

The South Korean Government's Policies on Education;  
Social Response and Economic Effects

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### Abstract

After gaining independence in the 1950s, the South Korean government set out multiple education initiatives that would scientifically progress the national society forward.

Policymakers at this time were afraid that if the people weren't educated, the nation would re-enter a stage of dominance by a foreign country. The result was positive for the following decades: the economy generally improved and the nation had one of the most educated workforces in the world. However, this was mostly because the Korean people would respond to those government incentives by endeavoring themselves further into education. This led to a widespread pursuit for education within the nation, one that people have not yet been able to recover from. This is evidently seen as many Koreans agree that in order to attain true success, one cannot be content with just financial success but also be educated. With the rising cost for high-quality education in South Korea and the willingness for citizens to pay for high-cost private education, social immobility and inequality has become a significant problem - the gap between the educated rich and the uneducated poor has only been getting wider. The research conclusion is that while government policies advocating for better education helped South Korea grow economically for decades, the long-term result, as viewed in 2020, is that the reality for Korean students have only been getting worse.

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## **I. Background and Introduction**

On August 15th, 1945, the Korean Peninsula was finally free of Japanese colonial occupation. This event would be followed by the official formation of the Republic of Korea (South Korea), which governed over southern Korea in 1948. When the first president of the republic, Syngman Rhee, took office, the country was in shambles. The economy was weak, there was political instability, and Korean society had not yet recovered from the occupation. The already weak country would be further destroyed by the Korean War (1950 - 1953) and by the end of the Korean War, "the country was one of the poorest in the world and barely made ends meet by relying on assistance from others" (Korea Herald). However, the decades of chaos and instability would be followed by a golden age for the Koreans. During the following period, a reconstruction period known as the "Miracle on the Han River" would spark. The Republic of Korea would redevelop and become one of the leading powers of the world. This reconstruction period would not have been possible without the strong values that both the government and individuals of Korea placed on education.

## **II. Education Policies set by the Government**

The original education system was initially set by the Korean government in hopes of protecting national sovereignty, competitiveness, and security. The government was fully aware that the Japanese colonization period of South Korea (1910 - 1945) had happened because Korea

was technologically behind Japan. As written in *Success and Education in South Korea*, “South Korea’s educational institutions have, in fact, been created as an integral part of a national project to strengthen and develop the country for survival.” (Sorenson). This quote, along with another common saying, “history repeats itself” describes the fear that the government had when building their education system. The government had strong reason to believe that if the nation continued to stay uneducated, they would be attacked again by an aggressive country. Hence, in order to become technologically advanced to “survive,” the government of Korea placed strong emphasis on educating the citizens of the country.

When planning the education system out for the republic, the government also took economic competitiveness into consideration. South Korea is surrounded by some of the greatest economies of the world. According to a report by Investopia, China and Japan, neighboring countries of South Korea, hold the 2nd and 3rd most powerful economies in the world and South Korea has had to compete with them for decades. Koreans needed resources to help them continue competing and since the country lacks natural resources, they have had to turn to human resources. In order to have a strong human workforce, they have focused more on education. As stated in *Education, the Driving Force for the Development in Korea*, it is said that “Education has been considered an important right for long in Korean society. Education has been considered important because of ... the particular national desire for greater achievements.” (South Korean Ministry of Education) The term “natural selection” seems to define Korea’s relations with its neighbors as only the fittest of the bunch ends up succeeding. Because they’ve ambitiously created an outwards facing export economy, they must outdo neighboring competitors, which requires an educated group of people.

The government first created the education system in hopes of building national power and security. However, the extent to which the government supported education is not enough to explain why South Koreans have caught the “education fever” which, as defined in *Education Fever and Happiness in Korean Higher Education* by Jeong-Kyu Lee, is “the strong zeal for education” (Lee). The South Korean government has actually spent less than foreign governments such as the United States on public education. The giant education machine of South Korea, while established by the government, was actually built mostly by the craving for knowledge the citizens had.

### **III. Society's Response to New Education Policies**

Although the education system of South Korea was initiated by the government, it became finer through the pursuit of education by the individual citizens. One of the first factors that went into play were the Confucian values that are embedded in society. In Korean culture, Confucian values, which are considered religious by a lot of countries, are considered to be basic social values people should abide by. One of these values focuses greatly on learning as it is stated that Confucius “viewed education as a means of transformation, the discovery of human nature, and the cultivation of character. Through education, virtues are developed and integrated” (Ng). Korea, along with others, “China, Vietnam, Singapore, Korea, and Japan are considered countries with Confucian heritage culture” (Phuong-Mai). In a study done by Mr. Lee in the case of Hong Kong, it was briefly mentioned, “The significance of education stands out in the Confucian tradition . . . Education is seen as the road to developing one's fullest potential” (Lee). In a further study done at the Hong Kong University where this work was analyzed, it was stated

that Lee's study "provide us with a clear picture of parents' beliefs and practices in education" which directly lead to the phenomenon where "academic success amount CHC (Confucian Heritage Culture) students has been attributed at least partially, to efforts parents put into their children's learning and how much these parents value education" (Lam, Ho, Wong). Hence, because Confucian values, which notes education highly, are embedded in the culture, it has been something that everyone wants to pursue to attain "one's fullest potential." For this reason, parents have been willing to invest more on education than any other country, spending the most amount of money on private education in the world modern day. Notably though, it is significant to understand that Confucian values have been in Korean society for centuries and with it, the desire for knowledge.

However, the Korean people of the country were barred from learning during colonization. During Japanese colonization, which was marked by heavy discrimination against the Korean natives by the Japanese aggressors, Koreans did not have good access to learning. "Records show that 80 percent of Japanese living in Korea were literate in Japanese, and 6.2 percent of them were literate in Korean as well. By comparison only 7 percent of Koreans were literate in Japanese, and 22 percent were literate in Korean" (Hong, Paik). The Japanese people's superiority over the Koreans in literacy rates was mostly due lack of education opportunities for the Koreans. During this time, Koreans had little chance to learn. Moreover, as seen in *Education, the Driving Force for the Development in Korea*, it is evident that the Koreans were filled with anger and sorrow for not being able to have educated themselves. Here is an excerpt:

“During the Japanese colonization of Korea (1910-1945), desire for education did not dissipate. In addition, after Korea's independence from Japan in 1945, people began to largely demand education to overcome the sorrow of not having gotten it during the Japanese occupation of Korea.” (South Korean Ministry of Education)

Koreans had to watch their aggressors go to education institutions, hoping they would be able to attend, during the colonization era. For that reason, when they were freed, they did not spare any resources on education. In a research that was done to determine which countries had the best education, South Korea was put in the top 5 globally on their list. Evidence of this is in *The Best Educational Systems in the World on Example of European and Asian Countries*, and South Korea was noted for having the best globally known for being a big spender on private education as well their “best and unusual educational systems” (Karolina). In *Private Tutoring and Demand for Education in South Korea*, it was stated that “the household sector spent 2.57% of the nation's GDP on private tutoring for primary and secondary school students” (Kim, Lee) in 2006 alone. The government did not tell anyone to spend money and all these investments have been done solely by the people.

#### **IV. Economic Impacts**

Through the pursuit of education by both the government and the people, great achievements have been made. The modern economy of South Korea has been multiplied by 31,000 times from its 1953 (post-Korean war) economy. This is mostly in part due to the high yearning for education within the country and competition that ensues. However, as South Korea becomes technologically advanced, education has become excessive.

Initially, in the 1970s and 1980s when South Korea's economic miracle, "Miracle on the Han River" occurred, education gained prominence. Overeducation, "which happens when the years of schooling required for the job is lower than the years of schooling completed" (Carolino) as defined by in *Overeducation: A Disease of the School-to-Work Transition System*, was good at this time as it allowed educated individuals to work in a diverse sectors on the Korean economy. Because of the growing number of people pursuing education, preferable jobs have gotten much more competitive. This forced educated people to move to less competitive jobs. While this helped in developing different economic sectors, this has posed a problem.

As South Korea's strong economy stabilizes and growth rates drop, the demands in the overall job market has been decreasing. Therefore, those with education have had to lower their expectations and look for any available jobs. According to an article by the Korea Times, "Over a third of the 66 applicants for janitor jobs in Seoul had university degrees" (Korea Times). This is a problem for educated individuals as they are not getting enough return for their education cost. It was found that "As of 2007, 80% of college graduates were job seekers while only 30% of jobs demand highly educated workers" (An, Bosworth). There is a surplus of educated workers while there is a deficit of jobs matching their level of education. This ultimately results in higher debt for those with college degrees in the future.

Also, for those wishing to succeed without education, even though they may become economically successful, Korean society will not accept them as fully successful. The underlying problems in Korea are seen when comparing the definition of "success" in Korea and foreign countries such as America. The historical "American Dream," as defined in *The American Dream: A History About Credit* was that it is a "concept that includes several spectra of the

economic cycle in the U.S.” (From) and includes “values such as self-fulfillment, hard work and possibilities to achieve a better life irrespective of one's background” (From). Ultimately, “success” in America, as defined by the “American Dream” would be striking it rich and one's background is not considered. However, this is greatly different in South Korea. It is written that “even economically successful persons find it difficult to attain high social status without education.” It was also found that if one succeeded without education, “people will talk behind his back. They will say he makes all this money, but he is really only an uneducated sajangnon” (Sorenson). In other words, in South Korea, one cannot be considered successful unless they have a social recognized education. Ultimately, the main difference between the two education systems is that in America, higher education isn't needed while higher education is needed in South Korea. American billionaires such as Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg dropped out of Harvard University but are respected for being “successful” in America. While a Korean businessman or businesswoman may get rich from leading a company, they would not receive the respect that Bill Gates or Mark Zuckerberg receive without a completed degree.

But this poses a bigger threat: social immobility. In *The role of education for social inequality in modern societies*, “Finnish sociologists have recently challenged the often-stated strong relationship between educational attainment and income, finding that the economic effects of an individual's educational achievements are mediated by parental income” (Caturianas). If this is the case, those born under richer parents will get better access to education and therefore in Korean society, have a better chance to “succeed.”

## V. Conclusion and Summary

Education has evolved greatly over the years, sharpened by the ambitious Korean society. The government had created the system in hopes of strengthening the power with knowledge so that when the time came to protect themselves, they had reliable human resources. The government also hoped that an educated population would help in making the Korean economy competitive in a geographically strong market. This was further developed by the common people who were initially driven by the traditional Confucious values and the tragedies of the Japanese occupation.

While these pursuits have greatly helped the economy due to having a strong human workforce, it has also had negative effects. There's been too many people who are getting higher education and while these people expect high returns for their degrees, they aren't getting rewards. Excessive eagerness towards education was the same factor that helped South Korea perform the economic "Miracle on the Han River." As time passes on, the negative effects of excessive education continue to go on without any reflections or changes and the facade that everything will work out if one is educated has only been embedded deeply into Korean culture. Although it is significant to note that education's high prominence in South Korea has helped the country in the past, it is just as important to know that the same factor has harmed present Koreans and will continue to hold back future Koreans.

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