

History of Korea - Part Thirteen

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The Korean people have a real passion for education. I heard many times Koreans say, we have only one natural resource and that is people. Educating people is a primary concern of all Koreans. The education system is built on rigorous studying and rote learning. From kindergarten to university the life of a Korean student is a hard row to hoe. The right kindergarten is an all important step for any parent to make. The curriculum is exacting and the successful completion leads to entrance into a top notch elementary school. There is no room for slouches in elementary school. Good study habits, when enforced, lead to lifelong habits. Real education begins in middle school and many parents with resources will move to a district with a famous or popular middle school. I once had a class of ladies who were all married to medical doctors. One day I led a discussion on 'my ambition.'

Eight out of ten had the ambition to move to Gangnam (South of the River) , a well to do district of Seoul. When I asked why, they all had almost identical answers. Gangnam has the best schools and academies. Ok, got it. From middle school intense competition among students, parents and teachers began. In order to keep up, kids were sent to hagwons (after school academies) sometimes till 11 o'clock at night. Math, science, art, and especially English were the most popular subjects. High school was much the same. This all led up to the day of days, the college entrance exam, 수능. A comprehensive examination was taken by all high school seniors. The results determine what university you can go to. And that, of course, will determine the success or failure, and happiness for the rest of your life. The pressure was immense. Every year on the day there was a news report on tv showing a harried student arriving late at a subway station and a police officer on a motorcycle picking up the student and motoring him off to the test site. The hagwon sector was very big. Academies were regularly opened and closed.

For a freelance English teacher it was a job bonanza. For 21 years I was besieged by requests to teach English. Early on I taught in hagwons, elementary schools, and community centers. In the beginning I sometimes worked with Korean co-teachers. They were typically English literature majors who couldn't speak three words of English. In most cases they were skilled at keeping order in a rowdy classroom of eight year olds. Along the way I learned a few tricks myself. At first I thought that Korean kids with their long history of filial piety and Confucianism in the family would be obedient and attentive in a classroom. Not so, even loud shouting and corporal punishment couldn't tame a lot of these kids. I was bigger than they were but sending them out the door in tears was not a good feeling and mothers always sided with the brats and easily moved the little monsters to another hagwon.

There were an overabundance of them and the Wonjang (hagwon boss) wasn't going to be happy about losing revenue. Finally I learned to view the kids in terms of how much their parents loved them. Classroom discipline and learning English became no longer important to me. The important thing was to have fun. If they learned any English it was a bonus. Some kids did learn English, some raised hell and we all left smiling at the end of the day. Later I learned that senior citizens were more satisfactory English learners. Eventually I developed a business based on private lessons. I visited students' homes, arranged times, and fees. It involved a lot more time and energy spent traveling around but I had the satisfaction of controlling my time and business.

One day I answered an ad on the internet and was introduced to TNKR (Teach North Korean Refugees) and thus began one of the most meaningful experiences I had in Korea. TNKR was an NGO started by an American affiliated with Harvard, Casey Lartigue and a Korean lady who had worked in a government agency, Lee Eunkoo. Casey was the frontman and Eunkoo did the administration. Their stated purpose was to assist refugees who had escaped from North Korea and had resettled in South Korea by tutoring them in English. The main program was to match volunteer native English speakers with North Korean learners. Then they would meet several times a week for tutoring.

I spent a lot of time and energy working on this program. It was very fulfilling because the learners were always grateful. Working with them I always had a sense that these were really substantial people of integrity. Mostly women, they were most often shy, diminutive, and gracious Korean ladies but upon hearing their stories I knew that at the risk of their lives they had crossed a river, survived in China, and successfully made their way to South Korea. TNKR in addition to tutoring sponsored talks by refugees and defectors telling what they did and how they lived in North Korea. At least twice a year they held an English language speech contest for the refugees. I was privileged to act as a speech coach many times. Together we created a speech and practiced delivering it.

I proudly became an advocate, teacher, and speech coach for these brave people. The stories I heard from refugees and defectors were pretty much the same. North Korea was an open air gulag filled with brutality and devoid of basic human freedoms. And then many starved to death or shot. More than a couple refugees stated that their most horrific memory was being called out by village officials to witness the public execution of a neighbor to discourage others from breaking the law. Defectors who had held positions in the government said never give any money to North Korea. Even so called humanitarian aid was siphoned off to give to the Kim regime and the military. Never relax the sanctions. The regime had almost gone bankrupt but was bailed out by humanitarian aid given by South Korea. The Sunshine policy of president Kim Dae jung sought to give aid to North Korea to improve the relationship.

The aid included fuel oil and rice. Now it is pretty clear that little of that aid ever reached the people but was diverted to the military and the Kim regime. Large scale investment projects like the tourist resort at Mt. Kumgang(they were running cruise ships and buses from South Korea to the resort in the North until a tourist wandered off the property and was shot dead by a North Korean soldier.) and the joint venture business park at Kaisan both ended in disaster due to bad behavior by North Korea. Nowadays the regime is earning hard currency from sending soldiers to fight in Ukraine and other deals with Russia.

Ever since 1945, the same ideological forces that built North Korea and put a bloody psychopath at its head have existed in South Korea. The dictators that everybody loves to hate have kept them at bay but slowly they have seeped into every level of South Korean society. Now they are entrenched in universities, labor unions, judicial, executive, and legislation levels of government. They are pro North Korea, pro CCP, and anti-American. They are pro unification, under the North Korean banner. North Korea has been sending agents to the south for decades to facilitate this. The reality is that the only way to unify the Korean peninsula is probably through regime change.

The Korean passion for education has contributed to an unforeseen result. Both boys and girls have the opportunity to go to school. Competition begins early first among proud parents and then it percolates up to the students. In the early days, boys and girls were mostly on a par. By middle school a demarcation almost always begins to appear. Boys are often more interested in sports and video games. Boys played soccer as much as possible but the key words were 'as much as possible', there were very limited organized or even pick up soccer matches and even fewer for other sports. On the other hand, video games were ubiquitous in every home and classroom on computers and hand phones. With an overabundance of opportunities to play, the chance of addiction follows.

Both boys and girls were adept at games but there seemed to be a difference. Girls from early on had a predilection for pleasing parents. This tendency transformed over to pleasing the teacher. Girls would work really hard to get good grades to please the teacher. Boys would calculate exactly how much effort was required to get the minimum grade not to fail. That's how much they put into it and the rest of their energy and time goes to video games. By the time they began keeping class rankings, girls were consistently number 1, 2, and 3. I had students, girls of course, who couldn't eat or sleep and just cried because they got only number 2 and missed number 1. This was the pattern through high school. By college hard work was no longer necessary for boys or girls, as the saying goes in America you play through high school and have to work hard in college.

On the contrary in Korea you have to work hard in high school but then can play through college. Once you enter a university in Korea you are almost guaranteed to graduate. The boys' natural ability allowed them to catch up a little in college. In the job market girls had a distinct advantage. Based on their academic performance they were often head and shoulders above the boys. In addition, they were viewed as more desirable corporate employees than boys, more obedient that is. Girls were told that they could be anything they wanted to be. It was only prudent to delay romance, love, and marriage. Being a career

woman was emphasized. It was a good life. She had a good job, enough of her own money for clothes, makeup, accessories, and a sense of self-sufficiency. Boys had lots of free time to play videogames. In the Confucian dominated world of her parents, women had obligations. She was expected, no, required to get married. Once married she fell under the domain of her mother-in-law, her husband's family, and last but not least, her husband. Almost every married woman I have spoken to dreaded the Korean holidays, Chuseok in the fall and Lunar New Year in the winter.

Women's duty during these times was overburdening. Shopping, food preparation, cleaning, and serving for three days straight was exhausting. In addition there were family holidays like memorial days that added more duties. It was the same for all women and God forbid if you marry the first son of the family. Duty consumes one's life. These prospects cause women to reject, or at least delay marriage. A portion of the young men are under employed, under motivated, and under achieving. Although they may be approaching becoming world class gamers by this time, they are not considered marriage material by most women. Young people refer to Korea as Jeoson hell. As a result the birth rate is currently the lowest in the world. It is a severe demographic catastrophe. The South Korean government has repeatedly tried to solve this problem. They often try giving cash bonuses to couples to have babies or awards to couples that have a lot of children. Neither has worked so far.

Adding up all the educational costs and the normal cost of living, people can see that raising a child is prohibitively expensive. The introduction of women from poor countries in SouthEast Asia is thought to be a solution. Korea is a homogeneous society and immigrants are not readily accepted into families or society. 다문화 means all cultures, and is translated into English as multiculturalism. There is a movement afoot to support multicultural families and break down prejudices inherent in society. But changes in attitudes, especially prejudices, are slow to manifest. In my view the solution is in the realm of religion. Only a religion can create and promote a culture of marriage and family beyond all practical difficulties.

June the 28th is my birthday and I'm asking everyone if possible to make a donation to an organization that is helping refugees from North Korea. donate.lovefsi.com/fundraisers/Teaching-North-Korean-Refugees



Teaching North Korean Refugees (Michael)

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About This Fundraiser

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