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# A Historical Analysis on the Landscape of Korean Education

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한국 교육의 지형에 대한 역사적 분석

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## Abstract

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International Track

This paper will examine the volatility of the modern Korean education system based on Korean Confucianist culture and contemporary history. It examines the cultural emphasis on education, which originated from a perpetual history of civil service examination and Confucian culture, bureaucratic shifts during the Japanese colonial period, the Korean War and its aftermath, rapid industrialization and modernization under dictatorship, student protests, democratization and market liberalization, the IMF crisis, and finally, the contemporary social climate. It assesses the impact of state-led policies on social inequality and the spread of private education. Through this, it illuminates the structural problems of Korean education and its historical legacy that persists to the present day. In particular, it critically examines government policies, examining the gap between policy intentions and actual outcomes.

**Keywords: Korean War, Industrialization, Dictatorship, Private Education, Social Inequality, Education Policy**

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## Introduction

In 1953, immediately after the armistice of the Korean War, education became the method for rapid recovery. Policies framed education as a base for economic development<sup>1</sup>, and the Korean government made efforts to eradicate illiteracy. Consequently, Korea experienced the Miracle of the Han River. Today, South Korea has one of the highest literacy rates in the world at 99 percent<sup>2</sup>, and consistently scores high in standardized tests. Previous scholarship emphasizes the positive aspects of Korea's education system, particularly how a war-torn, poverty-stricken country could have become an education powerhouse,<sup>3</sup> and while economic historians highlight the role of education in South Korea's rapid growth, often crediting education with driving Korea's 'developmental state' model, scholars often overlook structural consequences of a system that achieves excellence through extreme competition. While the Korean education system excels in terms of raw grades, its hypercompetitive and test-centric means of evaluation is unsustainable. Korea has the highest teenage suicide rates among OECD countries,<sup>4</sup> and societal norms place a heavy emphasis on private tutoring known as "hagwon". For example, a household with four or more family members including at least two children spends more on

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<sup>1</sup>Ministry of Education. *Education, the Driving Force for the Development of Korea: Land of the Morning Calm Develops into a Prominent Player in the Global Economy*. Korean Education Centre UK, 2015, [https://www.koreaneducentreinuk.org/wp-content/uploads/downloads/Education\\_the-driving-force-for-the-development-of-Korea.pdf](https://www.koreaneducentreinuk.org/wp-content/uploads/downloads/Education_the-driving-force-for-the-development-of-Korea.pdf)

<sup>2</sup>World Bank. "Literacy Rate, Adult Total (% of People Ages 15 and Above) - Korea, Rep." *World Bank Open Data*, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.ADT.LITR.ZS?end=2018&locations=KR&start=2018&view=bar>

<sup>3</sup>Clark W. Sorensen. "Success and Education in South Korea." *Comparative Education Review*, vol. 38, no. 1, 1994, pp. 10–35. <https://doi.org/10.1086/447223>

<sup>4</sup>Statistics Research Institute. "Korea Has the Highest Suicide Rate among OECD Countries." *Statistics Research Institute* (통계개발원), Statistics Korea, [https://sri.kostat.go.kr/board.es?mid=b10104000000&bid=12046&act=view&list\\_no=432657](https://sri.kostat.go.kr/board.es?mid=b10104000000&bid=12046&act=view&list_no=432657)

private education than groceries and housing<sup>5</sup>, and households widely report that having to pay for hagwons and private tutoring is a considerable financial burden for their family. Thus, the education system in its current form may cause mental health strain and reinforce social inequalities.

This paper argues that Korea's education system was not inevitable but historically contingent, emerging from war trauma, the influence of the Cold War and geopolitics, and authoritarian regimes that used education as a tool of state-building by developing human capital.

Furthermore, this paper contends that the very policies credited with South Korea's educational success also entrenched the hypercompetitive structures that are responsible for mental health problems and persistent inequality. In order to understand how and why such a hypercompetitive education environment occurred, this paper will first provide a background on the legacies of Confucianism in Korean culture and Japanese colonial bureaucracy. Then, it will analyze the aftermath of the Korean War and its effects on South Korean education. Finally, it will assess the authoritarian regimes of Park Chung Hee and Chun Du Hwan.

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<sup>5</sup>Kim, Min-jung. "South Korea's Education Fever Fuels Private Tutoring Boom." *The Chosun Daily*, 2 Oct. 2024, <https://www.chosun.com/english/national-en/2024/10/02/AHPTCZL54NELFEHXJFZXWUI7YQ/>

## **Background: Confucianist Influences in Education**

### **a. Goryeo**

Before 1984 with the Gabo Reforms, much of education was for the purpose of the civil service exam (Gwageo). First, in Korea, the primary education facility was Gukjagam, the highest institution of learning.<sup>6</sup> Education was centered around Confucianist principles, with the curriculum including works like Hyogyong (Classic of Filial Piety) and Sangse (Book of Documents).<sup>7</sup> There were also provincial education institutions called Hyanggyo, modeled after the Tang dynasty system, as well as Hakdangs, government-run schools established to promote Confucian learning, and Sibi-dos/Seodangs, elementary-level schools which later directly influenced the Joseon dynasty's seodang system.<sup>8</sup> Thus, in Goryeo, education was mostly state-driven and focused on Confucianist principles, which focused on the moral legitimacy of hierarchy.<sup>9</sup>

### **b. Joseon and Gwageo**

The situation was similar in Joseon with the Gwageo, a civil service exam, being the focal point of education. The civil service examination system of the Joseon Dynasty presented society not with an abstract ideal buried in the Confucian classics, but with a tangible and attainable model of success. Because the system maintained a degree of openness, it allowed individuals from various backgrounds to aspire to become admired figures and social role models. In this sense,

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<sup>6</sup> *Goryeosa*, Vol. 74, Section on Selection & Schools (高麗史 卷七十四 選舉二學校)

<sup>7</sup> Moon, Cheol-young. "1930 Nyeondae Minjokjuui Sahak-ui Ilyangsang" ["An Aspect of Nationalist Historiography in the 1930s"]. *Guksagwan Nonchong* [국사관논총], vol. 9, National Institute of Korean History, 1989.

<sup>8</sup> Kim, Ho-il. *Hanguk-ui Hyanggyo* [한국의 향교]. Daewonsa, 2000.

<sup>9</sup> *Gyeongguk Daejeon* [경국대전]. Dongbang Media Co., KoreaA2Z Digital Contents Library, <https://www.koreaa2z.com/viewer.php?seq=55>

the examination system served as a powerful driving force that sustained Joseon society as a Confucian educational state.<sup>10</sup> The examination system helped institutionalize educational aspiration throughout society, reinforcing the central role of learning and scholarly achievement in social advancement and going beyond just the selection of officials.<sup>11</sup>

The civil service examination system also had significant negative consequences for education. Rather than striving for knowledge itself, many scholars came to prioritize passing the state examinations as a means of achieving personal success and social advancement. As a result, everyday moral practice and the cultivation of human relationships were often neglected. In this process, the purpose of learning gradually shifted: scholarship was no longer pursued primarily for the benefit of society or for personal moral development, but increasingly became a tool for succeeding in the examinations; education became the means rather than the end.<sup>12</sup> The emphasis on examination success fostered a culture in which people were willing to use any means necessary to achieve their goals. By the late Joseon period, it became increasingly common for wealth and political influence to be used to buy and sell the prestige associated with examination success. Consequently, corruption, favoritism, and unfairness in the recruitment of government officials became widespread, undermining the integrity of the system and weakening its original meritocratic ideals. Also, although commoners were technically eligible to sit for the examinations<sup>13</sup>, the financial costs and educational requirements involved in years of preparation

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<sup>10</sup> Jeong, Se-hwa, and Eun-song Lee. *Gojeoneul Yeoneun Hanguk Gyoyuksa* [고전을 여는 한국교육사]. Yangseowon, 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Kim, Gyeong-yong. *Gwageo Jedowa Hanguk Geundaegyoyuk-ui Jaeinsik* [과거 제도와 한국 근대교육의 재인식]. Gyoyukgwahaksa, 2005.

<sup>12</sup> Jo, Jang-hun. *Daechidong: Hakbeoljuui-wa Budongsan Sinhwa-ga Mannaneun Got* [대치동: 학벌주의와 부동산 신화가 만나는 곳]. Sagyejeol, 2021.

<sup>13</sup> “Hyanggyo” [향교]. *Encyclopedia of Korean Culture* (한국민족문화대백과사전), The Academy of Korean Studies, <https://encykorea.aks.ac.kr/Article/E0050078>. Accessed 19 June 2026.

made success difficult for most of them. As a result, the system functioned in practice as a mechanism for continuously reproducing the yangban elite and preserving the existing social hierarchy.



## Japanese Colonial Bureaucratization of Schooling (1910–1945)

While colonial rule did not introduce Korean credentialism<sup>14</sup>, it bureaucratized and rationed it, converting an already status-conscious examination culture into an instrument of ethnic stratification, and in doing so intensifying rather than dissolving the competitive pressures that would resurface, transformed, under the developmental state. It changed the mechanism for the credentialist culture from a more relatively open Confucian moral examination to a rationed and ethically-stratified bureaucratic gatekeeping system.<sup>15</sup> There were a total of four Joseon Education Ordinances in 1911, 1922, 1938, and 1943, and each marked a distinct phase, but to establish a background, the 1908 Decree concerning private schools gave the colonial government regulatory authority over the fundamentals of a school including its founding purpose, headteachers, teachers, and textbooks at every private school. Critically, it banned teaching geography and history, linked to nationalism, and the Bible, targeting missionary-run school networks. This led to the collapse of such schools, from 1,973 in 1910 to 690 in 1919, a 65% decline over nine years. This shows suppression as a process of attrition through licensing, not a single decree shutting schools down: bureaucratic strangulation rather than overt closure had a bigger impact on Korean education than could be seen.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> "Korea's 'education fever' from the late nineteenth to the early twenty-first century," *Paedagogica Historica* (2022), tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0046760X.2022.2098391.

<sup>15</sup> Lee, J-K. (2002, March 7). Japanese higher education policy in Korea during the colonial period (1910-1945). Education Policy Analysis Archives, 10(14). Retrieved from <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v10n14.html/>.

<sup>16</sup> Glavin, Chris. "Japanese Rule (1910–1945)." *K12 Academics*, 7 Feb. 2017, [www.k12academics.com/Education%20Worldwide/Education%20in%20South%20Korea/History/History%20of%20Education%20in%20Korea/japanese-rule-191](http://www.k12academics.com/Education%20Worldwide/Education%20in%20South%20Korea/History/History%20of%20Education%20in%20Korea/japanese-rule-191).

### **a. The 1911 Ordinance**

The 1911 Ordinance came with the purpose of cultivating “loyal imperial subjects” and low-level workers. This ordinance used ideological conditioning, and education, instead of for the purpose of fostering critical thinking or national consciousness, mainly taught obedience to the Japanese emperor and state. Job training education was also similar—education was focused on practical training suited to filling subordinate roles in the colonial economy such as clerks, laborers, and low-skill technicians. The Japanese language was also used as a core assimilation tool, and the Japanese government attempted to end the Korean linguistic and cultural identity over time, attempting to make “Japaneseness” the norm Koreans had to assimilate into and laying the groundwork for deeper assimilation policies.<sup>17</sup> This ordinance also aimed to demote missionary colleges who were notably outside of direct Japanese state control and worked to revoke their authority to grant degrees and to downgrade them to a lesser status, closer to an unaccredited school, to eliminate an independent, non-Japanese-controlled channel for Korean higher education and reinforced that all legitimate education had to run through the colonial state.<sup>18</sup>

### **b. The 1922 Ordinance**

Following the 1919 March 1st Movement was the 1922 Ordinance, which acted more as a “cultural rule” concession with separate Japanese/Korean tracks. The 1919 March 1st Movement was a nationwide uprising that shocked Japan into realizing that the harsh, “military rule” (budan

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<sup>17</sup> Suh, Jiwon. "Japan's Education Policies in Korea in the 1910s: 'Thankful and Obedient.'" *Journal of Korean Studies*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2020, pp. 115–45. *Duke University Press*, doi.org/10.1215/21581665-8047512.

<sup>18</sup> United States Army Military Government in Korea. *History of the United States Army Military Government in Korea*. Korean History Database, db.history.go.kr/contemp/level.do?levelId=husa\_004\_0020\_0030&types=o. Accessed 21 June 2026.

seiji) approach was unsustainable and was fueling resistance instead.<sup>19</sup> In response, Japan shifted to a “cultural rule” (bunka seiji), a softer and more image-conscious style of colonial governance. The 1922 ordinance was part of this. While this ordinance formally separated school tracks for Japanese settlers and Koreans, it also loosened the rule so that Koreans could now attend “normal schools” like teacher-training schools.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, as a response to Korean intellectuals’ request to establish a Korean-run national university, the colonial government preempted it by founding Keijō Imperial University in Seoul as a state-run, Japanese-administered institution.<sup>21</sup> This absorbed the momentum and demand for a Korean university<sup>22</sup> but kept it firmly under state control, rather than letting Koreans build and run their own.<sup>23</sup>

### **c. The 1938 Ordinance**

The third phase of colonial education policy was the 1938 Education Ordinance. In 1939, Japan was deep into its preparations for the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937), and colonial policy pivoted from one to “manage and pacify” into one for a full wartime mobilization”, and accordingly, this era was called “Japan and Korea as one body” (naisen ittai), the most aggressive assimilation push of the entire colonial period. To achieve this, first, Korean was

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<sup>19</sup> “The Lingering Shadows of Japanese Words in Korean Identity.” *The Argus*, 5 Dec. 2025, [www.theargus.org/news/articleView.html?idxno=3160](http://www.theargus.org/news/articleView.html?idxno=3160).

<sup>20</sup> Government-General of Chōsen, Educational Bureau. *Revised Educational Regulations for Chosen*. Keijō, 9 Feb. 1922. Quoted in United States Army Military Government in Korea, *History of the United States Army Military Government in Korea*, Korean History Database, [db.history.go.kr/contemp/level.do?levelId=husa\\_004\\_0020\\_0030&types=o](http://db.history.go.kr/contemp/level.do?levelId=husa_004_0020_0030&types=o). Accessed 21 June 2026.

<sup>21</sup> Cha, Eun-Jeong. “The Imaginary Reconstruction of Keijō Imperial University.” *Korean Anthropology Review*, vol. 7, Feb. 2023, pp. 145–70. *Seoul National University Open Repository*, [s-space.snu.ac.kr/bitstream/10371/189926/1/Cha%20Eun-Jeong\\_2023\\_KAR.pdf](http://s-space.snu.ac.kr/bitstream/10371/189926/1/Cha%20Eun-Jeong_2023_KAR.pdf).

<sup>22</sup> Lee, Chong-Jae, et al. “Higher Education in Korea: An Historical and Institutional Analysis.” *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, vol. 10, no. 14, 7 Mar. 2002, [epaa.asu.edu/index.php/epaa/article/download/293/419](http://epaa.asu.edu/index.php/epaa/article/download/293/419).

<sup>23</sup> Park, Yunjae. “Training Medical Researchers in Korea during the Japanese Colonial Period (1910–1945).” *History of Universities, Volume XXXIV/1: A Global History of Research Education*, edited by Vassiliki Theodorou et al., Oxford UP, 2021, [academic.oup.com/book/39837/chapter/339982647](http://academic.oup.com/book/39837/chapter/339982647).

downgraded to an optional elective.<sup>24</sup> In practice, removing mandatory learning where Japanese was already the dominant language of instruction and advancement in terms of state favor meant it was functionally eliminated, as choosing it actively disadvantaged students. Second was the National Mobilization Law that conscripted students for labor. School time was redirected into labor service including agricultural and factory work to support the military's endeavors overseas, and education no longer had the luxury to even be nominally about training subjects or controlling access and became a pipeline directly into the war economy.<sup>25</sup>

#### **d. The 1943 Ordinance**

The fourth and final phase of colonial education policy was the 1943 Educational Ordinance. At this point, Japan was in the late stage of the Pacific War, and education policy collapsed into wartime extraction. Not only was the Korean language eliminated entirely from middle schools, completing the *naisen ittai* assimilation logic, but 250,000+ Koreans were conscripted by 1945, escalating from just redirecting school time into labor. Consequently, according to the 1944 Japanese census, 86.2% of the population were never schooled, with only 1% reaching secondary school and above. In terms of gender, 95% of Korean women never attended school at all, against an already-low baseline for men.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Caprio, Mark E. *Japanese Assimilation Policies in Colonial Korea, 1910–1945*. University of Washington Press, 2009.

<sup>25</sup> Robinson, Michael E. *Korea's Twentieth-Century Odyssey: A Short History*. University of Hawai'i Press, 2007.

<sup>26</sup> Oh, Seung-Cheol, and Ki-Seok Kim. "The Increase of Educational Opportunity in Korea under the Japanese Occupation: For Whom the Bell Told?" *The SNU Journal of Education Research*, 1997, [s-space.snu.ac.kr/bitstream/10371/72664/1/05.pdf](http://s-space.snu.ac.kr/bitstream/10371/72664/1/05.pdf).

### **e. An Examination of Empirical Data**

Statistics from this period of time reflect this. First, according to the data compiled by Grajdanzev, approximately 0.0093 per 1,000 Koreans went to college, while 1.06 per 1,000 Japanese residents in Korea did, a 11400% difference. What makes this so stark is that the number is a population-wide rate produced by a system that funneled resources and opportunities to the comparatively small population transplanted for colonization. In the pre-colonial world, Joseon-era status was tightly bound to passing the civil service exam, a meritocratic ladder tied to Confucian learning. In one study, areas that had more gwageo passers under the Joseon dynasty were later found to be the same areas with more Korean teachers and private schools functioning as alternatives to the colonial public school system. This means that the pre-colonial infrastructure of local prestige and communities organized around scholarly credentialing didn't disappear when the dynasty fell.<sup>27</sup> Through colonization, the ladder changed to a state-licensed, ethnically-rationed system with fixed school slots and government control over curriculum and accreditation, leading to such a structural ceiling shown by the difference in second education pursuit. Consequently, this made credentials scarcer and more contested than before. Therefore, the rationing of the cultural reflex that education is status sharpened the competitive intensity around it: Keijō University's pyramid structure became the template for Seoul National University's position at the top of the modern university hierarchy of Korea, and the competitive intensity that colonial rationing produced is the same intensity that resurfaces, supercharged, under Park Chung Hee's developmental state.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Hong, Ji Yeon, and Christopher Paik. "Colonization and Education: Exploring the Legacy of Local Elites in Korea." *Economic History Review*, vol. 71, no. 3, 2018, pp. 938–964.

<sup>28</sup> Neuhaus, Carolin. "Beyond Assimilation and National Resistance: 'Education Fever' during the Colonial Period in Korea, 1910–1945." *History of Education*, vol. 52, no. 4, 2023, pp. 533–554.

## **War, Rupture, and Emergency Expansion (1945–1959)**

Liberation in 1945 officially unraveled the colonial apparatus of ethnic gatekeeping, including the separation of Japanese settlers from Koreans, the fixed quotas, and the licensing regime throttling missionary and Korean-run schools, but the underlying idea that schooling was scarce and related to status, and therefore worth disproportionate sacrifice to obtain, did not change.

Liberation only removed the justification for that scarcity, not the scarcity itself, and the Korean War only made the shortage worse, destroying schools and displacing teachers and students at the exact moment the new state needed mass education to prove its legitimacy as a sovereign nation. Competition over education found a new alibi in the urgency of national reconstruction. It is also worth noting that in 1945, fewer than 20 percent of Koreans had ever attended any school, and the national literacy rate was around 22 percent.

### **a. Liberation and the Collapse of the Colonial Apparatus**

When Japan surrendered in August, 1945, Korea south of the 38th parallel came under USAMGIK administration until the foundation of Republic of Korea in August 1948. By its own admission and by most historians' assessments, USAMGIK was improvising: it had little Korean expertise, with almost no Korean-speaking staff and arrived with the occupation doctrine built more for postwar Japan than for a decolonizing country.<sup>29</sup> Consequently, USAMGIK did not have the time or an alternate cadre of administrators ready for a dismantling of the Japanese colonial education systems. The buildings, registries, and institutional hierarchy used were therefore the ones that existed. The same bureaucratic personnel of Korean teachers and

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<sup>29</sup> "An Unpromising Recovery: South Korea's Post-Korean War Economic Development: 1953-1961." *Education About Asia*, Association for Asian Studies, 16 June 2023, [www.asianstudies.org/publications/ea/archives/an-unpromising-recovery-south-koreas-post-korean-war-economic-development-1953-1961/](http://www.asianstudies.org/publications/ea/archives/an-unpromising-recovery-south-koreas-post-korean-war-economic-development-1953-1961/).

administrators trained and credentialed under the colonial system remained, and the curriculum, including the exam-gated transitions between school levels and the colonial-era management tools for rationing education to a colonized population remained.<sup>30</sup> USAMGIK and Korean educators, however, worked to change the symbolic and linguistic content quickly:

Japanese-language instruction was abolished essentially overnight, and Korean (Hangul) was reinstated as the medium of instruction, with Colonial-era textbooks being hastily revised and Korean-authored materials produced under a significant time pressure.<sup>31</sup> Liberation also triggered a surge in demand for Korean-language schooling that the existing infrastructure couldn't absorb: adult literacy programs, accelerated primary enrollment, and a national sentiment of education as a national right increased, while the supply of trained teachers, textbooks, and space was constrained. An improvisation of single-teacher, single-classroom arrangement resulted, often combining multiple grades and with cramped classrooms. Therefore, while the ethnic axis of exclusion was gone after 1945, the underlying scarcity remained, and the rationing mechanisms like centralized control and exams remained. This meant that the system needed another variable to sort by, and class background, urban/rural location, and the ability to pay, or the access to information largely determined a student's access to education.

### **b. The 1949 Education Act and the Promise of Mass Schooling**

In 1949, The Education Act came into force under the newly founded First Republic. It formalized the single-track 6-3-3-4 ladder system invented by the Council for Korean Education under USAMGIK rather than by the Rhee Government. On compulsory education specifically,

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<sup>30</sup> United States Army Military Government in Korea. "Ordinance No. 6." *Selected Ordinances of the Military Government*.

<sup>31</sup> Yoon, Jong Mun. "The Policy and Characteristics of Sending Korean Students to the United States during the Early U.S. Military Government Period." *Studies in Modern Korean History*, no. 63, 2012, pp. 178-210. Korean Citation Index (KCI)

the underlying constitutional commitment predates the Act itself; the 1948 Constitution already stated that elementary education is compulsory and free of charge, and that all citizens have the right to receive education equally according to ability.<sup>32</sup> The 1949 Act then operationalized this, and compulsory education formally began on June 1, 1950, just weeks before the Korean War broke out. The Act also carried explicit ideological content, adopting the motto Hong'ik in'gan ("to benefit humanity"), attributed to Korea's founder according to legend, Tan'gun.<sup>33</sup> This shows that the state anchored the purpose of education in a continuous national identity stretching before, through, and after the colonial interruption.

At this stage, Korea was among the poorest in the world at the time, with GDP per capita estimated at only \$50 to \$60. Between 70 and 80 percent of the population worked in agriculture, and infrastructure was severely constrained, with electricity self-sufficiency at only 8 percent, since most power plants built during the colonial era were concentrated in the North, a now separate and hostile state.<sup>34</sup> This resulted in retrenchment almost immediately. USAMGIK-era ambitions had floated compulsory education up to the ninth grade and co-education at all levels, but the Rhee government reversed many of these reforms after 1948; only primary schools remained generally coeducational, and because of a lack of resources, compulsory education was scaled back to the sixth grade only. Despite that, the mandate did drive real changes: the compulsory-education requirement led to widespread school construction, and by the end of the

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<sup>32</sup> "Primary Education." *Ministry of Education*, Republic of Korea, [english.moe.go.kr/sub/infoRenewal.do?m=0303&page=0303&s=english](http://english.moe.go.kr/sub/infoRenewal.do?m=0303&page=0303&s=english).

<sup>33</sup> Savada, Andrea Matles, and William Shaw, editors. *South Korea: A Country Study*. Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1990.

<sup>34</sup> "When Mandatory Education Began in South Korea." *Korea JoongAng Daily*, [exact publication date needed — appears to be within the last few weeks of search indexing; verify before submitting], [www.koreajoongangdaily.com/opinion/when-mandatory-education-began-in-south-korea/12528656](http://www.koreajoongangdaily.com/opinion/when-mandatory-education-began-in-south-korea/12528656).



First Republic, primary-school enrollment had topped 95 percent, albeit under severe resource constraints.<sup>35</sup> While universal education eliminated disparities between classes at that level, competition became very fierce due to restricted entry into higher academic tiers, which contributed to the "education fever" still prevalent in South Korea today.

### **c. The Korean War as Infrastructural Rupture**

The heavy damage of the war furthered Korea's struggles for a stable education environment. Studies report around 40 percent to more than half of school buildings in South Korea were destroyed during the war, with school closures nationwide.<sup>36</sup> Teachers and students were displaced into improvised settings almost immediately; by 1953, classes were being held everywhere space could be found, including abandoned factories and tents, and because of a severe teacher shortage, class sizes ballooned to as many as 100 students, running in two or even three shifts in a day. In some places, teachers were even forced to meet their classes outdoors without textbooks or writing paper.<sup>37</sup> Despite this, Korea's education didn't falter: by spring 1951, while the war was still ongoing, around 60 percent of schools had reopened, and two-thirds of the country's children were back in class while communities worked together to raise funds and rebuild.<sup>38</sup> Despite the destruction of buildings due to the war, between 1945 and 1960,

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<sup>35</sup> "Investing in Foundational Skills First: A Case from South Korea." *RISE Programme*, [riseprogramme.org/sites/default/files/2023-01/Investing\\_Foundational\\_Skills\\_First\\_South%20Korea.pdf](https://riseprogramme.org/sites/default/files/2023-01/Investing_Foundational_Skills_First_South%20Korea.pdf).

<sup>36</sup> Lee et al. "The Rise of Korean Education from the Ashes of the Korean War." *ResearchGate*, 6 Sept. 2012, [www.researchgate.net/publication/257641219\\_The\\_rise\\_of\\_Korean\\_education\\_from\\_the\\_ashes\\_of\\_the\\_Korean\\_War](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/257641219_The_rise_of_Korean_education_from_the_ashes_of_the_Korean_War).

<sup>37</sup> Kyung Sik Ahn. "A Study of Refugee Schools in Wartime Capital Busan During the Korean War: Focusing on Secondary Schools". *Korea Citation Index*, [www.kci.go.kr/kciportal/landing/article.kci?arti\\_id=ART001404558](http://www.kci.go.kr/kciportal/landing/article.kci?arti_id=ART001404558).

<sup>38</sup> Woody Paik. "Opinion: What the U.S. Can Learn About Education During Crisis from South Korea's Wartime Example." *The Hechinger Report*, 11 June 2020, [hechingerreport.org/opinion-what-the-u-s-can-learn-about-education-during-crisis-from-south-koreas-wartime-example/](https://hechingerreport.org/opinion-what-the-u-s-can-learn-about-education-during-crisis-from-south-koreas-wartime-example/).

primary enrollment grew threefold, secondary schooling eightfold, and higher education tenfold. Moreover, the demand pressure became so acute that it forced a major policy response right at the close of the war: in 1953, comprehensive entrance exams were instituted for middle and high school, an effort to balance demand for higher education against limited secondary provision and the state's desire to regulate the supply of advanced-degree holders.<sup>39</sup> The primary school enrollment rate jumped from 54 to 96 percent from 1945 to 1959 through a government-run “Six-Year Plan to Complete Mandatory Education”, and this meant that this expansion was bottom-heavy, as it was deliberately done in a sequential and low-cost strategy.<sup>40</sup> Only during ‘60s and ‘70s was access to secondary education possible, when the state had to implement an explicit “equalization policy” to reduce competition for entrance to prestigious middle and high schools. There were also socioeconomic barriers to entry in middle school: middle school was not compulsory at this time and it was costly for a family member to not work. At this period of time, despite the massive increase in the enrollment rate of primary schools, less than 2 percent of the population had ever been enrolled in higher education.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Klaus Dittrich, et al. "Korea's 'Education Fever' from the Late Nineteenth to the Twenty-First Century." *Comparative Education*, Taylor & Francis, 2022, [www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0046760X.2022.2098391](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0046760X.2022.2098391).

<sup>40</sup> "Investments in Education." *K-Developedia*, KDI School of Public Policy and Management, [www.kdevelopedia.org/Development-Overview/all/investments-education--201412120000423.do](http://www.kdevelopedia.org/Development-Overview/all/investments-education--201412120000423.do).

<sup>41</sup> "History of Korea as a Foreign Aid Recipient." *Google Arts & Culture*, Korea International Cooperation Agency, [artsandculture.google.com/story/history-of-korea-as-a-foreign-aid-recipient-korea-international-cooperation-agency/KAWBKWNerP\\_GKA](https://artsandculture.google.com/story/history-of-korea-as-a-foreign-aid-recipient-korea-international-cooperation-agency/KAWBKWNerP_GKA).

## **Developmental Dictatorship and Human Capital Engineering (1960s–1980s)**

By 1959, the structure inherited by colonial and wartime Korea had shaped into a pyramid with near-universal primary enrollment sitting atop a steep, narrowing pyramid, with a competitive entrance examination already institutionalized in 1953 as the gatekeeping mechanism for secondary and tertiary access. The developmental state that Park Chung Hee established following his 1961 coup directly inherited this architecture. What Park's regime did was subordinate it entirely to the logic of national economic planning as instruments of labor allocation instead of keeping schools the sites of citizen-building in the alibi of the Rhee era. In doing so, it supercharged the competitive pressure accumulated since the colonial period; each intervention designed to rationalize or equalize the system instead displaced competition upward, until the college entrance examination became the singular, totalizing pressure point it remains today. The collapse of authoritarian guarantees after democratization in 1987, and the economic trauma of the 1997 IMF crisis, then completed the transformation. What the state had administered as a public system of human capital production was progressively reframed as a private investment families were responsible for making on their own at whatever cost the market demanded.

### **a. Education Under Authoritarian Modernization**

Quite notably, Park Chung Hee arrived at education through economics: immediately after seizing power in the 1961 coup, his regime redirected an already-functioning apparatus towards new ends. In 1961, South Korea already had near-universal primary enrollment, with 96% by 1959, but secondary and tertiary education access remained bottlenecked. Moreover, a centralized Ministry of Education was already established and had institutionalized a competitive entrance exam as the gatekeeping mechanism for secondary and tertiary education, a pyramid that the Rhee era built but could not fund adequately.<sup>42</sup> With this system, Park simply shifted the alibi from the citizen-building focus of Rhee's nationalist regime rooted in the 1949 Education Act's Hong'ik in'gan framing to human capital production rooted in the Five-Year Plans, Park's

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<sup>42</sup> Lee, Eun-Jeung. "The 1960s in South Korea: Modernisation, Nationalism and the Pursuit of Democratisation." *International Quarterly for Asian Studies*, vol. 52, nos. 3-4, 2021, pp. 187-205. <https://doi.org/10.11588/iqas.2021.3-4.16181>

developmental idiom. He attempted this through an identical mechanism with centralized gatekeeping and an exam-mediated rationing of scarce upper-tier seats, but the stated purpose changed.<sup>43</sup>

Park's educational policies were heavily influenced by his economic policies, most notably with the Five-Year Plans acting as a master logic, framing education as a factor of production. The first Five-Year Plans in 1962 to 1966, announced immediately after the coup, laid the foundation with Park constructing a system where state funds were allocated to the private sector via financial institutions, placing the state in control of the resources necessary to sustain its developmental agenda. It primarily focused on light manufacturing, agricultural modernization, and basic infrastructure, which requires low-to-mid skill workers, not university graduates.<sup>44</sup> The second Five-Year Plan during 1967 to 1971 predicted a labor shortage with the Economic Planning Board (EPB), which caused the expansion of vocational training programs, where labor-supply planning and education policy were often merged together. This period of time is also when Park raised the target annual growth rate in Korea.<sup>45</sup> The third Five-Year Plan established a compulsory employer training system where large employers were required to provide workplace training or pay a levy funding governmental program; this stage formally mandated vocational and technical education, a qualitative shift in state control over the labor pipeline. Lastly, with the Heavy and Chemical Industry Policy (HCI Drive) targeting steel, nonferrous metals, shipbuilding, machinery, electronics, and chemicals, manpower policy now required experts in engineering, which drove the reorientation of vocational school curriculum from craft skills toward engineering. Here, the HCI Planning Committee (HCIPC) and its Secretariat controlled vocational education and training policy during this period, not the Ministry of Education: Oh Won-Chul, Park's second Senior Economic Secretary held manpower

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<sup>43</sup> Isozaki, Noriyo. "Education, Development, and Politics in South Korea." *Emerging States at Crossroads: Development, Environment, and Political Economy*, edited by Keiichi Tsunekawa and Yasuyuki Todo, Springer, Singapore, 2019, pp. 209-229. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-2859-6\\_10](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-2859-6_10)

<sup>44</sup> Amsden, Alice H. *Asia's Next Giant: South Korea and Late Industrialization*. Oxford UP, 1989.

<sup>45</sup> Fleckenstein, Timo, Soohyun Christine Lee, and Jaehyoung Park. "Skills and Training in Hierarchical Capitalism: The Rise and Fall of Vocational Training in South Korea." *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, vol. 54, no. 2, 2024, pp. 260-281. Taylor & Francis, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2023.2168207>

policy within the Blue House, showing that education was used as a factor of production during this time.<sup>46</sup>

The primary institutional vehicle through which Park translated economic planning into educational structure was the vocational high school system, a deliberately tiered track designed not to broaden opportunity but to sort it, channeling students toward the specific skill profiles each successive Five-Year Plan required. Specifically, Park explicitly did not want rapid university expansion: economically, the light industry in the 1960s required craft skills and degrees only produced overeducated workers for available jobs, and politically, university students were the protest base that brought down Rhee in 1960 via the April Revolution, and expanding their numbers were a political risk.<sup>47</sup> With Park's personal background as a former officer in the Japanese-controlled Manchukuo Imperial Army and later the Japanese Imperial Army, the Japanese colonial developmental model including its vocational education apparatus, was directly familiar to him.<sup>48</sup> This system was further solidified using Germany as an explicit institutional template after Park visited West Germany in 1964. The German dual system, or the Meister model, became the explicit reference point for Korean vocational education design, also furthering ties between Korea and Germany along with a labor export deal with Korean miners and nurses.<sup>49</sup> The first phase established vocational high schools to supply mid-level technicians for textiles, plywood, and footwear, the labor-intensive light export industries of the first two Five-Year Plans. Entry required a principal's letter of recommendation, and government scholarships attracted strong students regardless of family income background.<sup>50</sup> The second phase reoriented the curriculum toward engineering as the HCI Drive restructured the economy:

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<sup>46</sup> Stern, Joseph J., Jihong Kim, Dwight H. Perkins, and Jungho Yoo. *Industrialization and the State: The Korean Heavy and Chemical Industry Drive*. Harvard Institute for International Development and Korea Development Institute, 1995.

<sup>47</sup> Seth, Michael J. *Education Fever: Society, Politics, and the Pursuit of Schooling in South Korea*. University of Hawai'i Press, 2002.

<sup>48</sup> Eckert, Carter J. *Park Chung Hee and Modern Korea: The Roots of Militarism, 1866–1945*. Harvard University Press, 2016.

<sup>49</sup> Park, Jaeho, and Sang-Hoon Yu. "Labor Market Performance Gaps: The Role of Vocational Education in South Korea." *Cogent Education*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2023, Article 2250108. Taylor & Francis, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2023.2250108>

<sup>50</sup> Seth, Michael J. *Education Fever: Society, Politics, and the Pursuit of Schooling in South Korea*. University of Hawai'i Press, 2002.

the number of vocational trainees near-tripled in three years driven by rising public training programs and mandatory workplace training, and technical high schools and polytechnics trained over 100,000 workers annually by the 1980s in fields like machinery and electronics. Here, the vocational track was designed to be a productive alternative to the university path, but it still served as a prestige track inserted into a credential hierarchy whose apex was still the university degree.

The same administrative logic that had allowed the Government-General of Chōsen to control Korean education from a single center was perfected under Park. During both the Rhee and Park years, authority over education moved progressively out of local school boards into the Ministry of Education: by the 1980s, the Ministry controlled all basic policy decisions including administration of schools, allocation of resources, setting of enrollment quotas, certification of schools and teachers, and curriculum development including textbook guidelines.<sup>51</sup> Provincial and city school boards nominally continued to exist but ceased to function as independent bodies after 1973. In October 1972, Park dissolved the National Assembly, suspended the constitution, declared martial law, and closed all universities and colleges. The Yushin Constitution, promulgated in December 1972 with an implausible 92.3% gave Park unlimited presidential terms and other sweeping emergency powers, highly centralizing the government.<sup>52</sup> Even etymologically, *Yushin* is the Korean pronunciation of the Japanese *Ishin* (restoration), directly referencing the 1868 Meiji Restoration, whose educational and industrial apparatus Park had grown up inside as a colonial subject and imperial officer: the colonial model is consciously invoked here.<sup>53</sup> This centralization reflects a broader pattern across Korea's history of education: the Government-General of Joseon's administrative logic with a single central authority controlling access, curriculum, credential, and the supply of educated Koreans continues in the

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<sup>51</sup> Savada, Andrea Matles, and William Shaw, editors. *South Korea: A Country Study*. Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1992. U.S. Government Printing Office.

<sup>52</sup> Jeong, Minji, and Youseop Shin. "Post-War Korean Conservatism, Japanese Statism, and the Legacy of President Park Chung-hee in South Korea." *The Korean Journal of International Studies*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2018, pp. 57-76. <https://doi.org/10.14731/kjis.2018.04.16.1.57>.

<sup>53</sup> Eckert, Carter J. *Park Chung Hee and Modern Korea: The Roots of Militarism, 1866–1945*. Harvard University Press, 2016.

Park-era Ministry of Education's administrative logic, with a single central authority controlling everything: the mechanism is identical even if the alibi has changed from ethnic stratification to economic development.<sup>54</sup>

In 1968, the Third Republic adopted the Charter of National Education, outlining four goals for education: national revitalization, creating self-reliant individuals, promulgating a cooperative national image, and supporting anti-communism. Students were required to recite this in elementary schools, functioning more like a daily ideological ritual. This shows that the education system of this era ran two logics simultaneously: the economic logic with the sorting of labor and focus on human capital production for the Five-Year Plans, and the ideological logic, with anti-communist nationalism and loyalty to the developmental state. Moreover, rather than they reinforce each other, as a disciplined, nationalist, and anti-communist workforce was exactly what the developmental dictatorship needed: the state needed both obedient ideology-bearers and competitive exam-passers, and the system was designed to produce both. The Third Republic's solution to the student protest problem also revealed the relationship between academic competition and political control: the government allowed universities and colleges to recruit up to 130% of their graduation quotas, so that student activists would be forced to compete against one another in order to graduate. This shows that the competitive exam system was also deployed as a political mechanism to keep university students too busy and individually competitive to organize collectively.

By the late 1970s, the developmental state had achieved what it set out to achieve: secondary enrollment at 90 percent, the vocational track operational, and the HCI Drive producing the engineering cohorts heavy industry required. Measured against its own objectives, the system worked. What it had not done, however, was alter the competitive logic the paper has traced from the colonial period forward. The equalization policy, which abolished middle and high school entrance examinations in stages between 1969 and 1975, had tried and failed. Removing the lower gates did not reduce competitive pressure; it concentrated it entirely onto the single

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<sup>54</sup> Neuhaus, Dörte. "Beyond Assimilation and National Resistance: Colonial Education and the Formation of Korean Subjects under Japanese Rule." *History of Education*, vol. 52, no. 5, 2023, pp. 843-861. Taylor & Francis, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0046760X.2022.2161624>

remaining gate, the college entrance examination, which now bore the full weight of a society's credential anxiety alone. That concentration is the inheritance every subsequent government receives, and the inability to undo it is the subject of what follows.

### **b. Policy Intention and Outcome**

By the late 1960s, “examination hell” at the secondary level was severe enough to produce political pressures for reform: students cramming for middle school entrance exams from elementary school with a significant number repeating grades to improve performance, and the curriculum at all lower levels distorted towards exam preparation. Specifically, high-profile exam-error scandals in Seoul triggered a middle school reform. Thus, the Middle School Equalization Policy was born. This completely abolished middle school entrance examinations and implemented lottery-based enrollment when applicants exceed a school’s capacity, equalizing education levels across schools and removing the need for prestigious middle schools, as this policy was applied universally to private schools as well.<sup>55</sup>

This was also implemented in high school some years later. In 1974, the High School Equalization Policy was introduced to explicitly address overheated competition for prestigious high schools and the resulting concentration of students in urban areas. High school applicants were now screened with a regional uniform examination then allocated to individual schools within their district by lottery, ignoring school rankings. Private schools were also now required to charge the same tuition and teach the same curriculum as public schools: the government subsidized private school teachers’ salaries to match public school rates.

With these two policies, by 1998, nearly 100% of elementary school graduates proceeded to middle school, and middle school enrollment rose 2,347% from 1945 to 1999.<sup>56</sup> However, these equalization policies did not end examination pressure; it merely relocated it upward,

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<sup>55</sup> Kim, Sunwoong, and Ju-Ho Lee. *Secondary School Equalization Policies in South Korea*. KDI School of Public Policy and Management, 2002.

<sup>56</sup> “Secondary Education and Middle Schools and High Schools in South Korea.” *Facts and Details*, edited by Mark Cartwright, Facts and Details, [https://factsanddetails.com/korea/South\\_Korea/Education\\_Health\\_Transportation\\_Infrastructure/entry-7378.html](https://factsanddetails.com/korea/South_Korea/Education_Health_Transportation_Infrastructure/entry-7378.html)



concentrating the entirety of credential competition onto the university entrance examination.<sup>57</sup> This is because removing the lower gates while leaving the upper gate of university admission intact and unchanged means the system now has one point of failure instead of three, and thus, the stakes of a single exam rise accordingly. Furthermore, abolishing ranked schools did not abolish the social memory of school rankings, and the prestige of preexisting elite middle schools persisted afterwards for decades. The virtual nationalization of private schools also removed school diversity and competition among schools, creating little incentive for schools to respond to the needs of students and parents while doing nothing to remove the motive for competition among students.<sup>58</sup> Lastly, by the 1980s, the vocational high school, designed in the 1960s as a productive alternative track with genuine initial prestige, is now regarded as the destination for students who failed to qualify for academic high schools. This shows that the intervention does not change the underlying incentive of status credential, so is defeated by it: both the equalization policy and the vocational track represent attempts to work around the credential hierarchy, and neither touches the hierarchy itself, so both are ultimately absorbed by it.

The Park era was a system that has successfully produced the workforce the developmental state required while generating, as its structural byproduct, an exam pressure more concentrated and more socially totalizing than anything that came before. The state's response to this byproduct, first under Park, then under Chun Doo Hwan, is prohibition: a ban on hagwons or private tutoring and the market response to a market failure the state itself created.

### **c. Collapse of State Educational Guarantees**

The July 30, 1980 education reform was the act of a government with no political legitimacy attempting to manufacture social legitimacy through egalitarian policy. Its failure reveals, more directly than any prior intervention, the structural impossibility of suppressing educational competition without first dismantling the credential hierarchy that makes competition rational. 1980 was especially important because it directly followed the rise of power of Chun through the

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<sup>57</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. *Education Reform in Korea*. OECD Publishing, 2013, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264190673-en>.

<sup>58</sup> Sorensen, Clark W. "Popular Demand and Education in South Korea." *Comparative Education Review*, vol. 36, no. 3, 1992, pp. 307–324. University of Chicago Press, <https://doi.org/10.1086/447127>

coup d'état of December, 1979, following Park's assassination, then the consolidation through the May 17 coup and the brutal suppression of the Gwangju Uprising in May of 1980 in which soldiers fired on civilian protests.<sup>59</sup> The July 30 Education Reform landed merely six weeks after Gwangju, which means it was more than a coincidence and rather a gesture meant to build legitimacy from a government that could not afford dissent. The ban's egalitarian rationale and mentions of "unfair burdens on the poor" was a political one that positioned the regime as a defender of ordinary families against elite privilege at the precise moment it is suppressing those families' political rights by force. Seen from a broader context of social policy, the Chun government simultaneously introduced the so-called "3S Policy" loosening the censorship restrictions and expanding televised sports, including hosting the 1988 Olympics, to redirect public attention toward entertainment; the education ban also fits the same logic of managing dissent through social policy rather than democratic accountability.<sup>60</sup>

The July 30, 1980 Reform's official title was "A Plan to Take Public Education Back to the Normal Stage and Resolve the Overheated Problem of Private Education": the title itself frames private education as a deviation from a norm the public system represents, which is the reform's core ideological claim.<sup>61</sup> The stated rationale here, interestingly, is explicitly egalitarian: Chun contends that because not many parents can afford education, allowing hagwons, or private academies, to thrive hands an unfair advantage to rich families who can afford supplementary studies.<sup>62</sup> Thus, enforcement was severe, targeted, and class-conscious: the ban specifically emphasized the prohibition of tutoring for children of socially influential people including public officials, businessmen, doctors, or lawyers; violators faced public disclosure of their names, expulsion from public office, tax investigation, or even police raids in places where illegal

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<sup>59</sup> "Gwangju Uprising (1980)." *Historical Parallax*, Historical Parallax, 22 Dec. 2025, <https://historical.parallax.kr/a/gwangju-uprising-1980>

<sup>60</sup> Kim, Hak-Sun. "The New Military Regime's 'Accelerated Rule' and 3Ss Policy." *Society and History*, no. 136, 2022, pp. 255-306. <https://doi.org/10.37743/SAH.136.9>

<sup>61</sup> Bae, Sang Hoon, and Kee Ho Choi. "The Cause of Institutionalized Private Tutoring in Korea: Defective Public Schooling or a Universal Desire for Family Reproduction?" *ECNU Review of Education*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2024, pp. 12-41. SAGE Publications, <https://doi.org/10.1177/20965311231182722>.

<sup>62</sup> "All You Need to Know About TOEFL and SAT Hagwons in Korea." *Expat Schools Seoul Korea*, <https://expatschoolskorea.com/article/all-you-need-to-know-about-toefl-and-sat-hagwons-in-korea.html>

tutoring operations were suspected.<sup>63</sup> Initially, the ban's egalitarian framing resonated with a lot of people and received genuine public support, which makes its failure more analytically significant.

The 1980 ban is the purest illustration of the paper's central structural argument: every intervention that suppresses the expression of competitive pressure without altering the incentive structure that generates it will fail, and will typically produce outcomes that are worse than those it tried to prevent. In the case of this ban, it merely drove the competition underground: the ban suppressed supply without changing demand, as the university entrance exam and therefore the credential hierarchy was unchanged. Tutors now ended up simply charging premium rates for discretion, which meant only wealthier families could afford them. The enforcement apparatus itself becomes evidence of the ban's failure. In one instance, a foreign English teacher described being one of many "cowboy" and "backpack" tutors evading the "language police" investigators throughout the 1990s, a decade after the ban. Even in this time, the illegal tutoring economy was still so large it required ongoing policing.<sup>64</sup> This shows a deep irony: the ban ended up producing the exact inequality it was designed to prevent; the gap in educational investment by income only widened under the prohibition as wealthy families absorbed the risk premium of illegal tutoring while poor families lost even the cheaper group-hagwon option that had previously been accessible. Even the president of Seoul National University resigned in 1998 after it was revealed that his wife arranged private tutoring for their daughter; the most powerful symbol of public education in the country was caught violating a law designed to protect it.

The administration was therefore forced to proceed incremental relaxation of progressive: university tutors were granted the permission to teach privately first following the June Democratic Uprising of 1987 that forced Chun to accept democratic elections meant the political basis for authoritarian enforcement of the ban began to erode immediately. Then, limited educational establishments received licenses, then the ban unraveled under market and political pressure without ever being formally repealed. In 1991, middle and high school students were

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<sup>63</sup> "Hagwon: South Korea's \$23 Billion Private Tutoring Industry and the Education Arms Race." *Seoul Vision 2030*, 2025, <https://seoulvision2030.com/glossary/hagwon/>

<sup>64</sup> Lartigue, Casey J., Jr. "You'll Never Guess What South Korea Frowns Upon." *Cato Institute*, 28 May 2000, <https://www.cato.org/commentary/youll-never-guess-what-south-korea-frowns-upon>

formally permitted to take extracurricular courses at authorized private educational institutions for the first time since 1980. Finally, the constitutional court ruled the total ban on private tutoring unconstitutional in 2000, citing violations of individual rights to education and occupational freedom and free market principles. This marked the transition from the state trying to suppress the private education market to the state trying to regulate it. Even after the ruling, official discomfort existed: President Kim Dae Jung continued to oppose private tutoring on the same egalitarian grounds as Chun, ordering the Ministry of Education to coordinate with the National Tax Office to trace finances of anyone overcharging for private tutoring. The continuity of official rhetoric across Chun, a military dictator, and Kim Dae Jung, known for his opposition to Chun is striking, especially since both failed to suppress it. The small-sized tutoring institutions running covertly through the 1980s and 1990s that could not be quelled became the direct institutional predecessors of the neighborhood hagwons that multiplied after the Constitutional Court finding, showing that the prohibition could only reorganize but not erase it.

The intersection of the Constitutional Court's 2000 ruling and the economic trauma of the 1997 IMF crisis produces the hagwon economy as it exists today. From 1990 to 2000, the number of hagwons nearly doubled in ten years, from 28,862 to 57,935, driven by deregulation meeting demand that had been suppressed underground. Moreover, between 2000 and 2025, the number of registered hagwons grew further to approximately 85,000, and household spending on private education roughly tripled in real terms. By the early 2000s, 90 percent of all students interviewed at a primary school in Seoul reported taking private lessons after school, and families spent an upward of \$7,500 per month on private education for a single high school student, with 80 percent going to tutoring in the three core CSAT subjects: Korean, English, and Math. For English specifically, after being introduced to primary school curricula in 1997, the same year as the IMF crisis, as part of globalizing reforms, it became the fastest-growing market segment. Even this policy, initially aimed at social equity by bringing English to all levels of society including people from poorer backgrounds, only ended up spurring expenditure when those who could afford to tried to keep their competitive edge.

With the 1997 IMF crisis that resulted in mass privatization, deregulation, and layoffs, Korea was required to replace its traditional developmental-state economic model with a neoliberal

one.<sup>65</sup> This furthered the role of education as a competitive hedge: after constant instances of the disappearance of lifetime employment and the bifurcation of the labor market, the credential that determined which side of the divide a worker landed on became more valuable, and investment in that credential by families with disposable resources increased accordingly.<sup>66</sup> Seen from the macro scale, Korean households spent around 20.2 billion dollars on private education in 2024, which was a 60.1% increase from 2014; this year was the fourth consecutive year of record spending. Moreover, for families with two unmarried children, average monthly private education spending stands at 611,000 won, 12.6% of total household expenditure, exceeded only by food.<sup>67</sup>

The trajectory from the 1980 ban to the post-IMF hagwon economy is a story of the state progressively withdrawing from the educational guarantees it had made, leaving families to absorb individually the competitive pressure that the system's structure continues to generate collectively. There are largely three overlapping withdrawals that constitute the structural shift: legal withdrawal with the Constitutional Court ruling removing the state's authority to prohibit private educational investment; economic withdrawal with the IMF crisis dismantling the lifetime employment model that had given the developmental state's human capital logic its social contract; and the progressive reframing of education from a public good the state delivers to a private investment families are responsible for making. These three withdrawals resulted in a public school system that cannot adequately prepare students for the CSAT without private supplementation, a private tutoring market that now consumes a record share of household budgets, and an inequality structure in which access to the best supplementary education is increasingly determined by family income and geographic location.

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<sup>65</sup> Kotz, David M., and Terrence McDonough, editors. *Neoliberalism and the Transformation of Capitalism in Korea*. PERI Working Paper Series, no. 67, Political Economy Research Institute, University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2004.  
<https://peri.umass.edu/publication/item/182-neoliberalism-and-the-transformation-of-capitalism-in-korea>

<sup>66</sup> Kim, Sunwoong, and Ju-Ho Lee. "Private Tutoring and Demand for Education in South Korea." *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, vol. 58, no. 2, 2010, pp. 259-296. University of Chicago Press,  
<https://doi.org/10.1086/648186>

<sup>67</sup> Yoo, Jee-ho. "Spending on Private Education Jumps 60% over Past Decade: Data." *The Korea Times*, 4 Jan. 2026,  
<https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/amp/economy/20260104/spending-on-private-education-jumps-60-over-past-decade-d-ata>

## Synthesis and Conclusion

Across the periods examined in this paper, including confucian examination culture, colonial bureaucratization, USAMGIK improvisation, the 1949 promise of mass schooling, the Korean War, foreign-aided reconstruction, and developmental dictatorship, the Korean education system has performed three functions with remarkable consistency: elite selection, labor allocation, and political control. The relative weight of each shifts by era, but the mechanism through which all three are accomplished, such as centralized gatekeeping, exam-mediated scarcity, and a credential hierarchy with a narrow apex, remains structurally continuous. The pyramid whose apex was Keijō Imperial University under colonial rule is the same pyramid whose apex is the SKY institutions today, rationalized by a different principle but producing a recognizably similar distribution. What changes across the periods is not the hierarchical output but the legitimating alibi: loyal imperial subjecthood, nationalist citizenship, developmental human capital, individual investment. The alibi changes, but the structure does not.

This continuity explains what reform has consistently failed to grasp. Every intervention this paper has traced, such as the equalization policy, the hagwon ban, the emphasis on Susi, and the removal of killer questions, addressed the mechanism of competition without altering the incentive structure that makes competition rational. When the incentive structure is unchanged, competition migrates rather than diminishes. The gate moves but does not disappear. Calling the resulting intensity a product of Confucian culture performs a specific ideological function: it naturalizes the phenomenon, locating its cause in an immutable inheritance rather than in a sequence of specific institutional decisions that can be identified, traced, and held to account. This paper has argued the opposite, arguing that the system was built, deliberately and incrementally, across a century of colonial rule, war, and authoritarian modernization, and that understanding it as such is the precondition for any reform that might actually work.

What sustains the system in its current form is rationality that goes beyond culture. University admissions in Korean society function almost as a kind of rite of passage. Korean high school students earn their placement in higher education through institutionalized processes such as the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT, or Suneung) and school rank. It is generally accepted that

differences in demonstrated academic performance lead to differences in the universities students attend. Up to this point, the system itself is not necessarily problematic.

The more significant issue lies in the fact that, because graduation is relatively assured for most students once admitted, university diplomas carry different levels of social prestige depending on the institution's reputation. Traditionally, graduates of elite universities enjoyed advantages in employment, recruitment, and promotion opportunities. While the expansion of blind recruitment practices has reduced some of these effects by 2026, educational prestige continues to exert influence in many sectors.

Given the substantial benefits associated with prestigious academic credentials, few people are willing to forgo the opportunity to compete for them without making a serious effort. A label acquired through examinations and university applications at around age twenty can continue to provide social and professional advantages throughout one's life. From this perspective, investing several years of effort in the admissions process may appear rational, even to those who recognize its shortcomings.

As a result, many people find themselves deeply committed to preparing for university entrance examinations despite believing that aspects of the admissions system and credentialism are unfair. The perceived long-term rewards attached to educational status make disengagement difficult, reinforcing the cycle of intense competition surrounding higher education.

This is the trap that the paper's title names. The competitive logic is not irrational; it is individually rational and collectively self-defeating, sustained by the accumulated weight of a century of institutional decisions that made the credential hierarchy what it is. Reforming the examination without dismantling the hierarchy is the structural equivalent of changing the shape of the funnel while leaving its narrowness unchanged. What this paper has tried to demonstrate is that the funnel has a history that it was constructed through identifiable choices under identifiable pressures. Taking that history seriously is the only basis on which a different set of choices becomes imaginable.

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