

# Korean Youth Flap Their Wings Towards Their Dreams

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The Republic of Korea has been a vibrant country in more ways than one and its youth have always played an important role. In just a short time, only 50 years after the Korean War, the Republic of Korea has grown into a powerhouse that ranks 11<sup>th</sup> in the world economy according to the World Bank. Young Korean intellectuals of the past have shown strong aspirations for democracy and have attempted to overthrow dictatorships and establish democratic governance. Young people have also been the main players in Korean development.

Today Korean youth live under pressure. After 12 years of public education including after-school activities—and before the SAT test—they usually study in school until 10 pm. At the same time they have their dreams which they carry with them through university and beyond. In this article, we look at the young people of Korea as they struggle with the present and, at the same time, worry about their dreams and their future.

In Korea the strong pressure on education cannot be ignored. The stress of education may be stronger than in any other country in the world because of the intense competition in entrance examinations. So even subtle changes in education policy have an impact. The Korean government, which recently joined the fourth industrial revolution, is emphasising Information Communication Technologies (ICT) education. The Republic of Korea sees human resources as the key to its future success. Government and business investment in science and engineering is increasing every year.

In a dramatic change from the time of the older generation, young people are thrown into intense competition from a very young age. Unlike the past, when entering university was considered the key element for success, there are many young people going to vocational school and Meister high school<sup>1</sup> these days. They become professionals in their field as soon as they receive professional training. Particularly in connection with the 4<sup>th</sup> industry trend, the emphasis on ICT and artificial intelligence is growing, and young people are taking part in seminars and conferences in addition to their major courses.

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<sup>1</sup>“Meister Schools” are a network of vocational schools that have been set up to reduce the shortage of vocational occupations in South Korea.

Young Koreans are forced to understand the concept of opportunity cost early in their lives. Many are abandoning their dreams for careers. They will give up their hobbies and love affairs for a certain period to prepare for university or a start-up or for a civil service examination. Despite the strong influence of peer groups, they give up broader social activities and devote themselves to their own futures. It is no different with university students. Young people are even trying to find their career path by delaying their graduation and changing their major courses of study.

Young people are experimenting and searching with both hope and fear. Kim Yi-ra (23 years old), a senior student in Political Science and Diplomacy at Yonsei University, is a job-seeker. She is studying at one of the most prestigious universities in Korea but she recently turned down an internship offer in a large company and went on a career search in a non-profit social enterprise. Asked about her dreams, she said: “Self-realisation is important enough to be at the top level of the Maslow’s fifth-level desire theory”.

In Korea, however, young people often have to find jobs rather than pursue their dreams because of their family’s economic situation. Also there are not enough jobs, so we cannot fulfill our own dreams *and* the requirements of society. Before seeking employment, Yi-ra had dreamed of a variety of career paths from the non-profit sector such as international organisations to graduate school. But she decided to opt for more specific job choices. She is preparing to enter a field that is not related to her major—Political Science and Diplomacy—to venture into self-discovery, based on her experience and activities.

Stories of youth aspiring to become singers from their childhood also appear a lot in the media. Young people living as trainees in entertainment companies for more than 10 years until they get a break and make it on the stage are success stories in Korean popular culture. But opportunities to become a star are very limited. In a world where survival of the fittest is the rule, not everyone can debut and succeed. Trainees face two dilemmas: fear of an unknown future and success. For those who practice dancing and singing from a very young age giving up the ordinary life of youth, the beads of sweat on their forehead are the price they pay for the recognition they aspire to.

The people’s role in the socio-political life of Korea is highly valued. It is not the older generation that leads the flow, but the youth who are the future of Korea. As they take part in the peaceful candlelight vigils that have emerged as a common approach to the development of democracy, young people are symbolically lighting their dreams of self-realisation and their hopes for the future.

Korean society has its own characteristics. Political participation by youth is popular despite a busy schedule as they have their personal goals and in their hearts are

trying to make a better society. Students will gather in Gwanghwamun Square for social change at the cost of their SAT test and right after the test, they give up their school breaks to join together holding small candles and shouting for a better society. This active political participation of young people promises a more transparent and developed Korea tomorrow.

The future of Korea is bright, both socially and politically. Many young people are working hard not only to pursue their own values but also to strive in their field for a better quality of life. Not satisfied with the standards the older generation has set, they are trying to develop the values to realise dreams beyond an ordinary life. These young Koreans are pursuing a values-based life that is also future-oriented. Korea's future promises to be healthy, thanks to them.