

EDUCATION IN SOUTH KOREA, 1957-1976
A NARRATIVE INQUIRY OF ONE STUDENT'S EXPERIENCE

By

JOHN ARTHUR BURSTOW

A Thesis
submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF EDUCATION

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University of Manitoba
Winnipeg, Manitoba

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Abstract

This is a project in narrative inquiry but may also constitute a primary historical document. Led by a desire to critique E. D. Hirsch's rigorously outcomes-based conservative model of education, I interviewed a Korean-Canadian woman who was educated in the country of her birth, South Korea, from kindergarten through university, under one of the systems Hirsch approves. Working closely with "Soon-I", I chose to write up the results of the interviews in first-person form. Since Soon-I's English was rudimentary, most of my work was establishing a first-language-like voice that would do her justice. After the account was complete, I was surprised that it constituted a genuine narrative rather than just the set of memories I had expected; it is structured much as novels are structured. Much of the introduction explores this phenomenon surprise and proposes the narrative coherence and integrity of life stories and lived stories—those we tell and those we live out—be respected when dealing with narrative in the life sciences. The work of Clandinin and Connelly was inspiring, but my analysis of narrative closely follows categories established by Jerome Bruner. A brief history of Korea highlighting the importance of education since 1392 is included.

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Introduction

This thesis reports a project in narrative inquiry. In half a dozen formal interviews and many more informal conversations following up on these, I spoke with a Korean-Canadian friend and approximate contemporary of mine about her education in South Korea three and four decades ago. Mrs. Soon-I Park¹—Park Soon-I in the eastern form—was born in the last year of the Korean War. Our interviews touched upon the eighteen years of her life from her starting kindergarten in 1957 to her finishing university in 1976. Since Soon-I was an engaging and often dramatic storyteller. I initially hoped that her tale could be presented to the reader in her own voice. Unfortunately, Soon-I's English was rudimentary--stimulating in short bursts, but wearying in extended discourse. I therefore vacillated among various other possibilities for presentation, finally deciding to "ghost" her first-person narrative. In this, I tried for a prose that would be first-language-like and relatively mature while still catching my subject's spirit, and even incorporate the English words and expressions that had special significance for her. Naturally I also took pains that my rendition would represent her experiences and points of view accurately. However I may or may not have realized these goals, advance readers tell me that "Soon-I's Story" outshines the contributions—such as this Introduction--that are in my own voice. A reader could be forgiven for jumping directly to "Soon-I's Story."

¹ A pseudonym

Genesis of the Project

I came to interview Soon-I by a circuitous route, beginning with an interest in the age-old progressive-conservative debate in curriculum theory. In my year of graduate courses in Education, I had been exposed to a then popular book by the radically conservative apologist E. D. Hirsch (1996) and had been impressed by Hirsch's apparently common sense rationales for the kind of education I had myself undergone forty and more years ago. Hirsch recommends that Americans turn away from the progressive ideology and practices he believes have weakened the fabric of schooling in most English-speaking countries. It was progressivism, claims Hirsch, that had led to a breakdown in the simple transference of facts from the previous generation to the current one, and that also targets the poor and otherwise disadvantaged for a peculiar kind of non-education. For social equity as well as national (American) power, Hirsch would reinstitute the same traditional model of teaching and learning that most other countries continue to follow; indeed, he has been actively engaged in producing model syllabuses that have been attractive to many groups who have taken advantage of American charter school provisions and opted out of mainstream schooling (Hirsch 1992; 1996b; Core Knowledge Foundation, 2004).

It was progressive and often idiosyncratic writings that had drawn me into teaching. Neill's *Summerhill*, (1961) Ashton-Warner's *Teacher* (1963), Holt's *How Children Fail* (1964) were among the many books that were important to me in the late

1970s, as were a mass of adolescent literature paperbacks. Taken as a whole, these works made me hope that schooling was in fact becoming more sensitive to student experience than I believed it had been for me. Nevertheless, I approached Hirsch with an open mind and took his claims seriously. It was quite possible that what had appealed to me had not been what had given such knowledge as I had acquired and which I now used to function in the world. How could one know?

One possibility was to examine one of the many national education systems that embody Hirsch's ideal curriculum. I was in a position to interview first generation Korean-Canadians, albeit only in English. Although they often betrayed ambivalence as well, The Korean-Canadians I knew were effusive in their love for almost everything about the country they had left behind. They were proud of the high scores South Korean children were achieving year after year on international standardized proficiency tests in Mathematics and Science (documented by Jeong, Insook, & Armer, 1994) but many of them had emigrated to Canada explicitly to remove their children from the "examination hell" at the high school level in their first country. A little reading then convinced me that the South Korean school system, whatever ideology underpinned it, matched Hirsch's model point for point (Sorensen, 1994; Jeong, Insook, & Armer, 1994). Interviewing a mature Korean-Canadian for his or her experiences that were relevant to education (but, speaking from a progressivist viewpoint, which experiences are not?), both in childhood and up to the present day, would, I believed, have something to say about the progressive-traditional controversy.

The project was also relevant to local politics, and possibly a general swing to the right in education throughout North America. Over the cries of many teachers, the

provincial government of the day (in 1997) was moving towards reinstating departmental examinations in my corner of the world, Manitoba, Canada. Such subject specific examinations, to be administered simultaneously to all students at the same level in the province, are designed to hold all students, teachers, and school administrators to the same high standards. They imply, or are perceived by most teachers and parents as implying, the rigorous adoption of a uniform syllabus of testable items. My designated conservative would certainly welcome the trend. Imposition of such a syllabus at the ministerial level, policed by regular examinations from the same source, are pillars of Hirsch's system, as they are of the Grade 1-12 system in South Korea.

It was with such connections in mind that I first approached my family friend for an account of her schooling.

From Interviews to Narrative

The First Interview

Originally Soon-I and I contracted for six hour-long recorded interviews that were to be conducted over a twelve week period. As it turned out, the periods between these scheduled interviews were in fact several months, but there were “unofficial” interviews between the official ones and several more, after the official series was over. I seemed forever to be in need of clarification. All the official interviews were taped and transcribed. Some of the follow-up sessions were also taped, but others were written up quickly afterwards just from notes.

For the first² interview I prepared a series of questions and a script for myself as shown in **Figure 1** below. I chose questions that could be answered with bald facts, often with numbers, and I concentrated on Soon-I’s middle year of middle school for several reasons. First, I wanted an emotionally neutral way to ease Soon-I’s mind backwards. Second, although obviously no year of school is typical, the middle year of middle school is as nearly typical as I could think of. (But why did I want the typical?) It also positioned

² The interview reported here as the first was in fact the interview for a pilot study. Usually pilot studies are not reported in university research since they are subject to less rigorous ethical review and, accordingly Soon-I and I tried to gather the same information over again in the “real” first interview. It proved impossible for us to copy ourselves that way, however; the forward thrust was too great. We eventually sued (successfully) for a special dispensation, and the project for the Master’s was allowed to include information from the pilot.

us to go forward or back. Third, Grade 8 is, along with Grade 11, one of the two grades

Figure 1: Questions for the First Interview

In this interview I would like us to figure out how much time you spent at school and/or studying when you were in Grade 8.

- 1) Using the Western style of calculating age, how old were you when you began Grade 8? What month and year was that?
- 2) What holidays and vacations took time away from school that year?
- 3) How many days a week did you go to school?
- 4) When did you arrive at school on a typical day?
- 5) When did you leave school at the end of the day?
- 6) How was your school time divided up?
 - academic classes?
 - non-academic classes
 - art, music, gym etc.?
 - play?
 - study helped by a supervising teacher?
 - study on your own?
 - lunch and supper?
- 7) How much of the time was "basic time" and how much was "extra time" or one sort or another?
- 8) Did the teachers get paid for the extra time, or do you know?
- 9) What percentage of your classmates stayed for the extra time?
- 10) How much time did you spend doing homework or studying out of school?
- 11) Did your family employ a tutor for you that year?
- 12) Did a family member help you in your studies that year?
- 13) Where did you take Grade 8?
- 14) What social class were you and to what social classes did your classmates belong?

- 15) Was the school the one nearest your home?
 - 16) Did your family have to pay a basic tuition? How much?
 - 17) Did your family have to pay for extras? What extras? How much?
 - 18) Did you know students who did without because they could not afford the basics or the extras?
-

chosen for international Science and Mathematics tests (Robinson, 1994). My hypothesis was that the remarkable scores South Korean students obtained on these tests was a function more of the number of hours spent on study than of the centralized administration and uniform curriculum highlighted by Hirsch. You may infer that I thought of qualitative research as similar to quantitative, with hypotheses, data, and correlations, except for the embarrassingly small sample size ($n = 1$ in my case). In the air was the idea that Educational research should be scientific and aim at incontrovertibly valid generalizations, and I applied an unexamined idea of what that meant.

For all that, the daily schedule would prove important background for Soon-I's story, and the *pro forma* questions about family background and social class would uncover a world of which I had never dreamed. At heart, however, I considered the battery of questions of little consequence at the time. They were just to help us get started. I rightly expected Soon-I to be directing the inquiry shortly.

Subsequent Interviews

For several reasons, including time off to prepare a formal thesis proposal—since the first interview had in fact been a pilot—but also because I was studying the basics of oral history and narrative approaches to what Soon-I were doing, there was a nine month

interval between the first and second interviews. During this time, I also transcribed the tape of our first session, identified and tagged themes, and wrote an extended summary. This latter I began reviewing with Soon-I at the start of the second interview. It was crucial that she should now take charge of the direction her memory would take. The idea was that, with the help of the summary, she should choose the point where she wanted to jump back into the narrative. My theory behind this was based on tenets of process writing tenets, particularly those of Peter Elbow (1973), who believes that we do not *really* understand what we are talking about until we have said it at least four times over, and who has developed various protocols for expanding and gaining clarity and depth through focused rewriting. I imagined Soon-I's consciousness spiraling through her memory, making new connections or rediscovering old ones. I do not believe I had any preconceptions about what those connections would be.

Soon-I was not sympathetic to this approach. She wanted a list of questions that she could answer and then be done with. However, it was my research project, and she would do as I wished. She *did* convince me that spending interview time going over such summaries was a waste of time. She knew how to read English very well. For subsequent interviews, therefore, I got the summary of the previous interview to her in written form at least a day in advance. These she read and annotated thoughtfully.

In my summary of the first interview, I had noted that Soon-I had said, by the by and without particular reference, that things were not what they had been in her time. At the beginning of the second interview, she chose to pick up on that comment and surprised me by relating it specifically to the question of corporal punishment in school. I had not thought of inquiring into "classroom management" techniques at all, a gap that

now seems strange considering the traditional association of teacher and rod. (Hirsch is also silent on the physical discipline most of us connect with traditional schooling.) Soon-I was certain at that time that corporal punishment was essential to the building of character. She was now definitely telling the story according to her concerns. I did not argue with her.

Instead, in the interviews I attempted not to intervene in questions of substance. I often asked for clarification, but equally often I waited until I had studied the transcripts before returning to a given theme with my subject. The information seemed to float freely in time and space. Who had been punished when? And why? Soon-I and I returned to the subject several times during the next five years, and the picture clarified and deepened, as one may read in the appropriate section of her narrative. It was a victory for the spiraling-through-memory approach, as I thought, and the serendipitously slow-but-steady pace too. Soon-I never altered her low opinion of my methods or testudinarious pace. Nor do I recommend it to Master candidates with any deadlines to meet!

Soon-I and I were also not on the same wavelength concerning the value of telling her experiences or story at all. That it might have value for her personally was not an idea she entertained easily. Instead she thought of herself as simply giving information to another. The fault for this communication problem was mine. I was not clear enough in my mind as effectively to sell my method (or lack of method) to her.

A Story Emerges

I did not initially think of myself as gathering a life story, or any story. I had simply asked Soon-I for her experiences of going to school in South Korea. Towards the

end of the second interview, however, Soon-I began hinting at a crisis in her high school years, emphasizing that it was not especially important and not something she liked thinking about. Her disclaimers aside, by the end of the third interview it was clear that this still undefined crisis was providing a direction for our series of interviews. Soon-I and I both felt that I would need a lot of background before I could understand what that crisis had been about and that that background begged for a straightforward chronological account rather than the thematic, relatively atemporal one we had begun with.³ We went back to the beginning—Kindergarten—and moved forward year by year, knowing that a dark time was waiting for us.

Writing Up the Interviews

I began writing up the narrative early in the interviewing stage. As mentioned above, I had at first hoped simply to remove my voice from the transcripts, remove some hesitations and repetitions and produce an account in Soon-I's own voice. When, because of the limitations of Soon-I's English, that process seemed insufficient for an extended account, I experimented with other approaches, increasing the amount of editorial discretion I allowed myself in proportion to the internalization of Soon-I's life in my own psyche. Thus there were several drafts, some quite mixed up in points of fact, others more exact but lacking in spirit. Soon-I would not listen to her English voice on tape or read

³ As shall be looked at more closely later in this Introduction, for Bruner (1991) temporality in story involves a meaningful relationship of events through their sequence. Laws of strict cause and effect are not applicable because there is always an element of freedom on the part of the characters in a story as they pursue or choose not to pursue their ends through time, but a relationship "something like" cause and effect *does* hold, says Bruner, as people arrange their memories. It was this glue that was beginning to appear in my interviews with Soon-I.

over the transcripts. She reluctantly read over the chapters of the narrative as I finished them. Only after five years did she feel the writing was beginning to catch how it had been for her. “The Demon of the Well” was the first chapter with which I was satisfied, but the first that moved her was “Summer Job, 1969.”

“Yes,” she said when she read the nth draft of that segment. “That is how it was.”

Methodology: Oral History

When I began the present research project, I thought of it as essentially an historical inquiry into the practical concomitants of E. D. Hirsch's extreme conservative ideas for primary and early secondary schooling, a model plausibly realized in the highly centralized and uniform school system of South Korea. I anticipated that I would spend most of my time in the library researching educational developments in the recent history of the Far East. The interviews with Soon-I Park were to have constituted a small field component to give the final product a touch of life and colour. In this view, my overall methodology might be termed historical, or even historicist (since I believe my subject could be understood as at the focus of various historical processes, and the gathering of Soon-I's experience an undertaking of *oral history*).

The method of oral history is delightfully straightforward. The researcher identifies a witness to a past event, period, or situation of interest, negotiates time for an interview, sets up his or her equipment—traditionally a tape recorder—and gathers the information. The oral account is generally transcribed, a summary report written, and both deposited in a suitable archive. According to Ives (1995), either the transcript or the report then constitutes a primary historical document that awaits the work of another kind of historian who will weigh it along with evidence from more traditional sources (government documents, diaries, memoirs, contemporary newspaper accounts and so forth) finally taking it into account in writing or revising the history of the particular

event or time, as historians do. The work of the oral historian is peculiarly unproblematical.

Thompson (1978) notes that the informants (the “old-timers”) do a lot of historians’ work for them by sifting out the gold from the dross through a process of retelling the story to themselves and others over a period of many years. He quotes research showing that, as far as mere matters of fact are concerned, a memory of 60 years may be more accurate of a flood or general strike than contemporary newspaper accounts, more accurate in the aggregate (that is, when several informants are interviewed) even than a national census. For Thomson the arrangement of the past into a story by the informant constitutes an alternative to received history. Since informants tend to be ordinary people with little stake in the world their memory reconstructs, while historians tend to write plausible fictions that support an establishment of one sort or another (White, 1981), oral history is a significant force in establishing the disestablished. A glance through the ERIC database will show that amateur oral history projects are very common in the schools of North America and England. Primary and secondary school students are encouraged to interview grandparents and other old-timers about “how it was when...” or how it was *where*, in either case giving new validity to other times and other nations the grandparents knew.

It should come as no surprise, then, that oral history gathering has little importance in Hirsch’s (1996) curriculum. As Aronowitz and Giroux (1988) point out, Hirsch’s centralized curriculum is designed to restrain any centrifugal ideas that might take power away from the limited set of ideas that intellectually constitute the centralized nation state. Peculiarly, his love of centralization corresponds to the esteem in which it is

held in the Far East, though with less justification. The United States is politically so homogenous, it is not seriously threatened by pluralism. China, Japan, and Korea, on the other hand, have at different times in their history suffered sorely during periods when their central governments were weak.

This reformist aspect of oral history made it an attractive methodology for my work with Soon-I Park, especially when I considered her experience as critiquing a form of curriculum. Nevertheless, I ultimately rejected it as the methodology for my research because the historical focus was too objective for me. Possibly I misunderstood Thomson, but it seemed to me that in oral history the history gathered is evidence for or against the assertions and values of someone else's story—the story ascribed by professional historians to a nation. The activity of story-making on the part of the informant is not of primary interest. Oral history gives a voice to those who might otherwise be silent, but is not especially interested in how the individual generates that voice or carries it forward into life. Having contracted (with myself) to collaborate with Soon-I on the generating of her story—not just its reporting—I felt the need of another methodology, and I therefore turned to narrative inquiry.

Nevertheless, while I thought I was gathering oral history, I took the opportunity to read some introductions to Far East history and sociology. A vast continent and a great coherent history opened up for me. For those close to my level of ignorance in such matters, I would like to give an overview of Korean history during the last eight hundred years. My thesis will be that the history of Korea, including the history of education in Korea, is alive and well and evolving. That is, contemporary events in Korea are not as radical a departure from tradition as the proliferation of McDonald's might indicate.

In the historical narrative that I am going to include, there is little referencing of events before 1994. That is because such Korean history as I know has been knocking about in my head for so many years I forget that I was not born with it, much less that it is controversial at many points. By way of making up for this lack within my current time constraints, I have prefaced *my* narrative with a short survey of the literature.

Historical Background of South Korean Education

Bibliographical Note

For the political history of Korea and South Korea up to 1976, the end of the period covered by the narrative, the source I read most closely was Lee (1982). For the history and structure of Korean education, I generally relied on Seekins (1982). Both of the forgoing are chapters in Bunge (1982), a publication of the American military. By and large, I trust the facts and even the completeness of that “country study”. The objective tone one expects of a good soldier downplays what American involvement in Korean life looked like on the ground, however, and these details had to be filled in by Korean and missionary North American sources. Of these, particularly important for me was Park (1979), which gives an account of American suppression of the left end of the political spectrum from 1945-1948. Even Park downplays the violence of this process, violence graphically portrayed in “The Yosu Army Mutiny” (nd) as well as alluded to by the more scholarly sources yet to be noted. It is hard not to draw the inference that the limited concept of democracy imposed by American foreign policy at the beginning of the Cold War helped develop the polarization that led to the North Korean invasion in 1950. It is tempting to associate this reluctance to accommodate diverse interests and thought with the regimented school system of South Korea that Soon-I knew, and hence draw a line

back to the cheerful democratic totalitarianism of E. D. Hirsch (1996).

I read Park (1979) closely but only skimmed other Christian missionary readings of Korean history, for example, Kang (1997) and Brouwer and Rose (1996). It was from such books that I learned to associate religious influences (Catholic, Protestant, and even Buddhist) with the “modernism” that also packaged national independence, industrialization, militarism, and universal education with a common “practical” curriculum.

For the history of the Choson (Yi Dynasty) period, I relied on Lee (1982), as mentioned above, supplemented by an essentially official South Korean government account (Radio Korea International, 1995), and by several excellent websites, for example, Life in Korea (nd.). Also on the web was Choi (2002), who passionately attacks the alleged corruption and rapacity of *yangban* society from its beginning in 1392 to its end in 1910...and beyond--for Choi believes the mentality of clique, corruption, and exploitation of the weak underlies the widening gap between rich and poor in his country at the present time. Choi also notes, however, that the only easily available reading of Yi Dynasty history is in origin Korean modernist, and even Japanese imperialist. The *yangban* system was villainized in the last decades of the 19th century by Korean nationalists and then, in the first decades of the 20th century, by Japanese who wished to portray their colonization of the country as a progressive movement. For even an implied defense of the old ways, it seems one must go to Soon-I's narrative, or to the pride implicit in the story of the great King Sejong and his court of scholars.

Every Korean or adult Korean-Canadian I have met seems to know the story of King Sejong. There are several short accounts on the Internet, such as Kim (2004). They

seem hardly less mythologized than the account Soon-I gives in her narrative, but they do correct the history of *han'gul* given by Lee (1982) who, possibly forgetting that South Korea had movable metal type before Europe, does not mention the *han'gul* books published and widely distributed in the 15th century. My own view of the Choson period, which presents a glorious short reformist pluralistic⁴ enlightened age (1392-1450) followed by gradual decline, is no doubt influenced by the same Japanese-Korean modernist story that Choi suspects.

My historical narrative tells what I know, but I do not know much. As a student of Far East history and political thought, I am just a beginner. It was a wonderful side-effect of interviewing Soon-I Park—a triumph for both oral history and narrative inquiry--that a third of the globe became a part of my world or worldhood. With that by way of justification and humility, I shall now assume the authoritative voice of a survey historian.

Historical Survey

How education in modern South Korea became so broadly based after centuries of elitism and why a punitively competitive system of university entrance preparation was developed and is still tolerated by Korean parents are interesting questions. Answers often concentrate on the history of the years since the Second World War (Sorensen, 1994; Jeong, In-Sook, & Armer, 1994) but these developments may be understood as a democratization of characteristics deep in Korean history, but only now receiving popular (instead of elite) expression. Speaking in general, South Korea is more connected to its

⁴ Although absolute sovereign by right of Confucian doctrine, King Sejong was personally Buddhist.

two thousand years of tenuous independence (it has generally been a tributary state of China, and is relatively comfortable under American military command today) rather than a special phenomenon of the last century, as dramatic as recent events have been.

Educational issues have been more prominent in the history of Korea than in the west, for the neo-Confucianism intensified by the Yi Dynasty (1392-1910) made performance on the elite civil service examinations the one road towards wealth and status. Theory was bent by practice as the Dynasty matured, but the ideal of an absolutely meritocratic competitive examination was taken very seriously through the six hundred year period. The spirit of the civil service examinations continues in the university entrance examinations of the modern period.

In the first centuries of the dynasty, the young men who passed the civil service examinations, which followed the Chinese classical curriculum, gained the prestigious title, *yangban*, or learned official, as well as the high government position and wealth mentioned above, but they did not have the right to pass any of these benefits to their offspring. Upon their deaths, their estates returned to the crown for redistribution to a new generation of scholars. As well as securing an intelligent and studious civil service for the country, the system prevented the devolution of the civil service into the semi-autonomous feudal estates known in the West. Throughout East Asia, the absolute authority of a centralized administration has long been considered essential for peace and well-being.

The *yangban* elite was initially very small. The government operated a single preparatory high school in the capital comprising only two hundred students, and, by decree, all other academic secondary schools were illegal. Paradoxically, the Confucian

system also stressed family connections—though looking backwards rather than forwards to the fortunes of one's children, but it was no surprise that many *yangban* searched for ways to keep their estates in the family and to found mini-dynasties of their own. When the central government was strong, they could make little headway, but when international instability threatened Korea's security—as it did whenever China was weak—these men could bargain with the monarchy. Some got hereditary estates as a reward for special services; others pressured the monarchy to increase the number of classical high schools. Over the centuries the *yangban* thus devolved into three kinds. First, there were the men who scored well on the civil service examinations and were rewarded with lifetime administrative power. Soon-I's paternal ancestor who came down from the capital to govern the southeast province of the kingdom was possibly one of these. Second, there were *yangban* who may or may not have been educated at all but who had inherited large estates that they double-taxed almost to death. That is, they exacted the tax that was due to the monarch and a new tax to support their personal lifestyles. History (which on this issue may be “modernist” or even a legacy of nineteenth century Japanese writing) treats these men with contempt, seeing them as a corrupt class cruelly depriving their tenant farmers even of the means to learn superior farming methods. Finally, there was a growing class of genuinely educated men, who had passed the civil service examinations but for whom there were simply no positions in the government service. These *yangban* could be quite poor. They could also be responsive to Western influences, such as Catholicism in the 17th century, Protestantism in the 19th, and various forms of socialism and nationalism. By nationalism, they would have meant a Korea that would maintain its place in the world without paying tribute to China or to

any foreign country. For such nationalism, industrialization and militarization was essential, activities that in turn would demand education more universal and “practical” kind than traditionally existed in the “hermit kingdom.”

Briefly returning to earlier days, however, King Sejong and his court are often held up to show the glory of scholarly and practical achievement in the early days of the Yi Dynasty. Sejong attempted land reform, against the emergent quasi-aristocratic forces, and he also began a practical program of agricultural education that would be considered modern if he had not reigned in the early sixteenth century. He was visionary enough to see that the Chinese characters in which Korean was written at the time, hampered the education of the average tenant farmer and he therefore set about developing a straightforward virtually phonetic alphabet, the *han 'gul* that was presented to the world in 1446 and is now used in all Korean books. The story of his wisdom is told over and over again, but few add how fierce the resistance to his learn-in-one-week alphabet was on the part of the *yangban*. Their prestige depended on their literacy in Chinese characters and literature. Using the new Korean (!) invention of movable metal type, Sejong managed to have an agricultural encyclopedia printed in *han 'gul* in his lifetime—apparently to the great improvement of agriculture—but it seems to have been denied the printing press for four hundred years thereafter, when, in 1888, a nationalist newspaper began to employ it.

It might also be added that Sejong was a Buddhist. Although deprived of most of their lands in 1392, as part of General Yi's sweeping reforms at the beginning of the dynasty, Buddhists obviously were acceptable within the royal family. Common historical wisdom makes the Confucian *yangban* a conservative force—keeping soldiers and merchants in a lower class, for example—and religions old and new are billed as

progressive forces.

The last decades of the nineteenth century were turbulent ones for Korea and spelled the end of the Yi Dynasty, and the special relationship of Korea to China. It also brought “modernist” political and educational ideas to the fore. China was now too weakened by western incursions to defend Korea from Russia and the latter was too weak to resist the newly expansive Japan. Nonetheless, there were conservative pro-Chinese camps at court as well as modernist camps influenced by Japan and the more progressive Russian thought. The Protestant churches also saw rapid growth after being accepted by a branch of the royal family in 1888 and, as far as education was concerned, allied themselves with the modernist camp by working to broaden the base of primary schooling and make secondary education more practical for a country in need of industrialization. The Christian missionaries also had a feminist influence. What would later become Ewha Women’s University, where Soon-I hoped someday to teach, was founded at this time by missionaries from the United States and Canada. It began as a free primary school for girls, then developed into a normal school, and later into the Faculty of Education that Soon-I was too proud to enter. Finally, after World War II, it achieved full university rank. Thus the common school movement was well advanced before the Japanese annexation of the nation in 1910, although it is certainly true that the Japanese systematized and centralized the system. There is some question about whether the education of Koreans advanced during the occupation by Japan, partly because anti-Japanese rhetoric remains so strong in Korean writing. Common schools *were* advanced—the elementary school Soon-I attended was built by the Japanese occupiers--and the universities continued to be supported. Yet many, or even most, seats were

reserved for the children of the Japanese colonial administrators. During World War II itself, all instruction at every level was in Japanese, not Korean. Soon-I's mother remembered being beaten for speaking Korean in the playground. Thus the generation before Soon-I are all "secretly" fluent in Japanese, with the comical effects Soon-I reports in her narrative. In general, Koreans emphasize the rape of Korea's resources by Japan, and the annihilation even of their history, and underplay the extent to which Japanese educational and industrialization projects were initially welcomed by a sizeable faction.

Returning the language of instruction to Korean and Korean history to the curriculum, the government of the newly established South Korea initially maintained the system as it was under the Japanese with compulsory but only nominally free primary schooling and tuitioned middle school and high schools tightly controlled by the Ministry of Education. The surprise was how rapidly Korean parents subscribed to the system, especially after the Korean War. South Korea was moving toward virtually total literacy by the time Soon-I graduated from high school, and the competition for entry into secondary and post-secondary institutions had already created the "examination hell" of which Japan, Taiwan, and now the People's Republic of China all complain. It was as if the meritocracy of the old neo-Confucian period had become democratized, spread through the whole middle class, certainly, and into the working classes as well. Jeong, Insook, and Armer (1994) explain the phenomenon in all four East Asian countries by pointing to the radical loss of power of traditional upper classes in each. These had effectively maintained systems of education that barred lower class children from genuine competition with upper class children. But after the Second War, there was an "essentially revolutionary" situation in each of the states (Jeong, Insook & Armer, 1994)

that put men in power who owed little to the older classes and their interests. In South Korea, the upper class had also lost credibility through collaboration with the Japanese. The Japanese had punished non-collaborators by redistributing their estates among their tenants—a land reform desired by central governments at every point in Korean history. The large estates that remained in 1948 were thus tainted by their association with the recent occupying power. The landed class also suffered from a worldwide fall in commodity prices as well as the devastation of the civil war; they had no source of hard currency. The investment and aid money from the United States was redistributed by the South Korean government—a combination of nationalists returned from exile and Japanese-trained army officers--and these men could do what they wanted unfettered by class ties. What they wanted to do, especially under strongman Chong Hee Park, was build up industries in the South that had formerly been in the North, re-ally economically with Japan, harden the currency, and reward successful manufacturers of exports (often refugees from the North) with subsidies for quick expansion while letting less successful firms go to the wall.

The post-War governments continued and broadened the common modernist education established by the Japanese while imposing upon it a meritocracy that included all classes except the military (The requirements for entrance into the Korean West Point are not in the public domain). The previously dominant class was reduced to paying for extra texts, after-hour and week-end cram schools and university students employed as tutors in the hope that their children could pass into secondary schools and finally university. Their store of money had been largely reduced, however, and land had to be sold to fund education (Sorenson, 1994). The distribution of income was never equitable,

but from 1953-1965 it was more nearly equitable in South Korea than at any time before or since in the history of the whole peninsula. In her narrative, Soon-I responds to this narrowing of the gap enthusiastically, with the same sentiment for humanity that marked Western youth during the same period, the 1960s.

The lower classes embraced the new competitive rigor of the Ministry of Education with open arms. Suddenly their children had a chance to rise in the world. The compulsory, but never quite free, elementary schools were soon attended by over 100% of the age-cohort; that is, older children and adults were returning to complete their basic education (Lee, 1982). Literacy, if never the 100% boasted by Koreans, led the “developing” world. And more and more marginally middle-class parents found ways to scrimp and save and send their children to middle schools and high schools. Schools were both publicly and privately owned but absolutely controlled by the Ministry of education. Not just the curriculum was uniform. Tuition and extra fees were set by law, and a school grading system was instituted that rewarded higher-performing secondary schools with superior students. It mirrored the system of subsidy by which the government was encouraging the half dozen successful manufacturing conglomerates (Samsung, Hyundai, and so forth) that were emerging and letting the others go to the wall. Soon-I speculates that it was still possible for an ambitious upper-class woman to intimidate or bribe a principal to bend an entrance requirement, but his (never her) discretion was not great.

By 1970 “examination hell” had been realized, and by 1980 everyone agreed that childhood should be returned to South Korean children. There was also dissent at the university level. South Koreans (and Taiwanese) were regularly winning international mathematics competitions, but the nation had not produced a world-class mathematician.

In 1980, the government began to institute measures designed to compel students to study less! The extra hours, cram schools and tutor system that Soon-I describes, were now forbidden, and entrance examinations for middle school and high school abolished. However, possibly because the genius and authority of Chong Hee Park's ruthlessness was not inherited by his merely violent successors, when it came to determining the behaviour of *their* children, parents flouted the new laws and the full horror of the sixteen and even eighteen hour study day continued for high school students, and continues to this day (Sorensen, 1994, and anecdotal evidence from Soon-I's friends and relatives.)

In the same period, the government tried to improve the quality of its undergraduate degrees by introducing competition in its elite universities. They were met by a student strike. Because of the new risk of failure, for a few years superior students stopped applying to the superior universities. The old system has now been re-instituted. Qualification through the university entrance examinations, not any level of success at university itself, is the ticket to high prestige jobs in government or the conglomerates, just as scores on the old civil service examinations determined your status for life. University was so undemanding, Soon-I could work full time and study full time simultaneously.

In conclusion, the direct connection of education, wealth, and social position has always been stronger in Korea and other East Asian countries than it has been in the West. Centralized authority has also long been connected with security and good government. The perceived failure of Confucianism to meet the military threats of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries led to the victory of "modernist" education of the kind Hirsch (1996) and others calls traditional. Finally, the revolutionary situation, the

temporary disenfranchisement of a traditionally privileged class and the rise of an independent military-political authority in its place, allowed a window of opportunity for the imposition of a “Hirsch-like” curriculum. These conditions certainly do not apply to North America at this time. The systemic inequalities of the West may ironically allow more children to keep their childhoods in North America than in the countries whose educational systems Hirsch so admires.

Methodology: Narrative Inquiry

I was introduced to the field of narrative through the survey chapter Connelly and Clandinin contributed to Short's (1991) *Forms of Curriculum Inquiry*. Possibly it was the editor who serendipitously coined the phrase the pair of researchers would use in the titles of later works, for every heading of every chapter of his handbook ends with "inquiry"--"Hermeneutic Inquiry...Historical Inquiry...Philosophic Inquiry", and so forth). By 2000, however, Clandinin and Connelly had an informal patent on the term, denoting by "narrative inquiry" the particular kind of interactive practical research they and their graduate students conducted in specific educational settings. Their aim was, first to enhance the professional intimacy of educators, and second to restate all educational wisdom in narrative (rather than positivist or ideological) terms. If I am familiar with Bloom's taxonomy of cognitive objectives, then it is part of the story I tell myself as I teach and can tell others who are interested, with neither greater nor lesser authority than that (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

The processes Clandinin and Connelly developed to facilitate the sharing of stories among educators are complex, so an example will be given below. They are marked by the active role the researcher takes in facilitating and reacting to the stories that are shared. As I processed the first interviews with Soon-I Park, it was not their interactive model that I had internalized, but the broader, more various, and less defined

activities relating to narrative that are also surveyed by Connelly and Clandinin (1991) in that survey chapter. Later, although I had hardly built their complex interactive multi-feedback form into the design of my own study, the spirit and general aims of the two Canadian researchers became important to me, and so I will discuss these here.

As employed by Connelly and Clandinin (1991), narrative inquiry has a threefold reference. First, it can refer to any study that has story as its object—the way a medical student might have the nervous system as her object when she dissects a frog. Secondly, it can indicate any research that uses narrative as at least part of its method. Finally, it can designate research which chooses story as the mode of its report, as I have done in my study, for Soon-I's story *is* the research document. My method was also to facilitate the gathering and generating of a life story—however vague I was about what I was doing—and I really did not expect a *real* story would emerge. There remains the first question, deriving from the inquiry into narrative as an object for analysis and generalization. Has the present project anything to say *about* narrative as such, or about the particular genre of *lived story* exemplified by Soon-I's? The remaining paragraphs of this introduction will attempt to answer this question.

Narrative plays a role in countless disciplines and has for centuries. Among many other fields might be named anthropology,⁵ sociology, theology, the peculiar cataloguing

⁵ Connelly and Clandinin. (2000) report that a shift in anthropological perspective was important to their development. While previously the interpretation of professional anthropologists had priority over the understandings of their "primitive" informants, now the native's view of things was on an equal or superior footing, they having lived longest in the environment under investigation. From them the investigators could now expect wisdom. Nor was it any longer considered possible or desirable to separate the story gathered from the story of the anthropologist in the field interacting with his subjects. The life brought to the site by the anthropologist and the life he or she lived when there were as deeply contextualized by narrative understandings of self and world as was the

of story motifs and devices called narratology (Prince, 1982), psychiatry (Schafer, 1981), and, of course, history, this last being traditionally the most respectable academic purveyor of tales tall or true. There is, however, a curious tacit exclusion. Traditional literary works, a treasure-trove of story and commentary on story, are generally off-limits to the narrative inquirer. Their absence asks for an explanation. Connelly and Clandinin (1991) *do* refer to one of the more schematic, almost structuralist works of Northrop Frye (1957), presumably because it concerns itself with allegedly universal forms and not so much with what exceptional minds have done with them, and, in the gathering of symposium papers, Mitchell's (1981) *On Narrative*, a collection often cited as seminal, Jacques Derrida (1981) subjects a brief literary witticism to discourteously convoluted analysis. But, generally, "the great tradition" is ignored in favour of texts found closer to the ground. My project, and current interests, follow this trend by featuring the life story of an "ordinary" person, written up with amateur or "semi-literary" help (such as my own), but then subjected to a form of respectful study previously reserved for higher profile identifiable products of art and entertainment, the creations of an age-old guild of professional raconteurs. From the beginning, I was half sympathetic with the democratic blurring of high art and low, and half suspicious. Although I have little more deconstruction to apply to such tendencies at the present,⁶ Graham (1991) discusses at

Hottentot's. A level of scientific presumption (or privilege) was falling away. So also, in my work with Soon-I, I initially felt obliged to impose a respectable scientific model (historical determinism) and develop an interpretation of her life distinct from her own. Only gradually did the rightness of this division of labour lose its apparent rightness and my project reconceive itself as a presenting of Soon-I's own interpretation of her own life as best I could reconstruct it. (That was not the same as throwing the contingencies of my own life into the mix, however; my project was not narrative inquiry on the Clandinin and Connelly model.)

⁶ It may simply be that narrative inquiry has emerged from the philosophic end of things.

greater length the tension between autobiography as a potentially integrative project of student growth, and its roots in “high art.

I also found an abstract philosophical character to recent writings about narrative. That is not found so much in Clandinin and Connelly themselves, although their language could be more straightforward, but in writers such as Ricoeur (1981). Ricoeur is often content to discuss, and resolve to his satisfaction, an empirical literary question without reference to any actual story. Nevertheless, his question is an interesting one and relevant when lived story⁷ is at issue, as it is in Soon-I’s case. Ricoeur asks whether Heidegger’s “deep care”, a state of apprehending each moment in the aspect of our mortality, generating meanings beyond our presence in society, is actually found in narratives. Ricoeur thinks not, for Heidegger’s ultimate category takes being (*Dasein*) a dimension beyond its historical context, a mysticism Ricoeur excludes. Do we in fact ever experience time as a span between our birth and expected death?

Connelly and Clandinin are less interested than I in the nature of story as such (and might dismiss *my* interest as “formalist,”) but they *are* perfectly convinced that narrative is the most appropriate medium for educators to communicate with one another and their settings—for buildings and neighborhoods can also be “storied”, and the stories that the stones (and archives) tell can add to all the others that deepen pedagogic identity. A hallmark of stories is the far away and long ago. When that quality is brought to the mystery of our adult relations one to the other in the here and now, a reinvestment in

Since Plato, philosophers have not deigned to learn from the poets.

⁷ I distinguish lived story from life story. Life story is an account of your life as you lived it. Lived story includes life story but implies that an internalized narrative, a story you tell yourself about yourself, is in part driving your life forward. The distinction is easiest to appreciate when a character (such as Soon-I) is following a script not entirely of her own making, as she did in her years of being a good and predictably triumphant student.

reality is possible, to the benefits of ourselves and our students. The villains are positivist scientists on one hand and different kinds of formalists on the other, both of whom Clandinin and Connelly see as sucking reality from the soul of the here and now, and the Thou and I. My preferred formalism is historical, the reduction of Soon-I's story to the interplay of historical forces in the Far East since 1945, but other kinds of ideological foreknowing are also targeted by Connelly and Clandinin (2000). Both science, in the sense of an expert proven technology of passing on knowledge, and "isms" for which happenings in the classroom or school are just instances of forces completely out of control of those on the ground, are the enemy. Clandinin and Connelly, as does Bruner (1991), whom I shall discuss at length a little later, insist on the range of free will on the part of every character in the lived stories that comprise our world and life. Hirsch's (1996) reduction of teachers and administrators to human machines in the service of a curriculum ignores the realities that story highlight.

Clandinin and Connelly, then, hold a democratic interactive model for narrative inquiry. Researchers and participants are placed on the one plane, for narrative ultimately knows no hierarchy. The researcher has no special authority *vis à vis* the participant, or if he or she does, this specialness enters the narrative as just one more aspect or character in the story. The process, which will shortly be exemplified in the work of He (1998), resembles a phenomenological reduction when a putative ontological reality (typically "existence" but here "authority") is first bracketed off, that is, removed from consideration, but then returns to our contemplation as one more phenomenon in the observed field. So also authority figures in narrative. That seems to be the point Connelly and Clandinin are making when they tell how they resisted those who hold to Bloom's

taxonomy of educational objectives in a non-narrative form of truth (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Ming Fang He was a graduate student of Michael Connelly's at the University of Toronto in the middle 1990s and her doctoral dissertation (1998) shows Clandinin and Connelly's interactive process at work. The record of the narrative inquiry is itself in the form of a narrative. Having grown up in China during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), and probably (though not definitely) the daughter of a school teacher who spent much of that aggressively anti-academic period in a re-education camp where Ming Fang could visit him once a week. Despite his incarceration, her father made sure that his daughter got a high school education anyway--underground, from colleagues who were still at large and putting themselves in grave peril by teaching Ming Fang. Ironically, her illegal education found Ming Fang well placed when the Cultural Revolution ended. The reopened universities found themselves short of students, and there was Ming Fang, ready to go through on scholarships, virtually a hero of the republic. When Chairman Deng subsequently announced the Open Door Policy, freeing select scholars to study abroad, there again was Ming Fang. With government funding, she studied in France and other countries, finally ending in Toronto where she became a Canadian citizen, taught ESL when she could find an appointment—she complains of a prejudice in favour of native language speaking teachers even for instructing classes composed entirely of Chinese students—and finally studying with Dr. Connelly.

For her doctoral research under Dr. Connelly, Ming Fang searched out two Chinese-born residents of Canada born like her in the late 1950s and with similar middle class backgrounds. She projected the three of them would meet for several interviews,

immersing themselves in the theory of narrative inquiry, as Clandinin and Connelly conceived it, and sharing and reacting to one another's stories, with particularly emphasis on their current double identity—as both Chinese and Canadian—and speculating on their lifelines as projected into the future.

After Ming Fang had arranged with participants “Shaio” and “Wei” to work with her (“negotiating entry”), Ming Fang’s advisor had her retreat for several months to meditate and write up her own life story, for it would be in response to this that Shaio and Wei would develop their own stories.

Researcher and participant worked on the same plane. That is, the researcher did not hold a special store of knowledge or expertise that her participants lacked. Instead a democratic frame existed, of the sort I have already likened to a phenomenological reduction. Authority is banished, but then returns as one more story element, subject to discussion. Put more concretely, the advisor, Michael Connelly, enters the narrative as one of its characters, and the effusive authority with which the three thirty-five year old women invest his work becomes picture of the times. They speak of Connelly “behind his back” and the conversations (translated?) appear as dialogues in the finished work. His thinking is deeper than a well and one must read his corpus to begin to understand its profundity; no single book or article is enough (What happened to Clandinin?). My first (glib?) reaction was that the advisor had become their Mao substitute, and, although I would now phrase things more sympathetically—for my sympathies have grown through work with narrative inquiry, that interpretation fits in with other aspects of their story.

Thus, also given prominence is the advisor’s dismay at decisions made by his students--it is hard not to group Shaio and Wei under this term, though of course only

Ming Fang got the doctorate (or used her real name.) In a tradition coming from sociology rather than history, it is common practice to mask the identities of participants, even in cases when representing personality in very particular situations is thematic, as in my work, but also in Fry and Bogdan (1974), whom I shall discuss in their proper place. For Ming Fang and her collaborators, masking was especially important since all three women intended to work again in China, whether permanently or alternately with projects in Canada. Their lives had shown how uncertain the winds of change in China can blow, and they could imagine situations when “their” dissertation could be used against them. To cover their tracks, they solved the problem in an imaginative but nonwestern manner that I can imagine had Connelly tearing out his hair. The three women divided their lives into parallel aspects and episodes, shuffled these like so many playing cards and redealt them out at random among themselves. Thus, Ming Fang might take Shaio’s father for her own, and it might have been the military officer or merchant who spent time in prison. Wei and Shaio might exchange university majors. The one who was unhappiest in Canada would trade that aspect of personality with the one of the three most acculturated, and so forth. I believe that narrative inquiry, growing out of the western tradition of autobiography Graham (1991) discusses, assumes that people have unique lives however parallel their stories. It is the conservative opposition that sees all pupils at the same level as one in experience. In liberalism it is through particularity that universal humanity is approached. Yet here were three women quite happy creating a corporate identity for themselves.

The thesis is rich; yet to me it can become a caricature of itself with each character/person reacting to the reactions of the others reacting to her. Riveting, however,

are the stories of day to day life during the Cultural Revolution, the extraordinary willingness of all three women to forgive the regime that had created so much suffering for people of their (educated, professional) class, and their excitement at artistic developments in the New China that had only just had Hong Kong returned to it. The twenty pieces of contemporary artwork from China included in the thesis continue the tension of old and new but in optimistic vein.

Through He (1998), my image of the immigrant/emigrant was transformed—my world “restored” in Connelly’s term, for the story I tell myself of my own time must now include the experiences of these women—their China as something that was distant and now it close at hand. At the same time, the stereotypes of hyphenated Canadian identity are problematized for me. The three women are themselves uneasy with the old caricatures of the Canadian identities they feel are expected of them and which, dutifully, they expect of themselves. As a less than self-conscious Canadian, I was embarrassed by the pigeon holes into which I had been taught to place “immigrants.” It was while working through He’s thesis that I realized the hidden agenda of the spell checker on my word processor. It queried me every time I used “emigrate”. Surely you mean “immigrate”, it seemed to ask; “Surely where people come from is nothing compared to the land which will now devour them.” He (1998) and my work with Soon-I moved me away from this prescriptive stereotype. Even the spell checker seemed to learn something; a manufacturer’s update removed the discriminatory question. Immigrants have dignity as emigrants too.

He’s (1998) thesis ends with a poem yoking the Maple Leaf and Dragon together that is embarrassing to my ear, but that doggedly asserts the possibility of a livable dual

citizenship, a hope that seems more realistic at the end of the century (in the age of the McLuhan's "global village" than at the beginning, but that still seems a tall order. The very best to all three women.

If He's dissertation is unearthed a century from now, it will be valued as an historical document, one that adds to our understanding of a mid-Pacific identity at a point in history, and also as a modest piece of literature testifying to what it was like to be a graduate student in Education at the University of Toronto near the end of the second millennium. It will likely not add much to the idea of narrative.

I had not followed the Connelly and Clandinin approach, even to the extent that it could have been adapted for an interview with a single subject who had long been separate from any formal education setting. My work was not interactive in their sense. I had not first retreated to tell my own story to myself and to begin with such a narrative as a starting point for hearing and reacting to Soon-I's. Furthermore, I had not negotiated with Soon-I any very well developed idea of what telling one's story might mean for the one telling the story, what benefit she might gain from it. The idea of gaining anything of a psychological or spiritual nature simply from telling her story could have been alien to her South Korean upbringing; I do not know. I at almost no point shared any of the story of my own education. Nevertheless, I kept the ideas of Connelly and Clandinin in front of me during the writing up, and something of their spirit entered my personal understanding, however slight.

Bruner's Narrative Properties and the Integrity of Story

As explained earlier, I spent several years processing the material of my interviews with Soon-I Park and producing the first-person narrative that completes the present paper. Through most of this period, I was also reading books and articles on narrative and related qualitative research in the social sciences (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998; Graham, 1991, Fry and Bogdan, 1974). Nevertheless, through the whole period I did not consider that I was actually working with story as such. To put it another way, I thought that I was collecting such experiences of Soon-I Park as related to her education (but what experiences do not?) and I was by courtesy calling them a story in the aggregate. I did not think that Soon-I and I were producing something with a plot and artistic coherence such that one might intuitively recognize it as a story, in the sense that Aesop's fables are stories, at one end of the continuum of sophistication and Forster's novels at the other end, are intuitively recognized as stories. It had not been my or Soon-I's aim to produce a work with unity and plot. My obsession through the whole period, as detailed before, was finding an appropriate imaginatively reconstructed yet authentic English voice for Soon-I.

It was only when the first-person “narrative” on which we had laboured so long was essentially in its current form, that I allowed myself the luxury of stepping back and taking stock of what we had produced. At that moment I was surprised, even shocked, to find that we had indeed produced a story, a text operating through time and with an artistic coherence and other attributes I believe we all unconsciously apply to texts in determining whether or not they are stories or some other kind of record of the past or imaginative or discursive document.

Given that I had already fixed the methodology of the project as *narrative inquiry*, my surprise at finding a story may bring to mind the music hall coalminer’s amazement at finding a lump of coal in a coalmine, but my surprise was genuine enough. I had not previously considered that so-called stories collected for various purposes in the life sciences were really stories in the same way that myths, fables, parables, plays, novels and feature movies, the products of entertainment and art that we feed on from infancy to old age, are stories. I imagined that “legitimate” stories were produced, not out of human nature or experience, but by special and distinct craft, and that they spoke to a need to be entertained or transported away from present circumstances. When Soon-I said that she had always longed to write up stories from her life (as her childhood friend, the now critically acclaimed and successful novelist had done), my cynical silent response was “Yes, don’t we all? It is too bad we do not have the slightest grounding in how such things are produced. As Frye (1963) says poetry comes of poetry, so story comes of story, after long and arduous study.” Graham (1991) has interpreted autobiographies produced by plain folk as an assault upon the hegemony of “high art,” and apparently my allegiances were with the camp in the citadel. I was unwilling to step through the “long

ago and far away” horizon of the genre. Had I not in any case tried many times to write stories that were identifiably stories, fictional or otherwise, with remarkable lack of success?

There is another way to express my surprise. Distinctions have been made between *narrative* and *story*. Thus, for Clandinin and Connelly (1991), *narrative* refers to the form of inquiry which has story as its object or method. I hear the words differently. For me, narrative denotes any sequence of events that is narrated, but story comes with further distinguishing features. Having asked for Soon-I’s educational experiences through a period of history, I had naturally expected a narrative, but I was not prepared for the something more that story is.

What features of Soon-I’s narrative made me think it was a story? Having studiously rejected the diagram I had been taught in high school forty years earlier-- setting, initial incident, complications, climax, etc., apparently coming from Freytag (1863), I had no explicit criteria to apply. However, like most people, I thought I had been exposed to enough stories in my time to know one when I saw it, and there were two aspects of Soon-I’s narrative that especially struck me, unity and plot. Her account was unified in a way I had come to expect only of a work of art, and it clearly had a shape.

By unity I mean the parts speak to one another in a mutually illuminating way. Thus, episodes such as “The Demon of the Well” and “Fame” ask to be recalled when, ten years later, Soon-I is isolated in Seoul and questioning her directions in life, and again when the rapidly industrializing South Korea becomes her “village” as her prize for being an unusually efficient census taker. In the same way, the various competitions in the

narrative (the art contest, entrance examinations, marksmanship play downs, and the census takers' contest) also ask to be grouped, and reward close comparison.

As for plot, even during the interview stage I felt we were moving first towards and then away from the crisis Soon-I experienced in her second year of high school. When I was reviewing the completed document, I was forcibly struck by how *all* the material of the narrative arranged itself around her brief yet decisive rebellion against the system. It was easy to read the other events as presage or legacy. The crisis was not just one more event in her life. If a plot must have a resolution, however imperfect or ambiguous, Soon-I's emigration to Canada at the end of the period offers itself and invites the same kind of discussion of motive and significance, and the same speculation about her future that it would have if part of a novel.

There was another surprise besides aesthetic coherence and plot. It seemed to me that Soon-I had been living, if not a story, then a script from as early as Grade 5. In this script, she was the young woman most likely to succeed, the one designated by her mother, if not others, to climb the academic ladder and fulfill the ambitions that her father may have had, or that others may have had for him. As part of the plot, little Soon-I was going to succeed, not through brilliance but through character, meeting all challenges, especially those posed by teachers or others who doubted her powers. Her goal was first, to get into the top-ranked National University at Seoul and then to teach at the Christian, and only slightly less prestigious, Ewha Women's University. When, after the crisis of her second year of high school, reality set up a counter claim and it was clear to her teachers that Soon-I was not likely to qualify for the National University, the power of the script persisted. Soon-I refused to consider alternatives, and for a time it seemed that

she would have no university career at all. As I have come to understand these matters, it was at this point her script became a story, but to conceptualize that transformation will take further analysis.

Inquiry into life story and lived story was new to me, but hardly new to the literature. For Clandinin and Connelly (2000), it is virtually self-evident that we live “storied lives.” They would have teachers be true to this human truth, or human situatedness, by speaking out of their on-going “three-dimensional” narrative (with stress on the present and the projected future as well as the past) and encountering others similarly (that is, deliberately) storied. Furthermore, as I have said, I had expected experience but encountered story. Graham (1991) anticipated my own journey devoting a chapter to bridging Dewey’s idea of experience to more recent perspectives on autobiography. For my immediate guide, however, I took Jerome Bruner’s synoptic “The Narrative Construction of Reality” (1991). In this article, Bruner advances “narrative accrual”—the way we represent the world to ourselves as a loosely arranged and shifting accumulation of stories--as basis for a paradigm shift in the psychology of learning. Learning theories had emphasized wither the power of the unmediated natural world, as in behaviorism, determines learning, or whether developing mental powers of the individual human organism, as in Piaget, reach out to the environment, manipulating it physically and mentally, essentially controlling variables and building up a world view. In narrative construction, on the other hand, the focus moves away from the unmediated environment towards the mode of inquiry that stresses relationship of human with human either in society as a whole or in what Bruner calls “specific domains,” that is, subject areas. In exploring the distinct features of the narrative mode compared to others, Bruner

advances ten properties of story, and I have found it valuable to consider Soon-I's story in the light of these.

Bruner's ten features of narrative are as follows: 1) Narrative diachronicity, 2) Particularity, 3) Intentional state entailment, 4) Hermeneutic composability, 5) Canonicity and breach, 6) Referentiality, 7) Genericness, 8) Normativeness, 9. Context sensitivity and negotiability, and 10) Narrative accrual. The remainder of the Introduction will be devoted to explaining these terms and showing their relevance to lived story, especially Soon-I's Park's lived story.

By *narrative diachronicity*, Bruner refers to the most obvious characteristic of stories; they happen "through" time. Intuitively we feel that temporality cannot be abstracted from any given story without significant loss, that is, that stories do not just move through time but that their meanings are found in this movement, this imaging of becoming. The story of Soon-I Park is the story of Soon-I engaged in her own becoming through time.

In passing, Bruner throws a disapproving glance at those who abstract narrative motifs from the temporal fabric of whole stories; structuralists and others will miss the experience that stories bring to our reflection only when their parts are bonded by time.

One may retell stories, walk forwards and backwards in their time. That is as essential a quality, not noted by Bruner; the parts cohere through more than their relationship in time. The special concern of Bruner's discussion of temporality in story is that every story presents us with a single chronology, a time line on which all the events for all characters can be consistently related in time. It is thus a public time, the existential level which Ricoeur (1981) also ascribes to narrative. Bruner posits that this

chronology goes deeper and is separate from the manner in which a story may be told. It may use flashbacks, flash forwards, may deliberately withhold information and so forth, but the listener's mind is busy returning all to strict chronological order. Thus there is a presumption that stories always have a forward thrust, like time itself. I imagine the test case here would be an experimental novel such as Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, in which time itself seems frozen, the present a stillborn cocoon with the future unimaginable. Time has been apprehended, put on trial by two of the characters at least, and condemned. People who have penetrated this novel more deeply than I, however, assure me that a consistent chronology exists and that finding it is liberating.

It may be because story does not float above time but slogs through it that it speaks directly to children. This is the world, and the child is in for it.

I have said before that my interviews with Soon-I were not consciously a search for story and there was certainly no intention of imposing one. During the first two interviews, time references were vague and did not seem to matter. We focused on a school system, and I was just gathering details that could have come from anytime during a period of seventeen years. However, as story elements began to appear—especially the looming crisis of Soon-I's high school years—chronology began to matter a lot. Unguided by instinct rather than theory, it now seemed essential to get the events of Soon-I's life into the right order. Soon-I and I reviewed the same thematic material—punishment at home and school, for example, until I was satisfied that I understood which punishments were administered to whom at what time and for what reasons. The focus switched from Korean tolerance of violence towards children in the 1950s and 1960s to punishment in the particular life of my protagonist. That her punishments at school

intensified in high school, when those at home had stopped, indicated that Soon-I's behavior had gone from mere childhood impishness to something more approaching a cry for help. The meanings dawned on me slowly. Technically, they were a side-effect of trying to get the time-line right.

If temporality is the most obviously universal characteristic of story, *particularity* comes a close second. Stories are never about types or abstractions but always present particular individuals relating to one another in specific contexts. Bureaucracies and systems melt into the individuals that in real life we say *represent* them but in fact act as individuals contextualized by them.

It is through particularity that narrative understanding parts company with positive science, which is generally about the strictly replicable, and with other forms of determinism that deal with the type or average, or that have an underlying structure as the object of their study. The targeted reality for story is never that clear, a matter that Bruner discusses in *referentiality*. Stories refer to something, but not to perfect knowledge. There are even times when perfect knowledge in narrative would be “discourteous” (Steinbeck, 1994, p. 108). The goal of narrative inquiry, particularly where life story is concerned, is to become more familiar with particular people in particular situations, with what Bruner terms their “plights,” and with their never fully predictable responses to these.

I have studied embarrassingly few collaborative life stories, but early on in my work I took as a model the ground-breaking study, *Being Different: The Autobiography of Jane Fry* by the pseudonymous John or Jane Fry and the sociologist Robert Bogdan (Fry & Bogdan, 1974). It is a novel-length first-person account of a transsexual's difficulties being accepted by American institutions as a human being with normal rights,

especially the right to an affordable sex-change operation. Jane Fry wants nothing so much in life as to have her body changed to match the emotional identity of the woman she feels herself to be. As with Soon-I's story, it is worked up from extensive interviews, and it tries for a convincing voice. The collaborators certainly write better than I, but I believe their autobiographical fails through disrespect for particularity. First, there is the problem of masking. All sociological accounts—unlike historical ones--mask the identity of their informants, often clumsily. So John Fry comes from Centreville rather than from the Syracuse that the interviewer at least knew intimately. He lives in YMCAs, naval bases, mental hospitals, and in a New York gay sub-culture, of whose reality I am never convinced. The sense is that once you have seen one naval base, you have seen them all, and that sexual sub-cultures are also generic entities. After having struggled with the Soon-I interviews, forgive this lack of verisimilitude; it is not so easy to bring a character alive in her particular context. I was bedevilled throughout my work by a lack of names for people who were important to Soon-I; I never mastered the Korean art of identifying people very precisely in relationship terms. The same lacks are in Fry and Bogdan (1974). The masking makes it difficult to accept the title character whose acceptability is thematically crucial.

Fry's autobiography also has flaws of tone that I believe stem from jumping too quickly into advocacy mode. Fry is made to bear the burden of the class of marginalized people to which she has been assigned by "society" and her language is that of someone honing (and repeating) their case. The arguments are reasoned and strong; facts regarding the cost and availability of the desired operation are presented clearly. The book loses its quality of story, and thus makes it difficult for the reader to give Fry the acceptance that

comes along with story. The more tightly argued passages, such as those excerpted in Taylor and Bogdan (1998) sound stridently masculine

These flaws are understandable in a work of sociology that takes the description of institutions as its focus, but it is interesting to compare Fry and Bogdan's (1974) work with the Canadian movie by Anne Wheeler (1999), *Better than Chocolate*. The transsexual in this movie, presented in the complex of her particular desires and frustrations is immediately accepted as the woman she has chosen to be, accepted by other characters and most likely by the majority of the bookish audience at which the movie is aimed. It is a triumph of story mode, as well as Canadian comedic art. The differences may simply mark the changes in attitude between 1974 and 1999, a decrease in alienation for transsexuals that the more emphatic advocacy of Fry and Bogdan may have helped promote.

Whatever the worth of such distinctions, it is true that, as Soon-I's story took shape during the interviewing process, as the events and connections of her life became particularized, as it became more and more itself, the deeper I felt her that I knew the woman, and, I trust, the more her character came alive, suggesting the voice I would ultimately half give her and half appropriate. By intentional state entailment, Bruner means that characters in stories (as people in life) have at all times purposes and goals and a range of freedom with which to pursue these or to decline to pursue them. I note that thinking of this aspect of story makes it easy to understand the volitional dimension James and Dewey attach to experience or that Sartre believes is concomitant with consciousness. People have aims and possibilities; when the importance of their aims and agency is denied—as in some kinds of pedagogy—their existence in story is denied also.

Curiously, in story, institutions as such lose the over-riding character they may have in life. They become revealed as the “legal fictions” that they are called in law, this even though characters may refer to them as having a life of their own, as both Soon-I and her collaborator reify “the system” against whose “values” the young woman temporarily but decisively, paradoxically, rebelled at age sixteen. Qualitative research in sociology conceives reified institutions with real people working out their destinies within them; story is an obvious mode for the expression of this understanding.

Bruner is especially concerned with how agency and intentional states modify the model of cause and effect that is axiomatic in most positive science and, we might add, in most ideological explanation of the way things are. A story’s outcome cannot be said to be caused by earlier events in the same sense that boiling water causes steam for, were it human—and Bruner insists stories are only about humans—the water could choose not to become steam in a given instance. He thus prefers the word “explain.” Later events in a story may be explained by pointing to earlier events. But as free will is axiomatic for story, causal chains in the scientific sense cannot exist there. For narrative Singer’s quip applies: “Of course I believe in free will. I have no choice” (qtd. in Rosen, 2004, p, 86).

Bruner notes that intentional state entailment, along with the other properties of story, marks off narrative from traditional theories of learning. Both “empirical” approaches, such as behaviorism, or “rationalist” approaches, such as Piaget’s, have the environment manipulate the learner or the learner manipulate the environment, in either case dispensing with the mediation of the human world in which the learner actually lives, the webwork of relationships that comprise his or her human world. Both learning theories err by giving a non-human environment so much power. Even pure scientists,

says Bruner, learn most of the time from their storied relationships with others in their field—the stories they hear, the stories they live. Mentorship is a good example of an educational relationship which is always a story-in-progress. The relationships are everything, and the mode of relationship is story.

Again, the model is close enough to Dewey's (1916) to mark the distinction as well as the resemblance. For Dewey, the student is out to learn both the environment and his place in the society that mediates the environment. Society is certainly important in Dewey, but the raw confrontation of the social team with the natural environment falls back from a fully storied discovery of the world and one's place in it; the world one is discovering is not quite social.

It is a short step from saying that stories operate in an aspect of intention and agency to saying that they are *about* intention and agency. Life stories written to demonstrate the reduced range of a given human being's goals and free will, which often can be very limited indeed, risk throwing out the essence of what stories have to say about being human and intentional and living in a world where freedom and the realization of goals is always problematical.

An incidental criticism of Hirsch (1996, pp. 174-175) here would be that none of this interests him at all. For him, stories are pleasant ways to teach the facts that make up his curriculum or to teach (undefined) "consensus" values. Like everything else in his pedagogic world, stories are instrumental to the end that knowledge in a nation state should be uniform, whether for preparation of the workforce or for other unarticulated reasons; stories form far too unpredictable and personalized a web of understanding—my story set relates to yours but is separate—to be the stuff from which education arises.

Discovering Soon-I's dramatic free actions at the time of her crisis in high school and reading backwards to decisions she had made earlier in her life, even to her inspection of the demonized well, built up my respect for her enormously, as well as my respect for story, which allows the easy moving backwards and forwards in time in search of the meanings people make of life—people always different from ourselves, but never too different.

Earlier it has been shown how reaction to story is part of narrative inquiry for Clandinin and Connelly (2000). Bruner (1991) discusses how stories are received under the heading *hermeneutic composability*. He means that stories require interpretation, invite interpretations, and that communities which listen to story accept a great range of interpretations, a far greater range than in positivist science or, following Clandinin and Connelly, I might add, ideological or metaphysical systems. Curiously, the meanings of stories are always hidden. They cannot be said to have been heard or read until some interpretation has been made by the listener or reader. Bruner does not speculate on why this hiddenness is universal to story, but he does have ideas on why we can accept (or are willing to “negotiate”) so many even contradictory interpretations. We accept that stories come out of the context of their tellers and are heard only within the different contexts of their different hearers. Furthermore, when we are not being scientific or (I add) divinely or patriotically inspired, we accept that the world is wider than our conception of it.

Bruner does not consider how often particular interpretations of a given story are forced upon it, and upon its readers, by authorities--in religion, in politics, or in the schoolroom. I believe that he is absolutely right that the natural mode of responding to story is acceptance, sharing and—if practical decisions must be made—negotiation.

Pontificating from my limited experiences as a teacher of university entrance English to First Nations children, I say that listening to the interpretations of students is always more educational (at least for the teacher) than telling them the interpretations that have come down through “the tradition”—in teaching Shakespeare, for example. My students’ responses to *Macbeth* were far more reasonable than the good-man-gone-wrong interpretation that had been forced on the play when I was taught it in the years just after World War II. Interpretations of stories shared outside the strictures hierarchy can have amazing educational force. Something is always learned, the world always transformed.

In working with Soon-I Park, I had to struggle with the expectation I had placed upon myself to be “the expert”, to treat Soon-I’s memories as “raw data” out of which I would generate an authoritative interpretation. Over time, I realized what most people connected with narrative seem to have known since the beginning of time, that my data were *not* raw. Simply for the sake of the grammar, and the compilation of sentences into paragraphs, connections had to be made that would at least suggest one interpretation over another. Scrupulously wanting to avoid contaminating the evidence, I yet had to “put it all together”, and that ultimately required my guessing at Soon-I’s own interpretation. As mentioned earlier, the negotiation of interpretation that would be implicit in our collaborative narrative that could have occurred between sooner and me, did not happen. This reaching for Soon-I’s interpretation, involving creative work on my part to be sure, yet represented for me a shift in the locus of wisdom, from the person who turned the tape recorder on and off and hoped to end up with a new degree, to the one who had actually lived the life and was vitally engaged in its continued evolution.

Qualitative researchers have to struggle with the charge that they are merely projecting their preconceptions on their subjects, but reaching over to the other is the ultimate aim.

It is possible that the ideal interpretation of Soon-I's story would be to gather a dozen readers together--some young, some older, some off the street and some with credentials for expertise in one field or another, and certainly to add Soon-I to the gathering, and have them react to one another's readings in an orderly way.

The tolerance of readers for interpretations may relate to Bruner's final (tenth) property of story, *narrative accrual*. Just as quite different interpretations may co-exist amiably, so may the great store of stories we carry with us through life. We add to them, re-arrange, use one to question another, but exclude much less than positive science would. We do not feel the need to.

Bruner's terms that most opened up Soon-I's story for me were *breach and canonicity* and the related concept of *normativeness*. For me, they provided the missing link between story and life, and convinced me that life should indeed be expressed and examined as story. I shall discuss both categories together, and also take the occasion to touch on *genericness*, for genre is not unrelated to the conventions Bruner covers with "canonicity."

Bruner is nothing if not creative in terminology. *Breach and canonicity* pile together connotations of attack, escape, literature (an author's "canon"), and even ecclesiastical jurisprudence ("canon law"). Bruner claims that every story, banal or deep, involves the violation of law, convention or expectation. If the breach is meaningful, then the story is worth telling; if not, then it is not.

There is resemblance here to the “initial incident” in a common outline for stories, taught in my day but dating back at least to Freytag (1863). The discovery of Colonel Mustard suddenly deceased fills in the initial incident slot in the old scheme and also constitutes the “breach” in Bruner’s thinking. Canonicity would have demanded the good colonel be found alive and searching or perusing *The Times*. The difference between the old six-part formulation as taught in the school I knew (introduction, initial incident, complications, climax, falling action and resolution) and Bruner’s conception is that while the former was received as a technical formula for writing an entertainment, the breach, in Bruner’s conception goes to the heart of being human in society. In his discussion of *normativeness*, he expands the idea. Through the breach legitimacy of some kind is brought into question.

My deliberately trivial example involving the unfortunate colonel shows that legitimacy is not always tested very much. The story may be filling a *pro forma* need and stretching neither teller nor audience very much. It is wrong to murder colonels and, canonically, even worse to get away with it, but the canonical world order will reassert itself quickly enough. Sometimes the reassertion will come through the agency of the non-canonical. Sherlock Holmes is the conventional unconventional upholder of the law, for example. The play between breach and canonicity can get complex. The breaches can easily become canonical themselves (a murder mystery without a corpse is rare) and thus part of a genre. Following White (1981), who believes that history only becomes history when evidences of the past are transformed into a fiction that justifies the establishment that is directly or indirectly paying the historian, we may add that the questioning of

legitimacy that drives a story may be denied in the telling, so making history boring to the young who do not identify their interests with a given establishment, nor against it.

Here is an example from Aesop where the authoritative keepers of the canon rhetorical breach it themselves, and it takes the quick-witted hare to find a breach that sets him free and re-establishes the common sense view of how things are.

The lion, the wolf, the fox and a hare took a stroll one day on a fine sunny day. "I look forward to the day, and I know it is not far off, when there will be absolute peace on earth," said the lion, "and the lion will lie down with the sheep. "Yes," said the wolf, and swords will be beaten into ploughshares." "And dogs will no longer need to guard henhouses," said the Fox. "Yes, you are all right," said the hare, and he veered off to the right and ran away as fast as his legs would carry him." (my re-telling)

Bruner notes that a story's breach may not be one of event but of manner of telling--the flash backs and flash forwards that are now a stock in trade of raconteurs, and other devices which were perceived in their day as radical departures from expectation. He also follows Roland Barthes in distinguishing stories where the questioning of convention or legitimacy is trivial from stories where the question is serious. A "readerly text" is one written with the reader's intellectual and moral comfort in mind; in it, expectation is disturbed briefly, just enough to fill the novelty slot in a convention. In a "writerly text," much more is demanded of the reader, who must often step across to the world of the author, or as seen by the author, and often struggle to repeat the writer's creative process. Some read Shakespeare as a readerly text; one with a few peculiar

words that nevertheless reinforces what we already think about things. Others expect to encounter a not unrelated otherness of serious work. However much time I spent trying to make Soon-I's story inviting or "readerly," I believe all life stories to which we decide to give our attention should be received as writerly texts in Barthes' sense of the term. We must reach out for the other.

Bruner also defines the canonical as the story-like sequence of events that, for want of a breach, do not add up to genuine story but may provide the background to real story. For these, he borrows from clinical psychology (e.g., Berne, 1964) the term "scripts," pre-written temporal sequences whose legitimacy is at no point to be questioned.

I believe the distinction between script and genuine story is revealed in Soon-I's story and life narrative. From late elementary school through middle school, Soon-I invested herself into a hero script with great spirit and energy. In such scripts continual success is compulsory and assured. Ricoeur (1981) discusses the compulsion under which heroes operate, while Bly (1991) emphasizes the hero's great luck, a sensation Soon-I maintained through all her debacles. In the middle period of Soon-I's educational career, to be sure, there were "breaches" in the form of threats to her continued academic triumphs. These were enough to give her script the appearance of a story and make it interesting for her. Thus, whenever her scores fell (once after leaving Busan Song Do, and once after leaving Daegu), an antagonist would appear as surely as a dragon in a fairy tale--the poor Grade 6 teacher who doubted her destiny, the nephews and nieces who made claims on her time), and Soon-I countered with a powerful "I shall show them" and prevailed. The problem for the hero, says Ricoeur, is that although his or her options

seem to be open before every challenge--she may succeed, flee or fail--in fact the script does not allow her any but the first option; the punishment for exercising another option is removal from the whole story. It is the illusory freedom that makes heroic tales incomplete hortatory, psychologically untrue.

In her second year of high school (Grade 11) Soon-I's script collapsed and her real story began—or reasserted itself. She began to question the values and goals on which it was based. Finding her way to a new configuration of identity was the task of the rest of her story—insofar as it is followed in the period of the narrative, and the decisions she made for herself from that time until her emigration are complex, for breaches do not last long before new canonicity is established or an older one returns.

Extrapolating from Bruner's discussion of *referentiality*, we may say that stories point to states of affairs beyond themselves to the extent that there can be "true stories" and "false stories", but that locating the state of affairs to which they point is rather more complicated than with other kinds of exposition. I like Ricoeur's (1976) formulation that the reference of any literary text is "in front of the text", the process that is going on exactly at the time of the reading. This makes the reader an important character in the reading process, which to some seems as obvious as making the student an important part of the learning process, but which my chosen conservative, Hirsch (1967), abhors. For Hirsch, the meaning stands behind the text, in the mind of the writer, a noumenal presence to whose apprehension the text magically gives clues to the initiate. For Ricoeur, the world we share with the writer is sufficiently absolute a reference. But that world is no simple entity. In recollection, a story can be entered at any point and its reference shift as quick as thought or feeling. In part, the problem is that story is always

received as a becoming, and this is particularly true of a lived story. We are used to the world being represented as a fixity, a mechanism of replicable parts that are truths that hide only because of our ignorance, but such a view distorts the world of becoming which story brings back into balance. There is more to a true story than its meeting any set of criteria, but I believe that a life story that is sensitive to the properties discussed in Bruner's article is more likely to be psychologically true than one that limits the freedom of its characters, ferrets out motifs instead of listening for the lines of purpose and decision that have led the teller to where she is today.

In my work with Soon-I, I wished her story to refer to her state of mind at each of the times of which she spoke and also to the meaning she made of it all in her maturity. I think I succeeded more in the former than the latter, or it may just be that the pattern of the whole requires more work to grasp than each episode by itself. Why *did* one who so loved her country of birth and her extended family emigrate? Read on and draw your own conclusions.

Soon-I's Story

Preface

I don't think what I say about education will matter very much. I want to help out with my friend's research, but there's no particular point I'm trying to make. Who would listen to me anyway? I can't imagine the young caring. I went to school in another era. Everything is different now.

Family Background

Later I would live in Daegu and Seoul, and finally, of course, I would move to Canada, but I come from Busan Song Do in South Korea. Yet I was not born there; in Korea you traditionally go to your mother's town to be born. Still, I didn't do that either. Instead, my mother went to my father's town because that's where her mother was. And why was my maternal grandmother in my father's town instead of my mother's? Because one of her sons was just starting out teaching school there. You cannot always choose the location of your first teaching assignment. For all that, I lived in Busan Song Do for the first eleven years of my life and it is where I come from, *my* village; my heart is still there.

Although, as its name suggests, Busan Song Do is part of the Busan region, and even in my day Greater Busan was a metropolis of more than a million people—today it is almost four million—in the 1950s and 1960s, Busan Song Do was a rural farming area, hardly more than a village. It was on a little peninsula at the southeast tip of the larger, Korean, peninsula, separated from the bustling city by the narrowest neck of land. I look at an old map of my country—I mean one printed before they changed the English spellings—and I laugh when I see how the big P (for Pusan) obliterates my little home town entirely.⁸ The city streetcars did not come so far out. A trip to the city began with an hour's hike to the last stop, one that we often made as kids just for the fun of it. I had no

⁸ A map of South Korea (CIA, 1993) is included as **Figure 2**.

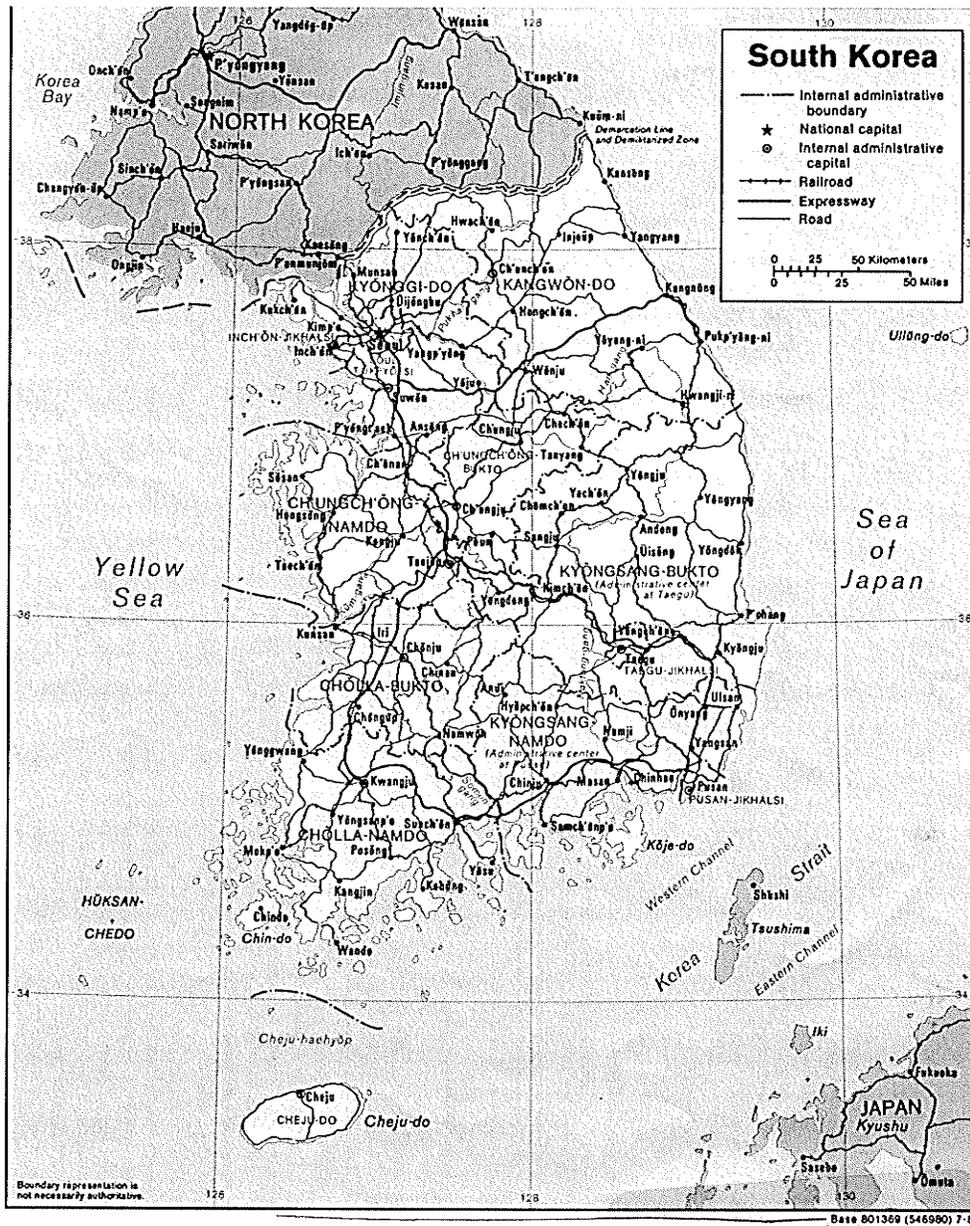


Figure 2: Map of South Korea

(CIA, 1993)

family in Busan itself.

Busan Song Do was a wonderful place to grow up, especially for the kind of girl I was. I was an adventuresome freewheeling outward-bound little girl, a tomboy, to use the English word, which I think perfectly fits the girl I was. I thrived in that safe but wonderfully varied world between mountain and sea.

Unfortunately, I have to use the past tense when I talk about the Busan Song Do I knew. The place with that name still exists and, to be sure, so does Busan Song Do Elementary School, which I attended from Grade 1 to Grade 5. But the farms are gone, and the farmers and their children too. My father still lived in the old way, a landowner surrounded by his tenant farmers, We were on the best of terms with these. Their children were my pals. Now the area has been devoured by the expansion of Busan proper, completely developed. They have even filled in the beach, the sandbar and lagoon I loved so dearly. It's all ocean front office buildings and apartment blocks now. Ah, if only my family had hung onto its land there a little longer, how rich we would be now! But we moved off the land when rural land prices were still depressed, well before South Korea's "economic miracle" really got going in the 1970s.

It was a wonderful time to grow up, I think, those years just after the Korean War. The poverty of the country after the awful devastation of that war was something we all had in common. How can I put it? Even the rich, and my family was always well-to-do, felt a commonality with the poor. That connection was part of the education I received from my mother, who worked with refugees on behalf of our church. Busan Song Do was a favourite destination for refugees from the North, and thus a favourite destination for missionaries too. People were there to take care of one another. That was the message I

got from my earliest years, when my mother took me on her rounds. I think that sense of the common good is gone now, in Korea at least, and, I suspect, in Canada too.

Both sides of my family had long histories in the southeast, though not necessarily in Busan itself. Five hundred years ago, one of my father's ancestors was sent down from the capital of the old kingdom to govern the area, and my particular division of the Park family—you have to be able to distinguish Chinese characters to figure out what clan you really belong to, for Parks are by not means all related—branched out from that time. We had landlords among us, but industrialists too. My family owned a coal mine until just a few years ago.

I want to emphasize the tradition of scholarship among these men. Scholarship has always been held in high esteem in Korea. A hundred years ago, a great grandfather founded a university. My family still owns it. I could have attended free of charge there, in theory at least. It would have been a shameful thing to have exploited that connection, however. Never for a moment would I have considered getting into university through the back door that way. But it is not that bad a school, as provincial institutions go.

To clarify things, before they get too confused, both sides of my family were educated. My father's side was scholarly in the great Confucian tradition. My mother's side was scholarly too, but within the Christian tradition. Father's side owned the university, but the men in Mother's family were all teachers, or almost all. I'll have fun talking about the exception in a minute, but first I will tell my father's story.

Very much in the tradition of his family, as a young man, my dear late father had shown great promise as a scholar. That would have been during the Japanese occupation, for the Japanese occupied my country from about 1910 until 1945 and did their best to

colonize it. They were the ones who set up our modern school system, actually. Before that there had been traditional Confucian schools—I'll talk about those a little later, too.

The occupation was not a good time for education in Korea. The Japanese kept the universities going, but most of the places were reserved for the children of the Japanese overseers. Yet they let a few of the most promising Koreans advance too. Father must have been among the most promising of all, for he won a spot at the Imperial University at Tokyo. Not many Koreans got to go there.

Father was studying there when the Second World War broke out. The War dashed all his plans, for they plucked him from the university and quickly put him in uniform. Yet, before he shipped out to Indonesia—we think it was Indonesia--he had just time to dash back to Korea and marry my mother. She was just a girl at the time, far too young to marry, but Father foresaw the possibility of the Japanese conscripting Korean girls to serve their soldiers, as all the world now knows that they did. Father also correctly predicted that married women would be exempt from this "draft." So Father married my mother much earlier than he otherwise would have. Then he was gone for six years or more.

The War ended on August 15, 1945, a date we South Koreans mark as our Independence Day. In Canada too, Korean-Canadians devote the whole of the nearest Sunday to that date for community and church events. I believe that Father did not return home until 1946, however, almost a year after the end of the war. Had he been taken prisoner? Or had his company got lost and out of touch with their commanders, as some other Japanese soldiers were said to have done? Father never said. In fact, he never told anyone about his war experiences. I said before that he served on the Japanese side in

Indonesia. Strictly speaking, that is just surmise. Someone mentioned the famous beauty of women in the South Seas and noted how many years my father had been away from “civilization” there. Father smiled quietly in a way that defied interpretation. I can say there was never a hint of that kind of impropriety in his make-up.

As far as I know, Father never told anyone of his war experiences, not his wife, and not me. But my mother, other people in the family, and people in the village too, told me that the man who returned to Korea in 1946 was much changed from the eager young scholar he had been. The war had damaged his spirit in some way, broken it; he never recovered.

The alteration in Father’s mood had a serious effect on our place in the family hierarchy and on the family finances. After *his* father’s death, Father was the senior member of our branch of the Park family; he was the direct heir of the man who had come out to govern in the sixteenth century. But it was evident that he had little enthusiasm for the responsibilities that came with that position and the rest of his family—his uncles I mean, and his sister even, began to redistribute the enterprises he nominally oversaw. Control of the university I told you passed by him in favour of a distant cousin, and later the coalmine slipped away too. Father did indeed start at least one new business—a bean sprout “factory” whose brave two or three years I remember very well—it was an exciting happy time for us--but he was not lucky there, and it ultimately failed. He was by temperament a scholar, not a businessman.

Yet he did not resume his studies. He spent a lot of time talking with friends in the the Men’s House, or travelling to visit other men of his class. Men’s house? Home at that time was a compound of dwellings. There was a Men’s House and a Women’s House,

where the women and children lived. There was a gate house, houses for the servants (though by my time we had lost all of these except for a nanny and a chauffeur) and other buildings for farm business. It would have been a big day in my older brother's life when he was promoted to take his meals and sleep in the same building as my father.

But I really do not know the details of Father's financial dealings. In fact, nobody in my immediate family seems to have had a really good idea. They were as obscure and locked away in his head as the story of how he had spent the war. What I do remember is the gentleness of his soul and his unwavering care and fondness for me. I was always in his thoughts. He would take long walks through his orchards fully absorbed in his own reflections, it would seem, but when he came back home he would surprise me with a perfectly ripe apple he had searched out just for his little Soon-I. "Here, Soon-i-ya, look what I have." Things like that I do not forget.

I went to Vancouver recently and stood on the shore with my head lifted up, crying across the Pacific: "Daddy, here I am, in Canada now! What do you think of that? And I am married to a good man. You would like him because he is gentle, like you in some ways. And your granddaughter is so beautiful and sweet." I am a believer, a Christian, not like Father who was Confucian. Unlike many of my faith, however, I believe he hears me, and his love remains with me.

My Christianity comes from my mother and her family. They were among the first to convert to Protestantism—Presbyterianism—at the end of the nineteenth century. Yet, although Father's side of the family was of the *yangban* class of scholar officials and even owned a university, it was my mother's side of the family that was thick with teachers and school administrators.

Mother was the baby of her family by a decade. She had no sisters but eight brothers. In fact, she still has eight brothers. The oldest are very old, but they are all still living and apparently in good health. They were all teachers and principals, or almost all. Mother speaks of herself as the great exception, the one poor student in her family. Otherwise, it was the family destiny to teach. Even the children of the teachers became teachers. Since my cousins were much older than I, when I was a little girl most of them were just launching their careers as school teachers. There are hamlets in Korea where young teachers go to “pay their dues,” as I mentioned earlier, and I remember my brother and my travelling by train to visit them. We tried to make a circuit of the relatives once a year. What great buyers of books they were, even the youngest and most penurious! It was in my uncles and cousins’ homes that my real education took place.

The “Japanese” Uncle

There’s a funny story about my family’s “destiny to teach.” It involves the one uncle of the eight who did *not* become a teacher. Apparently he thought of the family destiny as a kind of curse he had to run away from. That was the way the story was passed about by his brothers anyway; I heard it often.

Okay. As they tell the story, this prodigal brother ran off to Japan as soon as he was old enough to make his own decisions, and he was running precisely so that he could avoid the family fate. “I’m not going to be a teacher,” he shouted over his shoulder as he ran. That is the way I see it. “You hear me? I’m not. I’m not.”

So the story is retold at every family gathering, but there may have been more to it. It was true enough that he ran away to Japan. It would have been about 1945, maybe a

little earlier, possibly later. I am not sure. Penniless in Japan at the end of the War, Uncle scavenged for old metal, army surplus I suppose, and soon he had built up a big recycling business. By the 1950s he had his own foundry, employing hundreds of workers. There are a million Koreans in Japan. Many have been there for generations, centuries. They cannot become Japanese citizens however long they have been there, but they often do well for themselves. They usually marry within the group. Uncle also married a Korean woman in Japan. His oldest son, my cousin, distinguished himself at the University of Tokyo, incidentally, and he is now a university teacher. My stay-at-home uncles laugh and laugh about that. “The family curse may have skipped a generation,” they say, “but fate is fate, and we are teachers.”

There was more to it, although I am not privy to the details. This “dissenting” uncle was a socialist of some sort. It was not a good century to be a socialist in either South Korea or Japan, and the sixties and seventies were especially uncongenial. I do not know how actively political Uncle was, but his opinions seem to have got him into trouble in both countries, despite his considerable economic success. The Japanese government took away his foundry, for example, in the fifties I think, or maybe later. One day Uncle was a hero of Japanese reconstruction, and the next he was a security risk. I imagine they compensated him, or he had other ventures by that time. He remains rich today.

His politics presented him with another problem; he could not travel easily from one country to the other even if he wanted to. If he returned to South Korea for a visit during the administration of Chung Hee Park, for example, there was a chance he might be picked up. How much of a chance I do not know. It is strange to think of Uncle as

being associated with causes in Korea. It was Japan he loved. But if he crossed over for a visit there was another risk: would the Japanese authorities let him back into Japan? So he stayed put in Japan, and I did not meet him when I was growing up.

This uncle's love for Japanese culture was certainly not common in Korea. Even today, Korean popular sentiment is intensely anti-Japanese. Despite the economic reintegration with our former oppressor that was effected by Chong Hee Park in the early 1960s, South Korea still jams Japanese radio and television. The bad feeling is also shown comically by how we cast television roles. If a script calls for an American, we hire an American, but if a script calls for a Japanese, we hire a Korean and have him speak bad Korean with a stage Japanese accent, or even bad Japanese. In either case they will run subtitles below, as we often do anyway when pronunciation varies too far from the dialect of the capital. What's the point? Well, millions of Koreans my mother's age understand Japanese perfectly well and love to laugh at the stumbling pretend Japanese. Language and identity was not a joke for Mother in her childhood. From the late 1930s until the end of the Second War, all schooling was in Japanese; Korean even in the schoolyard was rewarded with a beating. Korean history was replaced by Japanese history too. So now Mother and her contemporaries usually pretend they cannot understand Japanese, but they laugh at the antics of the Korean actor pretending to be a Japanese who is too dumb to speak his own language.

The uncle who declined to be a teacher, on the other hand, has kept his love for things Japanese pure down through the decades. Finally, things eased, and both governments allowed him to enter Korea for his mother's funeral in 1970 and return to Japan afterwards. I attended too, of course—she was my favourite grandmother, the

feminist one--but I don't clearly remember meeting him there. That would not have been typical of me. Usually family matters are a priority for me. But I was eighteen and preoccupied with my new government job in Seoul, I guess, and perhaps Uncle could only stay a day or two, or perhaps that's all the time I could budget too. Uncle's heart was in Japan everyone said, and he wanted to get back. It was not just teaching he had been running away from when he initially left Korea, but the whole culture.

I finally got over to Japan to visit this uncle in 1980 when I was about to emigrate to Canada. I could not know when I would be on that side of the Pacific again, if ever, and it was important to me that I meet him, and really have a visit with him, before I was gone, or before he passed away, for that matter. I do not know if you can understand how much things like that mean to me. I had to pay my respects to all my family at that time in my life, when I was leaving a whole continent. So I went over to Japan.

How strange it was to find him standing before me. He had become so Japanese! His clothing and hair style, even the way he arranged the furniture in his house were Japanese, not Korean, and especially his manners. A westerner might not notice, but a Japanese bow is a touch more reserved than its Korean equivalent, yet taken more seriously too. The man stands a little farther back and holds the bow for a second longer. At least that is the way it used to be, and Uncle was living the way it used to be. As a result, although naturally Uncle still spoke good Korean, at first he did not seem like family. I was facing a stranger and quite at a loss as to what to do with all the formal respect he was showing me.

Then I noticed a twinkle in his eye, something, and suddenly I realized that all his elaborate ceremony was, not a put-on, I don't mean that, but a genuine expression of deep

respect for his twenty-eight-year-old niece. It was as important for him to meet me as it was for me to meet him. We had family as a deep bond. He was genuinely interested in every aspect of my life. I felt like a favourite who had rarely been out of his mind for the last twenty-five years. He was so charming, I fell in love with him, though we had only time for the single interview, and I still am in love. I was hoping to get across to Japan again on my last visit home, but it was not to be. I was slowed down by having two children in tow and by allergic reactions to the pollution in Seoul. It made the kids sick too, but they rebounded after a few hours, while I took days and days, wasting my holiday. Uncle is still alive, as I said before, but a very old man now. Despite unceasing entreaties from his seven brothers, he shows no desire to return to Korea. That is the story of the uncle who escaped being a teacher. Later I'll talk about my uncles who were teachers and especially about the one who was a principal of a prestigious high school. He was my favourite. It was in his library during holidays that I got my lifelong love of reading, not in school, though to be sure some teachers encouraged me there too and lead me to favourite writers, like Herman Hesse. I also read a lot in the libraries of my cousins too, the ones who, twelve or more years older than I, were just starting out on their teaching careers.

So, a lot of teachers! Even my sister, who you would think was too sociable and easy going for scholarship, trained in a college and taught kindergarten for a while. Then I sponsored her along with Mother, and she came out to Canada.

The "Last" Confucian School

I have one more great uncle to talk about, or possibly a great-great uncle, another

relative on my mother's side; I'm not a hundred percent sure how he was related. This man was not a teacher, but a landowner, yet he ran a school too, in a way. I think the Japanese gave us our modern Korean school system early in their occupation when they began to replace the traditional Confucian schools with common high schools. The great-uncle I'm speaking of may have sponsored one of the last of the traditional schools, opening one on his estate in the 1920s; maybe his was the last to be closed down by the occupier.

Such schools were common in the old kingdom. A landowner would open a school to educate his children, basically his sons but not just them, in the classical curriculum. The children of his managers and artisans would attend as well. Such schools were seen as acts of public beneficence, but the children of the peasants were excluded. Once a year in the old days—before our annexation by Japan I mean--a court official would make the circuit of the schools searching for scholars remarkable enough to be future leaders. It was a practice that had been going on a thousand years. The really promising, never more than two from a school, would be sent to Seoul for an annual super-examination by the King and his cabinet. It was a competitive oral examination designed to select from all the candidates no more than two new elite officials. One was destined to be the “practical” man, a minister of justice or foreign affairs perhaps, and the other purely “scholarly” and contemplative. Some years, there would be no successful candidates at all, but when there were, they would get the rest of their education at court before taking on very high positions.

Korea was proud of its court scholars and of its scholarly kings too. Every Korean knows how, almost six hundred years ago, the great King Sejong commissioned scholars

to help him devise the Han'gul alphabet. The king and the scholars were perfectly up-to-date on all the linguistic developments in Europe as well as other countries, and they produced for us, we believe, the world's most perfectly phonetic alphabet. Of course, the old kingdom was no more when my great-uncle opened his school. He could have guessed the Japanese would not approve. They were busy setting up the current system of common schools and getting everything under their own control, especially as the war approached. My mother was at school when its language changed to Japanese.

So they closed down Uncle's school in the 1930s, I think, and they put him in jail. There was likely more to it than his just running an "old-fashioned" school. Maybe he was in contact with the Korean government that was in exile in Manchuria. But I know was in prison for several years before they released him. Mother said they waited until he was sick and they knew he was going to die. They let him out to die among his family. That was when mother met him. She was a schoolgirl and he was a terribly emaciated frail man who seemed already half in the other world. How old was he really, this landowner who had been a philanthropist in the old manner?

So that is my family background, generations of government officials (though not so much in my time), landowners and teachers strung out along the southeast coast of Korea. Most of them are still there, though lots of my cousins have moved to the capital region, to Seoul. A few of the younger generation emigrated to the States, and my mother, sister and I have come to Canada of course.

Before leaving family background, I should mention religion again. My father's side of the family had no religion at all, neither Christianity nor Buddhism; Confucianism had been sufficient. On the other hand, my mother's side had largely converted,

obviously not the uncle who had opened a Confucian school, but most of them. What I want to add here is that most of Mother's family had been converted to Christianity by Presbyterian missionaries late in the nineteenth century and that a lot of these missionaries had come out from Canada. Through all the years of the Japanese occupation, my mother's family quietly kept their faith despite persecution by the Japanese, and occasionally by fellow Koreans. Presbyterian missionaries from the States and Canada, especially from Canada, stuck it out in Korea too. One of them would be my teacher at Ewha Women's University; she was very old when I took a professional course there, but quite wonderful. Such people, and of course my mother's lifelong volunteer work with the church, especially her work with refugees directly after the Korean War, when I was a toddler and elementary school kid, had a profound influence on me. Service to others as a pre-eminent value was something I learned early. And the interweaving of our religious life with missionaries from Canada, first in the nineteenth century and then again just after the Korean War, finally, my good experiences with charitable institutions that were well-managed by Canadians, whose integrity I learned when I became an inspector of total care institutions in my twenties, all of that made me fall in love with Canada before ever seeing her. People ask how someone who so loves Korea could come here, but I tell them coming to Canada was not a break with my traditions and values. I am a Christian and go where God wills.

Kindergarten

I loved kindergarten. It was great! I learnt all sorts of neat new things that nobody else knew yet, except the kids from the nearby orphanage, who of course got everything straight from the missionaries. My kindergarten teachers were women from the church, where the class was held, but Koreans, not missionaries.

What sort of neat new things did I learn? I'm talking about songs like "Ten Little Indians" and the A-B-C-D song, and lots of other songs too, all in English. I can still sing them, and do. I think my pronunciation of English was at least as good then as it is now.

In kindergarten we got stories and poems from the west too. So, curiously, I learnt the English alphabet a year before they would let me start in on Korean han'gul. That is funny, isn't it? Knowing the latest western things was considered very cool in 1957. (I suppose it still is.) Compared to friends who didn't go to kindergarten, and most kids didn't, I was a very smart up-to-date little five-year old. And I knew it.

Another nice thing about kindergarten was that the class was small. There were less than thirty kids, I'm pretty sure, and three teachers, all women. They weren't always all there at the same time, but compare that with the classes of 65-70 that I would know from Grade 1 to the end of high school!

A further nice thing about kindergarten was visits from the missionaries, especially from David, a red-haired Canadian giant who worked at the orphanage. He didn't come to teach us, just to play with us. That was an event. He really was an

enormous man. Three of us held on to each of his arms and he swung all six of us together. Okay, it was just after the Korean War and we were all like matchsticks, but even taking all that into account, David was huge. He dwarfed his wife, who was Canadian too and often came with him. Standing beside him, she looked like a child herself, or a doll.

We called him the Jolly Green Giant, and we sang the song. “Good things from the valley...” Yes, we knew American advertising too, somehow, without radios, without having ever seen a can of peas for that matter—tinned goods weren’t part of *our* CARE packages. The orphanage kids knew about them. Maybe it was from them we learned the ads.

It was just four years after the Korean War finished, and missionaries and other workers for foreign relief agencies had crowded into the Busan area to care for the refugees who had come down from the North. Greater Busan was the only part of Korea that at no time fell to the North during the war. So it got more than its share of refugees, and semi-rural Busan Song Do most of all, because it had the space, I guess.

My family was well-to-do and never needed relief from the agencies, but mixing with the missionaries and local church people who worked with refugees was an important part of my childhood, for my mother was very active in the local church, Busan Song Do Presbyterian, and I followed her about a lot before I started school, and later, on weekends.

Sometimes I felt poor because I was rich! The CARE packages didn’t have tins but they did have chocolate bars and I was sorely aware that I did not qualify for these. In elementary school, I would bring apples and peaches from home, melons too, and trade

them for some of the chocolate. Mars bars were my favourite. How angry Mother when she found out about these dealings. I should have just taken extra apples and peaches to school—we had lots of them--and given them away, she told me. Never should I bargain food out of the mouths of the hungry. She was right of course, but at the time I did not see how that was going to net me any chocolate bars. It was beneath my station to go beg from the American GIs too, though my friends did.

Yet the whole country was poor and I identified with my country in its poverty, even though I was personally pretty well off. CARE packages came wrapped in cotton like the cotton they use to make flour bags. Mothers cut it up and sewed their daughters dresses from them. And for sandals they wore bits of old tires from American jeeps. Not me—we were never as badly off as that--but I remember my mother cutting down a formal adult gown that some American lady had donated. Mother's volunteer work included opening overseas packages and sorting them; I guess she bowed to temptation sometimes and occasionally took first pickings. The gown made a marvellous dress for little Soon-I; I was the envy of my classmates. Mother got hold of a Bulova watch too; it was hidden in a jar of mixed buttons, she said.

Missionaries were everywhere and involved in everything. They ran an orphanage, an old folk's home, and a free hospital. I don't think they funded the kindergarten, though. I think the church itself ran it, quite separate from any relief effort, but I could be wrong. The orphans certainly had their own kindergarten inside their compound. They didn't mix with us until Grade 1, when all boys and girls attended the same Busan Song Do Elementary School.

Kindergartens were separate from the official school system and they still are.

Only a fraction of my age group attended. All my life Koreans have been crazy about education, but not many think of kindergarten as real education or more than a glorified day care. Anyone can open a kindergarten. You don't have to have any qualifications, though there are qualifications to be got. My younger sister took a two-year college course that prepared her for teaching kindergarten. She taught for a couple of years before I was able to sponsor her immigration.

Yet I do not think attitude completely explains why my kindergarten class was so small. I don't think it was a matter of money, either, for unlike grade school, which was supposed to be free but wasn't (there are so many compulsory extra fees) I'm pretty sure the kindergarten had no charges attached to it.

So I think the real reason more children did not attend was that our church simply restricted enrolment to the kids whose parents the elders considered important. You had to be the child of an elder or someone like that. My father did not belong to the church, but mother was so active in the church, she was virtually a deaconess (the female equivalent of elder) and, after all, we were a prominent family in the village; so I got in. The church's caretaker's kids too. Yet there were a lot of other kids that I saw in Sunday school and would meet again in Grade 1, but who never went to kindergarten. That bothers me, to think about my church that way. My religion is important to me, and justice and equity too; I hold us to a higher standard.

Oh, these are happy memories, the English songs and being swung round by David. As for whether we attended full days or half days, whether we went on Saturdays too, the way we would when we started grade school, those are details that I cannot remember at all.

Elementary School in Busan Song Do

I lived the first eleven years of my life in Busan Song Do. It was a wonderful place to grow up in, especially for a tomboy like me. I had a mountain to climb and a beach, not just to swim in, but to spend hundreds of hours digging for mussels between the tide lines and studying the great variety of marine life that was still abundant then. That was a serious part of my education, or at least I thought so. I checked out the names of the different species in the books at my uncle's, the principal in Masan. (There is a wonderful beach at Masan too.) Later, when I tell you about "The Bad Teacher," you will see how my education on the beach and in my uncle's study once got me into trouble at school—and may have got the teacher in trouble too.

Busan Song Do was a safe community. From an early age, my older brother and I had the run of it. He was three years my senior. Alone, I could go almost anywhere. In his company, everywhere, not just the seaside and the mountains and the farmland nearby. We had the freedom of the whole southeast of Korea! On weekends and holidays, we often traveled by train along the coast to my parents' cities, Chinju and Masan, as I mentioned above. They were just an hour or two away.

On weekends, and especially during the month-long summer and winter breaks, we would make the rounds of the uncles and cousins on my mother's side of the family, and visit my father's mother too. Most of my cousins were much older than we were, and, budding teachers mainly, like their fathers they had lots of books, great books. It was

there I read my holidays away—especially through mid-summer afternoons when it was just too hot to go swimming. It was there I developed the love of reading I still have. In elementary school the books I loved the most were factual things, like encyclopedias, and comic books. In Middle School I would turn to world literature.

At Home

Father did many things in his all-too-short life. Mainly they were connected to agriculture. In the 1950s he owned farmland in Busan Song Do. He didn't do fieldwork himself, of course. Most of the land was let to tenant farmers. I knew all of these, and mixed easily with their children. They would drop by to get milk, for we had the only cow, or they would leave some of their own produce. We were certainly better off than our neighbours, but there was not much wealth to share during those hard times. Korea was still recovering from half a century of a humiliating occupation followed by two wars (World War II and then the Korean War). I was lucky enough to have a dress cut down from an American woman's gown; that was the distinction of my wealth—or the distinction of having a mother who was constantly doing volunteer relief work. She got first pick when crates of cast off clothes from America were opened. Other girls had dresses made from the cotton bags of CARE packages. I was proud of my dress.

As I mentioned before, Mother worked tirelessly on behalf of the refugees. She put her heart into it—a Christian commitment. My family even adopted a refugee girl. She was considered part of the family for a time, an older sister that I was a bit jealous of at times—because of the attention she got from Mother, I mean. One day, however, she stole the family silver and ran off to Seoul. She had an older accomplice; she could not have managed that on her own.

You would think that would be the end of our relationship with her, but it was not. She came back later, and Mother found her a place working with a relative. Our own fortunes had fallen and we could not have maintained her.

This was the wealth of my childhood, to be close to people of different classes who cared about one another.

School Maintenance

Busan Sang-Do Elementary School is a good example of the fine school buildings with beautiful grounds that you find in Korea. When I go back and see it, and I do when I can, I get a good feeling, because it is an attractive building and because, along with all the other students, I spent a lot of wonderful time taking care of it, keeping it clean inside, and attending to the rounds. I know that in Canada my children are missing an important experience when such work is all done by caretakers. That is sad.

Then the school buildings in Canada are so ugly. Ach! What is the connection between ugliness and education? When I came here and they showed me one, a new one close to where I lived in downtown Winnipeg, I could not believe it. No windows! We have prisons that look like that in Korea.

When I started Grade 1 in 1957, Busan Song Do Elementary School consisted of an older central structure flanked by two newer wings. The centre part was truly lovely, just two storeys, basically of wood but also with some brick and stucco, but tall, partly because it was built a little off the ground, but more because the pagoda roof took your eye to the heavens. There were finely carved stairways to take you up to the first level, and the whole front of the building was filled in at the base with a profusion of flowers and ornamental shrubbery. It was the kind of building you think of as typically Korean, but in fact the Japanese had built it during their occupation.

The newer wings were a different matter. They were utilitarian single-storey

concrete block buildings, rather like what you see in Canada, basically ugly. They had been put up during the Korean War, very quickly I think, to accommodate the influx of refugees from the north. There were buildings like them all through the southeast, and not just for grade schools. Some of the famous universities had been evacuated from the capital and temporarily re-established in our relatively safe area. You know you are not going to hear me say much good about concrete block buildings, but we did mask them with flowers and shrubs pretty well. I can be proud of that.

The last time I was back, the old structure remained as it had been, but the “temporary” wings had been built up to three storeys each.

The school grounds were also very beautiful. There were playing fields and an assembly area in front, but there were playground structures for the small children and paths with benches and a few shade trees for the whole community. I would not have called it park like exactly—the interviewer and I have argued over the word--but it was a lot more like a park than the naked schoolyards I see in Canada, and perhaps it served the function of a park. I mean that in my day the schoolyard was a centre of village social life. Older youths and adults of all ages would come there after work and on weekends, for sports or just to sit outdoors and talk. In the summer, the school itself was closed but the grounds remained a focal point. You could meet your friends there and not just your friends. Everyone in the village would visit at one time or another. That has changed now. The grounds are still beautiful, and that is still to the credit of the school children themselves, but nobody except kids hang out there anymore. The country is richer, and there are so many other things for people to do with their spare time. I’m not too pleased about that. I liked the society the way it was in those less affluent times.

Unfortunately, I do not have many pictures of that school. My family did not get a camera until I was in middle school. The only pictures I remember were of whole classes standing on the parade ground with the school in the background, and these have got lost over the years. Perhaps my sister has some.

The really great thing about the school, as a building, was that it was ours, the showplace of its students' self-respect and even their gift to the community. We kids took care of almost every aspect of maintenance. The whole building was built around a courtyard in the centre of which there was a well from which we were forever drawing water, for drinking, but also to swab the classrooms and the hallways, and the outdoor latrines too. That was our work, not the caretaker's, and certainly not the teachers.' These latter would organize us, though we did not need much direction. The teachers put the ban jan or class leaders in charge, and we all worked like crazy, right from Grade 1 through what you would call Grade 12. The only exceptions were kids in examination years. If you were in Grade 6 preparing for middle school entrance examinations, in Grade 9 preparing for the same kind of examinations but into high school, or in Grade 12 when every minute had to be for preparing for the all-important university entrance examinations, you were exempt from all maintenance jobs that took you out of your classroom. These students still had to keep our own classrooms clean, of course.

We were also responsible for keeping the schoolyard in good repair too—I'll talk about that—and for the flower beds too. We were not responsible for shaping the ornamental shrubbery because that is a high art. It was the chief pride of the school's single caretaker, who was also responsible for major repairs and electrical work. Think of a school with a thousand students and only one caretaker! But a thousand students was a

small school. When I entered the big “factory” school for Grade 6 in Daegu, there was still just the one caretaker for possibly four thousand students. That’s how I remember it anyway.

The drill for cleaning our elementary school was the same as for cleaning the middle and high schools I attended, the same throughout Korea. I remember it best when I think back to my middle school years in Daegu. Perhaps it seemed most fun then; middle school was always the happiest period of my life. So here are some more details.

For daily cleaning, the class was divided into squads—rows actually—and one squad would be responsible for a full week before another took over. They would have to stay late, sweep, clean the boards and brushes, haul in water and mop up things like that. They would be responsible for our part of the hallway too. In Daegu, where there was real winter—every classroom had its own coal-fired stove. So there was the added burden of carrying in the coal and taking out the ashes.

But there were also special cleaning days or half-days—once a month perhaps—when the whole student body was expected to work like crazy scrubbing and rubbing until every square centimetre of the building was spotless. Everything would be cleaned thoroughly. We washed the windows and the doors, and we waxed the floors. It just took a couple of hours because there were so many of us and we challenged ourselves to see how fast we could work. We were like ants swarming everywhere, in apparent chaos, but actually in good order. We could accomplish anything.

It worked like this. Once he knew that we knew our responsibilities, the teacher would disappear to the staff room, to smoke and drink coffee with the other teachers I suppose, leaving us in the charge of the ban jan. When we thought we were finished, and

the ban jan saw nothing amiss, she would march triumphantly to the teacher's lounge and rap authoritatively on the door. "Class such-and-such reporting, sir. Everything is ready for your inspection." The teacher would nod conditionally, and look as if he was taking it all very seriously. Slowly he took his leave of the other teachers and made his way back to class, while we children were getting more and more excited, and more and more anxious. Then, again slowly, slowly, the teacher would go over every inch of the room, and the hallways, and the latrines too if that was our responsibility. We would be watching him carefully, anxiously trying to read his face, but his features betrayed nothing. Finally, his inspection was complete, and he would turn to speak to us.

If we were lucky, he would nod again. "Yes," he would say. "Very good. Let us get back to our studies." Success! But sometimes we were not lucky, and instead we would get rebuke, fiercely, and in great detail. We had missed that. We had been sloppy here, and here and here. Where had been our eyes? That must be fixed, and all that must be done again. Etc. Etc. And he would turn on his heel and march back to the staff room, for more smoking, coffee and conversation. (I came from a family of teachers. These guys needed their breaks just as much as we did.) Meanwhile, we would be crestfallen. We took it seriously, but doing everything over—if that's what we had to do—actually extended our holiday. For it was a holiday. Every minute stolen from the hours and hours of lectures and note-taking was something to remember and celebrate, as I do today.

I call the teacher "he" because, after kindergarten, all my teachers were men, even in the all-girls middle school. There were two or three women teaching in the high school in Seoul—I remember the French teacher who got to take her class regularly to the French consulate--but I did not have any. At university, again almost all the teachers were

men, except at Ewha Women's University, where I did take one course, in social policy, from a wonderful older Canadian woman, a woman very dear to my memory. I shall speak of her later.

Hauling coal was special in my middle school in Daegu, but there was a special maintenance chore in Busan Song Do too. Every so often, not more than once or twice a year, the principal would declare that the school grounds had been beaten by the wind and rains long enough and that it was time to replenish their surface. That would take a whole day and would involve everyone in the school. (Possibly the Grade 6 students were too busy cramming for middle school entrance examinations. I do not remember that part, for I had moved to Daegu just before I started Grade 6 myself.)

Busan Song Do Elementary School was built not too far from the ocean on a base of some of the finest firmest clay in the world. Really, it was wonderful clay. We used it for art class; it was of that quality. There is not much grass, most of the playing fields and the parade ground are bare, but there are the shrubs and flower beds I have told you about.

The problem of course is that when it rains, even the finest clay gets mucky, and Busan is subject to great rains coming off the ocean. So we had to keep a layer of sand over everything. Fortunately, we had some of the finest sand for the purpose near at hand too! (You see how I am celebrating the treasures that were naturally around us. How fortunate we were, are, just to be living in nature.) The sand was in dunes just as you approached the beach, about half a kilometre away from the school.

Thus, every so often, the whole school of a thousand students would march back and forth to the dunes carrying sand, then rake and smooth every inch of the school

grounds again. There were some wheelbarrows and some buckets used for the hauling, and some kids could bring things like that from home too, but most of us carried as much sand as we could in our knapsacks, or dragged flour bags full of it such as some had got from CARE. The funniest thing, the thing I loved to see the most, was the very little kids—and Grade 1 and Grade 2 boys and girls were especially little back then—bringing their tiny shoe bags to the beach, filling them up with a few cups of sand and walking back with us to the school! It was our school, everybody's school.

So we learned real life skills in school. I do not think Canadian schools teach these and, if they do not, where do kids learn them? Well, maybe they learn gardening and other things like that at home, but I do not know. We learned them in school, and that is still the way it is today. Whenever I go back, I stop by my old school again, and I can see that everything is in good shape. The kids still take care of the school, planting, weeding, watering, and making everything look good.

The Daily Routine

In elementary school, the classroom teacher was responsible for virtually everything to do with us. He taught every subject, including gym, music, and art. Very rarely another teacher would come by to teach us something special, like a technique for a field day event where he had expertise. Otherwise, basically there was one teacher for the whole year, and we were his students.

We did not have that much to do academically with the other classes—except to compete with them! The new class averages were posted in the hallways every week or second week. We hardly felt isolated from the rest of the school, however, or seriously

competitive in elementary school. I have already shown how the whole school joined together for school maintenance. That was true in later grades too, very important for our spirit and character, and our camaraderie too as academic competition got more and more stressful.

My elementary school had a principal, a vice-principal, a full-time nurse and a caretaker too. There were three classes of 65-70 students each and there was only the one caretaker. The school I went to in Daegu was four times as large—over 5,000 students. But that's all the administration I remember working there too: a principal, a vice-principal, a nurse, and just the one caretaker.

In middle school and high school, as in Canada, we still had a home teacher but had separate teachers for every subject. We circulated from room to room. Except for that, school life was organized pretty much the same way from Grades 1 to 12, although the day was shorter for primary students.

Although we got to school before 7:00 AM, the official school day began at 8:00 and ended at 5 PM. There were four classes before the lunch hour and four classes afterwards. On Saturdays, there were just the four morning classes. The day ended at noon with none of the “extra classes” I will soon speak of.

I think each of the classes was fifty minutes long and that there were ten minute breaks between them, but I not sure whether to trust my memory here. If that is all the time we had for breaks, we sure managed to pack a lot of life into them. From the beginning of elementary school to the end of high school, during all academic classes, the teacher stood on his platform at the front of the room talking, and the students followed along in their textbooks, or in expensive extra books that updated and expanded the

textbooks, and took notes. This pattern was broken by test periods, and there were a lot of these. Major subjects, like Korean, Math and Science, had a test every week, and the rest at least once every two weeks. In total, there were a lot of subjects, and no options, or very few—you could choose your third language in high school, but that was about it right to the end of high school. (I should mention there were also vocational high schools, but I know little about them. My family never considered that option.)

The official school day ended at 5 PM Monday to Friday, and 12 Noon on Saturday. In what I am about to say, I will be thinking of how it was from Grade 6 through middle school and high school. Earlier grades in elementary school usually really did end at 5 PM.

However, for later grades, 5 PM just marked the beginning of the “extra” hours. There was hardly more than a couple of minutes break to eat a snack—nothing like a dinner hour. These extra hours were by no means optional. Though our parents were billed for them separately, there was no getting around paying that part of our tuition.

You always had to spend some time at school after the official day was over, but the number of extra hours you had to put in before you were allowed to go home, varied depending on how well you were doing in the subjects taught that evening by the teachers on duty. Mercifully for them I guess, no teacher had to stay every night. Depending on how a student was doing in Science on the night the Science Teacher was there, you might have to stay only an hour or you might have to stay all three hours. The school finally closed at 8 PM.

During the extra hours, a teacher would re-teach material that tests showed we had not mastered. Some of the time saw us doing seatwork with the teacher circulating,

but half the time at least, he was at the front of the room teaching, and we were trying to absorb the lesson using our usual methods. But none of the material was new. The hours were “extra” in that sense.

Through middle school I was usually doing pretty well in all subject areas, except Mathematics, and, in Grade 8, I usually got home by 7 PM. When the Math teacher was on duty, however, I might have to stay the whole three hours. A lot of students had to stay the whole three hours right from the last year of elementary school, or even before, to the end of high school.

We distinguished extra hour work from “study” and “homework,” both of which we did after school. By study we meant reviewing previously taught material; by homework we meant getting ready to receive the new material that would be taught on the following day. I was a strong student and, during ordinary middle school years, my study and homework took me between one and two hours a night. During the last year of middle school, however, when we getting ready for the examinations that would determine what quality of high school we would go to, homework and study expanded to fill the time available. I would go to bed around midnight, and then rise a bit before six.

Here is a place for a sweet aside. I would rise a little before six unless there was birthday in my household, including among the tenant farmers and neighbours we saw daily. If there was a birthday, then everyone got up at 5 AM and celebrated the birthday with the customary seaweed soup (for health and long life). That makes sense to me, celebrating the birthday at the beginning of the day, so the birthday person will feel special all day long. We didn't exchange presents or anything like that. I have told people Koreans don't celebrate birthdays, but I had forgot about that lovely custom. I've tried

that in my Canadian home too, supplementing the seaweed soup with a cake from Safeway—I can't eat something with so much sugar myself--candles and a few gifts—and my husband and kids loved it!

I said that after the extra hours, we could go home, but in high school and other important examination years, that would not be the case for very many people. Of course the extra hours would be followed by private study hours for everybody, including me, but then, for many, hours with tutors or in a hog wan, which is a cram school. There were also private study halls where you could rent a space for a year and keep away from the distractions of home. Almost nobody got home before midnight in high school, and some lived (and still live) on four hours sleep a night.

The Art Contest

Mostly I have happy memories of school life, in elementary school and later too. I remember our playing outside after school, and I remember the people I walked to and from school with, how we dawdled or hurried—the short cuts that often found us splashing across streams. I've already mentioned how I liked outdoor activities—how good it was to be gardening in the schoolyard instead of studying—though I always studied well—and I remember the picnics and the field trips. There are not that many statutory holidays in South Korea, yet our time was broken up pretty well; it was not all studying. I have talked about school maintenance and I could talk about National Tree Day, when the whole country got the day off to climb the mountains and replace the trees taken by the Japanese during the War. Everyone worked alongside their fellow workers with their supervisors (our teachers) in command. It worked very well. The mountains are green again!

And we went on a lot of field trips. We went to concerts and, as well as our annual school field day, we took part in special interschool contests. I remember one contest particularly well, because I won it! Here is that story.

They held a city-wide art contest every year in Busan (including Busan Song Do) just as they did in every other South Korean city. It was for drawing and for painting in various media. My specialty was watercolour. It was only open to kids who had been short-listed by their elementary schools. Busan is a very large city, so just to be one of the three or four hundred contestants that year—I was in Grade 4 or Grade 5—was quite an

honour.

The contest took a full day. We all gathered at the same place bringing our pencils and brushes and our drawing boards; the contest organizers provided the paper. The site changed every year but was always outdoors and picturesque: up in the mountains perhaps, or in a park. My year, it was a beach. Once we got our paper and our instructions, we wandered about until each of us found the view we wanted, and then we set to work. At the end of the day they would gather in all our masterpieces, signed of course, and they would be taken away for evaluation. A couple of weeks later we would learn the winners in each category. There were a lot of categories and a lot of winners. I don't want to exaggerate my accomplishment, but you know, I did have some talent and I loved to draw and paint. Sometimes I think of taking up watercolour again, maybe sign up for lessons at the Winnipeg Art Gallery. Winning at that contest was very special for me.

There were rich kids and poor kids together at the contest. That was important to me too, then and now. Some of the really well-to-do kids had easels, but there were not many of those around at that time. Instead, those who could afford it, as I could, carried a wooden drawing board. Yet there were kids who could not afford such a board and carried sides of corrugated cardboard torn from cartons. Maybe they couldn't afford brushes or paints either, and they worked instead in pencil or crayon, but some did great work anyway.

When I was named a winner in my category, my school, Busan Song Do Elementary, approached my mother and asked if they could have the prize picture to hang in a hallway. Of course she let them have it; we both were proud of me. I remember that

picture, remember the decisions I made while drawing it, how I chose my perch, how I got the mountains in here and the fishing boats grouped just so, then stones along the shoreline, and an overhanging pine. I can sketch it out all again now.

A good memory. A happy time. And I had won!

A few years later, after I had gone with my family to Daegu, I went back to my old elementary school to see if they still had that picture hanging there. It hurt a little to see that it was gone. Well, of course, there were contests every year and many contest winners must have come up during the intervening years. What should I have expected?

The Demon of the Well

Busan Song-Do Elementary School was built around a courtyard, and in the middle of that courtyard stood the well from which we drew all our water, water for us kids to clean the classrooms and hallways with, as well as water for drinking. That was a lot of water, and so it was a big well, wide enough for two massive square wooden buckets connected by a heavy rope slung over a roller overhead. When you pulled on the rope to raise one bucket, the other went down.

Each bucket had a bar across it (rather than a handle). That's where its end of the rope was attached. The buckets were huge and the crossbars were strong—quite strong enough to take the weight of a little girl.

There was a safety feature to the well. When a bucket came up, it banged against a plank that stopped it from going any higher. Then we moved the bucket onto the edge of the well and tilted its contents into our more human-sized buckets. That arrangement stopped the bucket from accidentally going over the top of the scaffolding and then back into the well, which was a very deep one. It kept the lower bucket from very deep into the water too. I was going to appreciate that feature.

There was a story connected to the well because sometimes, no doubt depending on the wind, a low spooky moan rose from it and spread over the courtyard. The story was that this came from a demon that lived crouched out of sight in a niche at the water line, waiting for foolish children to lean out too far.

All my friends took this story seriously, but not me. I was firmly Christian; even at seven or eight, I mocked all pagan superstitions.

So one day I said to them, "Meet me after school in the courtyard and I will prove to you that there is no demon." Then, after school, when we were sure there was no adult around to interfere with my plans, I announced, "I will go down into the well myself." And I climbed onto one of the buckets; I sat on the bar, grasping the rope and letting my legs dangle into the bucket itself.

"Lower me down," I commanded. The ropes went through a pulley system. They could do this.

"Oh no, Soon-I," they said. They were scared, but I wasn't scared at all.

"If it is a demon, I will speak with him face to face," I boasted.

So they started lowering me, very slowly, three or four of them holding back the rope so I wouldn't all too quickly. They managed that okay. Then the bucket dipped below the water line, fifteen, possibly even twenty metres down, and stopped, submerged naturally, but only just. Since the water was cold, I now decided standing on the bar was preferable to sitting on it. When I stood up, only my feet were under water.

"Okay," I shouted up to my friends. "There is no demon down here. Pull me up."

Well, maybe they tried, but they were just little kids, and they didn't have the strength. Or other things may have scared them. Perhaps my voice came up distorted and they thought the demon had got me and now was asking for them to pull him up too. Whatever the case, I heard a few moments of confusion at the top, then silence, nothing at all. My friends had all run away home. I knew they would not tell an adult either; they would be too afraid of being blamed and getting a whipping.

So there I was, standing on a bucket twenty metres below a deserted school courtyard, in late afternoon with the sun declining. I was not uncomfortable for the

moment, but I knew I could not keep that position forever. I began to get worried. Could I last the whole night? Were there still some teachers in the school doing their preparation for the next day? Could they hear me if I shouted? It was worth trying, I reasoned. So I started to holler and holler as hard as I could. Sometimes I paused for breath or to try walking up the wall with the help of the rope, but I was not strong enough and the lining of the well was smooth stone, as slippery as shoreline rocks just covered by the sea. My shoes got no purchase at all. I resumed hollering.

Time passed. I don't know how long. It seemed like forever. The well must have muffled most of my cries. However, eventually the school caretaker just happened to pass by the courtyard. I can imagine him doing a double take, and approaching slowly. What were these strange human-like noises? He would have known the story of the well-demon, and he may have been a little superstitious too; I know he did not attend our church. But finally I saw his face as he leaned over.

“Are you the demon of the well, or are you little Soon-I Park?” he asked.

“I am Soon-I Park,” I said. “There is no demon of the well.”

“In that case, hang on,” he said, and he reeled me up without any trouble.

I was fine, but the caretaker was concerned and wouldn't let me just run off, especially since I could not give him a very coherent account of how I had got down there; I wasn't going to rat on my friends. So the caretaker called to others—there were teachers working in the building, and other adults socializing in the outer school grounds. Soon there was a big crowd around me, with everybody talking and asking questions, and, of course, someone sent for my mother.

Was my mother ever angry when she arrived and heard their story! I remember

her dragging me home, saying, “Soon-I, how could you?” and, “You must never never never. . .”

For my part, I was rather pleased with myself, and I thought Mother should be too if she would only look at it from a theological point of view. Had I not refuted the myth of the demon of the well to the honour and advancement of our faith?

I was always like that, not disobedient or mischievous in any mean way, but spirited, ready to go anywhere, test anything, confident in my own powers, and in providence too.

Fame

Did the caretaker know every kid in the school? He certainly knew me, but so did everybody else in the village. I think I was just a little more adventurous than the other girls, or even the boys. There was something, anyway, that made me stand out.

The men joked, “If you don’t know Soon-I Park, you must be a spy from the North.” They laughed at their own joke, repeating it often. “If you don’t know Soon-I Park, you must be a spy from the North.”

Reading Out of School

I was always a pretty good student—in the top ten percent—but in my elementary school days (all my days really) I preferred play to study. And I was already doing a lot of my own reading outside of school, or sometimes inside school with my book secretly on my lap while I was pretending to attend to the teacher. I always liked every kind of story book from the days when I was first read to by my father. I was not read to by my mother so much because she was so busy with her volunteer work for her church among the refugees, but my father had the time.

I spent a lot of time playing on my own, and with my friends, and with my older brother's friends, and, indeed, with all the kids of the town. We quite freely wandered to the seaside or up the mountain in this wonderful time and, when I had quiet time, I read books, and comic books too. A lot of them were in black and white, though more and more were appearing in colour.

There was a special genre of comic books I could not get enough of—melodramatic sad stories—how I would cry as I read them—with happy endings of course. A girl would lose her parents in the War and be forced to suffer in an orphanage—that was realistic enough—but, by the end of the story, she would have become a princess. How would she become a princess? This way or that; I can't remember. But great! I would dream of being these pretty and fortunate people and becoming a princess too. I think this kind of comic is still popular in Korea, even now television is everything.

War comics were not popular in South Korea, not even among boys. Korea had had enough of war, thank you. There was usually a hero a boy could identify with, but not a soldier, more likely a prince, coming to rescue the girl at the right moment, and maybe making her the princess I dreamed of being, but no, I didn't dream of a prince who would make me a princess, no matter how the stories read. I just dreamed of being the princess.

We hardly had the money to buy comic books, not if you were going to read them one after another as most of us kids did. Instead, we rented these from little shops, hole-in-the-walls that were everywhere, like the smaller video stores nowadays. You would pay a little money and get to take the comic book home for three days or maybe a week, and if you did you would share them with all your friends before returning them of course. Or, if you had no good place to read when you went home, or if you didn't want your parents to know you were reading comic books, you could just sit on the floor in the shop and read away—once you had paid over your pennies of course.

Incidentally parents didn't complain about comic books because they were a low form of literature. No, they complained about any reading at all, for there were lots of chores for kids to do in those days. Wood and water had to be hauled home and things like that. I was the lucky rich kid. We had servants to do that work. I could spend my free time reading, with my father's approval of course, often at my uncles and cousins, whose homes were full of books. I did not just read comics, of course. Even in elementary school, I was reading serious books alongside the material I got from the dens—and there were some more wordy books in the dens too. Yet, after I left Busan, I stopped going to the shops and just read serious books.

Of course no adult would be caught dead visiting a comic den. They are gone now. Kids have the cash to buy comic books if they like. Even books are not the luxury they were when the country was poor.

As for the serious books that I read in my childhood, these came mainly from my relatives, especially my uncles, and in particular one uncle—the school principal—who we often travelled to, especially in the summer. The story of how the reading I did in his study got me in trouble in school is coming up.

The Bad Teacher

Most of the teachers I had were good people. I knew how hard they worked from my uncles and cousins, who were also teachers, and I knew they genuinely cared about their students. I remember all my teachers from elementary school very well; we had a homeroom teacher each year who taught us nearly everything, and then special teachers for Music and Gym. But I do not remember their names! They told us them once a year at assembly on the first day, but we hardly noted them, and we never used them, even among ourselves. Korean children never call elders by their names, not even their family names. My brother is just three years older than I am, but I do not think I have ever used his name; instead we have a special word to indicate one's "older brother," and that's what I use. So also for teachers; we would say, Sun Sang Nim, which just means teacher, or Hui Sun Sang Nim, for "my teacher." The nim is especially important, for it is used only for teachers or ministers or other wise people. We also had more specific phrases to distinguish the Grade 5 teacher from the music teacher. Incidentally, I'm giving you the masculine forms, for simplicity's sake, but also since all my elementary school teachers were men. Yet I know, as a church deacon, that no one will add nim to my name, and I am, if not a feminist, then tomboy enough to take offence.

So I remember most of my teachers fondly, but I do not remember their names...with one exception, a teacher whose name I knew very well because I repeated it over and over again to myself. I repeated it over and over again to myself because I hated

him so much. Suh Gook Soo was my Grade 4 teacher, and I never forgave him for losing his temper in class one day and slapping me in front of everybody just because I was right on a point and he was wrong.

The incident began as a dispute over natural science. I should start the story in the study of my uncle in Masan, my mother's favourite brother. I read book after book in his cool study on hot summer days. He was a lover of learning and a great collector of books. All my uncles were, but this one had books you could not find anywhere else in Korea at that time, books in Japanese, Chinese, and English, as well as Korean. So much of my serious interest in reading started with the books I found at his home.

In my elementary school years it was the encyclopaedias I liked best. He had them in all languages. I remember one, it must have been a Britannica Junior, full of pictures. I cannot swear whether it was in English or Japanese! Of course I could read only Korean fluently, but I could make out a few words in the other languages, and I could look at the pictures in all of them, and Uncle was a born teacher. He always seemed to have time to answer my questions; he was that kind of man.

I was really interested in nature, in flowers and trees, animals and sea creatures—especially sea creatures, because I spent so much time on the beach. In one picture there were a salmon and an eel side by side. Why? My uncle explained; both the salmon and the eel were sea creatures who returned to fresh water to spawn.

Back at school, in Grade 4 with Suh Gook Soo, salmon and eels became an issue. A test had asked us for creatures that migrate to fresh water to spawn and I had listed both "salmon" and "eel". When the test was returned, I saw I had got credit for salmon but been marked down for eel. I put up my hand.

“Teacher, my answer is correct.”

“No, Park Soon-I, you are wrong,” said Suh Gook Soo.

“I am right,” I insisted. “You are wrong.” Not many girls would ever say that to a teacher, you can imagine. So he called me up to the front of the room where he was standing on his dias and, when I would not back down, he slapped me, and hard. The mark of his blow was on my cheek for a week.

That was a shameful thing for him to do, I think, not because it was physical punishment—though it was hardly an ordinary form of physical punishment, but because I had done nothing wrong. He was punishing me because I knew more than he did. That day, first I was so angry that I cried and cried. Then I opened my notebook and started to write Suh Gook Soo’s name down over and over, like an incantation. I wrote “I’m going to kill you, Suh Gook Soo. I’m going to kill you.” No, I put it another way. I actually wrote, “I’m going to have you killed. Suh Gook Soo. I’m going to have you killed,” as if I were going to “put out a contract” on him as gangsters do in movies. There were real gangsters in Korea at that time too, bully boys for the government or the industrialists, but I knew nothing about that, of course.)

It all seems funny now, but I was really distraught. I told my mother and she went to talk with the principal of the school. The principal talked with Suh Gook Soo and then returned to my mother with some kind of indirect apology. Mother passed this on to me, but she told me I must not confront teachers that way, and that I should especially not confront unfortunate people like Suh Gook Soo. That was the first time I heard that Suh Gook Soo was unfortunate, but he was. He did not just have a temper; he was susceptible to seizures. We students witnessed one at the end of the year. He fell on the floor and

thrashed about for a minute or so. When I returned to Grade 5, the hated teacher was no longer teaching in the school.

I must add an embarrassing footnote to this story. Forty years later, I have just learned that eels are freshwater creatures that spawn in the ocean, quite opposite to salmon. Did Suh Gook Soo know that? I had been so sure of myself!

Physical Punishment

Comparing South Korean schools then and now, I can only conclude that the old days were better. It's not a question of academics. I was a superior student most of my school career, studied long and hard, maintained high marks, qualified for the best middle and high schools; believe me, that was important to me, and to my family too, especially my mother. Today, there's still a lot of grinding and striving going on in South Korean schools. I keep in touch through friends and family, and through newspapers and television, and I can see that. Getting into the right schools and, especially, the right universities, is still very important. So that hasn't changed. Yet I think there's a lot more to education than what you get from lectures or books. Academics are not the most important thing, and, as for the non-academic, character-building parts of my schooling, the aspects I remember and value most, no, I don't find them there today.

Take the question of discipline. Nowadays, South Korea is like North America. Ever since the Korean War, whenever something new or modern comes along, Koreans just have to try it, and that is as true in educational matters as it is with electronic gadgets. So now there are laws forbidding teachers from striking children. There is no more disciplining with the rod. But how teachers are now supposed to handle kids who step out of line, or kids who simply will not buckle down to work, I have no idea.

In my day, the classroom teacher could punish students the moment they disobeyed, or that he saw them fooling around, or when he noted how a bad mark on one of the weekly tests showed one of them was slacking off. Nobody complained about this,

certainly not the kids. When a teacher applied a bamboo ruler to our hands or rolled an abacus over our head, we knew it was for our good that order should be maintained.

Rolled an abacus over our head? Yes, it is funny for me to think about it, but a teacher would sometimes pick up an abacus as he walked around the classroom—every child have them as they would have a mini-calculator today--and roll it hard across a student's head. Ouch! Sure it stung. So did 30cm of bamboo on the palm of your hand. But the pain was just for a moment. Sometimes there might be bruise marks for a couple of hours, but they went away, and after that not much pain was left. So we did not feel bad, or feel any resentment towards the teacher afterwards--well, not because of the physical punishment anyway. I remember holding a grudge against the Grade 4 teacher, but that was because he had humiliated me in front of the whole class unjustly, not because corporal punishment itself was wrong. It was an exceptional case. Usually, we knew we had done wrong, and we understood that the teacher was just trying to correct our behaviour. So even when we got hit with those thin bamboo rulers, or when they used the abacus, none of us complained.

I should say that the teachers never used the abacus on me personally. In fact, I was not punished very often in elementary school or middle school. High school was a different matter. You may be surprised to learn that these forms of punishment were by no means confined to little kids. They were common through all the grades. I was still subject to the bamboo in my last year of high school; I was a serious troublemaker in my last two years.

I had always liked to make fun of the teachers, and I had a talent for it. I could mimic how one teacher grunted in a particular way, how another intoned “ $x + y = z$ ” as if

he were doing the “here endeth” that closes a scripture reading at church, how the voices of some sped up when angry while others slowed down. I was also not above interrupting the teacher with irrelevant personal questions such as, “How many girlfriends did you have before you married, sir?” And I passed about notes that kept a running commentary on the teacher’s petty imperfections: his unshined shoes, creased trousers, shirts spotted with sauce.

Another thing my friends and I liked to do was wax a patch of floor near our desk with candle drippings. Teachers usually wore indoor slippers with smooth thin leather soles, and I remember one who liked to walk up and down the aisles making a self-important slap slap slap sound as he moved along. When a guy like that came to a slippery patch, watch out, down he went!

I also pinned paper tails on a teacher’s backside, or a note saying something like “girlfriend wanted.” The difference between middle school and high school for me was that in middle school I was careful not to get caught and never openly made fun of a teacher unless I knew he had a sense of humour, as in fact most had. In high school, however, I did not care if I got caught or not. Things were going on inside me; it was part of the crisis I will tell you about later. Here I want to stress that there was nothing strange about a seventeen-year old girl being physically corrected in this way at school.

In questions of discipline, the school followed the home. Almost all parents struck their children from time to time. If I was not disciplined for misbehaviour at home, it was because I was always a good daughter. I always listened to my mother and obeyed her. However, my mother did whip me if I came home with a lower test score in a major academic subject, I mean lower than what I had received on the previous weekly or

fortnightly test. She had a system. If I came home with 3% lower in Mathematics, I received three strokes of the willow against my calf. In theory, if my mark had fallen by 10%, I got ten strokes, but I was too good a student for it ever to fall that far.

Yet even one stroke of the willow against my bare calf stung terribly. The teachers at school were limited to bamboo; a good leathery willow switch is much more painful. It cuts the skin too. The thing I hated most was this: When mother needed a new willow switch, she wouldn't go get one herself. No, she would send me out into the woods to cut one; they grew on the side of the mountain. I would have to look and look until I found one that met Mother's severe standards. It had to be like leather, with just the right balance of firmness and flexibility. If it wasn't perfect, Mother sent me back up the mountain to try again. I thought that was cruel of her to make her victim prepare the instrument of torture, and I still do.

Once I plotted to outsmart my mother. I deliberately wrote for low marks at the beginning of a term, a full 10% below my potential. Then I tried to keep these grades level through the term, or rise never more than a mark at a time. Since Mother punished me only if a mark fell, that kept me safe for a while. Mother eventually caught on, of course, and punished me with extra until she figured she had got me back everything that was owing.

What my mother did here was wrong, but not because punishment itself is wrong. Her error, as I understand things today, was in pushing me to achieve through fear of her and not at all through love of knowledge. It was my father and my uncles who loved knowledge in and for itself.

Mother used the stick approach, but the carrot approach would have been wrong

for the same reason. In fact, now that Mother has become a grandmother and mellowed, or kept up with the changing fashions, she would never dream of hitting a child. Instead, she has developed a system of rewards for my little nephew, who is in Grade 3.

Whenever the boy comes home from school with a perfect paper of some sort—ten out of ten on Spelling or Arithmetic—she gives him a dollar, or maybe it is two dollars now. She jokes among her friends at church how he is bankrupting her he is such a good little student, as indeed he is. But I think Mother is damaging him by making his motivation for learning unnatural. I do not treat my children that way. If they come to love learning, what could be more wonderful? But I will not push them. I punish them for other things; they must obey me as I obeyed my mother; but I never punish them for their schoolwork, nor reward them either.

Yet in school, punishment was often just a kind of game, especially when a teacher would find some reason to punish the whole class together. The punishment would often be of the sort that pushes a student to his physical limits. For example, everybody in the class might have to squat on the floor, reach for the sky with their hands, and then hold that position, and hold it, and hold it. How long? Until the teacher felt better, that is how long! Sometimes the punishment could go on for an hour. If somebody whispered to her neighbour or relaxed her posture just a little, then the teacher would bark, "Straighten up there! You, straighten up!" But actually, you know, that was all kind of fun. Even while being punished, we kids would whisper to one another, and giggle, and move about just a little, no matter how much the teacher shouted. It was a contest that pitted the teacher against the students but also let both sides shirk a bit of work—a form of recreation.

I did not see anybody really get hurt from these punishments. Things may have been different in boys' schools where, my brother tells me, punishments were more severe. (The two elementary schools I attended were co-educational, but both my middle school and high school were girls only.)

When I think a little more about punishment back then, my feelings change a little. I guess some kids really did get hurt, emotionally more than physically. It shamed them. I was a pretty smart kid, and tough in my way. I knew how to take care of myself in these matters. That is, I knew how to stop the teachers from putting me in the wrong and humiliating me. They were not likely to come out ahead in these contests, for I knew how to manipulate things so they were the ones who looked bad and got flustered and laughed at. Some of my friends and classmates were not so adroit and I imagine now there were sensitive girls who were seriously hurt by the punishments. The worst thing would be to break down and cry in front of everyone, as these girls would. You don't get over that easily.

I never broke down and cried. For example, as I said, I often made fun of the teacher so that all the kids would laugh. Then the teacher might say, in a deep teacherly voice, "Park, come up here. Here!" and I would get out of my seat and calmly walk to the front of the room, and stand just below the teacher's platform. With mock obedience, I would stretch up both my hands palms upward. I knew the drill, but while I was getting the strokes I would tuck my head under my arm and twist it around just so, and all the class, but not the teacher, could see how I was giggling all the way through the punishment. I did not care!

So they were kind of playful, those episodes, a diversion, but nowadays teachers

cannot punish that way and I think it makes a difference. Yes, I know that people think Koreans spank our children too much, and I know we are even called abusive sometimes. Still, in my time I never directly heard of a schoolgirl getting pregnant or anything like that, never in my class or my school. We heard rumours of that kind of problem at other schools, but when are there not rumours. But today I get news from my relatives still in Korea, or from local people going back and forth, or from Korean videos I watch and books I read. I see documentaries about some school kids getting pregnant, and others failing, or just quitting, more and more for reasons very different from those of my day, when lots of families simply could not afford tuition. Nowadays it is not like that; money is plentiful. Yet kids leave and go on the street or whatever just because they do not want to study. It is true there were a few like that in my time, but not many. Nowadays--I can see it from the videos--there are a lot of dropouts in Korea, just as in North America. And I think the relaxation of discipline, including physical discipline, has contributed to that

The Good Teacher

I remember good teachers too, even if I don't remember their names. In fact, most of the teachers were good people but, among elementary school teachers, the man who taught me Grade 5 stands apart as an especially fine person, as well as the most able of my teachers. I remember him warmly, and at the time I loved him—as did all the girls in the class—and I still feel his love for me. I felt the same way about the Canadian missionary woman who taught me Social Policy in a special course at Ewha Women's university when I was in my twenties. Warm feelings. Love. I feel their love.

The young strong handsome vibrant young man who taught us in Grade 5, on the other hand, was just starting out. He was fresh from university. We were his first class, and from the beginning we saw how he threw himself into everything he did for us, and we responded in kind. In those days, class averages were updated regularly and posted. (Classes had not been streamed at Busan Song Do, though they apparently would be at my new elementary school when I moved to Daegu.) We compared ourselves with the two other Grade 5 classes every week or two. With this new teacher, our class average shot up. Our room was soon number one and it stayed number one for the rest of the year. We were proud of him, and he was proud of us.

So the whole class thought he was great and we were great, but I have two stories beyond that to show my personal connection to him.

The first is so simple, you might not think it is a story at all. It was during the

summer break. We have a month off in the summer, halfway through the school year. Then we go back to the same grade and the same teacher. Following the calendar year, we only change grades after Christmas.

We did not usually see our teachers in the summer, even though we were a small community. They had no reason to hang around the school. We had lots of reasons to hang around the school, though. It was a pleasant place, a natural place to meet and play.

There are ten years between my younger sister and me. So, when I was in Grade 5, she was still a baby. I did not do that much babysitting, not as much as other girls in the same situation because my mother wanted to do most of the work herself. However, I did take charge of my sister sometimes, and I was minding her in the school grounds late that summer afternoon. I think my older brother was supposed to be helping me, but he was no doubt off playing games with his friends somewhere nearby. There was grass and swings and other things for babies to do. At the moment I am writing about, I was sitting with little Soon-Uh on the grass by a walkway. Suddenly, someone tapped me on the shoulder. I looked up and, of course, it was my Grade 5 teacher. What a surprise! You know, I was a very shy little girl when I wasn't being a tomboy, fighting teachers, or challenging my playmates' superstitions. I'm not sure if I found anything to say at all. Maybe I blushed. But I did not have to say much. He took the lead saying hello, and soon he was on the ground playing with my little sister, of whom I was naturally very proud.

He spent some time with us, that is the whole story. He gave my sister a bun to eat, not a cookie, but a kind of traditional Korean bun. I remember that. He pushed her on the swings, and things like that. Pretty soon my sister was giggling and giggling, and I was giggling and giggling. This memory has stayed with me. I bring it out now and then.

Nothing spectacular. He was a good man.

The second story involving him is more dramatic, a matter of life and death. I was at the beach one Saturday afternoon later in the year—school ended at noon on Saturdays. I've told you how the beach was one of my favourite places, how I could wander between the tide lines for hours digging for mussels and learning all the sea life there. There was a sand bar a hundred metres or so out that was especially rich in life, a kind of island where kids would especially gather. Of course, it was not really an island; it would seem like one for a time, when the incoming tide washed round it, telling us we had better get to shore, and quick.

On this Saturday afternoon, however, I was even more absorbed than usual. I lost track of the time and I didn't even notice how all the other children had gone in. I was the only one left on the sandbar. You know, maybe I knew the tide was about to come in and I didn't care. I was young and strong, I thought. I could swim to shore if I had to. What a lot of faith I had in myself in those days! And not just those days, right up to the end of high school.

Well, as you can guess, when I finally looked about, the tide had come in. The "island" wasn't going to be an island very long. So I started swimming; the shore didn't seem that far away. As I swam and swam, however, the shore did not seem to be getting any closer. I swam, and I swam, and I swam, but still no progress. Things were getting serious. I was at the end of my strength. That was a strange experience, to be at the end of my strength. I simply could swim no more. I could shout out for help, and I did. I went down, came up, shouted again, went down again, came up. When I went down the third time, I did not come up.

The next thing I remembered I was on the beach looking up into the face of my teacher, the teacher. It was like having died and gone to heaven and had a dream fulfilled. He really was handsome and strong—not macho strong, like my brother, who used to work out in a gym, just strong. And there he was. On weekends, apparently, he was a lifeguard at Busan Song Do Beach! He had been perched all the time on a high tower while I was digging for shells. And he had got to me just in time before I drowned. He saved my life.

So he was everything, young, handsome, strong, single (which of course was very important in the imagination of a virtuous ten year old girl), a good teacher, a lifeguard, a man who took the time helping me care for my little sister and, finally, the man who saved my life. Curiously, my life was saved by a young man again, fifteen years later, a soldier, after a car accident in which two others died. Still, I do not count on these miracles, though I note them, and since that race with the tide, I have been afraid of water. It did not stop me from enjoying the beach itself, as a place to dig and explore, but I never tried to swim again. Today I take my children to the pool, but I do not go in the water with them, not even if it's just a wading pool, unless the rules of the pool oblige parents to be in the water, as sometimes they do. In that case, for my children's sake, of course I obey the rules.

Grade 6 in Daegu – Challenge

In January 1963, at the end of Grade 5, I moved with my family from Busan Song Do to Daegu. Daegu is not too far north of Busan, but is inland on a mountain plateau, and much colder. There is snow in the winter. One of Father's businesses, a bean-sprout operation, had failed down south, so he was going to try his luck with apple, peach and pear orchards on the edge of Daegu.

My parents waited to the end of the year to move so that my brother and I could start in our new schools at the beginning of the school year, in February.

I was living in a rural setting again and could have gone to the nearest school, but this time, my father chose to have me travel a little farther to a really huge school in Daegu itself. Huge? There were no less than thirteen Grade 6 classes in that giant factory of a school, each with sixty-five or seventy students. There were even more classes in the lower grades, because of the accelerating baby boom. Grades 1-3 came in shifts.

Father wanted me in that school because Grade 6 was an especially important year. It would culminate in the first of the three sets of entrance examinations that in those days stood between a child and university. Today only the university entrance exams at the end of high school remain today. The government is trying to reduce the pressure on younger kids.

Now the teacher of the top Grade 6 class in that Daegu school was known to be very successful in preparing students for the exams. Almost all of his students got placed

in the upper classes of first tier middle schools, and that is why Father wanted me there. The mark statements I brought from Busan indicated that that is where I belonged too, but the school had reservations. Despite the standard curriculum, in-school marks were not undeniably trustworthy, and there was a tendency for people even a few kilometres closer to Seoul to look down on Southeasterners. (Our accent was different too).

Usually it was the mother's job to go to principals and advocate for their children. We have a cute expression for this female function: "skirt wind." The Mother goes into the principal's office and blows him away with her confidence and volubility, and sometimes with her pocketbook too, which traditionally she would have kept tucked in her skirt. There wasn't that much corruption in the days when the Generals ruled, however. A principal's discretion was limited.

In this case, Father went to the principal. Perhaps he wanted to talk with the man scholar to scholar; I don't know. He was successful; they placed me in the top class. I remember when I was introduced to the famous teacher. He seemed to me a self-important type who was a little too proud of how well his students after he sent them off. He glanced over my Busan records.

"Scoring in the top five percent is all very well," he said, "but that was only in Busan Song Do. You will not be in the top five percent here."

"We will see about that," I said to myself.

Then the results of the first set of classroom tests and we did see. From the beginning of Grade 1 to the end of Grade 12 every class in every South Korean school tests progress in all subjects at least every two weeks, and after every set they alter the seating plan to show the world your rank. (They only transferred you up and down

between classes at the end of grades, however.) I was used to sitting in the front row. So when the first results came back I was mortified. I had scored close to the bottom of this elite class and had to move to the back of the room.

“I told you it would not be easy,” said the teacher.

I was bitterly ashamed of myself. How could I tell my family? Nevertheless, my faith in myself was still deep, and I started to work really hard. Adolescence was still far off for me; life was still simple. I valued my many friendships, and I had outside interests too, but I could focus my energies very well when I had to, and I felt this was the time to show my powers.

My family and society agreed with me here. Since Grade 6 was an examination year, I was excused from all household chores, even from minding my little sister. And at school the Grade 6 was exempt from all school maintenance except that related directly to our own classroom.

Week by week, my test scores moved gradually upwards, and soon I was in the top five percent and sitting at the front of the room again. I had shown everyone, especially my teacher, who now wanted to be my friend.

“You have worked extremely well, Park Soon-I,” he said to me. “You should be very proud of yourself.” I did not respond. I refused to acknowledge his compliment. I had marked him out as the enemy on the first day, and I was not going to change that now.

Yet he was a good teacher, not disrespectful or unstable the way my Grade 4 teacher had been. He worked hard, and he knew all the techniques for getting the class ready for the middle school entrance examinations. But I could not forgive him for

having originally doubted me. Part of me cannot forgive him even now.

As the National Examinations for Middle School Entrance approached (they were held in November, a month or six weeks before the end of the school year), I knew I was going to do well.

Entrance Examinations

Knowing I was going to do well on the middle school entrance exams did not stop me from experiencing incredible stress. As the exams approached, I who was never sick began to experience stomach cramps and a chronic cold, with cold sores breaking out around my mouth. Then, while actually writing the Nationals, I had the first nose bleeds of my life, and of course no time to attend to them whatsoever! The entrance exams I later wrote for high school and university were relatively relaxed compared to what I went through at the end of my eleventh year.

This may be a good time to explain how entrance exams work. The way things were set up for Grade 6 in 1963 is the same way they are set up for university today—the only set that is left.

Entrance examinations come in two stages. First there is the National Examinations that everyone in the grade writes on exactly the same day and the same time in their own schools, and then later there is the examination set by the institution you want to enter; it is held in the institution itself, naturally.

I'll speak of the the Nationals first. These are held on two days in November, the first for academics and the second for the physical component. The academic day was by far the more important, a day that not just students but the whole country holds in awe. How true it is I do not know, but they say the airlines and Air Force must divert their planes away from schools on that day, or keep them on the ground!

The Grade 6 exam began early in the morning and was divided into one hour

segments. Korean came first, then Math, then English. Exactly at the end of the hour, your paper was taken from you and another put in its place. You took a deep breath and attacked the next subject. There was an hour break for lunch—to the second; the whole country had its clocks synchronized—and then the remaining papers.

I do not remember how many subjects they examined in Grade 6. I do remember that the National Examination for University Entrance examined ten subjects, beginning at seven in the morning and ending at six in the evening.

The Nationals were set by the Ministry of Education. They were held in your own school, as I have said, and they were supervised by teachers—but not your own teachers. Instead teachers came from throughout the region, and it was said that the Ministry planted its own people among them to make sure nothing tricky happened. That is possible. In my twenties, I did undercover work for a government agency, posing as a volunteer in orphanages and other long-term care facilities.

The second day of the Nationals was a great relief. We ran and jumped, showed how many push-ups and chin-ups we could do, got weighed and measured, told somebody how to play volleyball. The second day counted for only 10 of the Nationals total 400 marks, and it wasn't hard to get the full 10 marks, but it was a great "warm down." The results were serious only for the obese (not many in Korea back then!) or the physically handicapped. Middle schools really had very little discretion over whom they might accept—marks were everything—but they could use a poor physical score to override a high academic mark and exclude such children, and some used that power.

When the two days of the Nationals were over, we went back to our regular class schedule and, while anxiously awaiting our results, we continued cramming for the next

state of the exam process—the institutional exam stage.

The Nationals were marked quickly with the results distributed to the teachers by early December. The marks were broken down by subjects but what really mattered was total number, the crucial number out of 400 that determined which institutions we would be allowed to apply to. In Grade 6, I was never told my number, but I was able to guess it easily enough from the beaming face of my teacher when we sat across from each other to discuss my future. He was pleased to tell me that he would give me application forms for any two first-tier middle schools I liked. Whether I asked him for two or just one I don't remember.

Here I must explain the tier system. Middle schools, high schools, and post-secondary institutions all followed a three tier system. The most desirable institutions were the first tier ones, naturally, and they would hold their entrance exams first, in early December. Second tier schools would hold back until the results of the first tier schools told borderline students whether they needed to apply to the second tier. Finally, third tier schools would finish up their selection process just before the beginning of the school year. It was (and is) almost the same at the post-secondary level. The universities that offer four year undergraduate programs are designated first tier or second tier, but the third tier consists of colleges that have only two-year diploma programs.

You could only sit for an institutional examination if a) you met its minimum National Exam score and b) you had applied to do so and been accepted. You could not apply unless you had filled out its official form—no facsimiles were accepted--and you could only get that official form from your home room teacher. Nor did he have an infinite supply of them. On the contrary, he was at the mercy of the institutions

themselves. Each would send him a limited number based on their opinion of his past students' performances. I believe my uncles and cousins told me receiving schools tried to limit the applications they handed out to twice the number of the places they had available. They did not want to see under-qualified students wasting their time, for you only got the chance to write for one first tier institution; if you failed to make the grade, you had to go down a whole level.

Your home room teacher could give you a maximum of two application forms for institutions of the same tier. If he did, you would have to choose which set of examinations you would actually write; you were not allowed to write more than one set of first tier exams in the same year. Naturally, if you had not met a school's minimum required National score, your teacher would not give you an application for it. Even if you had made the minimum, however, he might hesitate to give you the application if he thought you were unlikely to beat out the competition on the actual institutional examination. It was human nature to aim too high. Finally, he did not have to give you any application at all and if he thought you were not first tier material, he would not. In that case, you would sit out the first tier examinations and wait for the second tier institutions to begin testing, as they would when the first tier institutions had posted their selections.

These considerations would be more important to me at the end of high school. In Grade 6, everything was smooth sailing. My teacher was pleased to give me an application form for Kyong-Song Do Buk Girls' Middle School, the best in the province. I wrote their entrance examination—a relatively short battery concentrating on core subjects (Korean, English, Science, Math)—and easily made it into the top class there.

Possibly my teacher gave me a second application form too, for a good co-educational middle school. These were beginning to become popular, but neither my parents nor I really considered going that route, and I do not remember if I even asked for the application form.

Incidentally, it was possible to pass out of elementary school and yet not qualify for any middle school whatsoever. That didn't happen to my friends, because in Daegu they were all from the top class, but I remember that once, somehow, I mingled with some students from the lower classes of the school. Although they were covering exactly the same work as the upper classes, I found them amazingly dull. They could hardly carry on a conversation beyond the level of grunts and commonplaces, or so it seemed to me. Yet they thought they were doing well. They thought their class was a great class. How could they be as proud of it as I was of mine? They did not seem to understand how the classes in the school were streamed. Was that common knowledge only to the people at the top? These kids focused more on their rankings within the class than on absolute marks, I guess. I found this experience disturbing, like a visit to another world. They did not seem unhappy.

Middle School Life

My three years in middle school were the happiest of my life. I had loved elementary school, but middle school was even better. My studies went well—I was on my way to an elite high school and I knew it—but also chummed about with great friends, girls I will never forget. They were good people. I will tell you stories of their goodness, our goodness. I felt myself part of a good society.

There were no conflicts, no big problems in my life. I was a tomboy and mischievous always, but there was no serious getting into trouble the way there would be when I went to high school. I kept my nose to the grindstone, putting in long hours at my studies, yet I felt free as never before, and, for that matter, as I never have since. There was time for everything. If I could go back in time, that is the period I would go back to.

I was so skinny then. Okay, it was 1964 and everybody was skinny because the country was still poor--there was just enough food and nothing extra--but I was so skinny for it to be a distinction among my peers. Daegu's up in the mountains; the climate is nothing like Busan's at all. In winter, the wind can really push you around. It sure pushed me around. Vroosh! It would knock me over sometimes, or almost. I can remember the other girls singing out as I crossed the street or the school ground: "Hang stones on your skirt, Soon-I. Hang stones on your skirt." Oh, I can hear the wind singing and my friends singing out my name. They meant nothing by it, of course, except their fondness for me. It was all great fun, fun to be with friends and even to be known as the girl who was so

skinny she needed stones on her skirt to stop her from flying away. Who would think I would later be an athlete, picked out of thousands for her sturdiness!

Both elementary schools I had attended had been co-educational, but, as you would expect from its name, Kyöngsang Buk Girls' Middle School was not. I would go to a girls-only high school too. I could have also have gone to a women's university, Ewah, which is the women's university, and perhaps I should have, as you may judge when we get to that part of my story. When my parents were choosing a middle school for me, they could have chosen a co-educational one. They were not as common as the one-gendered ones, but, another sign of western influence, they existed.

Now I am in Canada. Would I send my daughter to a girls-only school if I could afford it? I don't know. Perhaps there were things that I missed out on by not having boys around in my teens, socializing skills I lack because of that. But there were lots of compensations too. My group certainly had a lot of fun, studying together and negotiating the ways of the school, that is, getting around the rules. Would we have been so spirited and free if we had to worry about boys all the time?

I speak of my group. The middle school classes, like classes at all levels, had between 65 and 70 students in them, but "my" group would have consisted of only about ten girls. We were all from the same class, in the sense of the same room—we were certainly not of the same social class--and probably we were all near the top of the class, which, naturally, was always the first of the eight classes in the grade. It was our similar interests that bound us together. We were they who read translations of Russian and German novels. We met formally to discuss them in school time, once a week, as well as informally, whenever we could.

I've been asked to profile Middle School 2; that's Grade 8 western style, and, my interviewer tells me, a common year for comparative international Mathematics and Science examinations. For some reason, I remember the exact number of girls at the beginning of that year. We were sixty-eight. A couple dropped out during the year for financial reasons. Every family in the country was straining to keep their children in school—everyone believed education was the key to the good life--but not all succeeded. It was not just the cost of tuition, though schools were not free; children that age were often needed to keep the home going while their parents worked, or to go out and work themselves.

Sometimes a student whose family could no longer afford tuition would continue coming to school. An embarrassing and sad situation would arise. The school would never tell her she must not come anymore—that would shame the profession—but, periodically, the teacher would read out a list of students whose fees were in arrears. The teacher would stand at the front of the room and read out the list and all the girls would stare straight ahead, avoiding the gaze of the girl whose parents could no longer afford her education. The girl might miss a day, then return. Maybe her family was hoping to find money somewhere. Then she would miss two days in a row. Finally, she would not return.

Naturally, the coveted middle school that I attended was not close to home. It was in Daegu proper. I had a forty minute cross-country walk into the city every morning. It really was cross-country too, a series of "short-cuts" through fields and across streams. It was a good time, because there were usually several of us coming in together from my village, walking together. The walk ended where the city began; from there we took the

bus.

The school was not nearly as big as the Daegu elementary “factory” where I had taken my Grade 6, but it was big enough, with seven storeys, if you can imagine, and no elevator. Our homeroom was on the ground floor for 1st year (Grade 7), then moved up for 2nd year, and up again for the final year. Most subjects were taught in that homeroom, in fifty minute classes followed by a ten-minute break. We had different teachers for different subjects at the middle school level, just as they do here I think, but the teachers usually came to us. Naturally Gym was an exception of course, and so was Science on the special occasions when we got to use the Lab. That would be when our chemistry teacher thought it time to risk another experiment. If there were time to tell everything, I would tell you about the one that almost blew the school away—it wasn’t my class that did it, though--how we evacuated to the parade ground and watched the smoke billowing out the doorway and windows. It was wonderful, but not, just the birth of a very successful new way for making smoke prodigiously.

We had to move for Music class too, and I feel that in my bones still, for the music room was on the top floor, in the clouds. We sang among the angels. And we had only ten minutes to climb up there and also do whatever else we had to do at break time, no mean feat when the washrooms were in a separate building and there would be big line ups. There was simply no time to go there and still climb six flights of stairs to get to Music on time. So we dreaded the approach of Music class as much as we loved the actual singing. In Middle School Years 2 and 3 as our homerooms shifted upwards, the climb was not so great.

Those stairs were used for discipline too, and that was fun. Punishments were a

great diversion. If the gym teacher did not think we girls were paying attention, he would send us to run up and down the six flights:

“Five times up and down, girls, and mind you go right to the top.” We ran all the way to the top and then all the way down, or seem to, because we didn’t. because some kids would duck underneath the staircase at the first turning. The other girls would run all the way up and then down again, at the last moment being joined by the rested ones. It was a carefully plotted relay. We had it all worked out, Since the teacher would notice if too many girls left the pack we decided only three girls could rest under the stairs like that on a given lap.

We were really good at organizing things like that, and we loved outsmarting our teachers, though not in a big way or intending real harm, and not getting beaten by the system. Another example: We came to school with packed lunches, two or three of them, one for early in the morning—we ate it secretly and illegally in the first class--one for lunch time, when we were given a longer break, and one for dinner time—the short break between the regular day and the special revision classes that could fill an evening, especially in the last year, Grade 9, when everyone was cramming for the high school entrance exams.

Even when you did not have evening classes, you would like to have a second lunch later in the afternoon. I usually packed two meals and bought a third in the school canteen; this was a cramped room where you could buy good noodles very reasonably, and some other things, like buns. You would usually take them away though you could eat them there, standing up or at one of the two tables if you were lucky. It was a room about half the size of a classroom, big enough for about twenty girls to crowd in at one

time, and it was supposed to serve a school of fifteen hundred! My family could afford my buying something there every day. Most girls brought all three meals from home.

Some girls could neither bring more than one meal from home nor buy things from the canteen; they were too poor, not so poor that their parents couldn't pay the tuition like the couple of girls who had to leave us, but almost that poor.

My gang did our bit to solve that problem; that's what I meant earlier by saying that these were good people. We worked as a group to take care of our own without anyone having to lose face. It worked like this. Just before a morning break when we would have determined to get hot noodles, one of us would manage to shift her seat to the one next to the door of the class. So, even as the change-of-class bell was still sounding, she would be racing down the halls towards the canteen. Since it would seem to have all been planned in a hurry, we would barely have time to stuff money into her hands and she wouldn't have had time to count it or even notice who gave and who didn't. At the canteen, she would dump all the money on the counter and come back balancing one or two or even three giant bowls of noodles which the rest of us would gather around with our chopsticks and devour—all in ten minutes; the break was only ten minutes! The same thing might happen at lunch too, though there would not be quite the same hurry.

The point was that the runner would be in too much of a hurry to notice how much a particular girl had contributed or not contributed. If one day I had forgotten to bring any money, well next time I would put in double. And the genuinely hungry girls, the poor ones, had to eat because it would be impolite not to. There was no saying, thanks, but I'm not hungry. They were part of the group and they had their role to play too.

I like that memory very much. Somehow we had found a system that was not demeaning for the poor scholars.. It was this camaraderie, this sense of all for one and one for all, that made my middle school years so much fun. I might also point out that it was a Korean way, a traditional way, this way of sharing that we were learning. I think it was what the better part of my schooling was all about. Rich and poor together, we were learning to care about one another regardless of class. I do not know if the schools teach that today, either in Korea or in Canada. Now, in the neighbourhood where my children are growing up, everybody has enough money for everything, or it seems that way.

More details I remember about Daegu: Every schoolroom had a coal stove to heat it in winter: Daegu winters were no joke. The meals we brought from home were packed in a special container called a *shi rak* that in those days consisted of two pieces of cast aluminium fitting closely together to make something like an oversize sardine tin, about six inches by four, and three inches deep. They make them out of stainless steel now, and they are not so bulky. That's not just because stainless steel is less bulky, but because kids fill them with protein, with meat and eggs, with noodles less likely and rice actually frowned upon. But Korean-Canadians still live on rice, so when young Korean Koreans come to visit us, they eye our meals strangely and we eye them strangely. It is funny. In restaurants in Seoul, they serve you one spoonful of rice at the beginning of the meal; it you want more, you have to pay extra. But in my day our *shi rak* was big enough to be filled with rice or noodles, a vegetable or two, and just a hint of meat.

They sold plastic lunch containers too, but for the Daegu winters we needed the metal ones to pile on the stove to heat up in time for lunch. There were a lot of girls and it was only a small stove, so we stacked them up, one *shi rak* on top of another. The one at

the top would hardly get warmed at all while the noodles in the one at the bottom could even be burnt. I do not know why I remember that as one of the good things, but I do. It was one of the good things, and, on my children's behalf, I regret that time has passed.

I do not mean that there were not little differences between rich and poor. The poor kids brought only rice and *kim chee* (half-pickled cabbage or daikon spiced with chilli pepper) while the rich kids brought rice mixed with meat or egg. Yet we were rich and poor together. I remember the kettle on the stove too. We could boil water and put just enough barley in it to call it tea. How welcome that was during the winter!

Daegu was damp and cold; there was snow every winter, unlike in Busan, where snow was a rare event. If you are old enough, you may remember the news photos of the refugee babies lying unprotected in the snow as their families scrambled south to Busan. Those pictures were shot on the mountain slopes just south of Daegu.

Those are the kinds of thing I remember. What did I learn academically? I do not remember. I certainly remembered at the time, for I tried hard, gave my lessons my complete attention—in middle school more than high school even—and always scored near the top of the class. I was aiming at an elite high school on my way to an elite university, and, in those days, never for a moment did I doubt my destiny. But, more important, in middle school we were a good group of girls, giggling and laughing together, and crying too, all aiming at getting into a good high school, but all caring too. It was a sweet age. I was lucky to come from a family that could afford to let me concentrate on school and not worry about other things, not even housework. We had a servant to do that, and my mother took care of my sister, who was still a preschooler.

School Reading *versus* Personal Reading

My interest in comic books ended after Grade 5. I don't remember frequenting any of the dens after we moved to Daegu. Possibly I was too focused on getting my work up to standard in Grade 6.

In Middle School, however, my interest in books intensified and began to focus in on what you might call literature, especially international literature. This was mainly personal reading, although, to be sure, I had sympathetic teachers in middle school who encouraged me in my love of writers like Dostoevsky and Herman Hesse, and school was the place where girls—my kind of girls, anyway—talked about these writers and circulated books among themselves. There was some school time set aside for the literature club, possibly an hour a week.

We read Korean writers too. Incidentally, I have a personal connection with modern Korean literature because one of my playmates in Busan Song Do was a marvelously imaginative boy, and a wonderfully warm little fellow. He would later become one of the country's most celebrated writers, one of those who might have got the Nobel Prize for literature if any Korean did. We used to correspond once a year at least, even after I had emigrated. He would send me a copy of each of his books as they were published. One year, however, I wrote him that I thought he was becoming too popular; it was pulling the quality of his writing down. That was that, I'm afraid. I did not hear from him again.

International literature was also a part of the curriculum, right from Kindergarten,

if you remember the American songs I learned there. As part of Korean, in middle school and high school, we surveyed an amazing number of foreign writers. I remember Eliot, Pound, Frost, Tolstoy, and Hesse and Dostoevsky too. Then there was Shakespeare, Chaucer, Cervantes, and Chinese writers. Pearl Buck and Lin Yutang; I learnt of both of them in school, and then they became personal favourites: *The Good Earth*, *Why I am a Pagan*, *Why I Became a Christian*.

We certainly did not go into these writers in depth at school. We were expected to know their names, countries, dates, the titles of their major works, an interesting event or two from their lives, and one or two short passages from their oeuvre. I remember “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,” and O Henry’s “Gift of the Magi.” I remember piles of Herman Hesse, but most of that came from my reading at home, or in the studies of my uncles and cousins.

In middle school, I also read during classes, but surreptitiously. I would spread *Crime and Punishment*, or some other thick tome, on my lap and keep glancing down at it. That was one of the many games I played with my teachers. I was a strong enough student to get away with that kind of thing in middle school, but in senior high, with all-important university entrance exams looming, I would have to decide which was more important, literature or memorizing for the exams. You will learn my decision in its proper place.

I know lots of the Shakespeare stories, but the other day I identified Tolstoy as the author of *Crime and Punishment*. So did the interviewer. We both laughed in embarrassment when we realized our mistake.

My school and home reading were not as absolutely separate as my interviewer says his were; the books came from the libraries of relatives that were teachers, after all, and, as I said before, my gang did discuss these books as members of a reading class that met during school hours, and I had one special teacher of Korean who encouraged my reading, and my writing too, but I felt a growing tension between literature as I knew it in school, as just one subject among many, a set of facts to be learned, and literature that seemed to be life itself for me.

Outdoor Assemblies

Personally, I was always happiest outdoors. In every grade our school days actually started outside and that was okay with me. We began with physical exercises done to music on the large assembly area just outside the front door. No, let me be precise. Our school day started earlier than that, when we were walking to school and gradually got into the range of the music, for it came over enormous loudspeakers, this music; you could hear it from blocks away, starting well before 7:00 AM. We would keep walking our regular way and think nothing of it, but soon we would find ourselves marching in step, and swinging our arms if we weren't loaded down with things. The music was always marches. I would not be surprised if those loudspeakers dated from the days of the Japanese occupation, and the parade ground and marches. In fact, I associate our whole system of education with the Japanese occupation. Korea's an armed camp now, but that's not like Korea. The militarism of Japan flowed into the militarism of the Koreans after the war. The great but ruthless general and later president, Park Chong Hee, was trained by the Japanese.

When you got to school, you would line up on the parade ground according to class and start doing the exercises, one of a thousand children in Busan Song Do, one of several thousand in Daegu. I remember the exercises at the two Daegu schools I attended best. In Daegu, the winters are cold, really cold, but you had to strip down and do the calisthenics anyway. It was not as cold as Winnipeg, but we were dressed lightly. You don't forget things like that.

Yet I loved it. Some kids hated the exercises, in good weather or bad but, you know, actually I loved them, even in winter. I guess that was the tomboy in me, or maybe the athlete I didn't know I was yet! That would be a surprise waiting for me in high school, to think of myself as an athlete. I never thought of myself that way.

I watch news and documentaries on Korean television as well as on North American stations, and I see that Chinese and Japanese kids are still following that routine, doing those exercises, the frost coming out of their mouths, yet I don't see Korean kids doing them anymore. I watch a lot of soap operas that come from Korea to Canada on VCR. You would think scenes like that would figure in some young boy or girl's story, but I never see that there, either. I hope they are still doing them, but I don't think they are.

When we had done our exercises, in elementary or middle school, we still couldn't enter the building yet. Instead we all turned to face a podium beside the front door. The principal would appear and we would snap to attention, place our hands over our hearts, and sing the national anthem. I can't say there were many patriotic observances in my day, but that was one. Then the principal would make a few announcements, and we went inside.

That would be at 7:00 AM. The official classes did not start until 8:00. We would have an hour's study and quiet chatting time under the supervision of the *ban jan*, or class leader. We got our last minute homework done, or copied from our friends--it was not all socializing, but it was informal and pleasant. Then, at 8:00, the teacher would arrive, the *ban jan* stood and reported to the teacher, and the first official class would start.

I will say a few words about the *ban jan* reported to the teacher. She was

responsible for marking the register too but, if she was a good *ban jan*, she was lenient when it came to entering lates. In one sense she was our representative—because the class elected her. In another sense, she was the administration's girl—because the teacher always found a way to let us know who we should elect. But she was our girl in the final analysis, because she was a girl, not a teacher. I always wanted to be a *ban jan*, but my character was not compliant enough, so the teachers never gave me the nod. If they had, my fellow students might still not have elected me; I was popular enough but bubbly, not charming, never super popular. My little sister grew to be very charming. She still is, a very sweet woman. They elected her to be *ban jan* year after year. That would cost her in study time; it's a responsible position. I could have handled my studies and been *ban jan* too! But I never got the chance.

Let me say a few more things about assemblies. Sometimes the morning assembly would be longer than usual, or there would be another special assembly later in the day if the principal thought he had something important to say, and he often did. On those occasions, how he could blather on! We never listened to what he said, of course. We knew he was annoyed at something, or proud of something, or exhorting us to climb higher and higher, for Korea or for the school, I guess. Today I can't remember a word! But I do remember how we had to remain at attention absolutely motionless all through his speech. Sometimes the day was so hot, a few students would simply keel over. These were kids from poorer homes usually, ones who weren't getting enough to eat. They just lay on the ground until they recovered and found a way to crawl off while the rest of us stood at attention and the principal kept talking.

Crushes

In middle school, most of my good friends were close at hand and I did not mind the hard work. The teachers were very good, too, including my first love, the Korean teacher. It wasn't exactly a private or secret love; all the girls had a crush on him and openly competed for his attention. Girls would pop up with questions or do other things to get him to notice them instead of their rivals. (Not me. I was too shy.) They would chatter about it after class. "I think he was looking at X more than he was looking at Y." That sort of thing.

Crushes were sometimes no joke. Students had been known to commit suicide because of some impossible passion, though not to my personal knowledge, I must confess. The men who taught literature were usually the targets of these infatuations. My affections were milder, but real too. When I said before that I remembered no teacher's name except the one I hated in Grade 4, I must have been suppressing my memory of this man. I certainly remember his name, but I am not going to tell it to you. I will tell you a very simple story, however.

Once, late in the evening, extra hours were finished, and school was finally out. It was raining and dark and I had a long way to walk to the bus (not to mention the long walk home through the countryside at the end of the bus line), and I had forgotten my umbrella! I stood at the gate of the school looking out, hoping for the rain to stop I guess, or for some other miracle! And then...this teacher appeared and offered to share his

umbrella with me. We walked off, me beside the wonderful teacher, keeping my eyes averted to look shy and proper in the oriental way, hardly daring to whisper more than one or two replies to his many kindly questions. I had become a quiet kid in middle school, but never so quiet as with that teacher. I do not remember whether the rain had stopped when I got to the end of the bus line and had to walk the couple of miles cross-country home, but it probably didn't matter.

He was my homeroom teacher. Just as they do here in junior high, I believe, we had many teachers in middle school, and the homeroom teacher was our counsellor as well as one of our subject teachers. That would make him an especially important person in entrance examination years, as I shall explain later.

Then, of course, I had a crush on my German teacher in high school. He had just finished an advanced degree in Germany and was headed to teach in a university when they found he had cancer. They let him spend his last year teaching us, as a gift to him rather than us, at the elite high school in Seoul. This story is out of place except that it is about my feelings. Soon he was too weak to teach us German grammar or hear our lessons. Instead, though teachers never sat while teaching, he sat languidly at the front of the room playing phonograph records of Schumann Lieder and other German music. You can imagine how moving this was for a class of sensitive "superior" girls. When we returned after the summer break for the second term, we found he had left and been replaced by an unmemorable teacher. (I would still rather be speaking German than English, however.) When he died, no one thought to invite us to the funeral, nor did we expect them too. There was a sharp divide between the real lives of students and teachers.

Becoming A Kyung-Yun High Girl

In November 1966, the end of my three years of middle school was approaching and my family and I faced a serious decision. Where should I go to high school? I had studied hard all the four years we had lived in Daegu, beginning in Grade 6 class where I had to prove I still belonged among the elite, even in that enormous factory of a school, and then through all three years of middle school. What great years those had been: The best of my life in every sense!

As expected, I had done very well on the National Entrance Examinations for High School. My homeroom teacher, in his role as counselor, was beaming when we sat down across from each other to discuss my options for high school. Which first tier institution should I apply to? Basically, since I was not going to consider a co-educational school, I had two options, both attractive. I could write the entrance examination for the best girls' high school in my province, in which case I could remain with my mother, father, older brother and younger sister for three more years at least, or I could go to Seoul and write the entrance exam for the best girls' high school in the whole country, Kyung-Yun Girls' High School. Nobody doubted for a moment that I would pass that examination, but, of course, if I did I would have to leave home and live in Seoul. This wasn't a problem for my teacher. He was allowed to give a girl up to two application forms for "first tier" institutions, and he had no hesitation giving me the forms for any schools I asked. He had every confidence in me. So did I.

I tripped home clutching the two forms, very pleased with myself. Though I had

never been absolutely the best student in a school, I had always been close to the top, and I was quite certain that I deserved whatever honours the world had to extend me. How excitedly Mom, Dad, and I talked over the two possibilities. Mother and I were especially excited about the possibility of going to the very best girls' high school in the country—I almost said “in the world,” because, for all the world literature I had been reading, Seoul still was the centre of the world for me.

Father had a few reservations, however. He was pleased for me, of course, and knew I could pass the entrance examination at Kyung-Yun and proceed to an illustrious university, but he thought the provincial institution was quite good enough for the purpose too. He had been a scholar himself before the war, don't forget, and had qualified for the premier institution in the whole Japanese Empire without attending high school in Seoul.

Perhaps Mother and I should have listened to him. I thought he really just wanted to keep me close to him at home a few more years; I was his favourite. His feelings should have mattered to me more than they did, I now think, but I should have listened to his arguments too. I was only fourteen years old, by no means worldly, and thriving in the bosom of my family. Why risk major change so soon?

But the prospect of attending Kyung-Yun excited both my mother and me tremendously. I have mentioned before that my mother had been an atypically poor student, considering our pedagogic family traditions I mean. There is even a story she tells on herself, how one of her older brothers asked her not to tell people she belonged to our branch of the family; he was a teacher starting out in the same elementary school she attended, and he didn't want students to know the connection! Now I could see Mother

with stars in her eyes. The bragging rights of a mother with a daughter at Kyung-Yun in a country crazy about education were not to be underestimated.

I too had stars in my eyes. Yes, Father was right that students often qualified for good universities directly from schools in Daegu. Many even won places in the National University of Seoul. Nevertheless, Mother and I argued, if I applied myself well at Kyung Yun, famous for peopling the elite universities, how could I not qualify for the National? Moreover, I could stay with my aunt, Father's sister, and thus save money while continuing in a good home environment too. That would get around the residency regulations too. In theory, children below university level were not allowed to move to the capital just for the sake of their education.

Father yielded, and a few days later that same month, December 1966, my mother and I were on the train to Seoul so that I could sit for the institutional exam at Kyung-Yun at the high school itself. At the time it was in an old structure in the heart of the embassy district--at the centre of the world as it seemed to me, and most other Koreans too. The exam itself was much shorter and easier than the National, stressing the major academic subjects, and with no physical component—schools were allowed to exercise a little discretion in composing their own exams, but not much. Naturally, I was successful.

Thus, a few weeks later, I was living with my aunt and her family and about to step out the door for the first time dressed in the blue and white uniform of a Kyung Yun girl, and walk to high school through downtown Seoul. I remember the crowds and feeling all eyes upon me, admiring me, envying me or, more precisely, my uniform, the uniform of one who had it made! Shy as I was—and I have told you how I hated pressing against others in crowded buses or subway cars—I enjoyed those stares.

Yes, Kyung-Yun Girls' High School was famous, and it still is famous, despite today's official levelling policy, where every school supposedly must accept the same mix of weak and strong students and where the only "high stake" exams are supposed to be for university entrance. Kyung-Yun still manages to fill itself with the best. How famous is Kyung-Yun? When I am among Korean-Canadians, a word is enough to make their jaws drop.

"Wow! You went to that school?"

They are so impressed that they forget to ask me my university, saving me from the shame of not having made it into a first tier university. I would rather people thought I had gone to no university at all, than tell them the name of the second-tier institution I finally attended. Being an elite high school graduate with no university would be quite plausible for someone of my generation. The poverty of the time was such that lots of very successful students had to break off their education early and go to work. Or possibly I could have gotten married! For lots of Kyung-Yun girls, the idea was to convert the uniform into a "first tier" husband, declare one's life a success and start raising kids. I've visited these women, too; their lives seem happy enough.

What university did I go to? I'm not going to tell you its name. No, not even from the safety of a pseudonym. If you want to play twenty questions, I will say that the university was at least in Seoul—it was not a provincial institution—and that it soon got upgraded to the first tier. Today they have reunions every few years in Toronto, not just in Korea. I am told they are well attended by Korean-Canadians proud of their school tie. But I will not attend. Never. That is how I feel. The shame of not getting into the Korean National University at Seoul still stings.

This has been by way of introduction to my high school years. Obviously, trouble was ahead. Would it have been avoided had I stayed at home and attended high school in Daegu, close to my family and among my friends? Very likely. In the meantime, I was in the middle of Seoul, marked out not just by others as one of the women most likely to succeed, but by myself too. As I understood these matters—and I was a very young fifteen years--I was ready to grasp all the new opportunities available to me, and live life to the full!

The Crisis

When I was sixteen and in my second year of high school, I went through a crisis from which, even thirty years later, I have possibly not yet fully emerged. At least, that's the way the interviewer sees it. I am not so sure. It is part of my story for sure, but I would not dwell upon it so much except under his influence.

It was certainly a tumultuous time, and occasionally painful. Under its pressure, I made decisions that altered the course of my life. It happened in my second year of high school—Grade 11—when I suddenly began questioning my values and career goals, directions that had been fixed in my mind since elementary school. I did not by any means renounce my former goals, but I questioned them.

“Why am I studying so hard?” I asked myself. “What is it all for?” And, “Is there no possible future for me than being a professor of literature at Ewha?” That was the prestigious university I was aiming at. I did not plan to study there, for, as institutions are ranked in Korea, it was a small but significant step down from the ne plus ultra, Korean National University at Seoul, but I had been planning to teach there eventually.

These were serious questions. By way of answer, I stopped studying so hard and threw myself into other interests. Through it all, I never thought I was really jeopardizing my chances of shining on the university entrance exams. I guess I knew I was running a risk, but I was sure my luck would hold out. When it didn't, it took me a long time to adjust. Is the interviewer right when he claims I am still adjusting?

Here is the story.

I was a strong student up to the end of middle school, where academics were concerned, a real fighter. Whenever my place in the top five percent was threatened, as it was the three times I changed schools, I responded by saying, “We shall see,” and throwing myself even more completely into my studies. I got a lot of satisfaction from seeing my marks and my class ranking rise until I was sitting in my rightful place again, as the third or fourth in the class. Of course the general standard of the class I was in improved as I climbed the academic ladder. That did not matter. However elite the class, either I was number three or four in it, or I soon would be.

My first year of high school presented me with that kind of challenge. I had come from a good provincial school, but now I was in the best girls’ high school in the country. Getting near the top class there took a lot of effort, and perhaps simply that expense of effort kept me from having to deal with other problems or dissatisfactions. If that is true, then, by the end of Grade 10, when I was securely in the front row again, I guess it was time for my adolescence to catch up with me and express itself. It was a very late adolescence, incidentally, even compared to other Korean girls. Puberty was late anyway in those days, but mine was later than late.

In Grade 11 the underlying stresses of my situation began to weigh upon me. What were these, I mean besides puberty? Well, first there was being away from home. Had I still been with my parents in Daegu, attending a good local school and in touch with all the friends I had made in middle school, my adolescent questioning and rebellion might have been kept within bounds. Who knows, I might have fulfilled the plan we had originally set out for myself. Today, I might be standing at the front of a classroom at

Ewha, lecturing on Simone de Beauvoir.

My living arrangements were also less than ideal. Just moving in with my aunt and her family was a kind of culture shock. At home, I had been the designated student in the family, even more so than my older brother, and I had enjoyed a lot of pampering, fed royal jelly as it were. Most students are exempted from chores in examination years, but I did not even have to mind my little sister very much, even though that was definitely the older daughter's responsibility, designated student or not. I was lucky. My sister had come along ten years later than I and my mother prized every moment with her. So in Daegu, as in Busan before that, I could spend most of my time studying, then read as I liked, roam the countryside or otherwise enjoy the world as it was pleased to revolve around me.

At my aunt's home in Seoul, the world did not revolve around me. She had five children, the oldest a year or two younger than I. In that very noisy house she expected me to play big sister to them all. How placid home life in Daegu had been! In Seoul, there was always something going on, some emergency or other to be dealt with. A shock.

I'm listing these as stresses, but, you know, all that commotion was good for me too. I learned a lot about getting along with people, skills just as important as what I was learning in the classroom. I am not complaining. As for keeping me academically on track, however, the environment was less than optimal.

Nor was it just the number of children and the noise. I faced another kind of tension at my aunt's: competition—competition in a direct personal way I had not known before. I had certainly known academic competition before, but as a kind of game that everybody wanted me to win. At Auntie's, it was a serious matter, and I was perceived as

a threat to her children. These were all bright enough and doing okay, but none of them was a candidate for an elite high school. Their resentment of my uniform was obvious. Today, by the by, one of those plodders is now a professor of literature at Ewah. You can guess how I feel about that.

As a further complication, there was genuine bad feeling between my mother and my aunt, who was my father's sister. Father had fallen on comparatively hard times financially. We were never poor, always distinctly more comfortable than the average Korean family, but Dad's more recent business ventures had misfired and he had lost some of his authority within the larger family. I do not know the details, and in any case our family still argues about them, but a significant family business, a rolling mill north of Seoul, close to the demilitarized zone, had passed out of his control and into that of my Aunt and her husband. My hosts were rising in the world while we were falling. My parents, who should have been senior to them, instead had to beg favours: "Please, can you take in our Soon-I?" Of course nobody talked like that, but it was in the air.

Still, that was just life and I could cope with it, maturing in the process. I am not blaming my aunt or anybody for my problems. Yet it was while I was living there that I began to ask existential questions too. I would have been less likely to go far down such paths had I still been in the bosom of my family in Daegu.

I also had to cope with being a provincial in the capital, a country girl in the big city. Although Busan and Daegu are big cities themselves, I had actually lived in farming villages on their outskirts. In Seoul, I was living in the bustling core, at the centre of the world, as it seemed to me. There were not many other provincials studying at Kyung-Yun. The overwhelming majority of my classmates were from Seoul itself, and they

seemed enticingly sophisticated to me, privy to aspects of the world I had not dreamed existed. They were also not above making fun of my Busan accent, which for their amusement I would exaggerate! I was an easygoing girl who did not take offence easily and who wanted to fit in. But it was one more thing that made me feel out of place in the capital.

As for school itself, I was bitter that the extra textbook reading placed on high school students was limiting my personal reading. Girls with literary interests still met to discuss things sometimes, but not as much. The little summaries of writers that we learned to get up in school annoyed me. As part of our Korean course, we covered hundreds of world figures, memorizing dates and places, the titles of their major works and reading very brief excerpts in translation. In middle school that had sometimes been stimulating, but now I was tired of it. In school we never read a full Shakespeare play, for example. We were just getting facts to trot out on the entrance examinations. But I read most of Shakespeare in translation, Tolstoy, and Thomas Mann too. But that dated back to my middle school years. High school demanded all my time, and it meant business.

As part of my crisis, my rebellion, I was already deliberately cutting back on my studying to accommodate my personal reading, when something new would enter my life, from the most unexpected of quarters, and accelerate my changes.

Shooting at Different Targets

My crisis arose in part just from my being in the great city and seeing the world as a bigger and more varied place than I had before. I always look outside myself to see what is going on—I'm that sort; I'm naturally interested in all sorts of possibilities. Yet I would never have guessed the military was going to play a role in my future. In South Korea the military had virtually nothing to do with women at all.

Except with me. It came in the form of a weathered sergeant who one day visited the school and began poking about in student records. Who was doing well academically? Who was physically fit? Then there were interviews and a physical examination that, as well as measuring reflexes and stamina, checked eyes for keenness and shoulders for breadth. I had gained a little weight since leaving Daegu, but I was still a very thin girl. I didn't think anything special about my shoulders. Furthermore, though I liked games well enough, I hardly thought of myself as athletic. In point of fact, only a very small percentage of Korean young people get marked out as potential athletes, and I had not been one of these. Yet I apparently had what the examiner wanted.

My teacher and the soldier explained it me to me. The government was scouring all the high schools in the country looking for girls who showed definite potential for competitive shooting. Shooting? Marksmanship? I had never touched a gun in my life!

They weren't looking for many girls, they said, just enough to make up one class. Those they selected would train daily after school at army ranges in their home towns, then the whole group together for a month of intensive training at the military academy in

Seoul (South Korea's West Point!). Their ultimate intention was to select at least one girl who would do South Korea proud in the upcoming world championships, and possibly even in future Olympics, which were just introducing competitive shooting for women.

They told me Kyung-Yun Girls High School should feel honoured because they had found, not one, but two girls with clear potential. I was one.

If you do not know how much I enjoyed excelling at tests, I have not expressed myself well so far in these memoirs, but I had no interest in guns whatsoever. Neither did my family have any historical involvement with the military. On the contrary, one side were Christian and the other Confucian, both scholarly or pedagogic. It is true my father had been forced to fight during World War II, but that had sickened him rather than anything else.

So, I said, thanks, but no.

That was not the answer the sergeant was looking for. He already had my home room teacher on his side. The two of them began pressing patriotic buttons. "A nation's health is its power," they said. "The pride of South Korea demands..." They sent round people to put pressure on my parents in Daegu too, but Mom and Dad stayed firmly opposed.

Why did I finally give in? There were many factors. Students did not have any sense of personal rights in those days; what we wanted for ourselves just did not matter. That was one thing, one strand of my feelings. Then, living so far from home, I was isolated, lonely and vulnerable. I had no close family around, and no old friends either. Daegu did not seem as close to Seoul as it would today. Mail was slow and, in 1966, telephones were still a luxury. Even if I could have afforded long distance calls, my old

friends in Daegu were not on the phone. The benefits of the “economic miracle” had not trickled down to the people yet.

So loneliness, isolation and a sense of powerlessness were all factors. Yet I don't want them as excuses. It was my decision. I could have done otherwise. I could have said, "Thank you very much, but I am going to be a professor of literature and I do not want anything to divert me from my studies." Had I talked that way, the advantage would instantly have switched over to me. Academic ambition was revered, even by the military.

I did not speak that way to them because it was no longer entirely true. The truth was that the project appealed to my sense of adventure. Seoul was my brave new world, and marksmanship was certainly something new. "Why not try it?" I asked myself; "Let's see what will happen." That's always been my attitude; it took me to Canada finally.

I did not for a minute imagine I was throwing everything away. I thought I could handle the extra burden of the training, find time for my private reading too, and still breeze through the university entrance exams. The military was of the same opinion; they had taken my academic record into account in their selection process. And the university entrance examinations were still two years away.

Training began in the winter of Grade 11, close to the beginning of the school year as things are in Korea. Every evening at 5:30, a jeep would come to the school and take the other girl and me to a military base, about half an hour away, still within the city. There we practised shooting for an hour and a half, under the guidance of various soldiers, including the sergeant who had recruited us, who actually was the best of them. Then we got back in the jeep and returned to school, ready to resume our “extra-hours”

work. This private study plus re-teaching that I described earlier would continue until about 11 pm when the high school closed. That was the usual end of the day for Grade 10 and 11 students, but in the last year, there could be a couple more hours in a nearby private study hall that was open twenty-four hours a day. You paid for your seat by the hour.

Our training cost the other girl and me "just" two and a half or three hours of extended study every day, but its effect was greater than that since the training was physically taxing and reduced our powers of concentration when we had returned. Meanwhile, our real competitors, the other Kyun Hun girls, were hard at it, day in and day out, their eye always on the one goal of entrance into the best university possible for them. That was the downside. On the other side of the equation, my military training was a lot of fun. I have lots of good memories from that period, especially from the intense summer component. At that time, all thirty of the girls who had been selected for the program from all over the country, were brought to the great military academy in Seoul for a month of boot camp, the real thing. We rolled out of bed to reveille, drilled side by side with the handsome young officers-in-training, then went to bed with taps. I loved it. We emerged as one strong fit group of young women. The big thing for me was our group spirit, our camaraderie. In theory, we were one another's enemies just as in school. There were thirty of us competing for a single spot on the national shooting team. It soon became clear who were the most likely candidates, but none of that affected our relationships with one another. We had a ball.

I will tell you one of the crazy things we did, well, not me, but others. You may not know that pressing the barrel of a revolver against your temple deprives the powder

of the oxygen it needs to explode. If you are sure of your weapon and your hand is steady you can play Russian roulette all night long with impunity. Do you believe me? Or do you remember that I was wrong about the spawning habits of eels? I never trusted that piece of chemistry either, but I saw other girls do it, and live to laugh. We did a lot of laughing.

We also enjoyed the innocent attentions of the young men officers in training. We interpreted them as innocent, in any case. It was all good fun, smiles and giggles. That mattered to me as much as the sense of becoming one of the best in the world in a particular activity, although in fact that was what was happening too, for our training was first-rate; and in fact in less than six months we were among the best female markspersons in the world.

Learning to shoot well did not make me like guns. I would never have one in my home. I do not even let my little boy watch the more violent kiddie channel on television, or play warlike video games. Still, in later life, I occasionally revisited that military academy, to see people I had grown fond of, including that old sergeant, and yes, when I visited, I would pick up a rifle to see if I still remembered how it was done. A lot of my skill remained for many years.

It was something I never talked about with my friends in Canada. Once, however, I was out larking with a few of my fellow sewing machine operators at the Red River Exhibition, a few of the three hundred young, unmarried, fancy free women who had come over from South Korea about the same time I did, in 1980. We saw a shooting gallery, and I could not resist temptation.

"Let's go there," I said. "I've always wanted to try it."

"The line up is too long," they said. "And who cares?" Why would they be interested?

I persisted. "I just want to see if it is really so hard," I said.

We joked as we stood in line, working girls enjoying their day off, but, while we chatted, I was secretly sizing up the concession. The attendant would hand you a pre-loaded and cocked single shot small calibre rifle. You would aim at slowly moving "ducks" about twenty-five feet away. It was fifty cents a round and you got a teddy bear or similar toy if you hit the target. The guns were cheaply-made but adequate for that short distance.

"Am I holding it right?" I asked the attendant.

"It's okay," he said.

Then, of course, so many rounds, so many downed ducks, and so many teddy bears for my friends. (Doesn't everybody dream of doing that once?)

"Wow," exclaimed my friends.

"No more for you," said the attendant.

"What?" I said, feigning astonishment. "It was just beginners luck." I had picked up that expression, "beginner's luck" and was pleased to have an occasion to use it.

"Go away," said the attendant. "Don't come back."

Merrily complaining, we backed away. I did go back a few days later, however, alone. There was another attendant on duty, but I guess he had heard about me. He refused to hand me a rifle.

"I have rights," I said.

"Not here," he said. So I was famous again!

That was twenty years ago. I have been to the Red River Exhibition a few times since, and have always looked for the shooting gallery, but in vain. They don't seem to offer it anymore.

My training as a sharpshooter climaxed in a competition among the thirty girls at the end of the summer. There would be only one winner. Based on daily competitions through the summer, as many as ten of us were in the running, but the other girl from my school and I were often as not the high scorers. So it was in the final competition. Towards the end of the day only she and I remained. As a matter of fact, we had had identical near perfect scores. Now there was a play down. The first to miss would lose.

Now I am going to confess something for the first time. Never to anyone have I told this before. In a way this was the moment my “crisis” came to a head. I took my time aiming at that last important target, but I had planned what I was going to do in this situation well before the start of the competition. I was going to miss deliberately.

As much I had loved the training, the mixing with the military, the friendship of the other girls, I despised the competition, the endless contest my life had become. I was going to lose on purpose.

That is actually not easy to do. I had been trained not to squeeze the trigger until a bulls-eye was assured. It is actually difficult for someone with that training to let herself pull the trigger under any other situation. As I write this, in 2002, there is a drive-by sniper in the news, and I confess I have been following his career with “professional” interest. He is supposed to have missed three times, but I do not believe that possible. Instead, there could be a novice shooter taking some of the shots, but I would not be surprised if the three survivors have just been tremendously lucky in the path the bullets

took once they were hit.

In 1966, my task was to miss by the smallest possible margin. Anything more would have been smelled out by the soldiers. So, against my instincts, I aimed an inch below the bulls-eye, pulled the trigger, and let the other girl from my school go on to an international career. As a matter of fact, she won the world championship that year and later did well in the Olympics. She then made coaching her career. I've visited her in Seoul since. She seems quite normal and happy.

I was pleased that the "last shot" of my career had been so accurate. The sharp shooting had been a success in my mind. It confirmed my feeling that I had all sorts of powers and would succeed at whatever I turned my hand to. Looking at the larger picture, I cannot call my second year of high school unhappy, despite "the crisis." I do not want to paint myself as miserable at that time.

Yet it was not a clean end to my shooting career either. For some reason, I signed up for a second year in Grade 12, which was madness. It was soon clear that my shooting was getting worse, not better, and I dropped out after a few weeks. My heart wasn't in it anymore.

Summer Job, 1969

My third year of high school, Grade 12, was actually unhappier than the year I have chosen to call the crisis. I had repented, or almost repented of my rebellion against the system and its values, and I wanted to regain lost ground in my studies, but it was not going to be as easy as I had thought. First, I gained a lot of weight. I had been such a skinny girl, but with the military training I put on the pounds. Then I signed up for another year of shooting; I don't know why. Without my heart in it this time, I had nothing like the success of the previous year, and I withdrew just before it was time for another summer boot camp.

So I had the summer free, and I could have filled it with studying just as thousands of other ambitious girls were doing. They were starting at dawn and working all day in study halls, at cram schools, or with private tutors, and getting to bed at two in the morning, just as during the school terms. I could have done that, but I sure didn't want to. I found something else to do instead. I wasn't planning to be a drop out, though. I just still had this strange overconfidence, this sense that everything was going to come out all right; I could make up lost ground by great exertion at the last moment, just as I had done before. I still wanted to get into the best university. In fact, I wasn't prepared to accept any other future; the second best university would not do. But it was summer; my short career as a sharpshooter had filled the previous summer nicely, and now I was looking around for something else interesting to do.

Answering an advertisement in the newspaper, I found the perfect job to fill that one month. It was a volunteer job, no salary at all, but that was okay because I didn't need the money. And there was a prize connected with it, a sort of contest, as I will explain shortly. I chose it because I thought it would be different from anything I had ever done before. It was like it had been with the shooting. I was always open to new things. "Hey, I never tried that before," I would say to myself. "Why not try it now?" Possibly that was the tomboy in me.

So what was that really different, interesting job? Census taking! They were advertising for people to go around and canvas for the national census. There would be no pay, because you were doing it for the good of your country, but if you did your job well you would get a prize. How would they judge if you had done your job well? Just as they had a formula for ranking students and schools, they had a formula for ranking volunteer census takers. How much ground did you cover? How high was your proportion of actual over possible returns was, that is, how few call backs had you left for your supervisors. If, after your rating was calculated, you scored in the top ten percent of all the census takers in the country, then you shared in the prize. That was okay with me. I was planning to excel.

And I did a really good job! I still get a lift when I think how brilliantly I handled it. Planning made all the difference. I spread out the ordnance maps on my aunt's kitchen considered every turn and cul de sac so as to plot the day's optimal route. I also figured out how best to apply my energies. When was the best time to make a first visit, when the best time to schedule return visits to catch the ones I had missed? How many times should I knock on a door before leaving a note saying "Sorry to have missed you. I will

return at ___”? When should I turn to the neighbours for information? I worked all that out, and I made sure I took no breaks at all during the prime hours, when people were most likely to be home. I exploited every minute, while still being friendly and polite with everyone I met, easygoing and bubbly. People liked to answer my questions and fill out the forms I left with them. My efficiency was amazing. Of course I had no trouble finishing in the top ten percent of census takers and sharing the prize.

What was this great prize? You may laugh when I tell you. It was an all-expense-paid bus tour of South Korean factories, mines and agribusiness projects! Boring? No. This was July, 1969. It was the early days of the “economic miracle,” just about the time of Chong Hee Park’s coup. (He had actually been setting policy before that coup.) The government and the big conglomerates--Samsung, Hyundai, Daewoo, and the others--were working closely together. The government ran its own “contests” for them, with tax breaks and subsidies as prizes to reward companies that had increased foreign market share in their areas. As far as economic development was concerned, the system worked splendidly. We, the whole country, were all proud of ourselves. Thus, a one week all-expense-paid tour of the biggest concerns was getting me to where the action was. I really thought of things that way when I was young; I was excited for my country.

The bus trip was centred in Seoul. I was studying there of course, and obviously I hadn’t gone home to Daegu that summer. So I missed being brought in and put up at a four star hotel. You can’t experience everything! As it was, the two hundred or so winners met at that hotel every morning and climbed into state-of-the-art-tour buses, with the glass bubbles so that we could see everything. We got back late every night except for a couple of nights, as when we visited the great kelp farms on the ocean, when we were

just too far afield to get back to Seoul. Then we were put up in good quality local hotels.

South Koreans are still nuts about their business enterprises, about what people do for a living. There was recently a very popular TV series in which celebrities travelled to a different site each week. One week they were at a mine, the next at a shipyard or on a fishing boat. They had to do the work of the real workers. They would get dirty and try their best but usually collapse from exertion. They would groan and laugh and the real workers would commiserate and shout good-natured encouragement, and the studio audience would go “ooh!” and “ahhh!” as studio audiences do in South Korea. We have programs like that instead of *Survivor*, and I enjoy watching them on video tapes I can rent here. (I like *Survivor* too.)

At every complex—factory, farm, or whatever—we were met by management and treated like royalty, and given substantial souvenirs as we left. As a matter of fact, the government had cleverly got the sector to fund the whole venture, even the hotels and the tour buses. We were given so many presents that the tour buses could hardly hold everything. The clock radio I got from Samsung lasted until I emigrated, and the huge box of cool Coca-Cola T-shirts and caps until I was able to get around to all my cousins and their children.

That trip made me experience my country in a way I never had before. I felt close to the pounding heart of it, and part of the economic miracle that was underway. I was proud of my country and proud of the good work I had done for the census. I still am. I was a smart, organized and capable person, and I had done a really good job. In the meantime, of course, I was falling behind the academic competition. The other girls (and boys) had spent the month cramming. Slowly but surely I was losing my chance to get

into the National University at Seoul.

Real Work, University at Last, and Emigration: 1970-1979

In November 1969, I joined hundreds of thousands of other Grade 12 students to write the National Examination for University Entrance. Despite two years of mediocre scores on weekly tests at high school, I wrote in a confident carefree manner, sure that I would score high enough to “make the cut” and go on to write the entrance examination for Seoul National University, Korea’s premier institution.

As a matter of fact, I did score high enough. The cut was 347, and I had 351. Winning the right to take the examination, and actually qualifying to study at Korea’s premier institution were not the same thing, however, and just scraping by the way I had did not impress my Grade 12 home room teacher. Your home room teacher was also your guidance counsellor in these matters.

“The competition will be keen, Soon-I,” said my teacher. “The very best will be sitting for that exam. I don’t think you are strong enough at this time to beat them out.”

“Well,” I insisted. “It is what I’ve always wanted.”

“I suggest you try for Ewha Women’s University instead. It ranks almost as high, and you would find it more congenial too.” He was right of course. Ewha has a Christian missionary background dating back a hundred years. (It has historical links to Canada too.) Its values were closer to mine than Seoul National’s, and that was why I wanted to teach there eventually. But it was not part of my game plan to be a student anywhere else than at Seoul National.

Yet if my teacher thought I could apply to the Faculty of Arts at Ewha, I might

have listened. In fact, he was suggesting I take yet another step down.

“I would not recommend you try for the Faculty of Arts at Ewha,” he said. There were different exams for different faculties. Arts would be the most popular at Ewha, which was almost as prestigious as Seoul National. “I suggest you apply for Education, or maybe Home Economics. If you are successful, you can switch back to Arts after a year. It is done all the time.” Again, he was wise, I could only write one “first tier” entrance exam in a given year and I should stay away from the tanks where the sharks would be swimming.

But Education? Home Economics? These faculties had approximately the same status that they had in Canada during the same period. I wouldn’t hear of it. I demanded an application for the Korean National University at Seoul and, reluctantly, my poor teacher finally handed one over. I applied to the National, wrote their examination, and failed.

I should not have been surprised, but was actually shocked, ashamed. I had let my family down, myself down. I could not accept the result as final. If I had wanted to, I could have written the entrance exam for a second tier university that same winter—they examined in early January, after the results for tier one had been posted. I could not bring myself to do that.

There was another way. I could have taken a year off and spent it in cram schools or working with private tutors. You are allowed to write the entrance examination a second time, a year after the first. Thousands of students take that route, and I had been such a disciplined student I am sure I could have got into the National that way. There is no question, that was a realistic plan. I owed it to my family.

But what a tedious and demeaning year it would have been I owed it to my family. I was not ready for such realism, and I am not sure I ever will be.

Instead, I chose a less realistic third alternative. “I will go to work,” I told myself, “and I will study on my own in my spare time. I will be able to do it, because I can do anything.” I still felt that way, still felt that power. Maybe I just wanted to go to work.

Be that as it may, a relative recommended me to a government agency, which I will tell you about shortly, and I entered at the level of a clerk. Of course I did not find the time to review and update my high school studies, and so, when I sat for the Korean National University entrance examinations again a year later, I failed once more.

The writing was on the wall. There could be no third chance. Still, perversely, I would not consider applying to a second tier university. I preferred to give up the idea of university education altogether, and resign myself to a career as a clerk in the civil service.

But fate had a few twists in store for me.

Actually, I liked working, especially at first. The government agency I went to work for was in fact a new special directorate for social services. It bypassed the normal the civil service hierarchy and reported directly to the First Lady. Strongman President Park was used to making bold moves in the economic and political realms; his interest in social welfare was less obvious. His wife, however, was clearly a liberal and she took social concerns seriously. Her agency’s mandate was to investigate and finally rationalize the delivery of services in all the nation’s total care institutions: its orphanages, residential hospitals, nursing homes, even its prisons. At the time these were a hodge podge of public institutions, charitable corporations, and private for-profit operations, and

there were very few regulations in place for them. The agency was to investigate, recommend changes and set up regulatory systems. It was a small group, a dozen officers perhaps, another dozen or so field workers, and then a few clerks like me, maybe fifty people in all. We expected to find incompetence and corruption, and in the process they were to find a lot of people they considered mismatched. There were deaf children living with the retarded, the insane living with paraplegics, and so forth.

So I was just an office worker to start out with, known for the cheerful competent way I served coffee to the men who studied the field reports and wrote up their recommendations. They liked me. I did whatever they told me to do conscientiously and with a lot of energy. I was young! I must have made a strong impression on them, for after two years, they called me into one of their posh offices and told me they wanted me as a field worker, and then later as one of the inner circle, the ones proposing policy to the government.

I was flattered. Then they told me I would need a university arts degree, overweighted in the social sciences. They had a list of courses for me to take and had already picked out a university for me. It was a second tier institution in Seoul, close to the central offices of the agency. They thought that someone of my powers could take university full time, and continue working full time simultaneously! They would pay all tuition and expenses of course.

I like people who like my work. It was an offer I could hardly refuse. And so I ended up at university after all. The Arts degree was a four year program. After I had my degree, there was one more course for me to take, in Social Policy that was offered only at Ewha, and that my employer especially wanted me to have. That was ironic, to end up

at Ewha after all.

It was also a wonderful experience, for the teacher was a very special woman who made a deep impression on me. She was a Canadian who was just then at the end of forty years work as a missionary in Korea. She had come in the years of the Japanese occupation, and that in itself is remarkable, for the Japanese frowned on higher education for women and were also suspicious of religions from the West. She managed to survive, though, and she had stayed through both wars. She was past normal retirement age when she taught me, and she was soon to return home to Canada, after all those years. What a wonderful person she was! Kind, gentle, quiet-spoken but very clear, mentally powerful still. No wonder my agency wanted me to take her course! She taught in quite adequate Korean, though all the technical terms of her discipline were English at that time, and we learned those. What I remember most was her warmth. I had not had many women teachers since my days in Kindergarten. Perhaps everyone felt her warmth, but I felt the connection personally. I experienced it as love. I think back and I say, "There was someone who loved me."

Perhaps my employers reduced my work load a little while I was studying at university, but not much. It is only half a joke that once you make it to university in Korea you never have to study again! I had more free time than before, and I had all kinds of friends in those days. I could tell you about gadding about at night and being caught out of doors after the curfew. That was no joke, and there were close calls, but we always managed to make it to someone's house or apartment before we ran into a policeman.

It was the Saturday afternoons I enjoyed the most, for then a friend and I would

often climb one of the mountains near Seoul. I don't mean we took picks and ropes and grappling irons. I mean that the two of us very pleasantly wound our way along the mountain paths, and, oh, the trees were returning twenty years after the Japanese had denuded all our mountains. We always had the same destination, a particular Buddhist monk's hut. This man was one of the few monk's permitted to live as a hermit. That would have been a high honour for him.

Sometimes the monk would be available for us and we had wonderful conversations. Never for a moment did I waver from the Christianity I had been born to, but I knew there was holiness in his words. I had no sense of doing anything dangerous in visiting him, but I do not know what some of my Christian relatives might have thought.

Maybe they would not have cared. Christians and Buddhists get along very well in Korea. I guess that half the country is non-believers and that Christians and Buddhists share the other half equally. Oh, there are some little religions too. We Christians have the great holidays of Christmas and Easter of course, and Buddhists celebrate right along with us. Why not? Then, in the spring, there is the birthday of the Buddha, a beautiful event. The whole Buddhist population spreads itself out on the mountainsides, and there are mountains everywhere in Korea. Then just after nightfall, they light prayer candles, millions of little lights through all Korea. Of course all the Christians are out of doors at that time watching, reverently too. So it may have been a little unusual for a good Christian girl to go visit with a Buddhist monk like that, but it was not unheard of, and it was very like me!

It could be very funny though, because often we would get to his hut early in the afternoon, as soon as we could after work or classes, and there he would be, sitting in

front of his hut as always, but meditating, absolutely oblivious to us. So what could we do? We sat a few feet away from him and waited, sometimes for a few minutes and sometimes until dark. He would still be meditating, and we would have to wind our way down the mountain unsatisfied, and try again the next Saturday. He was a very sweet man when he had time for us, easy to talk with.

Returning to the subject of my work: Even while studying I got to do field work, including undercover work. My targets were institutions, not individuals; the agency did not work with individuals. We wanted to know what was really going on in the institutions. So, before my face got too well known, I set off on a tour of the country as a well-to-do university student, interested in social work, and eager to do volunteer work wherever I could. All that was true in a way. I remember spending a lot of time in train compartments loaded down with presents for the children I was going to visit and two valises, one with a change of clothes for me, the other containing a portable “silent” typewriter. I would arrive at the orphanage or hospital, work as a bubbly cheerful volunteer all day long, and then spend the night in their guest room, typing up my report. What a lot of energy I had back then! Who needed sleep?

The reports I wrote, along with those of my fellow workers, often revealed incompetence and corruption among the owners and managers of many total care institutions. I also saw suffering as I never had before, old people living in filth and neglect while the operators raked in all the money they could from families, the government and foreign relief organizations. A lot of these latter, well-meaning as they were, made no follow-up efforts whatever to see that their money was being well spent. Sometimes they were crooked too. I mean that some of the charities were scams from the

start, but that was not often the case. Usually it was my fellow countrymen who were corrupt, not the foreigners. It sickened me to discover that. On the other hand, institutions run by the Canadian agencies, my readers may be pleased to know, were welcome exceptions. The Canadian parent institutions kept in close contact with their Korean managers and there was very little mismanagement. Once again my future homeland was impressing me.

What disturbed me most had nothing to do with corruption, however. It was just the existence of the multi-handicapped. How terrible and sad. I did not deal with the children directly very often, but just to be close to so much suffering one could do nothing about, just to know it was there, made me terribly unhappy. That would be one of the reasons I left the profession a few years later.

Another reason I would leave had to do with the public policy being developed by my agency. It was great to see the corrupt operators thrown out of business and occasionally into jail, and it was understandable that homes that were too small to care adequately for their charges should be forced to amalgamate. I had no problem about that. However, another reform seemed to make more sense to the government than to me. My fellow workers and I had discovered many institutions that had people with different kinds of needs or disabilities all thrown together. Deaf orphans would be living with seniors or paraplegics, and the retarded or the insane would show up here or there. Soon one of Chong Hee Park's powerful directives changed all that. Henceforth able-bodied orphans would live only with other able-bodied orphans, the retarded with the retarded, the old with the old. That bothered me a lot, for I had found strong family feelings among those diverse groups of individuals. A deaf child and a paraplegic might be living

together as brothers, a senior and a retarded man relating as father and son, and now they were to be parted, never to see each other again, as if the bonds between them counted for nothing. Why?

I was too junior to be invited to discuss policy, of course. Possibly, as a woman, I would always be too junior to join in policy discussions with the half dozen directors. When I was not on the road but in our headquarters in Seoul, I found myself serving coffee to the chiefs, cheerfully of course, just as I had when I was a clerk; they were all men of course.

As an aside, most of the children under care in Korea were orphans, physically and mentally sound, the kind of kids that would be adopted instantly if they lived in Canada or the States. Unfortunately Koreans rarely consider adopting a non-relative. It was while I was working for the agency that the first “Soon-I Previn scandal” broke, twenty years before the one involving Woody Allen. Koreans my age remember how the Previn’s adoption of a Korean baby shamed the nation. It was front page news for weeks. How could we not take care of our own? screamed the headlines. Whether that changed any attitudes, I do not know.

The atmosphere at the agency changed over the nine years that I worked there. It had been a cheerful place to work. However, the Park Chong Hee era was darkening. The president’s rule had been oppressive from the beginning, but he had been in a position to institute many reforms that ultimately placed the country among the developed nations. Then his wife was assassinated. She had been the patron of our agency. We did not take it as a good sign that the police seemed hardly to look for her killer. We half suspected that Park had had his own wife killed because he found her too liberal; her social programs

would interfere with his economic ones. That made the directors of the agency anxious, as you can well imagine, and the anxiety began to fill the couple of floors of the government building we occupied in Seoul.

Then Park himself was assassinated.. The killer was caught and executed quickly enough. He was the head of the KCIA. Formerly one of Park's most trusted friends, the man confessed and took sole responsibility. He implicated no one else. It was a high-minded crime it seemed, with the welfare of Korea at heart. But no one could say for sure that the new president was not behind the assassination. The country was entering a black time. No one in the agency dared speak his mind to another.

That same year, my beloved father died, far too young, and quickly. I was unable to get back to Daegu in time. It seemed wrong to me that I should be so far away.

I cannot explain my feelings further. Something inside told me it was time to get out of Korea and make my way to a new country. In 1979, I therefore applied to emigrate to Canada as a sewing machine operator. That would end the story of my education in South Korea except that the government of Korea enrolled me in one final free course—a six week course in sewing! It may seem strange that a university graduate with nine years experience as a social worker in a country whose economy was beginning to boom should deliberately downgrade herself in that way, or that someone so rooted in her home country would want to leave it. For that matter, why would someone who loathed learning English move to Canada? After kindergarten I never liked the language. I had a bad teacher once and that spoiled it. I would have preferred German.

I was hardly the only educated young woman to take the same path to the new world. There were three hundred other high school and university graduates learning to

be sewing machine operators, all middle class girls like me, headed for the garment factories of Winnipeg.

I stepped off the plane in Winnipeg in the middle of winter in 1980, and began a new chapter in my life.

Concluding Summary

This has been the life story of a woman who took all her education in South Korea in the two decades after the Korean War. My original idea was to use her experience to critique the conservative educational theories of E. D. Hirsch (1996). Hirsch loves the school systems of the Far East for their centralized administration, common curriculum and rigorous standards. I made Hirsch a special study—it is not just in curriculum theory that he is conservative—but gradually he seemed less important, while the particular story Soon-I was telling became more and more important.

There were supposed to be six hour-long interviews, but they ended up longer than that, and there were more of them. I took a long time processing each interview before going on to the next because I wanted them to grow out of each other so that Soon-I would give a deeper more thematically concentrated account.

I thought that a first-person narrative form of presentation would best take the reader into Soon-I's experience. There were problems, however, because Soon-I's English was rougher than I had thought. In the interviews, she compensated with dramatic nonverbal additions, and she also persisted until her meanings came through. I decided to produce a written voice for her that would be fluent first language English but still attempt to keep her spiritedness, as well as honoring the seriousness and courage with which she has lived her life. I wished to avoid any reduction of her full humanity, whether it should be a reduction to a stereotype of "immigrant", or a reduction to the

traditionally inferior status of “research subject”—data for interpretation. As I laboured over the transcripts, and began to decode some of what her life was trying to say, I gained great respect for Soon-I.

Soon-I was of a landed upper class but born at a time when South Korea as a whole was very poor and when even her class was losing many of its privileges in the face of new industrial and military classes. Her extended family was rife with scholars and teachers, but it was her less educated mother who judged that her daughter, simply by studying hard, could become a professional, a university professor, thus succeeding as a woman in a man’s world. At the same time, the whole middle and upper classes were bent on retaining their social status or climbing higher through the agency of the extremely competitive education system that was now in place. The workings of that system have been described at length in her narrative.

Soon-I did indeed work hard and become a superior student, though, in her estimation, not an outstanding one. She made the grade for the elite girls’ high school in Seoul, and it looked as if she would easily qualify for the nation’s #1 University, the co-educational National University at Seoul. Her aim was to go on to become a professor of Korean and world literature at Ewha Women’s University, another elite institution, but one that more closely shared her and her mother’s Christian and humanitarian values.

However, sent off to Seoul for high school, separated from immediate family, in what we would call Grade 11 Soon-I began to question the whole value system that was driving her ambition. Life had opened up to her in all its diversity. It was a sign of her independent soul that she stopped studying as hard as before and went “off the tracks” in several interesting directions. When guilt, more than self-interest, put her back on her

career track, it was too late. She could not score the necessary grade on the entrance examinations for the National University at Seoul, and decided instead to enter the workforce. The government agency for which she worked encouraged her to get a degree from a lesser institution, however, and thus she got a university education after all, and began a career as a Social Work professional. That career seemed to suit her, but, for many reasons, including political turbulence in her country, she left it in 1980 to come to Canada as a sewing machine operator.

I first thought my methodology was historical. I wanted to place the education system of South Korea in and historical political context, and I thought Soon-I's account would constitute an oral history interlude of fieldwork. But, coming up through English studies as I had, from the beginning I was really more interested in how life stories are generated and told, so I began calling my methodology narrative inquiry—words that are associated with Drs. Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly of the University of Alberta and the University of Alberta, respectively. I read some of their writings and also a fascinating doctoral dissertation of one of their students (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1991; He, 1988). Telling the relationships within education as *essentially* parts of ongoing stories, is central to their idea of curriculum and educator to educator transference of wisdom. I learned from their interactive (teacher to teacher feedback) model more than I put into practice in working with Soon-I.

I was then struck with how well formed a story Soon-I's was. How had this form emerged? I was convinced it was not because either she or I had designed it that way, but went searching elsewhere for explanations. Jerome Bruner's (1991) amazing article was suggestive indeed. To sum up very broadly, living one's life as a story (to adapt the title

of Cruikshank, 1990) involves discovering one's freedom and coming to grips with the realities of worlds far wider and more complex than non-narrative forms of life science can comprehend. Though for a time she had followed a script written for her both by her mother and by society, in high school Soon-I had rebelled. She would not speak in these terms, but she was endeavoring in this way to grasp again the threads of her deeper story and move forward. At the end of the period covered by that narrative, the tension between scripts and authentic story still remained in her life and there were many unanswered questions about her directions in life.

The work had begun as a way to critique E. D. Hirsch (1996). At the end, it may simply be said that, for him, none of this discussion about scripts and stories, inauthentic and authentic threads of one's becoming, would mean much to him or be seen as pertinent to education or meaningful outside the faculties of education that the University of Virginia professor emeritus detests. Anticipated by Aronowitz and Giroux (1988) among others, however, I will not be the first to note that Hirsch's putative education for democracy is underpinned by a limited idea of freedom and humanity, a recipe for alienation rather than a response to it.

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