Introduction

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This volume takes up burgeoning education venues in South Korea—what we call here “nonmainstream” or “other” education—namely, education beyond daytime K-16 schooling (both public and private, a distinction in South Korea that until recently has not been so significant). These include alternative or second-chance schooling, homeschooling, private after-schooling, and adult distance education. These “other” venues have garnered increasing social significance in large part precisely because mainstream schooling has widely been perceived as a problem. These “other” venues then are championed either as correctives to the problems of mainstream schooling or dismissed as nothing other than functional extensions of mainstream schooling, motivated by the same aims and values. The chapters in this volume engage this debate and demonstrate that in fact individuals often simultaneously reject or exit mainstream schooling and embrace or seek to attain the symbolic value of mainstream education.

In long proclaiming a “crisis” in education, South Korea joins many other advanced industrial nations, including the United States, Japan, and Great Britain. Although these education crises echo one another, including, for example, anxiety over the behavior of “youth today,” the quality of teachers, and the ability of schools to prepare the next generation for a changing world, not surprisingly their character and idioms are country-specific. As a country that has experienced both rapid democratization and dramatic increases in standards of living in recent decades, South Koreans have felt that mainstream education has not kept pace with the times. For example, while social life is characterized by ever greater freedoms—of mobility, consumption, speech, and so on—schools, much of the citizenry bemoans, have remained conservative bastions of centralization, hierarchy, and control. Or again, while young South Koreans have arguably emerged
as global trend-setters in technology, media, and consumption (from music to fashion to online gaming), mainstream schooling has been burdened by its fixed and homogeneous curriculum, allowing for only limited creative expression. Similarly, while South Korea’s economy and rhetoric of globalization demand an ever-more creative elite class, its schooling is decried for producing narrow achievers well suited to older economies based on staid, hierarchical conglomerates rather than creative start-up companies and cutting-edge ventures. The alternative education venues introduced in this volume must all be appreciated in this context. Although not the focus of this volume, we can also point to the large number of K-16 students who exit mainstream schooling for so-called early study abroad (chogi yuhak) (i.e., pre-college) as comprising yet another South Korean education experiment.1 Jiyeon Kang and Nancy Abelmann argue that while in the past chogi yuhak was celebrated as a real alternative, over time the discourse on chogi yuhak reveals that many South Koreans have come to see the phenomenon as merely an extension of, rather than any real challenge to, the South Korean educational market.2

While recognizing the broad-based charge that South Korean mainstream schooling has not changed, we note that in fact all of South Korea’s democratic presidencies have instituted considerable education reforms. Indeed, integral to South Korea’s burgeoning nonmainstream education sector have been education reforms beginning in the mid-1990s, in accordance with democratization, escalating consumerism, and economic restructuring after the so-called IMF crisis, and globalization. The Kim Young Sam government (1993–97) planned and initiated a series of education reforms to build a new education system, while the Kim Dae Jung government (1998–2003) accelerated these reforms in the aftermath of the IMF crisis. In order to cope with the crisis, education reforms were designed to transform the citizenry to become “creative citizens” who could compete in the twenty-first-century global economy as self-sufficient and independent actors (Mok, Yoon, and Welch 2003; J. Song 2003). These recent neoliberal education reforms are perhaps the most radical and comprehensive in the history of South Korean education (Mok, Yoon, and Welch 2003, 58; Seth 2002, 169). They initiated dramatic changes in education rhetoric from “uniformity and equality” to “creativity, excellence, and diversification.” In contrast to the emphasis on “uniformity,” “standardization,” and “equality” of education during South Korea’s successive authoritarian regimes (1961–92), neoliberal educational reforms pursued a “decentralized and diversified” curriculum designed to promote students’ “excellence” and “creativity.” While applying market principles (e.g., “free
competition” and “deregulation”) to education, these reforms emphasized education consumers’ rights to education choice (C. Kim 1997; Y. Lee 2001; Ro 1998, 1999).

However, many argue that in fact, schools, teachers, and parents are resistant to real reform. Further, we suggest that both state-promulgated and more informal changes to mainstream education have again and again been dwarfed by the education experiments that we take up in this volume. A recent conversation with one of this volume’s contributors, Misook Kim (who has written extensively on South Korean mainstream schooling), sheds light on why mainstream schooling has largely maintained the status quo. Among others, Kim offered the following examples, a number of them ironic. To take one, answering to public demand for diversified criteria for college admission (i.e., criteria beyond the exclusive and long-standardized college entrance examinations), high school grades (among other things) have become more important. While this might seem to offer schools and teachers a greater measure of autonomy (as they are freed from teaching exclusively to the test), grade pressure exerts its own conservative effect. In another example, mainstream schools have been encouraged to institute tracking to remedy what many citizen consumers have perceived as an egalitarian straitjacket, the homogeneous curriculum. Here, too, however, the reform has not produced the desired results: again, the increased value placed on school grades for university entrance has been such that even with tracking, most schools have settled on uniform tests for all children. Thus, teachers and mainstream education consumers alike have become resistant to experimentation because of grade consciousness. Similarly, because entrance exams do remain important, teachers note that parents complain when the curriculum veers too far afield of what is necessary for college entrance exam preparation. This works against the efforts of those schools who are making good on their autonomy, and those teachers who are exercising their freedom to foster student-centered or self-directed learning (chagijudojŏk haksŭp).

While static schools are supposedly to blame for South Korea’s educational shortcomings, we appreciate with Misook Kim in this volume that real transformation is limited by persistent social structures, such as network-based employment and a class system that precludes real second chances. As mentioned above, these education developments are not unique. However, the East Asian countries, Japan and Taiwan foremost, continue to have highly stratified higher education systems, enormous wage rewards linked to educational achievement, and entrance examination–centered college application systems. And while South Korea’s after-school educa-
tion market is an exaggerated form of what can be found in many other countries (demanding relatively greater inputs of family income, child time, and effort than perhaps any country, as Michael Seth discusses in chapter 1 in this volume), throughout the world people are increasingly bearing the financial and emotional burden of their own human capital development.

Despite these considerable education reforms, it is hard to conclude that new market-driven educational values in South Korea have simply superseded old ones. Rather, it is best to think of these divergent values as coexisting while competing and conflicting with one another, as Jae Hoon Lim argues in chapter 2. In order to understand the complex relationship between nonmainstream and mainstream education, we must consider the tensions and conflicts among diverse educational values. Under recent neoliberal transformation, on the one hand mainstream schooling itself is ideologically fraught; on the other, burgeoning nonmainstream education venues are by no means insulated from mainstream schooling. The ethnographic studies in this volume thus ask how these nonmainstream education venues variously challenge, co-opt, or negotiate the discourses and practices of mainstream schooling.

*No Alternative?* draws on the voices of its ethnographic interlocutors to consider what it is to manage and experience education amid arguably one of the world’s most interesting cluster of educational experiments: namely, the extremes of South Korea’s private market, education migration abroad, and familial investment in education. We hope, then, that this book offers a national case study of the global educational predicament in which nations inevitably undertake neoliberal reforms while also managing long-standing national education values, such as, in South Korea’s case, a persistent commitment to educational egalitarianism, a largely unchanged entrance exam system, and unrelenting credentialism and a network-based mobility system. By investigating South Korea’s nonmainstream education venues, we are interested in how families and young people are managing new opportunities alongside long-standing constraints. The people introduced in this volume reveal the on-the-ground reality of a country caught amid proclamations of crisis in mainstream education, valiant efforts at education reform, hope pinned on new education venues, and profound disappointments when the “new” ends up proving not so new after all.

We warn that some of our contributors answer the volume title’s question pessimistically, asserting that yes, there is no alternative: the demands of South Korean social life and anxieties about indeterminate futures are such that systems and individuals have little room with which to really
experiment in earnest. But most contributors, at least fleetingly, identify real experiments.

EDUCATIONAL TRANSFORMATION

In chapter 1, Michael Seth pinpoints the long-standing tension between egalitarian educational philosophies and the reality of a very stratified and rank-conscious society as one example of what he dubs South Korean educational exceptionalism. The history of early education reforms and the state’s regulation of the private after-school market during the postwar military regimes call attention to the ways in which policy makers juggled South Korea’s egalitarian legacy and the strong desires of its citizenry for social mobility.

In the past, South Korea’s military regimes, committed at least ideologically to educational equality and the pursuit of educational uniformity, exerted tight control over all levels of education. In order to be faithful to the egalitarian mission—namely, equal opportunity for all citizens, regardless of social class—the government made strenuous efforts to minimize the effects of familial disparities on student achievement. A primary example was President Park Chung Hee’s high-school equalization policy (see chapter 1 in this volume, by Michael Seth). The policy was originally established for the purpose of reducing excessive competition for high-school entrance (H. Cho 1995; J. S. Kim 2001; Seth 2002, 155–58). The subsequent Chun Doo Hwan regime furthered this drive for equality of educational opportunity by banning all forms of private after-school education and all extra classes in high schools. However, in the aftermath of the Chun regime in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, the state gradually loosened regulation and enforcement of the private after-school education market (J. S. Kim 2001; Ju-ho Lee 2004; Seth 2002; Sorensen 1994).

Into the era of neoliberal education reforms, in April 2000 the Constitutional Court decided to rescind state regulations that had prohibited private (after-school) education institutions, thus guaranteeing parents’ rights to make decisions about their children’s education. While the private after-school market had rapidly expanded throughout the 1990s, this court decision amplified this expansion. Already by the late 1990s, family expenditures for private after-school education almost equaled the country’s entire education budget (Ju-ho Lee 2004, 223). Among nonmainstream education venues, it is this after-school sector that has grown most precipitously: indeed, by 2002, 83 percent of elementary students partici-
This liberalized private after-school education sector has emerged as a frontier for unabashed privatization. In this volume, chapters 6 and 7, by Misook Kim and So Jin Park respectively, take up both the history of the private after-school sector and its contemporary character.

The complexity of education in the era of neoliberal reform is further evidenced by the South Korean media’s hue and cry about “school collapse.” As the educational climate changed, the media responded with portrayals of immoral and ineffective teachers—taking bribes from parents, not being able to teach as effectively as private institute instructors, and not being respected by their students. A media image emerged of students and parents as neoliberal consuming subjects, entitled to “purchase” education and thus eroding long-standing norms of deference to and respect for teachers and schools. As Jae Hoon Lim discusses in chapter 2, the heated public debate on “school collapse” (hakkyo punggoe or kyosil punggoe) between 1999 and 2001 encapsulates the tensions and conflicts between different educational values. Lim demonstrates how diverse ideological camps ironically echoed each other on some points. Despite their radically different political positions, for instance, what she dubs “traditionalists” and “democratic reformists” share a communitarian view of education, while “neoliberalists” and “de-schooling advocates” are united by a strong commitment to individualism.

ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

Three chapters take up the fraught character of nonmainstream educational venues including second-chance schooling, homeschooling, and adult distance education. Together they examine the extent to which these alternative venues challenge both the values and realities of mainstream schooling. While not uniformly pessimistic, their ethnographic findings do give pause about the real potential for disrupting mainstream ideologies and structures. The underlying question is, how can people sustain support for new ways of preparing children for the future if they remain unconvinced that long-standing social sorting measures—college entrance exams, elite college attendance, and a network society in which elite connections are preeminent—will abate? Despite this sense of doubt, people do think that the future might hold new social arrangements. It is this indeterminate future that makes education such a fraught social field. Because people are ambivalent, they are often torn when it comes to making educational decisions, not quite knowing how to proceed.
In chapter 3, Jung-ah Choi introduces the ideological complexity of South Korea’s nonmainstream education field via a so-called second-chance school. Despite the school’s self-identification as a “progressive” and “liberal” savior for dropouts, the demographics of its student body (homogeneously low income and from nontraditional families) reveal that this school works in reality as a sort of dumping ground. Despite the school’s pioneering character and its egalitarian slogans, student voices narrate that they have internalized mainstream educational values and are keenly aware that their mere attendance at the school confirms their status as second-rate citizens. Her ethnographic data introduce students who are smart enough to know their school’s place in the social hierarchy, and that their teachers’ leniency and permissiveness promise a second-class future.

Deok-Hee Seo considers the opposite end of South Korea’s class spectrum in chapter 4, on homeschooling. Consumers who have grown dissatisfied with South Korea’s homogenous mainstream schooling now have many venues through which to exercise their educational visions and values. Advocates have begun to mobilize and form alliances to promote “de-schooling,” one form of which is homeschooling. Seo examines homeschooling’s relationship with mainstream schooling by taking up the case of homeschoolers who return to mainstream schooling. Seo points to the irony that for some people “successful” homeschooling is measured by the extent to which it allows homeschoolers to return to the mainstream sector better able to succeed. Seo demonstrates that many of her subjects chose to have their children exit mainstream schooling to become individually motivated, creative, contemplative learners, only to end up propelling them back into mainstream schooling for human capital accumulation and success. She offers a sympathetic analysis of how and why it is that they “fail” at homeschooling even as they “succeed” in returning their children to mainstream schooling. Specifically, she argues that these parents’ individualistic, meritocratic approach to homeschooling precludes the successful formation of an alternative space or autonomous learning network. Her findings invite readers to ask whether homeschooling can really serve as an alternative to mainstream school, and if not, why not?

Choi and Seo thus demonstrate that although homeschooling and second-chance schooling owe their formation to a critique of mainstream education, their students have not been able to successfully resist mainstream ideals of schooling and prevailing images of “studenthood,” or to exit from South Korea’s existing stratification system. In both cases students (and their families) wrestled with conflicting messages about the educational space of home- and second-chance schooling. In contrast,
Kiyeon Yi’s discussion of adult distance education in chapter 5 is considerably more optimistic about the potential for a real alternative.

Yi argues that although distance adult education is not necessarily alternative in itself, her interlocutors appear to be fashioning something alternative out of it. Indeed, the adult female long-distance learners at Korea National Open University (KNOU) are disappointed by their chosen venue: KNOU, not unlike the second-chance school in Choi’s chapter, emerges as a pseudo-institution, in this case a pseudo-university. It delivers, her informants painfully come to realize, little of what they imagined they missed by not having been able to attend college in their youth. Specifically, it falls short both on the nature of the experience—the promise of high-level college learning—and on the results—the real career opportunities and social mobility afforded by a college credential. Yi’s optimism thus emerges not from the sector itself but from how her group of primary interlocutors enlivens this space. The group helps them manage their pseudo-university career and, much more important, provides a community through which to reject the credentialism and educational prejudice that have dogged them all their adult lives. And it offers them a new template for how to participate meaningfully in the social world: in activities designed to transform the world in progressive directions. And yet Yi’s informants are adult middle-class women who can, in a sense, afford to not worry about their own class reproduction. We might wonder instead how they have managed or are managing their children’s education.

SUPPLEMENTARY EDUCATION

This struggle between upholding and resisting the mainstream education sector is also captured in the voices of many students who participate in the escalating private after-school sector. While most South Koreans avail their children of some after-school education (with the caveat that a minority are shut out of the market because of cost), there is nonetheless considerable confusion as to the ultimate value and impact of this sector. On the one hand, the after-school market is the ultimate champion of new neoliberal values: it is private and consumer- and choice-driven, and it makes no pretense to egalitarianism (e.g., it uses tracking). On the other hand, it does not embrace a host of other neoliberal principles, including autonomy, creativity, and independent thought and study. In this latter vein, private after-schooling ironically looks much like “traditional” mainstream schooling with its stress on rote-memorization, repetition, and teaching to the test.
This contradictory character is more apparent in the secondary market than in the elementary sector. In secondary after-school institutes, as Misook Kim shows in chapter 6, teachers succeed or fail depending on students’ exam scores and to a lesser extent on the basis of improved mainstream school grades. In this way institutes undermine mainstream school curricula and learning. Herein lies the irony: in many cases it is the same public that calls for school reform, consumes in the private market, and insists on tailoring that market in ways that are counterproductive to meaningful school reform. Kim describes “institute addicts” who can’t even begin to imagine mainstream schooling without institutes. In the words of one such student, “But to study on my own, I would have to search for books! And what if there are problems that are not in the textbooks?” Here we can productively recall Seo’s findings: the “successful” students of her study were precisely those who became self-directed learners through homeschooling and then could return to mainstream schooling destined for conventional success. Thus, students’ embrace of after-schooling is on the one hand quintessentially neoliberal—they are opting for choice and ability-driven consumerism—and on the other hand entirely at odds with neoliberal values in that they risk not becoming self-directed learners or autonomous agents but rather spoon-fed, “traditional” learners destined perhaps to succeed only marginally in a constantly transforming world—and in constantly transforming mainstream schools, as well.

The debates on private after-school institutes take a somewhat different shape in chapter 7, by So Jin Park, on the elementary market. The private after-school market for elementary students has been growing rapidly in the aftermath of two reforms—the adoption of English as a formal subject in elementary schools in 1997, and the 2000 Constitutional Court decision against state regulation of the after-school market. Even as this sector mushrooms, there has been widespread criticism of the heavy burdens it places on young children, while mothers have a heightened sense of responsibility for and anxiety over their children’s education. Park’s ethnographic interlocutors, primary school mothers, reveal the ambivalence of the education consumer today as they combine enormous hope and anxiety. If it is their hope that draws them to private after-schooling and fuels their desire to nurture creative new citizens with a broad array of skills, their anxiety wonders if it is not old skills and conventional credentials that still rule the day. Here we can recall Seo’s homeschooling parents who are well aware that this is not an either/or venture, and that perhaps it is precisely the creative and autonomous learners who will succeed in mainstream schooling. It is an understanding of the tapestry of
the simultaneous embrace and rejection of mainstream schooling that is critical for understanding the predicament of the ethnographic subjects featured in this book.

These findings remind us that one feature of neoliberalism is the reconfiguration of the public definition of success. Recent neoliberal education reforms rhetorically and practically unsettle the assumed close link between education and success. They promote values of new human capital, such as creativity and excellence, as well as open up the possibility of new types of social success—perhaps even beyond status achieved through higher education. Indeed, a critical context here is the change in the value of (higher) education amid recent transformations. As the national preoccupation with the college entrance examination illustrates, during the period of rapid industrialization and educational expansion, the notion of social success through education was pervasive (O 2000; Seth 2002; Sorensen 1994). However, as several scholars note, since the number of college graduates continued to increase during the 1990s, credentials gradually conferred less and less in terms of employment and income—a phenomenon dubbed “credential inflation” (hangnyŏk inp’ûlleisyŏn) (Abelmann 1997; Wang-bae Kim 2001; O 2000; Sol 1994). In particular, the value of higher education credentials came into question in the aftermath of the IMF crisis and the extensive economic restructuring that followed, including the waning of the production sector and the rapid rise of the service sector, growing instability in employment (i.e., increasing unemployment and the waning of “lifetime employment,” especially for white-collar workers), and the emergence of venture capital firms. Accordingly, the rhetoric of education reform also promoted the possibility of new social success achieved through means other than the traditional path.

CLASS MATTERS

At the heart of No Alternative? are narratives of educational producers and consumers. Central to our analysis is how social class operates in a transforming, increasingly neoliberal South Korea. As with all industrializing countries, education in South Korea long served as a beacon of hope for the achievement of social mobility. In the South Korean case, this was particularly so given the fluidity of class in the postcolonial, postwar era. All of the chapters in this volume, however, consider class reconfiguration and stagnation in the present era. With the premise that alternative education, too, is a profoundly classed space, we ask who are the winners and losers of these education experiments.
The chapters herein feature people’s fraught calculations about who can achieve educational success today; which factors make for success; what educational success promises people; and whether education is still the critical tool for social mobility. Despite the neoliberal rhetoric that a college education is not the only form of capital that can secure upward mobility, our contributors demonstrate that higher-education credentials are still relevant to social mobility in South Korea. Indeed, college graduates—particularly those from elite universities in the highly stratified higher-education system—are still highly valued and privileged, symbolically and economically, despite the decreasing economic return on higher education in general (see also Abelmann 2003, 126–31; O 2000, 387; S. Park 2006). As Misook Kim demonstrates in chapter 6, ensuring admission to a prestigious college is the very reason why high-school students purchase after-school education. Importantly, in the context of South Korea’s restructuring after the IMF crisis, the economic hardship and fragility of middle-class families made higher education, especially elite higher education, all the more important for middle-class aspiration and reproduction (S. Kim and Finch 2002; Shin and Chang 2000; J. Song 2003).

At this juncture, it is critically important to analyze diverse subjects’ voices in light of their socioeconomic class. Specifically, in the chapters by Kim (6), Park (7), and Seo (4), working- and middle-class students and parents anxiously invest their cultural and material resources in the non-mainstream education market. Neoliberal education reforms and the privatization of education open up seemingly diverse options that invite anxious middle-class students and parents to nonmainstream schooling. However, in accordance with free-market principles, as middle-class interests in and commitment to nonmainstream schooling increase, material and cultural resources have increasingly become a key determinant for education success. As the chapters by Kim and Park illustrate, the private after-school market clearly gives children with more resources more diverse options, although the effects of private after-schooling on children might not be uniformly benevolent. Moreover, as the chapters by Park and Seo illustrate, some middle-class families with economic and cultural resources can make the decision to homeschool their kids or go abroad to opt for a better education, while lower-class families have no other options but to rely on domestic mainstream schools or bottom-tier private after-schools. The disproportionate number of economically underprivileged youth in Choi’s second-chance school and their life stories testify to this thesis.

In this context, the reports and public concern about the growing income and consumption gulf between the haves and have-nots, including in
education consumption, dispel the long-standing egalitarian myth of social success through education (Ju-ho Lee 2004; T. Song 2002). For instance, according to a Hankyoreh daily newspaper article on November 15, 2003, the changing demographics of the freshmen at Seoul National University (at the top of the South Korean higher-education pyramid), which has been publicized since 2000, demonstrates that students’ family background is becoming more and more important for educational success.5

We consider the ironic nature of the ways in which some relatively less-privileged people have optimistically embraced the new reform rhetoric—even as we understand that this embrace is not without ambivalence. Choi has argued elsewhere (2005) that students in second-chance schools aspire to be service-sector workers who dress in white-collar outfits to distinguish themselves from the typical working class, and in turn often belittle the value of school education. They are almost ready to identify with neoliberal intellectuals by believing that they can become materially successful without recourse to school education. Their definition of success is thus neatly aligned with neoliberal discourses of success. Similarly, working-class mothers in Park’s chapter embrace new education rhetoric that calls for “finding and developing children’s talents,” while emphasizing that nowadays a college diploma does not guarantee either privilege or wealth. Appreciating the subtle way in which existing social stratification is sustained, this embrace can perhaps be considered a ruse by which less-privileged people console themselves. However, this is only partially true because the narratives of second-chance school students and working-class mothers also express their ambivalence and resentment about South Korea’s persistent stratification and their own marginalization. Although most of the ethnographic analyses in this volume do not necessarily speak in traditional “class” terms, we argue that people’s practices and travels in nonmainstream schooling venues are thoroughly mediated by their class backgrounds in the context of the escalating privatization of education.

This analysis of neoliberalism and its impact on class configurations in South Korea reminds us of recent policy debates over equity issues. For example, the hottest debates over school diversification and privatization echo the long-standing school equalization policy mentioned above (Ju-ho Lee 2004). When neoliberal reformists pursue diversification and privatization, especially of secondary schools, the persistent tension between equality and social stratification resurfaces (Ju-ho Lee 2004). Our volume leaves readers to question to what extent the diversification of schools (i.e., the co-existence of mainstream and nonmainstream schools) promotes meaningful social debate about stratification and educational opportunity.
The studies presented here also invite readers to ponder whether and in what way the existence and flourishing of nonmainstream education venues challenge the hegemony of mainstream schooling.

BROUGHT TO YOU BY . . .

Five of the chapters in this volume are ethnographic, namely, grounded in field research or participant observation. Commonsensical in anthropology (and other disciplines that employ ethnography) is the intersubjective nature of field research, such that the identity or subjectivity of the researcher matters, both to the field research itself and to its eventual write-up. With this in mind, we introduce in brief the social location and subjectivity of the field researchers whose chapters compose this volume. Jung-ah Choi’s research emerged from her own experience as a teacher at a second-chance high school in 1999 and 2000, when she listened to students talk about why they left mainstream schools and how they made the decision to return to school. In her analysis, she calls our attention to the school itself as the (active) site in and from which those student narratives are produced. Indeed, in Choi’s chapter the school comes to life as a set of institutional and ideological practices that act upon both students and teachers. Deok-Hee Seo’s chapter on homeschooling is organized around her own journey: from deep-seated admiration of homeschoolers as a progressive vanguard resisting South Korean schoolism to profound disappointment upon realizing their totalizing complicity in what she calls the “habitus” of the South Korean middle class. Seo, a scholar working in South Korea, makes her educational longings clear, that is, her interest in alternatives that challenge mainstream schooling and ideologies. Kiyeon Yi’s research on adult women learners in a largely digital university emerged from her own experience as a returnee student from 1998 to 2001. Her research documents the transformative impact of a women’s study group on herself and her returnee-student colleagues. Although Yi began her returnee studies having completed a BA (the other members had not previously graduated from college) and went on to earn a PhD at another university and today resides and works in the United States, she nonetheless considers herself an “insider” to this research. In her chapter, Misook Kim, an active writer on educational issues in South Korea today, makes very clear her critical position about private institutes. She minces no words in denouncing this market-driven sector, which she argues preys on parental worry and makes educational dependents of youth. As an ethnographer working in South Korea, So Jin Park, in her chapter on mothers’ management of
their children’s private after-school education, reveals her sympathy for
the mothers’ predicament, one that she well understands as an insider.
In this vein, we may take note of Jae Hoon Lim’s critical stance in her
analysis of the discourse of “school collapse.” Although a scholar working
in the United States, Lim’s credentials include having been a schoolteacher
in South Korea and publishing widely in Korean. Lim is explicit in her
charge that neoliberal educational reforms in South Korea and elsewhere
run afield of, in her words, “the ultimate goal of education . . . the ethical
or moral aspirations that are essential to human growth.” Finally, as a
historian of South Korean education, Michael Seth makes clear his com-
parative perspective from which South Korea emerges as quite remarkable
in a world-historical context, both for the rapidity of the growth of the
education sector and for the “extent to which the state was able to transfer
the financial burden of schooling to the students and their families.”