

Korea's Nord Politics and New Direction of Geography Education in Korea

Ki-Suk Lee

Seoul National University

The recent geography education at level of middle and high school in Korea is facing two inevitable problems. One is the consistent shrinking of the proper geography territory and teaching shares whenever revision of the school curriculum has occurred. The second one is a failure to accommodate unceasingly a new knowledge of regional geography in a rapidly changing world, and to reflect problem-oriented topics which are closely related to the Korean national policy and interests of foreign countries on the school curriculum.

In handling the latter, one major question is, "Exactly what is the problem with the current teaching of world and regional geography and in what way can we accommodate new contexts of regional geography relating to the Korean Nord Politics into the school curriculum?"

This paper suggests a new division for world and regional geography based on the concept of a Korea-centric world view, maximization of national interests and full accommodation of new knowledge of the changing world applicable to the high school and college levels considered.

Two major regions, the Korea's Nord Region and the Pacific Rim Area, and five other sub-regions can be identified as a proposed unit of study strategically designed for better future geography education. For the delination of this regional division, the paper considers the goal of national interests such as Korea's Nord Policy, a new pivotal area in terms of economic and political affairs which will critically influence national development in the near future. Additionally the concepts of a Korea-centric view of the world and the role of Korea within and among regions is considered.

I. Introduction

Throughout the world, a basic knowledge of the regional geography of foreign countries is an essential part of geography teaching

in all levels of schools. Unfortunately during a few of the last decades many leading nations have failed to maintain the balance of teaching world regional geography. Thus, in recent years there has been a movement to recognize the significance of teaching regional geography and to revive it in the school curriculum (Johnston 1985; Gardner 1986; Abler 1987).

Korea is not an exception. The recent geography education at the level of middle and high school in Korea is facing two inevitable problems. One is the consistent shrinking of the proper geography territory and teaching shares whenever every revision of the school curriculum has occurred. This is partially due to a strong trend toward an integration of all related social subject within the social studies framework; also and particularly in high school, with there has been an unflinching movement to add new subjects to the curriculum, and the university entrance examination system has distorted the teaching of a regular curriculum. Another reason for its losing ground may come from the fact that we all are responsible for the lack of effort at making the subject significant and popular in school teaching. Also there has been a failure to accommodate in the school curriculum unceasingly a new knowledge of regional geography in a rapidly changing world, as well as to reflect problem-oriented topics which are closely related to the national policies and interests in foreign countries.

In the last 20 years, Korea has become one of the world's most rapidly developing nations in fields of both industrialization and internationalization. Also during the same period over 2 million of its population have migrated to other promising countries, and nearly 500 thousand workers, including businessmen and diplomats, are working in over 140 countries. Besides these substantial changes, massive travel to many foreign countries and the rapid development of telecommunication and mass media endlessly provide us with documentary information of foreign countries. Along these lines of social change the traditional geographical framework for schools seems not to be fitted into attracting geography in general any more. It is time to reform the framework of world regional geography teaching in the school curriculum and to turn it back on the right track. Specially we are confronting an urgent need for new understanding of the regional geography of socialist countries such as China, U.S.S.R., and Eastern European Nations since Korea has launched the Nord Politics.

While handling the latter matters, a major question should be

raised about exactly what is the problem of current teaching of world regional geography and in what way can we accommodate new contexts of regional geography relating to the Korean Nord Politics into the school curriculum?

First this paper is going to discuss the current situation of school geography, then the nature of the Nord Politics and its region. Finally for better future education in geography, I would like to propose a new division of world regional geography applicable to high school and college levels.

II. Current Teaching of World Regional Geography in Schools

In all levels of Korean schools, world regional geography exists as a part of social studies or the independent subjects (Table 1), even though the depth and details of contents are varied according to the school age. The major contents of world regional geography in elementary grades are very brief. Only one chapter out of six in the 4th grade text for social studies deals with world regional geography. It divided into two section: one describes mainly the earth and map, physical environment, and world people, the other describes regional geography of Japan and China, Southeast Asia, Middle Asia, Western Europe, U.S.A., Russia, and the world mutual cooperation. The selection of regions and nations for the main text follows a few criteria such as "neighbouring countries", "affluent countries", and "socialist nations."

Even though one chapter is not enough for understanding a whole world, this introduction of regional geography provides a basic conceptual frame and idea of world geography and the concept of nations in general.

In middle school, for a period of two years only four chapters are devoted to learning world regional geography, including some detail sections of systematic geography about human and physical features.

The regional division of the world follows the traditional and conventional way based on cultural region. In both elementary and

TABLE 1
OUTLINE OF WORLD REGIONAL GEOGRAPHY IN SCHOOLS

Level	Grade	Hours/Week	Division
Elementary	4th	3	Social Studies
Middle School	1st & 3rd yr.	2	Social Studies
High School	1st or 2nd yr.	2	Geography

middle schools geography is offered as a part of social studies. It needs further integration work to achieve the goal of social studies education. Thus, middle schools are suffering in appointments of subject teachers because current systems of teacher training do not meet this general demand.

In high school both Korean regional geography and World regional geography, which consist of two volumes, are offered as independent subjects for a two years period. After basic introduction chapters for physical and human geography, four chapters deal with major world regions, which are subdivided according to cultural criteria. The final chapter discusses current problems of society on the earth. The world regional book contains not only detailed geographical information on each region and basic concepts of geography, but also handles the problem-oriented subjects of the region. However, for better understanding of world regions, its subdivision of the world remains the static way of a conventional framework in which the arrangement and description can not keep abreast of a dynamic and changing world. It means the repetition of world geography under the same framework does not attract the student as a subject of curiosity anymore. Also there is no way with the traditional framework to introduce new concepts of interdependency and interconnection created by flows and exchange between and among nations, in order to understand the region in the global scale.

Overall we are facing the urgent needs of new organization and expansion of the geography curriculum in both schools and colleges to better understand the geography of the changing world.

III. Korea's Emerging Nord Politics and Its Regional Characteristics

Before discussing the reformation of world regional geography, it is meaningful to review Korea's Nord Politics and its related regional characteristics in general. The review also discusses in what way the Nord Politics affects the necessity of teaching and research on this region.

Even though it's not clear when the government has been provisionally launched the Nord Politics, the partial opendoor policy in specific fields has resulted in a rapid development of the economy in the early 1980s. However, a great moment to take initiative for improving ties with the northern socialist countries came just after when the Seoul city government won the right to host the Summer

Olympics in 1984. This occasion provided for free entry of athletic members for the games, but the conceptualization of the Nord Politics was in the premature stage.

The full-fledged policy came finally at the beginning of the 6th Republic, when Mr. President Roh proclaimed the Nord Politics in his UN address in October 1988. Ideas of the Politics include normalization of political relations with socialist countries and bilateral cooperation in many fields such as trade, joint ventures, the exploitation of natural resources, science-technology, and so on.

Since it was launched in 1988, in less than 3 years it has made the tremendous progress in opening new horizons, including normalization of relations with U.S.S.R., and most Eastern European Countries, and the establishment of the office of trade promotion cooperation with China.

Target regions for the Nord Politics include China, U.S.S.R., Eastern European Countries and other socialist nations. Over its long history, Korea has maintained very close relationships with those countries in terms of political, cultural and economic aspects, even though the relationships might have been established by force rather than under Korea control. Geographically, this region comprises many common characteristics such as location of the same continent and sharing almost 3 millions of Koreans who had migrated during the Japanese occupation. Therefore, this region is not an unfamiliar land for us. However, the Nord Politics has brought and related a new strong image for the region where the goals of our national interests might be achieved through political normalization. There is no doubt that most Koreans have high confidence that these regions could be a new frontier for trade, various investments for joint venture and resource exploitation, and mutual cooperation in many areas. In other words, business in these regions should be beneficial to both sides.

Needless speaking, it is natural that the exercise of Nord Politics absolutely requires the basics of the regional geography on those region. In spite of this urgent necessities of professional lore for the region, we are frankly suffering from so deficient in knowledge of the region. This is a reason why we need to reformation of school geography education in the near future. The Nord Politics is an valuable opportunities that can be realistically provided the significant meaning and concept of spatial interconnection, complementary interdependency, interaction and distance in the global scale. Also due to implementation of the Nord Politics has involved the spatial

decision making process, the teaching and research of this region should be oriented to the policy-oriented approach as well as the problem-orientation of the region.

The Nord Politics is one of an indication shifting our national interests from the Pacific Rim. This shifting could be the same trend of "Geography and California's Educational Reform: One Approach to a Common Cause" with relation to the interest in the Pacific Rim (Salter, 1986). With the changing world, to accommodate the change of the regional situation should be the prior important matter in the future of geography education, and without its efforts we could not get along in the information society.

IV. Urgent Needs for Reformation of Geography Curriculum

It can be argued that the urgent needs for the reformation of geography teaching in the school and college curriculum are forced from two directions. As mentioned above, one is the increase of internationalization through the expansion of trade, cultural exchanges, and the overflow of information on the world's nations. The second is a strong tendency to achieve our national interests in certain regions. The national interests are obviously served by an effort at keeping abreast of the rapidly changing world. Yet another reason is the multinational business cooperation of the advanced countries. The rise of the Pacific Rim and the EEC are examples of the formation of regional blocs to maximize their own interests in the given economic region.

New formation of world regions based on such dynamic changes absolutely needs to be reflected in the school curriculum. Learning newly emerged structures of the sub-regions of the world is an essential part of knowledge for individuals as well as a means of pursuing indispensable national interests. This sort of knowledge is only realistic and practical for future society.

Generally, this kind of need to meet urgent efficient geography education may commonly be shared by those who are concerned with it. However, there is a very important thing to consider in the reorganization of world regional geography. That is to follow the concept of an ethnocentric world view that places Korea at the center of the world. The concept of the Korea-centric world view could be one tool to propose in a new framework of world geography, and this might be a way in which a learner and teacher could

become mutually and subjectively involved in discussing the contents of policy-oriented world regions.

I would like to propose a new division of world regional geography based on the concept of a Korea-centric world view, maximization of national interests and full accommodation of new knowledge of the changing world. The new framework in this proposal is limited to the practice at high school and college levels of world regional geography. For regional division the substantial criteria include national policies such as the Nord Politics, major new areas which are increasingly powerful economic and political forces in world affairs, the remnant to cultural turfs, and the existing economic blocs such as EEC and OPEC. The other important factor used for the criteria for world division is the leading role of Korea within and among the nations which form an interdependent system. The leading role of Korea is different from region to region. This role whatever it will be is a key for understanding the interconnections between regions. Without it, we may repeat taking the same track of formal geography, which is losing its grounds of justification.

The following Table 2 shows proposed major regions and sub-regions of the world.

If we consider the rate of world change and the world's stability in terms of economic and political affairs, at least for the next decade this framework of regional division will be useful for promoting our regional geography. We should write a curriculum that encompasses the new frame for regional geography. The geography curriculum built on established strength in the new regional geogra-

TABLE 2
MAJOR REGIONS AND SUB-REGIONS OF THE WORLD

Region	Subdivision	Countries
Two Major Region	The Nord Politics Region	China, U.S.S.R., Mongolia, Eastern European Countries
	The Pacific Rim	U.S.A., Japan, Australia & New Zealand, Part of Latin America
Five Sub-Region	West Pacific Rim	South East and South Asian Countries
	Middle East	OPEC Countries
	EEC Country	Most European Countries
	Africa	Central and Southern Africa
	Others	Part of Latin Countries

phy may play a major role in really understanding the nature of geography education. This proposal needs to do further complementary research to meet an operational level of format.

Therefore, an urgent need for better geography education is a full understanding of where we are in the changing world. In this view Korea's Nord Politics should be one of the distinguishing national policies which is stimulating the necessity of a realistic regional geography teaching and research from now on.

For the early achieving of this educational goal, a extensive field survey and research program by a group of professionals and teachers has to be set up immediately. At the same time the joint research program and scholar-student exchange program have to be practically established.

References

- Abler, Ronald F., 1987, "What Shall We Say? To Whom Shall We Speak?," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 77, pp. 511-524.
- Department of Geography Education, S.N.U., 1989, "Special Issues: Studies in Regional Geography," *Journal of Geography Education*, Seoul National University; in Korean with English Summary.
- Gardner, David Pierpont, 1986, "Geography in the School Curriculum," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 76, pp. 1-4.
- Guelke, Leonard, 1977, "Regional Geography," *The Professional Geographer*, Vol. 29, No. 1, pp. 1-7.
- Johnston, R. J., 1985, "To the Ends of the Earth," in *The Future of Geography*, R. J. Johnston, ed., London: Methuen, pp. 326-338.
- Morrill, Richard, 1983, "The Nature of Unity and Value of Geography," *The Professional Geographer*, Vol. 35, No. 1, pp. 1-9.
- Salter, Christopher, 1986, "Geography and California's Educational Reform: One Approach to a Common Course," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 76, pp. 5-16.
- Steel, R. W., 1982, "Regional Geography in Practice," *Geography*, Vol. 67, pp. 2-8.