

# The Importance of People

Editor: Prudence Bostwick

Contributor: Don Sudlow<sup>1</sup>

## The Brilliant One

ON winter afternoons when my work day at the school in Pusan was over, I often used to stop to chat with Kim Myung Tae before I climbed the hill home. He would be sitting cross-legged on the warm floor of his hut wearing the white robe and peaked black hat of the retired farmer and expressing in his whole demeanor that dignity of person which more than any other quality characterizes the Korean. Between the puffs of his long pipe he would talk about his world—a world just opening for me as a consultant in arts and crafts education to the schools of South Korea.

Best of all Kim Myung Tae loved the land—the rice paddies and the fruit orchards that had nourished his family for 16 generations. Here were the resources which made life possible. He had memories of young sons who had ridden on his plow in their first joyous years of life and of little girls who had accompanied their mother as she came down along the paddy dikes bearing on her head a luncheon basket filled with rice and kimchi, a favorite dish of cabbage and hot peppers. These feasts were part of the sharing that cemented the common interests of a Korean family.

When the harvests had been gathered in, there were winter evenings when parents and children made baskets from rice straw and bamboo as their ancestors had done for centuries past. Korean culture is learned this way in the give and take of family life. Once in my first weeks of working in Korea, when my eyes fell on the busts of Hermes and Caesar that were used as models in ceramics classes, I asked one of the Korean crafts teachers why the schools did not teach Oriental art. "Oh," he replied, "you can't teach Oriental art; you have to live it."

All five children had finished the elementary school, as do most of the children in Korea. A rural school of six grades served the 30 families in Kim Myung Tae's village. He himself in his childhood had attended a reading and writing school where he had learned to form Chinese characters and to interpret them. Only a year or two and he was out in the fields for good. His education was gained primarily through participation in the adult world of farming. Three of his children had gone on to the middle school and two to the high school; but only one had loved the life of the scholar enough to pass the rigorous examinations for one of the 20 universities in Seoul.

It was this fifth child, Kim Chung Suk (now grown a man), about whom his

<sup>1</sup>The author was a member of the Peabody College Team working with teacher education in Korea, 1958-1960.

father spoke most often. As a little boy, Kim Chung Suk had shown promise in the elementary school, so great in fact that his family decided that nothing should stand in the way of his success. When the sixth school year came—the year of decision when he must face the examination which would decide, not only whether he could go on to middle school, but also whether he could go to the Number One school in Pusan 15 miles away—the child studied even longer hours than usual.

Many a night he trudged home from school in the dark, on his back the knapsack of books which he must study into the evening. No basket weaving for him, no family picnics on the dikes, no sharing in the harvest. All his efforts for all the years in school must be centered in his learning. The work of the school is primarily a process of gaining vast stores of knowledge, of memorizing, of preparing for examinations which will open the door to the next level. Like so much education based on severe competition through written examination, the content is made up of predicted answers to be learned rather than of questions to be asked or problems to be analyzed or solved.

Kim Chung Suk stood well in his class but he had no time to learn the ways of his Korean culture where it touched the lives of common men. When he came home from the university for holidays, he was respectful toward his family; but by the second day he was well aware that his home held nothing for him—this was not his life. On the other hand, his brothers had chosen different ways. One had ended his formal education with the middle school and had stayed close to his father's farm where now he labored in his father's stead. The other had attended a normal high school and had become a

teacher in a rural school near Taegu.

By the time Kim Chung Suk had earned his Master's Degree at the university he was ready to take his place in the new Korea. His thesis was entitled, "The Masculinity of Ernest Hemingway." His work was brilliant. But he was only one of the 25,000 liberal arts graduates that year from the universities in Seoul. It was obvious that a scholar such as he could become a teacher, but only in a university. Unless such an opportunity came, he saw no other future ahead, at least no other that he could tolerate.

If he had had the chance he would have emigrated to the Americas or Australia or New Zealand. However, neither would these countries have accepted him gladly as an immigrant, nor would his own government have granted him permission to go. In the meantime, he would wait. He would sit with his fellow graduates in the teahouses of Seoul. Here, while he drank coffee and listened sporadically to the music of Beethoven and Bach from the latest stereophonic equipment, he would share in conversation of the highest quality centered in literature (Shakespeare and Hemingway), philosophy, politics and economics. As Kim Chung Suk contemplated his future he found the teahouses not enough. He must find some outlet for his frustrations and his sense of personal defeat.

Kim Myung Tae is worried. He doesn't know what is to become of his brilliant son. He is not sure that the long, hard road to and through the university is wise for a young man. It cuts him off from the stream of Korean life that binds the people together. Better had he come to know and love the land which nourished him and which so badly needs his help.

I too am worried, not so much about Kim Chung Suk, as about the conditions which he symbolizes. How can formal education in Korea—or in my own country for that matter—be more closely related to the problems and needs of the nation and to their solution. A program in which greatest emphasis is on memorization and predicted answers fails to stir the creative power that is desperately needed for the salvation of a country that is in transition from ox to jet.

The descendants of men who invented the first moveable type made of metal and the first armored boats, as well as astronomical instruments, a mariner's compass, a suspension bridge and a phonetic alphabet, should have a better education in their schools. At the same time that minds are disciplined to think and to gain the tools of thought, there should be opportunity for exercise of thought on problems that make a difference in men's lives. As Korean students grow in experience and power, they will have to conceive of improved exploitation and conservation of natural resources, of improved irrigation, of increased hydro-electric power and of the industries that such power makes possible. They will have to develop export items for trade. They will have to find ways to unite and strengthen their country.

I would not have less art and less poetry, or less concern for the literature of other nations, including the works of Ernest Hemingway, or less sensitivity to the beauty of the Korean countryside. But I would have greater freedom for children to do some thinking on their own, more emphasis on the quality of learning in a school and less on the minutiae which tend to characterize a competitive entrance examination, greater freedom for schools to try out new ways of working even if they make

mistakes, closer relationship between school and the family, and a larger destiny for the young men of the universities than the replication of their own learning.

—DON SUDLOW, *Chairman of the Division of Fine Arts and Professor of Art, San Fernando Valley State College, Northridge, California.*

---

### Nongraded Programs

*(Continued from page 169)*

ards and inflexible segments of content organized as grades through which students pass in lock-step fashion.

The nongraded pattern of organization, together with the body of philosophical and psychological principles which give it meaning, has the opportunity for influencing profoundly the pattern and organization of elementary education in America and possibly secondary and higher education as well. The extent to which this influence results in educational change will depend upon those of us who use and develop its pattern and philosophy.

A look into the future might hopefully reveal innumerable varieties and types of individualized, self-paced patterns of instruction, each developed as a result of thoughtful planning and continuous evaluation in relation to the unique needs of students and community. In a broader context, one might hope that the knowledge gained in the development of this and other instructional patterns might lead to a more comprehensive and functional understanding of how human beings learn and develop. The extent to which these hopes are realized depends upon the wisdom and commitment of those of us who labor in these vineyards.

Copyright © 1961 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.