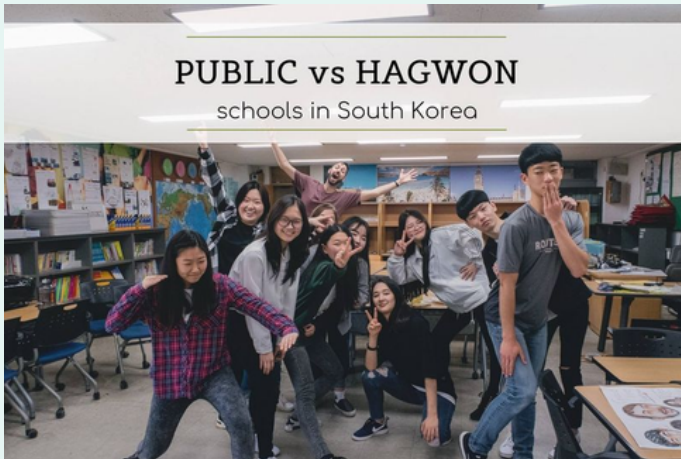


MESSICK'S KOREAN CULTURE LESSONS

Lesson #6

HAGWONS

JUNE 19, 2024



MESSICK'S KOREAN CULTURE LESSON #6: HAGWONS AND THE FOCUS ON EDUCATION

Written by Dr. Kyle Messick

Why is education so important in Korea? With the fall of Joseon and the commencement of Japanese occupation, the class structure that was in place was eradicated. Koreans suddenly all woke up as equals under Japanese government. At this point, it was seen that government jobs were the way to gain status, so there was an immense pressure for families to become educated so they could qualify for those jobs. Families would sell their farms to put their kids through school. Everyone had a chance to succeed, so they went all-in with education. Education was the only way to make it in the new world Koreans found themselves in, and it would bring honor to their families. Education was the key to escaping poverty. When Korea was liberated from Japan in 1945, seeing education as a great value needed for success continued. There were very few

college students, so when a student from a small village was accepted into college, then the whole village would celebrate, so education was a milestone for entire communities. When the Korean economy started to grow after the Japanese departed, there was a quick need for more skilled employees, so universities quickly grew. In the 1970s, these highly-educated students contributed greatly to Korea's economic development. As Korean industries grew in the 1980s, the number of Koreans entering colleges doubled and higher education became more accessible.

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2005), 97% of Koreans complete high school, which is the highest percentage of any country. As many as 80% of Koreans now enroll at a university (compared to 62% in the United States). The competition to get into top universities means that students have to differentiate themselves, so despite the long hours at public school, many Korean students also enroll in extracurricular activities or for tutoring. Korea has many private tutoring institutions called 'hagwon.' This is in addition to regular schooling. As of 2022, 78.3% of grade school students attend at least one hagwon and they spend an average of 7.2 hours there per week (Wells, 2023). Most begin attending at a hagwon at age five, with the earliest beginning at age 2.

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Billions is spent on these hagwons each year. The focus in Korea isn't on surpassing others, it is not falling behind others, so Korean parents will go to great lengths to get the money to pay for hagwon tutoring so that their children have a higher chance of getting into a strong university. This, in turn, would instill a drive in Korean students to work hard to make the sacrifices of their parents worthwhile. Korean students spend between 12 and 16 hours per day at public school and at a hagwon. Another lasting goal has been to make Korea more affluent, so many students would study abroad in America, Europe, Australia, and Japan. Studying abroad in more 'advanced' countries is a Korean practice going all the way back to the Shilla Dynasty (57 B.C. – 935 A.D.) and contributed to Korea's industrial development.

The strong sense of competition in Korean culture also influences universities. Universities are like cliques. Which university someone graduates from communicates status, so competition to get into top-ranking universities can be fierce, which further fuels the use of hagwons.

