

Educational System and Parental Education Fever in Contemporary Japan: Comparison with the Case of South Korea

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to show the homogeneity and heterogeneity of education fever among East Asian societies and to make some educational policy recommendations. First, I describe the present status of educational system in Japan as compared with South Korea. Second, I analyze the data from high school students in South Korea and Japan, collected in 2000 by our study group, and demonstrate homogeneity and heterogeneity of education fever phenomena through a cross-national comparative analysis. I found that parental education fever in terms of attitudes and behaviors in South Korea is much higher than in Japan and social class variables have effects on education fever in both societies. An international study of education fever is very important in the making of education policy.

Key words: Japan, South Korea, education fever, educational system, parental attitudes and behaviors toward education, social class

I. Introduction

The aim of this article is to show the homogeneity and heterogeneity of education fever among East Asian societies and to make some suggestions with regard to educational policy. For this purpose, I examine parental education fever in Japan and compare this phenomenon with that of the Republic of Korea (hereafter ‘South Korea’).

As with South Korea, it has been pointed out that the education fever is high and the competition for entrance examination is intense in Japan. The OECD (1971) investigated the Japanese educational system early in the 1970’s and reported that the Japanese system is marked by intense competitiveness for entrance examinations and that the destructive strains are imposed on thousands of young Japanese. Since then, many researchers, such as Dore (1976), Cummings (1980), and Rohlen (1983) have introduced this phenomenon of “high education fever” in Japan to readers in the West.

It is inappropriate to suggest that this educational fever is uniquely Japanese when comparing Japan with Western societies. In fact, many late-developed societies, especially East Asian societies among which South Korea is typical, are similar to Japan, a fact that Dore (1976) has already recognized. However, the studies of Japanese society and culture by Japanese researchers are inclined to conclude that the characteristics found in Japan but not in Western societies are therefore peculiar to Japan, as Lee (1982) clearly pointed out. This applies to educational research in Japan. Most Japanese researchers on education did not conduct an intensively comparative study with another Asian society where education fever is high (Nakamura et al., 2002). Therefore, when we consider education fever, it is more important to examine the characteristics of this education fever in East Asian societies rather than compare it with education in Western societies. We must be sensitive to the fact that there is a wide range in the societies within Asia that have education fever.

For this purpose, I take up the case of South Korea as such a comparable society. It is well-known to have high education fever and shares common features with Japan in terms of educational system, social structure, and culture, etc. These common features enable us to recognize the heterogeneity of two societies rather clearly if these are thought to be controlled. Although the method of controlled comparison has some merits and weaknesses, it is a comparative method that many social scientists have used (Smelser, 1988).

First, I focus on the present status of educational selection in Japan as compared with South Korea. According to these thoughts, two hypotheses will be suggested. Second, I will analyze the data from high school students in South Korea and Japan, collected in 2000 by our study group, and show diversity of the fever phenomena through a cross-national analysis. Finally, I want to make some educational policy suggestions toward the handling of education fever.

In this article, I define education fever as “parents’ desire to get better education for their children and their educational attitudes and behaviors arising from that desire”. Education fever is not a technical term but a word used in daily life in South Korea and Japan. It is difficult to

define the total meaning of education fever theoretically. Therefore, I defined it only for my analytical convenience. By my definition, education fever has two dimensions. One is “desire” and the other is “attitudes and behaviors”. My analyses in this article mainly focus on attitudes and behaviors. So, the readers should note that I discuss only a part of education fever.

II. Education and Selection System in Japan as Compared with South Korea

First, we would like to confirm the nature of the education and selection system in Japan as compared with South Korea. The educational systems of Japan and South Korea are basically very similar. Almost all children go to elementary school for six years, progressing to junior high school for three years, and then to senior high school for another three years. As for higher edu-

Table 1. Percentage of Junior High School Graduates Progressing to Senior High School in Japan and South Korea by Gender and Type of Senior High School

Country	Gender	% progressing to senior high	academic : vocational
Japan	Male	96.5	2.5 : 1
	Female	97.5	3.5 : 1
Korea	Male	98.5	2.6 : 1
	Female	98.3	2.6 : 1

Sources: For Japan, Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, Basic Statistics of Schools, 2002 edition. For South Korea, Korean Educational Development Institute, Statistical Yearbook of Education, 2002.

Table 2. Progress from Senior High School to Higher Education in Japan and South Korea by Gender and Type of School

Country	Gender	% going to university		% going to junior college		% going to special training school		% Total % going to higher education	
		From academic high school	From vocational high school	From academic high school	From vocational high school	From academic high school	From vocational high school	From academic high school	From vocational high school
Japan	Male	49.5	18.8	1.4	2.1	13.8	18.9	64.9	40.0
	Female	37.5	12.0	16.2	11.0	20.0	22.3	73.8	47.0
Korea	Male	70.8	14.3	14.6	39.8	—	—	86.5	54.9
	Female	68.5	13.9	17.3	30.4	—	—	87.5	44.6

Sources: As for Table1. Please note that the column for total percentage going to higher education includes university and college correspondence classes for Japan, and 'other schools' for Korea, so that the categories do not precisely match and do not combine to give the complete figure for progress to

higher education in either country.

cation, both countries have two-year junior colleges (South Korea also has three-year junior colleges), four-year universities, and graduate schools.

Table 1 compares destinations of junior high school graduates in the two countries. Compulsory education ends with junior high school graduation in both countries, but in Japan and South Korea alike, almost all students attend senior high school as well. Table 2 looks at the destinations of senior high school graduates, and again both countries show a high proportion of students continuing on to higher education. Here there are some interesting differences, however. A substantial minority of Japanese senior high school graduates go on to 'special training schools' (*senmon gakkō*), vocationally oriented institutes of higher education established under a 1975 educational reform, and junior colleges (*tanki daigaku*) that cater almost entirely to female students. In South Korea, a considerably higher percentage of senior high school graduates go on to four-year universities, and there is a well-established pattern of progress from vocational senior high schools to junior colleges (*chongmundehak*), which also specialize in vocational training.ⁱ

Although the tables do not extend to post-graduate education, it is important to note another major difference here. In Japan only about 10% of university graduates continue on to graduate studies, whereas close to a third of all South Korean graduates do. Hence there are significant differences between the two systems. However, in terms of the basic structure of the system and the high rate of progress from lower to higher levels of education, Japan and South Korea can be described as having basically similar school systems.

It is the examination system for high school entrance that we must note when considering the difference between South Korea and Japan as regards education fever. In Japan, each prefecture (local administrative unit in Japan that is smaller than state and larger than city) conducts examinations for all public high schools within the prefecture, but each individual school selects its first-year students based on the examination scores. Private high schools conduct their own examinations and determine their students by themselves. Some senior high schools are much more difficult to enter than others, and there is a hierarchical structure reflecting their relative competitiveness (Kariya & Rosenbaum 1999). Which high school the student is able to enter becomes very important. Consequently, many junior high school students attend private cram schools outside regular school hours. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology reported that 2,890,000 of 3,860,000 junior high school students attend these cram schools (MEXT 2003). They take numerous mock entrance examinations and rejoice at or lament their *hensachi*, or deviation score.ⁱⁱ

In this respect, South Korea is different from Japan. South Korean academic senior high schools in big cities do not select their own students. If a student passes a general examination, he or she is placed in one of the neighborhood academic senior high schools according to non-academic factors such as convenience of location. So, the hierarchical structure is less clearly defined than it is in Japan and the competition for senior high school is not as universal or as fierce as in Japan.

University entrance examinations are held by each of the universities in Japan. As with high schools, there is a hierarchical structure reflecting the relative degree of competitiveness in the university system as well. Therefore, the competition for high-ranking universities is intense. Many high school students attend cram schools, take mock examinations, and study hard to improve their *hensachi*.

In Japan, the existence of *ronin*ⁱⁱⁱ reflects the problem of education fever where university entrance is concerned. In the middle of the 1960s, when baby boomers graduated from high school, a substantial increase in the number of *ronin* was the subject of public concern. Now *ronin* number about 130,000 of the 620,000 12th grade applicants for university entrance (MEXT 2002). And although *ronin* continue to be born every year, the Japanese people take their presence for granted and the existence of *ronin* is considered to be less of a problem than it once was. But the *ronin* problem in the middle of the 1960s compelled the government to introduce a less competitive system. The high school recommendation system which was authorized in 1967 is a major example of this. Some universities adopting this system admit a part of new students mainly by recommendations from high school, not by entrance examinations.^{iv} Today, about one third of university students are matriculated through this system (Nakamura 1996).

One of the differences between South Korea and Japan is the degree of state control. Because of a weakness of control, the Japanese government could not introduce a policy to equalize high schools like the one that is found in South Korea. As a result, the differences among high schools became greater. In this hierarchy, a differentiation of the student's educational career occurs even before the university entrance examination. Recently, university entrance systems in Japan have become more varied due to the influence of educational liberalism, a declining birthrate, and consequent competition for survival among universities. The image that a student's future is decided by a single examination taken at the age of 18, as OECD (1971) once reported, is not always true in contemporary Japan. The entrance competition in Japan seems to be lessening.

Ironically, the latest educational problem in Japan is a decline in academic ability. Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) reduced 30% of the educational content that teachers should teach in school curriculum.^v This policy is criticized and students are also criticized for not studying. Parents who are zealous about their children's education worry about this decline in academic ability and are inclined to want them to attend private cram schools and private junior or senior high schools. Consequently, the difference between social classes is said to be more distinctive in keeping with the parents' educational zeal (Kariya 2001).

Thus in the educational system in contemporary Japan, competition for entrance examinations is less intense than it used to be. And education fever seems to exist only among those parents who want their children to go to high-ranked high schools and universities and who belong to high social class.

III. Hypotheses

There are some data showing the possibility that parental education fever has declined and it tends to differ more widely according to social class.

Figure 1 and Figure 2 are made using the SSM (Social Stratification & Mobility Survey) data^{vi} which has been gathered every ten years since 1955. This data set is one of the most reliable one in Japanese random-sampled national survey data. In the 1995 SSM questionnaire, subjects were asked to respond to the statement “It is best for children to be educated as highly as possible.” This question measures the level of educational fever. Figure1 shows the percentages of positive respondents in each age group and Figure 2 shows the percentages dividing the same data in terms of educational backgrounds.^{vii} According to Figure1, the younger they are the lower the percentage of their ‘yes’ responses is, for both males and females. This reflects the possibility that education fever in Japan has declined, although this interpretation may be confounded by the age effect.

Figure 2 shows a linear decline in the education fever of male high school graduates, while male higher education graduates do not show a linear trend and seem to generally share the

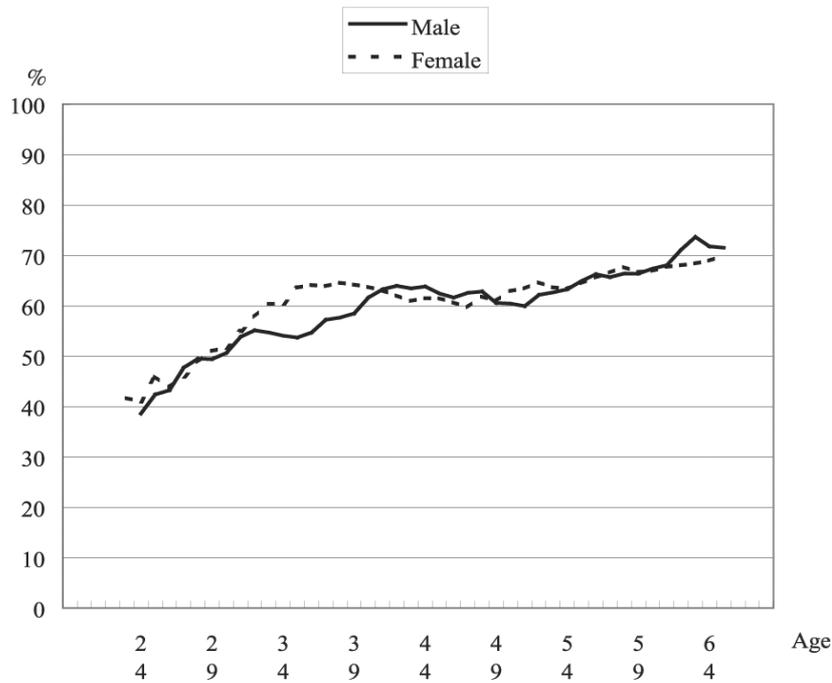


Figure 1. Trends of Parental Education Fever in Japan

same level of education fever with the exception of the youngest and the oldest among them. In the case of women, high school graduates tend to answer less positively, while middle age women have the highest education fever among higher education graduates. This may be partly because their children are reaching school age and taking examinations. Overall, the youngest people have the lowest education fever and the oldest people have the highest education fever in all groups and the differences by academic background are wide in younger generations, especially in the 30's and 40's.

These figures show the possibility that parental education fever has declined and it tends to differ more widely according to social class. However, Figure 1 and Figure 2 show only “desire” dimension of parental education fever. It is necessary to examine the “attitudes and behaviors” dimension. Then, are these arguments supported from the viewpoint of international comparison? By comparing Japan with South Korea, it is possible to examine whether these characteristics of education fever in terms of attitudes and behaviors are observed only in contemporary Japan or not. In order to understand education fever comparatively, the following two hypothesis will be examined.

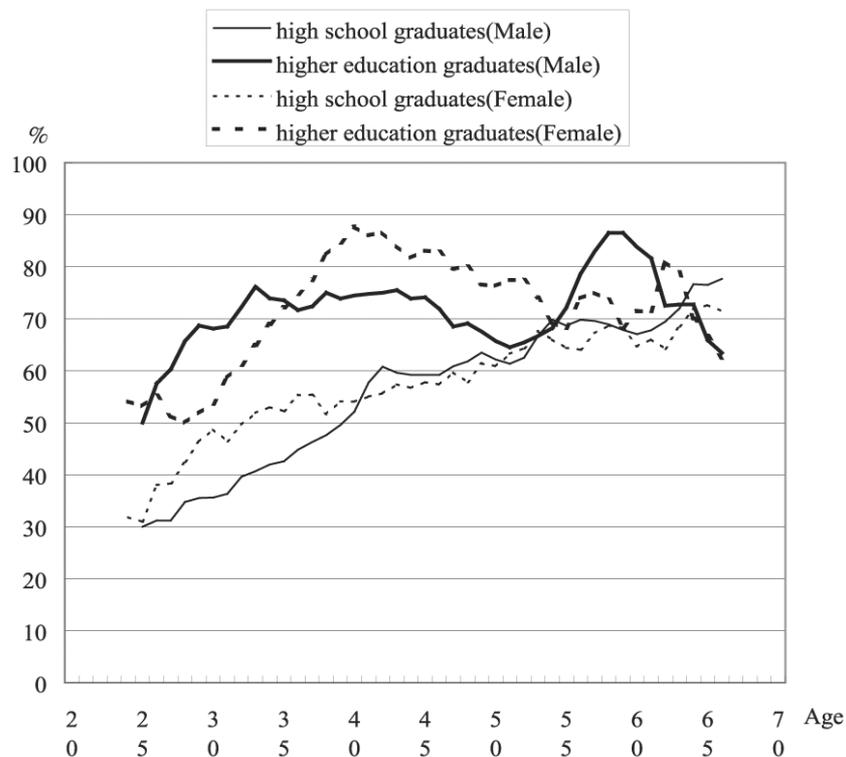


Figure 2. Trends of Parental Education Fever by Social Classes in Japan

Hypothesis1: Parental education fever in terms of educational attitudes and behaviors is higher in South Korea than in Japan.

Education fever in South Korea may be changing too. But it seems that the education fever in South Korea is high and that competition for university entrance is intense. In fact, it was reported that education fever in terms of desire in South Korea is higher than in Japan. A comparative international survey, made over the course of a one-year period from 1994 to 1995 by the Management and Coordination Agency in Japan, asked parents “What is the highest level of education you hope your child will complete?” 39.1% of Korean parents answered “a college education” and 45.1% answered “a graduate or professional degree.” By contrast, 54.6% of Japanese parents replied “a college education” while only 1.8% hoped that their children would pursue a graduate degree (MCA, 1996). I predict that parental education fever in terms of educational attitudes and behaviors in South Korea is also higher than that in Japan.

Hypothesis2: The difference of parental attitudes and behaviors toward education among social classes is wider in Japan than in South Korea.

I predict that the difference of parental attitudes and behaviors toward education among social classes exists in both South Korea and Japan. However, an increase in the gaps between social classes in Japan has been pointed out in recent years (Tachibanagi 1998, Sato 2000, Kariya 2001). As shown in Figure1 & Figure 2, the difference of parental desire to get higher education among social classes seems to become wider over time. Therefore, I predict that the difference of parental attitudes and behaviors toward education among social classes in Japan is wider than that in South Korea.

Finally, I will examine these two hypotheses about education fever in South Korea and Japan, making use of our own survey data.

IV. Data and Method

4.1 Data

There is no public data that contains information about both parental attitudes and behaviors toward education and social classes. I used the data of “Survey on Lives and Careers of High School Students” which I collected with some colleagues of the Comparative Educational Sociology Study Group.^{viii}

This survey was conducted between March and June 2000 on high school seniors in South Korea and Japan. Sample size was 2,793, made up of 1,354 students from 12 senior high schools in South Korea (835 male, 519 female), and 1,439 students from 12 senior high schools in Japan

(733 male, 706 female).

Admittedly the data was not randomly sampled. However, an effort was made to select schools with consideration for such factors as academic level, male-female ratio, curriculum etc. We contacted the schools directly and asked them to administer the survey for us. We have already analyzed the data in various ways (Nakamura et al. 2002), and on a number of basic items our results have broadly confirmed those of previous studies. In addition, given the lack of comparative study of education fever between South Korea and Japan, analyzing this data is important for guiding further studies.

4.2 Methods

The two hypotheses, shown in section III, are very simple. Therefore, it is not necessary to examine them with complicated methods. I will use cross tabulations, chi-squared test, correlation coefficient, ANOVA, and etc. I think that it is very important to show some simple results and conclusions about homogeneity and heterogeneity of East Asian societies having high education fever, before doing complicated analysis, for the sake of further studies comparing among East Asian societies.

V. Results from the Analyses of Education Fever in South Korea and Japan

5.1 The Difference of Parental Attitudes and Behaviors toward Education

A Japanese national survey shows the possibility of the decline in education desire among parents in Japan, as I have already suggested. If the results of this research are correct, there is a chance that the South Korean parents' attitudes and behaviors toward education and Japanese ones may be quite different from each other.

In order to confirm this point, I will review our data regarding parental attitudes and behaviors from the children's perspective. Our questionnaire contains the question "Do your parents hope for your success in society?". Because children recognize their parental hope only by the medium of parental attitudes and behaviors, this is an index of parental attitudes and behaviors. To this question, 92.9% of South Korean high school students answered "yes," while 48.2% of the students answered "yes" in Japan. The difference was statistically significant, $\chi^2(2, N=2,783)=661.21, p=.00, \phi=.49$. It can be said then that the number of Korean students who feel their parents' expectations is much greater than the number of Japanese students who do. This result indirectly shows the strength of South Korean parental involvement to their children. This also has a large influence on their career choice. Figure 3 shows the person who has affected the child's desired level of education. The percentage of children who answered

“father” or “mother” in South Korea was approximately twice that of Japan. The differences between

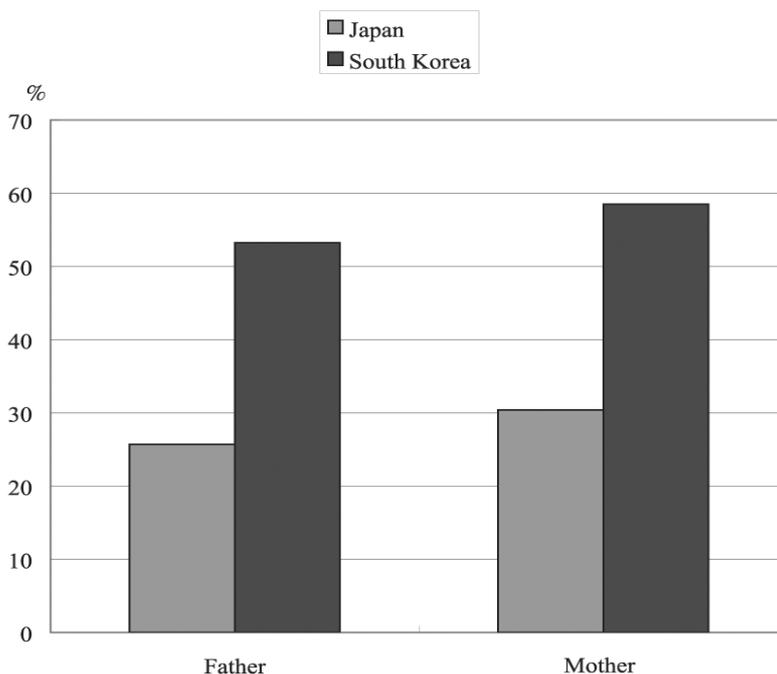


Figure 3. The Person who has Affected the Child's Desired Level of Education

South Korea and Japan were statistically significant, $\chi^2 (2, N=2,793)=222.23, p=.00, \phi=.28$, and $\chi^2 (2, N=2,793)=223.95, p=.00, \phi=.28$, respectively. In this way, Korean students feel their parents' expectations, take them into consideration, and make their decisions accordingly, while it might be said that this relationship between the expectations held by parents and children is not as strong in Japan.

The next step is to examine actual parental attitudes and behaviors toward children's education. This survey contains the following five items about mother's attitudes toward education:

1. "She often asks you about your school life."
2. "She takes care of you for your study."
3. "She cautions you not to watch TV too much."
4. "She says that to enter a prestigious school is the pleasure of your parents."
5. "She compares you with other students."

Students selected one of four categories: "I agree a great deal", "I agree somewhat", "I do not agree very much", and "I do not agree at all."

Figure 4 shows the percentages of these positive responses ("I agree a great deal" and "I

agree somewhat”). The differences between South Korea and Japan were statistically significant, $\chi^2 (2, N=2,564)=17.51, p=.00, \phi=.08$, $\chi^2 (2, N=2,569)=350.36, p=.00, \phi=.37$, $\chi^2 (2, N=2,569)=6.69, p=.01, \phi=.05$, $\chi^2 (2, N=2,571)=318.97, p=.00, \phi=.35$, and $\chi^2 (2,$

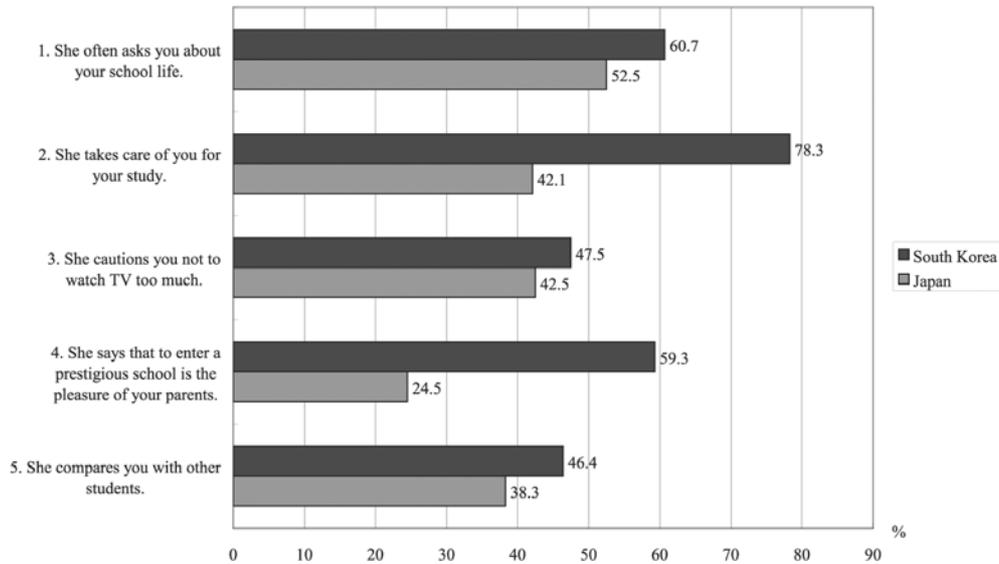


Figure 4. Percentages of Positive Responses to the Items about Mother's Attitudes toward Education

$N=2,570$)=17.38, $p=.00$, $\phi=.08$, respectively. Particularly, item 2 and item 4 have great differences between South Korea and Japan. All these results support the Hypothesis 1.

5.2 The Difference of Parental Attitudes and Behaviors toward Education among Social Classes

Next, I examine the hypothesis 2. In order to do this simply and clearly, I conducted a principal-components analysis using the five items showed in Figure 5. I use the first principal component score on this analysis as a dependent variable that indicates parental attitudes and behaviors toward education.^{ix} As an independent variable, I adopt mother's academic background to explain mother's attitudes as a dependent variable. I use mother's education level as a proxy indicator of social class.^x It has four categories, which are middle school graduates or less, high school graduates, junior college graduates, and university graduates or more.

Table 3 shows the results of ANOVA. Figure 5 shows means of the first principal component score by social class categories. According to Figure 5, it can be confirmed that South Korean mothers' education fever in terms of educational attitudes and behaviors is higher than Japanese counterpart across social classes. The difference between social classes in South Korea seems to be as wide as in Japan. The mean differences by mother's academic background are statistically significant at the .01 level both in South Korea and in Japan. In addition, I calculated η squared using the value of η in Table 3. It is .066 in South Korea and it is .020 in Japan. These results mean that mother's academic background explains 6.6% of variance in

South Korea while it explains 2.0% in Japan. Although both values of η^2 are small, the social class indicator in South Korea may explain the difference of mother's attitudes more than in Japan. At least, the mean difference of parental attitudes toward education by social classes in Japan is not wider than the difference in South Korea. These results do not support the Hypothesis 2.

Table 3. Analysis of Variance: 1st Principal Component Score(Mother's Educational Attitudes)

Japan			
source	d.f.	F	η^2
mother's education	3	7.28**	.14
South Korea			
source	d.f.	F	η^2
mother's education	3	29.13**	.26

*p<.05. **p<.01

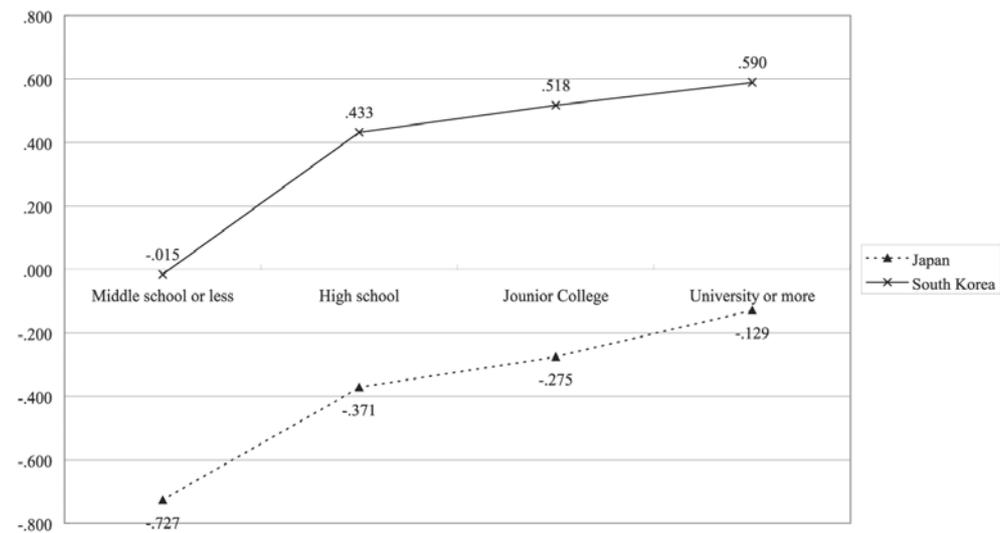


Figure 5. Mother's Attitudes toward Education by her Academic Background (Means of First Principal Component Score)

VI. Conclusions

In this article I have described the following two findings:

First, I surveyed the Japanese education system, making a comparison with the South Korean education system. I found that the Japanese system is basically similar to that in South Korea, but the pressures of entrance competition in South Korea are concentrated at the university admission stage, while pressures in Japan are dispersed between university and high school admissions. Though Japan is said to have the same education fever as South Korea, the data showed that different characteristics in education fever occur in keeping with differences in the institutional environment. Educational institution is made by educational policy. This implies that we need to make policies that address education fever based on the comparison of educational systems in East Asian countries.

Second, making use of original survey data gathered in South Korea and Japan, the homogeneity and heterogeneity of education fever phenomena between the two countries was demonstrated. According to the results of my analysis, the difference of parental attitudes and behaviors toward education between South Korea and Japan is very great. I found that parental education fever in terms of attitudes and behaviors in South Korea is much higher than in Japan. However, its differences by social classes were observed in both societies. Contrary to my prediction, the results of my analyses showed that the relation between education fever and social class is the same or may be stronger in South Korea. It is true that this finding should be restricted to an education fever phenomenon in terms of parental attitudes and behaviors toward education, but social class variables have effects on education fever in both societies. Also, this finding suggests that education policies should be made in consideration of the differences between social classes in these two societies.

I can suggest two policy implications which can be drawn from this study, as follows:

First, education policies should be made by taking into consideration that the three Es (Excellence, Equality of Opportunity, and Education Fever) are linked with one another. In the case of Japan, education fever seems to have declined as compared with the past, while a decline in academic achievement and a growing difference among social classes has become increasingly problematic. Japanese education policies such as the introduction of a recommendation system, a reduction in educational content, etc. are more or less related to this change.

Second, education fever is a universal phenomenon, deeply connected with the principle of selection inherent to modern society. However, as I have demonstrated, education fever is not the same in all societies, so we need to distinguish the particular characteristics of education fever – those characteristics which distinguish it from a universal concept of education fever – to make policy that is suited to each society.

To consider policies for education fever as described above, we must know the circumstances faced by the many countries that have an education fever problem. With this in mind, it is very important to perform international studies with regard to education fever.

ⁱ Table 1 & Table 2 are drawn from Nakamura(2003).

ⁱⁱ *Hensachi* is calculated using the following equation.

$$Hensachi = 10 \times \{(\text{individual score} - \text{mean}) / \text{standard deviation}\} + 50$$

Statistically speaking, this is the application of Z score. This calculation was contrived by a junior high school teacher, Shouzou Kuwata, and has been used in Japan since the 1960s. Most mock examinations for high school and university entrance continue to use it today to calculate the probability of passing the examination. Most applicants for high school and university focus a great deal of attention on raising their *hensachi*. This climate of worrying only about *hensachi* is now being criticized.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ronin* was a word originally used to describe a samurai warrior who had lost his job despite belonging to the ruling class in pre-modern Japan. This word is now used for high school graduates who did not pass the entrance examination and are studying for the next year's examination.

^{iv} Exactly speaking, some universities conduct simple paper tests with recommendation. However, also in the case of this, the pressure to an applicant is lower than the case of ordinary entrance examination system.

^v In Japan, its national standard of educational contents is almost determined by MEXT. This means the same contents are taught anywhere at least in the compulsory education. This curriculum guideline is called Gakushu-shido-yoryo.

^{vi} I analyzed the data with the permission of the 2005 SSM Research Committee.

^{vii} A percentage of each age group in this graph is a weighted average of the same age's, the preceding 4 ages' and the following 4 ages' percentages in order to correct for statistical error (similar to seasonal adjustments in economics). Yasuda (1971) called this the 'moving percentage method.'

^{viii} I thank Takeshi Fujita, Shin Arita, Shinji Kumagai, Tatsuo Watanabe, and Meeran Kim, my colleagues in the Comparative Educational Sociology Study Group, for their permission to use the data.

^{ix} From this analysis, two principal components were extracted under the condition of eigenvalue>1. For the first principal component, its eigenvalue was 1.96 and its rate of contribution was 39.2%. All the factor loading for the first component showed positive values, ranging from .37227 to .78563, so that this component appears to indicate overall mother's attitudes toward education.

^x This data contains information about mother's occupation. However, It is accompanied by some problems that we use woman's occupation as an index of social classes. For example, it is difficult to categorize household wife into one particular class.

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