

South Korea¹: a star performer or a suicide republic?

I. An unhappy model of development

With GDP per capita of only \$64², South Korea was one of the world's poorest country after the Korean war in the 1950s. Until the 1960s, its GDP was behind that of Democratic Republic of Congo and was less than half that of Ghana³. That is why Korea's current GDP of \$1,400,000 – on a par with Canada – is surprising to many scholars in the world. Since 1970s, Korea's per capita GDP has increased 60-fold in less than 40 years, when the United States took 130 years to increase theirs by tenfold. With GDP growth rate of around 4%⁴, Korea has joined the rich man's club, OECD, in 1996 as the third fastest growing economy in the world. A country of destroyed buildings and famine has now become a world leader of technology including automobile production and shipbuilding⁵; "miracle" might not be an exaggeration for Korea.

At first glance of these statistics, people might acclaim Korea's tremendous growth over only few years. But on closer inspection, South Korea has been suffering from a great devastation of high suicide rate, caused by the rapid industrialization and urbanization. Technological development, improved hygiene, and advanced social welfare system have all contributed to the

¹ For the brevity of the paper, South Korea will be henceforth referred to Korea.

² Tran, Mark. "South Korea: A Model of Development? | Mark Tran." The Guardian. Guardian News and Media, 28 Nov. 2011. Web. 16 Apr. 2017.

Founded by John Edward Taylor in 1821, The Guardian has been recognized as one of the credible mainstream news and media sources. The Guardian provides various information from business, culture, to money.

³ Tran, Mark. "South Korea: A Model of Development? | Mark Tran." The Guardian. Guardian News and Media, 28 Nov. 2011. Web. 16 Apr. 2017.

⁴ Chang, Ha-Joon. "South Korea's Economic Reforms – a Recipe for Unhappiness | Ha-Joon Chang." The Guardian. Guardian News and Media, 01 Apr. 2012. Web. 16 Apr. 2017.

⁵ Chang, Ha-Joon. "South Korea's Economic Reforms – a Recipe for Unhappiness | Ha-Joon Chang." The Guardian. Guardian News and Media, 01 Apr. 2012. Web. 16 Apr. 2017.

decrease in total mortality, but they were to no avail in front a fast increasing suicide rate. Korea has the second highest suicide rate among the OECD countries⁶; 40 people commit suicide every day. Although high suicide rate may seem trivial, it is in fact crucial in terms of a concern over its impact to the community and the nation⁷. According to WHO, developed countries show decreasing trend in suicide rate⁸ and average suicide rate among OECD countries are also decreasing⁹. But why did Korea's hustle to make a "better country" in fact make its people "unhappier"?

II. Was foreign aid a support or a threat?

After the Korean War, South Korea could grow under the immense support of the foreign countries. Because of Korean companies' inability to gain support within the country during the 1997 financial crisis, the stock market was fully open to foreign investors¹⁰. Yet the support soon became a threat to Korean companies and hampered their future investment; companies had to drastically reduce their investments and concentrate on short-term profits because of the pressure

⁶ OECD Data. N.p., n.d. Web. 16 Apr. 2017.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, OECD, is to "promote policies that will improve the economic and social well-being of people around the world". 35 member countries in OECD include the world's most advanced and fast-growing countries from North and South America to Europe and Asia-Pacific. South Korea joined OECD in 1996. OECD data provides their collected data for further analysis, discussion, and future implementation.

⁷ Choi, Eun Sook, and Yeongmi Ha. "Work-related Stress and Risk Factors among Korean Employees." *Journal of Korean Academy of Nursing* 39.4 (2009): 549. Web.

⁸ Kwon, Jin-Won, Heeran Chun, and Sung-II Cho. "A Closer Look at the Increase in Suicide Rates in South Korea from 1986-2005." *BMC Public Health* 9.1 (2009): n. pag. Web.

BMC Public Health is a peer-reviewed journal site that allows anyone to access the articles. Topics of the journals are all based on public health, including "social determinants of health, the environmental, behavioral, and occupational correlates of health and disease, and the impact of health policies, practices and interventions on the community". In this journal, written by three scholars from Seoul National University (Seoul, Korea) and Rutgers University (New Jersey, USA), the authors discuss the correlation between Korea's increasing suicide rate and development of technology with the data provided by the Korean National Statistical Office (NSO).

⁹ OECD Data. N.p., n.d. Web. 16 Apr. 2017.

¹⁰ Chang, Ha-Joon. "South Korea's Economic Reforms – a Recipe for Unhappiness | Ha-Joon Chang." *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, 01 Apr. 2012. Web. 16 Apr. 2017.

coming from foreign stock holders. Low investments soon led to a fall in economic growth from 7% to 4%¹¹, and most of the companies had to downsize, increasing the number of temporary workers¹².

Temporary workers, created by the companies to increase profit by paying less wages, are dominating 50% to 60% of Korea's workforce today¹³. Since temporary workers in Korea get relatively tougher tasks and have longer working hours with lower wages, it is no surprise that they get about 7% more work-related stress than permanent workers¹⁴. Increasing number of underemployed workers has caused not only a great disparity between the middle-class and *chaebols*¹⁵, but also an immense stress rate among the workers. Only 5% of Korean workers perform their work without getting any stress, and about 22% are in a high-risk group, who are vulnerable to cardiovascular illnesses¹⁶.

¹¹ Chang, Ha-Joon. "South Korea's Economic Reforms – a Recipe for Unhappiness | Ha-Joon Chang." The Guardian. Guardian News and Media, 01 Apr. 2012. Web. 16 Apr. 2017.

¹² Kim, Hwan-Cheol, Byeong-Kwon Kim, Kyoung-Bok Min, Jin-Young Min, Sang-Hee Hwang, and Shin-Goo Park. "Association between Job Stress and Insomnia in Korean Workers." Journal of Occupational Health 53.3 (2011): 164-74. Web.

Journal of Occupational Health is a peer-reviewed international journal on environmental health published by the Japan Society for Occupational Health.

In this journal, the authors explain Korea's unique culture of collectivism compared to European countries' individualism. Based on the explanation, they argue that Korean workers' high job related stress is affected a lot by the Korean culture.

¹³ Chang, Ha-Joon. "South Korea's Economic Reforms – a Recipe for Unhappiness | Ha-Joon Chang." The Guardian. Guardian News and Media, 01 Apr. 2012. Web. 16 Apr. 2017.

¹⁴ Choi, Eun Sook, and Yeongmi Ha. "Work-related Stress and Risk Factors among Korean Employees." Journal of Korean Academy of Nursing 39.4 (2009): 549. Web.

Journal of Korean Academy of Nursing is published by Korea Med, which was established by Korean Association of Medical Journal Editors(KAMJE) with the support from Korean Academy of Medical Science, Health Technology Planning and Evaluation Board, in order to give easy access to Korean medical school students.

In this article, authors discuss the factors that cause high stress rate among Korean workers and ways to manage it.

¹⁵ Chaebol is a South Korean conglomerate, usually owned by a single family. After Korea's 1997 financial crisis, few families became extremely rich, making a big economic disparity between the poor and the rich.

¹⁶ Chang, Sei Jin, Sang Baek Koh, Myung Gun Kang, Bong Suk Cha, Jong Ku Park, Sook Jung Hyun, Jun Ho Park, Seong Ah Kim, Dong Mug Kang, Seong Sil Chang, Kyung Jae Lee, Eun Hee Ha, Mina Ha, Jong Min Woo, Hyeong Su Kim, and Jung Sun Park. "Epidemiology of Psychosocial Distress in Korean Employees." Journal of Preventive Medicine and Public Health 38.1 (2005): 25-37. Print.

Journal of Preventive Medicine and Public Health (JPMPH) is published by the Korean Society for Preventive Medicine. The journal covers many aspects of medicine including policy and education.

In this article, the authors claim that Korean workers' job stress is not only caused by job-related factors, but also affected by social factors such as self-respect and support.

III. “Competitive spirit” in Korean society

Richard Nixon, a former president of the United States, once stated that “the competitive spirit is the inner drive”¹⁷ of Americans, which make them unique and productive. He believed that people’s desire of high standard of living and success, and willingness to sacrifice would push the nation forward. In his speech in 1971, Nixon strongly condemns the “lazy and slothful”¹⁸ people and argues that the people should always strive for an even-higher standard of living. Along similar lines, he develops a claim that the vigorous competition would yield a better quality of work, and thus create a nation of “peace and prosperity”. It is true that the competitive spirit contributed to Korea’s rapid development; Korea’s world-beating growth rate would not have been possible without Koreans’ keen desire of a “better” nation. However, is competition really the best impetus to a “happier” nation?

The answer seems to be a big no in Korea. Koreans face competition in every communities from school to work. Korean students are exposed to the fierce competition of grades; success in Korea is only defined as getting good grades, entering top universities¹⁹, and being employed in well-paying companies²⁰. Therefore, students are taught how to be better than others, not how to help and cooperate with others. Among the students who felt suicidal, almost 53 percent cited

¹⁷ Nixon, Richard. "Address to the Nation on Labor Day." Camp David in Maryland. 6 Sept. 1971. Web. 16 Apr. 2017.

Richard Nixon, a 37th president of the United States gave a speech on September 6th, 1971, encouraging people to bring back their “competitive spirit” to make a nation of “peace and prosperity”.

¹⁸ Nixon, Richard. "Address to the Nation on Labor Day." Camp David in Maryland. 6 Sept. 1971. Web. 16 Apr. 2017.

¹⁹ McCurry, Justin. "Funerals for the Living in Bid to Tackle South Korea's High Suicide Rate." The Guardian. Guardian News and Media, 15 Dec. 2015. Web. 16 Apr. 2017.

²⁰ Evans, Stephen. "The Employees Shut inside Coffins." BBC News. BBC, 14 Dec. 2015. Web. 16 Apr. 2017. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) is the world’s oldest broadcasting organization which is headquartered in London. BBC has been recognized as a credible source provider of various topics in the world.

inadequate academic performance as the main reason of those thoughts²¹. Furthermore, only 60% of Korean students feel content in school, whereas more than 80% of average students from the wealthy nations feel so²². In the last few decades, researches have provided ample support for the assertion that Korean students are getting “abused” by the intense educational system that does not consider their health or happiness. Average Korean high school students sleep only 5.5 hours and study 14 hours a day²³, which is double that of Finnish students who perform equally well in the international exams. The reason behind the Korean students’ extraordinary long study hours is 170,000 cram institutions²⁴ called “*hagwon*”. Almost every Korean students study in *hagwons*, or “soulless facilities”²⁵, until 11p.m or later. Some critics say the life of youth in Korea is “not about freedom, personal choice or happiness; it is about production, performance, and obedience”²⁶.

Korean students’ 12 years of rigorous studying life does not end even after their college admission. Since there are only few well-paying companies considered “top” and “successful”,

²¹ Koo, Se-Woong. "South Korea's Education System Hurts Students." The New York Times. The New York Times, 01 Aug. 2014. Web. 16 Apr. 2017.

An American daily newspaper, The New York Times, is considered one of the most credible and commonly-read newspaper. In this article, Se-Woong Koo condemns Korea’s excessive educational zeal that “abuses” the children. Based on himself and his brother’s experience of going to Korean schools and cram institutions (Hagwons), Koo scrutinizes the root cause of unhappy students in Korea.

²² Koo, Se-Woong. "South Korea's Education System Hurts Students." The New York Times. The New York Times, 01 Aug. 2014. Web. 16 Apr. 2017.

²³ Hu, Elise. "The All-Work, No-Play Culture Of South Korean Education." NPR. NPR, 15 Apr. 2015. Web. 15 Apr. 2017.

National Public Radio (NPR) is a non-profit media organization that broadcasts to more than 900 public radio stations in the United States. Since 1971, NPR has received 36 Alfred I. duPont-Columbia University Awards, 62 George Foster Peabody Awards and 23 awards from the Overseas Press Club of America. In this article, the author, Elise Hu cited interviews with Korean high-school students and criticized Korea’s current educational system in the students’ perspective.

²⁴ "KOSIS 국가통계포털." 국가통계포털-korean Statistical Information Service. N.p., n.d. Web. 17 Apr. 2017.

KOSIS, Korean statistical information service, is a government-supported website that provides data on Korea from environment, transportation, welfare to education.

²⁵ Koo, Se-Woong. "South Korea's Education System Hurts Students." The New York Times. The New York Times, 01 Aug. 2014. Web. 16 Apr. 2017.

²⁶ Koo, Se-Woong. "South Korea's Education System Hurts Students." The New York Times. The New York Times, 01 Aug. 2014. Web. 16 Apr. 2017.

university students go to *hagwons* again, to study for company entrance exam such as Samsung SAT (Samsung Aptitude Test). Among 100,000 people who take Samsung SAT, only 5% of them are admitted to the next step of the hiring process²⁷. Koreans believe that being a “Samsung man” is the only way to be successful; since the students only seek for secure professions rather than looking for what they really want to be, job satisfaction of the Korean workers is almost 15% lower than that of EU workers, although the average Koreans work 12.4 hours more per week²⁸.

IV. Hypocrisy of technology

“Machines would soon make workers obsolete”²⁹. This is a quote from a journal named “World without Work” that discusses the effect of continuous innovation and technological developments in the world. Recent writings and researches like this shed new light on the negative side of technology. Rapid and continuous replacement of human jobs by machines are now threatening the people, and no one can guarantee the safety of any job today. Advanced technology’s contribution to people’s convenient life is not negligible, but it is also true that decreasing number of total jobs have created great educational zeal and job obsession in Korea,

²⁷ Hu, Elise. "To The List Of High-Stakes Tests In Korea, Add The Samsung SAT." NPR. NPR, 19 Apr. 2016. Web. 16 Apr. 2017.

²⁸ Park, Jungsun, and Naroo Lee. "First Korean Working Conditions Survey: A Comparison between South Korea and EU Countries." *Industrial Health* 47.1 (2009): 50-54. Web.

Industrial Health is a peer-reviewed journal and covers topics including occupational medicine, ergonomics, industrial hygiene, engineering, safety and policy sciences. It collects journals on many countries in the world, and suggests solution to some issues.

In this article, the authors analyze and compare the data collected by EU countries and Korea.

²⁹ Thompson, Derek. "A World Without Work." *The Atlantic*. Atlantic Media Company, 17 Aug. 2015. Web. 16 Apr. 2017.

Published by one of the most read newspaper, *The Atlantic*, the article deeply analyzes people’s wonder of “world without work”.

led to an enormously high stress and suicide rate. Increasing number of jobless people who dropped out of the competition became poorer, as some scholars concern the creation of a “separate nation of the poor, the unskilled, the jobless”³⁰. Instead of spending their free time to socialize or look for new hobbies, unemployed people spend most of their time watching TV and sleeping. This result challenges the work of those critics who have long assumed that the decrease in number of jobs will give people more freedom and time for leisure.

Although the unemployed people get more chance to socialize, researches show that they feel more isolated from the society. The alienation of the Korean people resulted by technology has become clearly evident. In the past, Korea was well-known for its intimate bonding between family and community. However, a brisk urbanization and industrialization pushed people away. Some critics appraise the development of informational technology which enabled the “globalization” through social networking. Ironically, Koreans feel more disconnected and secluded within this globalized world³¹. The main use of social media in Korea is not for socializing, but for sending more work orders after the working hours. Average Korean workers work 11 extra hours a week because of the orders received by the social media³² after their working hours. “Globalized society” is giving them more stress, rather than the support and communication.

Recent researches stated “lack of support” as one of the biggest reasons of Korean workers’ high stress rate. Compared to the workers in EU countries, Korean workers get less support from

³⁰ Thompson, Derek. "A World Without Work." The Atlantic. Atlantic Media Company, 17 Aug. 2015. Web. 16 Apr. 2017.

³¹ Dhawan, Ranjit Kumar. "Why Koreans Commit Suicide." Koreatimes. N.p., 20 Dec. 2015. Web. 16 Apr. 2017. Published by one of the largest newspaper companies in Korea, Korea Times is the oldest English-language Korean newspaper that provided information for more than 65 years.

³² France-Presse, Agence. "South Korea Mulls Ban on Bosses Messaging Employees at Home." The Guardian. Guardian News and Media, 24 June 2016. Web. 16 Apr. 2017.

colleagues and superiors at work³³. 60% of people who committed suicide in Korea were suffering from depression³⁴, meaning that suicides were preventable with appropriate psychological treatment. However, Korean society tends to be apathetic towards those people, regarding them as “weak”. Also, having a record of psychological treatment can work negatively in employment, marriage, and legal matters³⁵. Koreans who are already experiencing a great job crisis would not even consider seeing a doctor even when they are in a great depression.

Korean workers not only get mentally unhealthy, but also physically weak. Because of the advanced technology that enables the machines to perform more intricate and high-quality production, the work left for human workers are getting more repetitive³⁶ and sedentary³⁷. Repetitive work contributes to the workers’ low job satisfaction and engagement. With a busy daily schedule, workers usually do not find any time to exercise or eat well. While few number of Korean workers complained about their exposure to chemicals or smoke, there was a sharp increase in the number of workers who complained about muscle pain because of the sedentary work³⁸. Due to the increasing inquiry upon the negative correlation between work and health, many scholars have conducted studies, looking for the relation between long working hours and

³³ Park, Jungsun, and Naroo Lee. "First Korean Working Conditions Survey: A Comparison between South Korea and EU Countries." *Industrial Health* 47.1 (2009): 50-54. Web.

³⁴ Kim, Young-Ha. "Opinion | South Korea's Struggle With Suicide." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 02 Apr. 2014. Web. 16 Apr. 2017.

³⁵ Kim, Young-Ha. "Opinion | South Korea's Struggle With Suicide." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 02 Apr. 2014. Web. 16 Apr. 2017.

³⁶ Thompson, Derek. "A World Without Work." *The Atlantic*. Atlantic Media Company, 17 Aug. 2015. Web. 16 Apr. 2017.

³⁷ Max, Sarah. "Is Your Job Making You Fat?" *CNNMoney*. Cable News Network, 28 July 2003. Web. 16 Apr. 2017.

³⁸ Kim, Young Sun, Jungsun Park, Kyung Yong Rhee, and Hye Min Kim. "A Comparison between the Second Korean Working Conditions Survey (KWCS) and the First KWCS." *Safety and Health at Work* 6.2 (2015): 85-89. Web.

Safety and Health at Work (SH@W) is a peer-reviewed journal established by two Korean editors in 2010. The authors write journals on workers’ safety and health, and ways to improve.

This article compares the data collected in Korea in 2006 and 2010, using the same method. The authors strongly suggest the nation to address the increasing number of workers complaining job-related stress and musculoskeletal pain.

illnesses such as cancer³⁹. Although there has been relatively little research to assert the relationship between the long working hours and the overall cancer risk, scholars are warning the work-addicted workers nowadays of possible illnesses.

V. “Visible hand”⁴⁰ of the Korean government

Adam Smith, a prominent economist, asserted that a nation’s economy has an ability to “self-correct” and maintain the order of the society. However, in the convoluted Korean society, some extent of government intervention seems necessary. Koreans’ high stress rate followed by high suicide rate is a huge damage to the nation since the individual’s low job satisfaction leads to the inefficient productivity of the company⁴¹, also affecting the nation in the long-run. In order to prevent people from suiciding, Korean government has blocked 566 blogs and chat groups that encourage suicidal thoughts in 2005⁴². However, as a German philosopher Nietzsche said, suicidal thoughts might be “a great consolation”⁴³ to the people nowadays. Therefore, Korea is now looking for ways of giving people opportunity to ponder about life. For example, one of the bridges in Seoul started a campaign called “bridge of life”. Instead of physically blocking people from jumping, the bridge has insightful quotes about life on its banister; while walking, people

³⁹ Heikkila, Katriina. "Long Working Hours and Cancer Risk: A Multi-cohort Study." *Occupational and Environmental Medicine* 73.Suppl 1 (2016): n. pag. Web.

⁴⁰ Thompson, Derek. "A World Without Work." *The Atlantic*. Atlantic Media Company, 17 Aug. 2015. Web. 16 Apr. 2017.

⁴¹ Chang, Sei Jin, Sang Baek Koh, Myung Gun Kang, Bong Suk Cha, Jong Ku Park, Sook Jung Hyun, Jun Ho Park, Seong Ah Kim, Dong Mug Kang, Seong Sil Chang, Kyung Jae Lee, Eun Hee Ha, Mina Ha, Jong Min Woo, Hyeong Su Kim, and Jung Sun Park. "Epidemiology of Psychosocial Distress in Korean Employees." *Journal of Preventive Medicine and Public Health* 38.1 (2005): 25-37. Print.

⁴² Kwon, Jin-Won, Heeran Chun, and Sung-II Cho. "A Closer Look at the Increase in Suicide Rates in South Korea from 1986-2005." *BMC Public Health* 9.1 (2009): n. pag. Web.

⁴³ "A Quote by Friedrich Nietzsche." *Goodreads*. N.p., n.d. Web. 17 Apr. 2017.

Nietzsche said “The thought of suicide is a great consolation: by means of it one gets through many a dark night.”

can be healed by the quotes. “Fake funerals” are another unique therapy in Korea. To live more purposefully by reminding how precious their lives are, people get into the coffin for 10 minutes, thinking about the world after their death⁴⁴. Those programs teach people the value of life and make the society more enjoyable.

Although Korea provides various welfare systems⁴⁵, recent studies claim that there should be more budget invested and more policy amended specifically focused on Koreans’ high stress rate. Schools should teach the students how important it is to study what they love, rather than how to get better grades and be a “Samsung man”. Subsidizing research institutions will encourage the interested students to contribute to the nation’s development without concerning about their wages. Since many people feel little connection and less supported in the society, there should be more support groups in schools and work to make them feel more content; campaigns such as “bridge of life” will be a great way to change people’s perspective on supporting and empathizing others. To alleviate Korea’s fierce employment process followed by the workers’ long working hours, Korea can adapt Germany’s “job-sharing”⁴⁶; with incentives provided by the government, firms can hire more workers and cut their overall working hours. In addition to that, Korean government should limit the percentage of temporary workers in a firm. Korean government’s appropriate intervention in the community will soon make a happier nation where people do what they are passionate about.

VI. Korea can be revived

⁴⁴ Fleming, Peter. "The Graveyard Shift: Would a Stint in a Coffin Inspire You to Work Harder? | Peter Fleming." The Guardian. Guardian News and Media, 16 Dec. 2015. Web. 16 Apr. 2017.

⁴⁵ Kwon, Jin-Won, Heeran Chun, and Sung-II Cho. "A Closer Look at the Increase in Suicide Rates in South Korea from 1986-2005." BMC Public Health 9.1 (2009): n. pag. Web.

⁴⁶ Thompson, Derek. "A World Without Work." The Atlantic. Atlantic Media Company, 17 Aug. 2015. Web. 16 Apr. 2017.

Past 70 years of Korea was busy of continuous innovation. Assiduous people have studied, worked, and competed hard with unanimous goal of making Korea successful. Their effort was undoubtedly rewarding; Korean students' high performance in international exams and Korean companies' world-famous innovative products bring great honor back to the nation. However, these achievements were done without considering people's happiness. In Korea's "all-work, no-play"⁴⁷ culture, Koreans have been living purposelessly, forgetting how to enjoy their lives. A "suicide republic" with an enormous stress rate is not the title Koreans worked for. It's now time for Korea to change, to make Korea happy again.

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⁴⁷ Hu, Elise. "The All-Work, No-Play Culture Of South Korean Education." NPR. NPR, 15 Apr. 2015. Web. 15 Apr. 2017.

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