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The Myth of Meritocracy and False Hope  
in Korean College Admissions and Preparation

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*An Introduction to the Korean Education System*

Education is a core component of social reproduction, an essential element in early socialization as well as human capital development. Successful systems are often heralded as much as the poorer ones are criticized; it impacts the daily lives of every child born within such a society, their families, and their futures.

This close connection between education and a student's lifestyle, belief systems, and future prospects are no more evident than in South Korea. In a country of 51 million and a K-12 population 2 million, the country boasts a 68 percent of undergraduate degree attainment—the highest in any OECD nation. Its intense focus on education even has a name: 교 육 열 (*gyoyukyeol*) or *educational heat*, often characterized by stereotyped mothers with a laser-focus on their children's studies, hand-picking high schools, catering costly tuition teachers and making round-trips on cars delivering their children from and to the 학원 (*hakwons*) or private cram schools that teach everything from differential equations—a standard part of Korean high school curriculum—to Korean history—a recently mandated course by the *Ministry of Education, Science and Technology*. The driving force, the motivation and culmination of this year-long effort is the college standardized admission test, or 수능 (*Suneung*), a once-per-year occasion in which airports near school close to reduce noise and police are on staff waiting to take late students to their testing centers, resulting in a report card featuring the test-taker's

national ranking, percentage/bracket score on each subject, and a total score out of 400 which, arguably, encapsulates most of their future prospects.

Like all other life-defining socially-reproducing institutes, the Korean educational system is a victim not only to socioeconomic inequality, but also offers a solid myth of meritocracy. Students are willing to invest hundreds of hours for a few more points on their final report card, the sole score that determines their entry into the renowned Korean colleges of Seoul National, Korea or Yonsei University, or the *SKY*. These three institutes—or for the less prospected, a few other ones in Seoul that, if one gains admission to, they would be known to have “*in Seoul*”-ed—are those of legends to the mediocre, middle-to-lower class students (noting the divine connotations of the word *sky* in the Korean language) but which, so graciously, opened their hands to anyone who has the merit, or rather a high-enough number on their *Suneung* report card. Gaining admissions into SKY would mean a lifetime of respect, shining job opportunities and a ticket into the lifestyle of the elites, the successful, into social mobility.

But does it indeed? A closer look into its public and private educational institutes, industries founded on academic reassurances to students and parents, and Seoul’s concentrated centers of expensive, private cram schools, viewed through the privilege of hindsight and extraneity, we can decouple the meritocratic façade offered by a well-intending yet anachronistic system, exploited by privileged parents, failing to provide equitable opportunities nor a merit-based roadmap for success—the myths which those less privileged within the system have no choice but to buy into.

It is not the aim of this paper to offer a clean, equitable solution nor to investigate the social labels of college prestige in professional success in Korea—the inequality of an education

system and the popularly accepted non-meritocratic job market is taken as-is. Rather, it is the goal of this investigation to reveal the reality of a mechanism that seemingly stimulates hard-work, mobility, and merit, but in reality, perpetuates false hope of success while imposing unnecessary stress onto every student undergoing the *Suneung* preparation, a myth of meritocracy that perpetuates socioeconomic class and the broken status quo.

#### *A Note Regarding the Scope of This Paper*

The widely accepted notion in Korea that the social label of a prestigious university contributes significantly to success is neither a core topic of this paper; rather, it is the fact that students accept it, and despite being aware of it choose to work inside the system—either due to lack of an alternative, or the inability to afford an alternative such as studying abroad; the belief trapped a system focussed on individual hard work and perceived fairness—that this paper aims to address. It is therefore important to note the common Korean perception that “the reason university entrance is such a big deal here, is because most big companies [...] choose people from the higher ranking universities—Seoul, Yonsei, and Korea Universities are usually the first choices. Better scores = better university = big company = more pay,” as a Quora answer suggests.<sup>1</sup>

#### *Meritocracy in Education Systems and the Role of Effort*

The notion of meritocracy in Korean education systems are sparingly studied in academia, and introductory analyses have vastly different frameworks in analyzing the system. Yunkyong Loh Garrison et. al. drew a perspective based on the concept of *Hakbeol* or the

“social construct that emphasizes social rankings based on one’s educational success,”<sup>2</sup> characterizing, among others, upward mobility, pressure, and expectations<sup>3</sup> as defining characteristics of the concept. This idea is pervasively used throughout the paper as the unspoken rules and axiomatized expectations placed on students in Korean society; they strive for excellence due to the pressures and expectations of upward mobility through educational success, which is socialized through cultural means.

On the other hand, a more traditional approach concerns the role of Confucianism deriving effort, as well as a social class’s direct impact on meritocracy. Kim Mee-Ran suggests that the “inheritance mechanism reproducing social class exists in the system of higher education,”<sup>4</sup> which is an assumption taken in this paper as education is treated as a socially reproducing institution. It must be noted that both papers take Korean society as viewed from the outside—the former from the U.S. and latter Japan—which is necessary for the socialized views to be isolated from the theoretical framework.

### *Socialized False Hope, Blinded by Effort*

A pervasive pressure exists in Korean education for students to motivate themselves, that effort is fair, and most importantly, to not turn to alternatives. Perpetuated both by the private education sector, the school, and the media, such a thought, in turn, leads to a society in which hard work is encouraged, yet unrewarded; decorated hopeful, yet only through a blindfold of exertion.

It is common for Korean students to have the study schedule of the following, shown by a Quora answer thread:<sup>5</sup>

Q. How do Koreans prepare for a college entrance exam?

[...]

A. Koreans spend 12 years of their schooling just to prepare for this day.

Here is a glimpse of their everyday routine.

8.00 - 12.00 p.m. School

1.00 - 1.30 p.m. Lunch

2.00 - 6.00 p.m. Ha[k]won (cram school)

6.15 p.m. Dinner

7.00 - 11.00 p.m. Do[seo]shil (a private school like place where you can do self study)

Note: Some cram school open till 2.00 a.m.

Special attention must drawn to the fact that this is an “everyday routine” for the students, as well as the emphasis on the private academies or *Hakwons*, which are “mostly after school, resulting in a harsh schedule for most students.” The most accepted purpose of students attending *Hakwons* is “because my parents say so,”<sup>6</sup> and the parent’s reason for making them attend is due to the idea that, as a columnist and an *elementary* schoolteacher from Joong-ang Daily suggests: “once you start send children to a *Hakwon*, and you repeat that type of education [...] you feel relaxed that your child won’t lose against competition, and that you are doing something for the child’s future.”<sup>7</sup> This type of pressure causes a parent to expose such a form of structured, formatted and effort-based education from a young age, while *Hakwons* market themselves as

the sole way to ensure the child's success. With 78.4% of middle- and high-school students in Korea attending *Hakwons* in some form<sup>8</sup>, they are indeed successful with their messaging, drawing in students with congratulatory banners of lists of renowned universities their students were accepted to, or money-back guarantees if you don't get accepted: "The 0-won *Megastudy Pass*, [...] a refund program with the condition of acceptance into specified universities. [...] refund is provided when you are selected as the final refund candidates."<sup>9</sup> These socialized ideologies form the mindset of the Korean student, trusting *Hakwons* as their educational foundation, to feel relaxed and safe in their hands that they will surely guarantee a great *Suneung* score, admission to a great university, and thus a great future. This also instills a false hope to those buying into such agendas; the confidence presented by these private companies, the numerous line-up of famous instructors and intense programs, appears to be able to turn any normal student into a SKY candidate.

On the other hand, an average Korean student "still values academic success, and many students are asked to continue to learn [...],"<sup>10</sup> while the means to achieve such success must be through hard work, possibly finding its roots on the heritage of "Confusion culture [which] stresses exertion and effort," a value found in many other Asian nations as well<sup>11</sup>. This type of effort-centric mindset is perpetuated primarily through the student's main and most conservative social institute—the *school*—where it materializes in mandatory self-study sessions after school, a system 80.5% of all high schools adopt, in which students must study in silence until 10 p.m. or later. This program is frequented as a topic for debate, which are shown to "cause excessive academic stress, lack of sleep and lead to depression," but still have not been in any form outlawed<sup>12</sup>. The commonly-given argument to oppose canceling such programs is, remarkably,

that “students will go to Hakwons anyways and will lead to inequality.”<sup>13</sup> Such direct and indirect messaging students receive regarding the extent of effort required limits the student’s perspective in acknowledging any alternative reasons for results; *I invest so much time and effort; therefore, effort must be the only reason for my success or demise*—a mindset exemplified in latter paragraphs. It is also important to note that such devotion crowds out any time for self-development and reflection in other areas—as the *Kyeongki-Do* Director of Education suggest: “[If we cancel this system] students may have a new understanding of what college means in their life, and some students might say, ‘I don’t need to go to college, I just want a job.’”<sup>14</sup> As of now it is not possible for students to explore alternative futures, as their studies are laser-focussed on college entrance; this renders the college admissions as the sole standard of success, students viewing it as their only determined future. This hopeful messaging may be helpful if success were based clearly on merit—as it seems to the students, with *Suneung* as the sole factor of success; though, the gates of SKY are narrower than it seems.

This pressure for hard work and unending effort intertwined with a message of hope is most iconically presented in the format students are most likely to access: Youtube. A Korean teacher, lecturer and Facebook influencer turned Youtuber with the channel name 공부의 신 (Gongbueu Shin) or *God of Study*, has over a million subscribers, with a description of “Everyone, we can do it! Regardless of how rich you are, where you’re from, I will be your mentor [...] and through my videos, I wish you would think: ‘I am not alone, I am precious, I can make it.’”<sup>15</sup> This, evidently, suggests the importance of merit-based hard work, and has the inherent issue of pushing responsibility of results to students. This burden, however, is revealed to be more tragic than at first glance; contrasted to the flashy click-bait-y motivation titles like:

“2-min of study motivational quotes by the GongShin[short for God of Study] Gang-seungte (honestly facts),”<sup>16</sup> the comments on these videos reveal the tragic environment in which these videos thrive:

“I have the exam tomorrow. I studied really hard. From 4 weeks ago I reduced sleep to four hours, I didn’t talk to friends during break and I studied. I’m back from *Hakwon* right now, but can I really do well tomorrow? [crying emoji] I studied really hard and if I do bad [...] I am afraid I may lose hope in myself.”<sup>17</sup>

The lack of sleep, the dwindling social interaction, and the intense pressure delivered through the words of the student, is richly endowed with societal pressures given to the student, one which creates a self-blaming cycle that necessitates them to, instead of turning their head to the surrounding pressures, internalize the pain and blame themselves, “afraid [they] may lose hope in [them]self.” This pressure—delivered through their socialization in school and the marketing messages of their *Hakwons*—normalizes pain and faults oneself. The video itself only reveals further evidence; the “motivational quote” is the commonly-said yet context-unaware adage: “if you can’t avoid it, enjoy it.” This especially exacerbates and also symbolizes the student’s focus on effort—instead of looking for alternative, efficient, and more reasonable route to success, it demands they face their fears—in this case, the *legitimate* fears—of the painful crusade for improved grades under the hopeful premise that success is solely based on hard work.

### *The Daechidong Mom Myth*

The remaining half of the issue is meritocracy; does the Korean education system, indeed, equitably reward those with merit? The presence of sizable private education industries

suggest otherwise; the inescapable reach of *Hakwons* and their unfair distribution of educational resources based on wealth, not merit, completes full picture of the perpetuated myth of meritocracy in the Korean education system.

The iconoclastic distillation of this privilege is the *Daechidong* Mom—a parent living in one of the richer streets of Gangnam—the richest district in Seoul—who, through her wealth and influence, presides over and assists her child’s each and every educational endeavors. The image of them hiring an array of private tutors, college consultants, and expensive, top classes in *Hakwons* are shown fictionally, yet in cutting accuracy in the show *Sky Castle*<sup>18</sup>—detailing a group of wealthy families coordinating efforts for their children’s education. This half-trusted myth is common in Korean society as books such as “*Main Street for Private Education: Daechidong mother’s admission strategies*,” are sold as legitimate college advisory books.<sup>19</sup> The issue of gendered familial roles aside, this myth has the issue of being humorous and fictional enough to pervade everybody’s minds, yet not harsh enough for those not privileged to see this as a cause of legitimate concern nor reconsider their meritocratic model.

With the above-mentioned over 80% of the population enrolled in private education, it may be a wonder how much difference wealth can provide in the quality of education: the answer in numerical terms, *very*. A 16.1-fold disparity in private education spending was found in a statistic from 2015, with a rising trend from 10.1-fold in 2013;<sup>20</sup> those who are able to invest as much as 300,000 Won (around \$300) per hour in admissions consulting are—to an anonymous parent from *Daechidong* interviewed in the same article who “moved twice to end up here, where the schools are good and there’s a lot of good *Hakwons*,”—not too much money, and “is relatively not much compared to how much our neighbors normally spend.”<sup>21</sup> This considerable

comfort in spending vast sums of money is not available to those who cannot afford such fees, and are led to find smaller, and possibly less effective means of private education.

There exists, evidently, little competition between the “high-cost” tutors and college consulting services against school-supported mandatory study sessions. This is further evidenced in an interview with a student in Seoul National University, who suggest: “regarding the differences in spending in private education, if you just look at the *Suneung* scores it’s inevitable that like, 100 students from Gangnam’s [redacted] high school go to SNU,”<sup>22</sup> revealing that the standardized test give a clear advantage to those who can afford to spend the money to study better. This is additionally exemplified in her response to the pin-pointed question of *whether there is a privilege to the wealthy*: “I feel like depending on the wealth of the family people receive completely different education. In actuality, in 12th grade my wealthier friends’s studies focused on expensive tutoring and *Hakwons* funded by their parents. But those who were not were forced to rely on school classes and self-study, and they were struggling much more.”<sup>23</sup> Such anecdotes of a student who has indeed been successful working within the system provide a contrast: the interviewer asking questions from the perspective of a clearly false meritocratic model, is responded to by the *privileged* one by a clear delineation of the inequitable role wealth has on college admission prospects. The collocation of these statistical and anecdotal evidence paint a picture in which a society that promotes wealth over merit in their self-designed and sacred test of *Suneung*.

A comparison with religion is not particularly unwarranted as many who cannot afford to increase their *chances* of success resort to *luck*, often in the form of religion. Leading up to the

D-day there are organized prayer sessions from churches with the flyer suggesting: “Let the test-takers rely on God until the end, and let them face the exam in the best conditions,”<sup>24</sup> and quoting the bible: “Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them.”<sup>25</sup> Buddhist parents, common in South Korea, also participate in the traditional 108 bows for a 100 days leading up to the exam, with news articles warning of arthritis shockingly common.<sup>26</sup> Effort, regardless of method, is a dominating value in any of its forms, and when it cannot be invested in the reasonable, shows itself in such religious ways. Such acts arise possibly from dedication and desperation, the impending doom or salvation which they believe to have little more control over when, in fact, others more wealthy may be participating in more effective pre-testing review sessions. Religion has, in many historical cases a justification for inequality in opportunity; in this case it is a mask for the myth of meritocracy, the firm yet dangerous belief that hard work, in any shape or form, will lead to success, that is instilled in such a parent or student that attend these gatherings, one church of which attracted 700 believers. The fact that only around 3000 students in the nation will be accepted into SKY must then, be to them, a meaningless statistic.<sup>27</sup>

### *Conclusion*

The two-fold analysis on the false hope instilled in students through the social institutions of school, media, and (the uniquely Korean) *Hakwons*, and how this meritocratic belief falls apart facing the myriad evidence supporting the importance of private education, holistically builds a picture of a system that actively promotes the myth that the sole determinant of a student’s success is through academic success, relying simply upon effort and merit—a

meritocratic myth, especially concerning as they are less examined due to most choosing or rather, as we now see, forced to “work within the system.” The impact of this revelation, while obvious when presented, must especially concentrated to the students who have lack an alternative viewpoint; that their education may be based on false premises, or that merit plays less of a role than they have been told. It is obvious that any solution requires a multifaceted approach—awareness from students and their parents, systematic reform putting less importance into a single standardized test, or better regulations in the private education industry—but any policy must stem from a clear understanding of the deformed status quo. It is the hope that this paper provided an insight, and more importantly provided readers the *empathy* towards the students in Korea educated within this system, the crucial ingredient in any motivation for societal reform.

## Endnotes

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