Legal Education in Korea*
- Some Thoughts on Linking the Past and the Future -

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I. Introduction

The post-graduate law school system that began to operate since March 2009 opened a new era of the legal education in Korea.1) It drastically changed the previous system based on the initial selection by the judicial examination and the training at the Judicial Research and Training Institute (JRTI) afterwards.2) While a number of changes and

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developments have been made regarding the legal education in Korea, the present law school system is by far the most drastic and innovative reform measure of its kind. The law school system has not only changed the institutional structure (“hardware” aspects) but also the curriculum and teaching methods (“software” aspects) of the legal education. It is expected to produce a new breed of lawyers who will reshape the existing landscape of the legal profession in Korea.

The story of the legal educational reform is not new, at least in the Asian region. Similar reform measures were designed and implemented elsewhere. An almost concurrent and identical change was made in Japan. Some scholars argue that these common qualitative changes in the legal education reflect the globalization and the pervasive influence of the American law. Indeed the law school model as adopted in Korea, and to a lesser extent in Japan, resembles much the American law school system. Law professors and legal practitioners who were trained in the U.S. influenced the reform debate, and one of the most frequently cited reasons for introducing the law school system was to produce a professional group of lawyers who can deal with difficult legal problems arising from the globalizing world.

Has the globalization led the legal educational reform in Korea? Was the introduction

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2) The judicial examination was primarily designed to recruit judges and prosecutors. After the quota was increased to 300 since 1981 and to 1,000 since 2001, however, it has transformed itself as a de facto bar examination. See generally Dae-Kyu Yoon, “The paralysis of legal education,” in Legal Reform in Korea (RoutledgeCurzon, 2004).

3) It should be noted that Korea began discussing the legal educational reform earlier than Japan, but the implementation has been delayed due to the strong opposition from the legal profession, including the judiciary. For a comparative overview of the legal educational reform in Asia, see Setsuo Miyazawa, Kay-Wah Chan, and Ilhyung Lee, “The Reform of Legal Education in East Asia,” Annual Review of Law and Social Sciences, Vol.4(2008).


5) But note also the internal dynamics between the reformers and the established legal elites during the Japanese legal educational reform, as manifested in Mayumi Saegusa, “Why the Japanese Law School System Was Established: Co-optation as a Defensive Tactic in the Face of Global Pressures,” Law and Social Inquiry, Vol.34(2009).