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South Korean Education: Hagwon 학원

Hyejoo Choi (최혜주), 22, has been vigilantly studying for the government national exam that will be held this June in South Korea. “I long to work for the interest of the public,” stated Choi. “The national exam I am preparing for determines which people are fit for working in the government, such as government branches, provincial offices, city hall, etc.” Choi took a semester off from university in order to focus all of her attention on passing the national exam. Studying for the national exam this year brought back memories of Choi’s high school days. “I spent most of high school preparing for the college entrance exam,” explained Choi, “I did not want to have any regrets, so I studied whenever I could.”

Choi’s dedication to her studies is not an uncommon story in the least. Many South Korean high school students study long hours to prepare for the CSAT or College Scholastic Ability Test taken in the last year of high school (Lee). Most of the preparation for the test is supplemented by private education institutions known as hagwons. “Hagwons, tutorial schools that offer summer and after-school programs, are an age-old tradition in Korea, where most children attend some sort of extracurricular academic program” (Yi). Also known as “shadow education”, hagwons are considered cram schools that are held after regular classes for students wanting a leg up in their skills (Ripley and Kim).

According to the Minister of Education, “nearly 75% of the student population took up private education” in 2010 (Lee).

Choi’s was enrolled in a hagwon during high school. “I remember that I always wanted to go home,” said Choi, “but we would have to stay until around 11 PM”. Because of the long hours, “authorities have been enforcing a curfew to stop children from studying after 10 PM in hagwons” (Ripley and Kim). “There was a time when my teacher would not let us go home until we passed the quiz she gave us with no mistakes,” recalls Choi. “My friend and I had to take the quiz over and over again. We were not doing very well that day, and we just wanted to go home, but we were not allowed to.”

Parents want their children to get into a good school and are willing to pay for hagwons, “an average cost of nearly \$2,600 per student for the year” (Ripley and Kim). Choi states that it was her parents that pushed her to study in hagwons, so that she could have a better future. “I can understand my parents,” Choi said. “They wanted me to get into a good college so I could have a successful future, but it was really hard. I could not wake up from the nightmare because it was real.” Many Korean parents are “aware of the role the academic credentials play in their children’s future opportunities and make sacrifices to provide their children with shadow education” (Byun, Schofer, and Kim). The drive behind this obsession with private education is the desire for parents to get their children into prestigious colleges in Korea. “Seoul National University (SNU), Korea University and Yonsei University are collectively nicknamed SKY” (Card). Being a student in one of the SKY universities reaps rewards for the future ahead. “Not only will successful students

have the best academic pedigree in the country, they will also have a strong alumni network that tends to be biased in hiring and mentoring grads from their alma mater” (Card).

“It is difficult to say, but I was living in a nightmare,” explained Choi. “I do not think anyone wants to admit the truth, but it was really tough. When I finished taking the college entrance exam I became overwhelmed with sadness. I could not believe that I wasted my high school experience for one exam. All that mattered was getting into a good university at the time, but when I look back on it, I wish I had a better high school experience. I cannot go back, but it would have been nice to have some good high school memories.”

Choi explained that the obsession with education did not occur over night. She briefly retold the history of the era that changed Korean thinking. “The last dynasty in Korea, called Joseon, lasted for about 500 years from the 14th century to 1910,” Choi stated. “In that era, Confucianism started to heavily affect the whole nation. Confucianism dominated our ancestor’s ways of thinking, and behavior”.

The Joseon Dynasty and Confucianism shed light on the rise of education obsession prominent in South Korea today. “Confucius “孔夫子” Kong Fu Zi or K'ung-fu-tzu, Master Kong was a Chinese social philosopher” (Confucius). In the Analects (collection of Confucius’s ideas and sayings) the first line states, “Isn't it a pleasure to study and practice what you have learned (學而時習之、不亦說乎)?” (Confucius). Even though Confucius was Chinese, “his teachings deeply influenced East Asian life and thought” (Confucius). The ideals of Confucianism heavily shape the values of South Korea. “Confucian values,

such as... the importance of education and diligence... were incorporated into the newly developed work ethic” (Kim and Park 44).

The Joseon Dynasty was based on Neo-Confucianism, which was a more rational and secular form of Confucianism. The values held during this era were morality, practical ethics, and righteousness. Private academies and educational institutions developed during this time. The Korean alphabet Hangul was also developed. The social hierarchy that existed during the Joseon Dynasty was different than other dynasties. The top consisted of the king and royal families, followed by the civil military officials called yangban. After yangbans were the middle class who were often scribes, and medical officers, followed by the commoners or peasants. The lowest class consisted of tenant farmers, slaves, entertainers, craftsman, laborers and criminals (History of Korea).

Yangbans “were landed or un-landed aristocracy” that were second to the king (Yangban). This tier in the social hierarchy was unlike the rest because one could obtain their position as a yangban.

Choi continued to explain, “Based on Confucianism, the country tried to select those who are fully aware of it by testing them. The exam was called gwageo, and it was considered the only way to change one’s class or status in an aristocratic society”.

The national civil service exam or gwageo tested one’s knowledge of Confucian classics and history. Once it was passed, one could become a yangban and join the aristocrats (Yangban). These scholarly officials proved that one could become successful if one studied.

“Before this dynasty, it had always been aristocrats or royal families who led wealthy and successful lives, Choi concluded. “During the Joseon Dynasty, people had to become accustomed to working for most of the day and studying for the rest of it, dreaming to ascend to power and a better life. Obviously, those ideals still influence us today.”

Excelling academically is rooted in the Confucian teachings that South Korean values developed from. Although it is admirable to work hard to reach a goal, Koreans are taking education to extremes. A Korean high school student’s daily schedule consists of “self-study sessions at school, cram school classes and more self-studying hours late into the night at private cubicles, all on top of their regular class hours” (Lee). “I remember getting around 2 to 4 hours of sleep each day if I was lucky,” recalls Choi. Students experience extreme pressures to excel and assume failure if they do not get the highest marks on exams. According to Ahn’s Presidential Advisory Council on Education, Science and Technology, “more than 200 students committed suicide in 2009 and about 150 the following year” (Lee).

“Learning at a hagwon after school was not pleasant,” shared Choi. “I knew I was there for a reason, but there were days when I just wanted everything to stop. The worst situation I was in was when one of my teachers blacklisted me in the hagwon. There were teachers who used to hit misbehaving students on the hands, but she was not a hitter. I remember wishing that she was. I was in a situation where I really wanted to go home one day, so I cheated on one of the tests she gave out. She unfortunately caught me in the act. I know it is bad to cheat, but I was so exhausted that day and I really wanted to rest at home. I had no idea she would make the rest of my time studying at hagwons so hard for me.

Teachers looked down at me and did not give me a chance to explain myself. Every answer I gave was wrong. I felt as if I was having a nightmare within another nightmare. I contemplated suicide a few times because I felt helpless. But my parents' sacrifices kept creeping up in my mind and eventually I decided not to do anything too rash."

"More than 80% of high school students go on to higher education" in South Korea (Lee). The motivation to excel academically is rooted in the Confucian values. "The long practice of equating social status with academic achievement has left behind a tradition of pouring everything into studying" (Lee).

"I am currently studying for the national exam, but it is different now," explains Choi. "I am studying because I want to be involved in the government. I was more or less forced to study during high school. My parents were the people that I did not want to let down. This time, the person that will be the most disappointed if I do not pass the national exam would be myself. It is different and I have changed for the better."

Choi is gradually working towards her dream and trying to cut out her extreme study habits of the past. "You don't have to worry," Choi added, "I get around 6 hours of sleep now!"

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