal.

Thus superior and inferior nations do not exist in the ecological sense. They may only be referred to in economic indexes, and the sense of value or the identity of nations cannot be ranked. Ecological approaches do not convey only the necessary aspects regarding the coexistence of mankind and the environment but also internalize the virtue of coexistence. What enables coexistence may be defined as attitudes of heartfelt respect for and understanding of others. Such attitudes start with the firm belief in a new world well beyond one’s perceptions. National identity is formed on the basis of ecology and helps establish a relationship of cooperation and equality rather than that of superiority or inferiority when compared with other nations, and enables an emphasis on mutual understanding and respect.

Assignment of National Identity and Comparative Education

National identity surfaced with the onset of the modern age and was formed amidst the rationalist paradigms of the West. Nations established their identities based on rationalism. They felt a sense of individuality, subjectivity and superiority, while other nations failed in the foregoing process and felt a sense of inferiority through confused identity. In this sense, the history of mankind has been the history of resistance against the will to establish identity in the face of larger opposition. The stronger nations continued to expand and unify, and in the process created unity and identity, while the weaker ones resisted the expansion and unity of their stronger counterparts, and went through the history of establishing their identities.

In this context, the recent argument for globalization seems to be a discussion of the spirit of community as related to environmental issues, human rights issues and political and economic issues on the one hand but accompanies the identity of individuals or independent entities on the other, because discussion of globalization also has another aspect of expansion by networking independent entities, comprising the world, on the extension line of rationalist paradigms based on the Western tradition. In such a world, the weaker ones, as networked constituent members, must undergo similar identity confusion. Rationalist globalization, based on information and communication, looks most likely to develop as the new Westernization campaign of the twenty-first century. If the foregoing possibility materializes, the incessant resistance of non-Western society against Western society and feuds between the two societies is bound to reoccur. The Oriental way of thinking is different from that of the West and will again experience problems with integrity.

Understanding one nation’s relationship with other nations as based on mutual coexistence from the ecological point of view, which sees the
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relationship in terms of mankind and nature, and among nations on the basis of a symbiotic (win/win) principle, will help remove consciousness from the ranks of national identity.

Such virtues of coexistence can be transmitted through comparative education, which enables the establishment of relations with many other countries of the world and can make a contribution in this respect. From this point of view, I would like to add some proper attitudes to scholars researching comparative education and when they should adopt their own.

Firstly, from the ecological point of view, comparative education should aim at the understanding of other countries through the education of other countries, rather than trying to import the merits of advanced education in order to achieve the development of education in one’s own country. By moving on, understanding the sentiments of other countries through exposure to education with other countries, beyond merely recognizing education from other countries, and discovering new values by taking notice of the invisible area of education controlling their perspective while also introducing new discoveries to the world, and by finally helping countries interact with the world, one can improve educational relations and the possibility of coexistence with other countries.

Secondly, comparative education should not only transmit the necessity for coexistence through educational relations with other countries, but should also provide the opportunity to internalize the virtues of coexistence. Coexistence is made possible by adopting an attitude of having a healthy respect for other countries and their people. Such an attitude stems from one’s belief in a new world beyond what one recognizes as his or her own. The ecological approach to comparative education helps form such an attitude. It also helps to understand the identity of a country or its people in terms of cooperation and equality rather than in terms of superiority or inferiority.

Thirdly, comparative education should play a role of helping people to establish their identities, while realizing the true meaning of coexistence through mutual interaction and sharing of abundant phenomena on the basis of recognition of such an approach to ecology.

Now, change must occur in the recognition of national identity as a target of understanding rather than as a target of reconstruction. Fortunately, however, attempts at a change in recognition have been established in the form of postmodern approaches and interest in Oriental culture and thought, while in the Orient attempts at change are being made in recognition of cultural and ideological subjectivity in one’s nation. What we have to do now may be to understand the identity of others more abundantly and recognize their identities. This amounts to coexistence and a symbiotic (win/win) situation. And comparative education has to play an important role in contributing to the education of national identity based on the viewpoint of ecological education.
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References