

The Rise of Private Universities in the Republic of Korea (South Korea)

南韓私立大學的興起

-Is this a lesson for Taiwan higher education?-

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On January 27-28, President Michael Lai (賴明詔,) Professor Chin-Cheng Chen (陳建成 Chair of Chemical Engineering) and I were graciously hosted by the President of Seoul National University (SNU,) President Jang-Mon Lee. Our mission to SNU was surgical. We were there to learn about the mission, process, and internal and external challenges for SNU to possibly enter into a profound transformation, the transformation of corporatization.

On the evening of our departure, our delegation was warmly hosted to a sumptuous dinner by a long time friend of mine, Dr. Jung Uck Seo. Dr. Seo is a renowned builder of science and technology in Korea in the past forty years since his return from the United States after completing his education at Texas A and M University. He was a former Minister of Science and Technology, a CEO of several high-tech corporations, and a member of the Board of Regents of his alma mater Texas A and M University. I was extremely fortunate to have invited him to be a distinguished member of University of Texas of Dallas' scientific advisory board.

After the dinner and just before we said goodbye, Dr. Seo said one of the most profound statements about Korean higher education in our two days of meeting. He said that "*some twenty years ago, if one were to ask which universities in Korea would be the top twenty in the country, you would*

probably find 15 national universities and 5 private ones. Today, the situation is reversed. This tells me that Korean higher education has progressed!”

Coupled with what we learned from our discussions with President Lee’s team, the President of the University Senate of SNU, Professor Sam Ock Park, all of us were stunned by this statement.

To get some precise information about this rather remarkable point, I examined two popular systems of ranking of universities: Shanghai Jiaotong University ranking and QS ranking. As I have said often that by themselves, these rankings only could convey information, however you like them emotionally and/or intellectually, within their restrictive boundary conditions. Together, however, they may convey a more global information.

Shanghai Jiaotong University 2009 Ranking of Korean universities in the top 500 globally

1. Seoul National University	(101-200)	(N)
2. Yongsei University	(201-300)	(P)
3. KAIST	(201-300)	(N)
4. Hanyang University	(301-400)	(P)
5. Korea University	(301-400)	(P)
6. Pohang University of Science and Technology	(301-400)	(P)
7. Sungkungkwan University	(301-400)	(P)
8. Kyungpook National University	(401-500)	(N)
9. Pusan National University	(401-500)	(N)

QS 2009 Ranking of Korean universities in the top 500 globally

1. KAIST	(N)
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| 2. Seoul National University | (N) |
| 3. Pohang University of Science and Technology | (P) |
| 4. Yongsei University | (P) |
| 5. Korea University | (P) |
| 6. Ewha Woman's University | (P) |
| 7. Sungkungkwan University | (P) |
| 8. Hanyang University | (P) |
| 9. Kyung Hee University | (P) |
| 10. Pusan National University | (N) |
| 11. Sogang University | (P) |
| 12. Kyungpook National University | (N) |
| 13. Inha University | (P) |
| 14. Chung-Ang University | (P) |
| 15. Kangnung National University | (N) |

(P means Private and N means National)

The data of these two ranking systems certainly corroborate the statement of Dr. Seo.

1. In the SJTU ranking, in the top nine universities in Korea, five are private universities. The situation is even more striking but totally consistent for the QS ranking. In the fifteen in the QS ranking, only five are national universities. This is completely consistent with Dr. Seo's statement.
2. This situation is quite the opposite in Taiwan, where the dominance of national universities is nearly absolute, in public perception and possibly in reality. I wonder whether this would imply a deeper cultural difference between Taiwan and South Korea? It is clear that what sort of competitive pressure does the rise of private universities on the national universities is a most intriguing question that needs an answer.
3. The rise of the private universities not only is challenging the leadership of national universities in Korea, it also ironically provided SNU one of the most important safety nets in its quest for corporatization: the issue of retirement package for all employees after

the transition!

4. I believe that because of the significant similarities of South Korea and Taiwan, in culture, economy and social structure, the rise of private universities in Korea would require deeper analysis and understanding by education policy makers in Taiwan. Since funding is the mother of all human activities, such a rise must imply that the government of Korea has maintained a relatively “hands-off” attitude towards them. In the South Korea higher education landscape, the strong private universities will get stronger intellectually and financially and the weak ones either diminish in stature, or find alternative ways to survive, or simply shut down.
5. In addition, it also may imply that philanthropic contributions of higher education, especially for private universities are socially and governmentally acceptable and encouraged. Academic structure of private universities must allow the presidents to engage in vigorous fund raising activities, just like those in the United States.

For me, that a distinguished alumnus of SNU, Dr. Seo, would imply that the rise of private universities of Korea is closely linked to the rise of higher education in Korea! Such a phenomenal rise of private universities in Korea must be putting enormous pressure, directly or indirectly, on its national universities. Society pressure must be felt by the national universities. There are only few countries in the world where private universities could challenge or dominate the landscape of higher education. United States is of course an off-scale example, while Japan and now South Korea are two whose private universities are highly visible at the societal level!.