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# Youth in Crisis: Understanding the Surge of Adolescent Suicide in South Korea

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**YOUTH IN CRISIS:**

*UNDERSTANDING THE SURGE OF ADOLESCENT SUICIDE IN SOUTH KOREA*

by

**CAROLINE PORTER**

**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL  
FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

**PROFESSOR ALBERT PARK  
PROFESSOR SEOYOUNG PARK**

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## Chapter One

In 2014, South Korea had had the highest suicide rate of all industrialized countries in the world for eight years straight, with it dropping to mere second place in 2015. For individuals age fifteen to twenty-four, suicide is the leading cause of death in the nation. These are alarming statistics for a country whose populace makes up less than one percent of the world's total population. The subject of suicide, specifically adolescent suicide, is a startlingly normalized and accepted fact in South Korea. Over the past two decades the rate of adolescent suicide rate has progressively increased, raising the question of why this trend is escalating in such fashion. What are the historical, cultural, and topical causes of the recent prevalence of South Korean adolescent suicide? Through examination of Korean historical eras, traditional social values and their continued influence, and the widespread impact of the Asian Financial Crisis on all parts of society, the context and rationale for adolescent suicide prevalence will be further understood.

The following review of literature focuses on studies on suicide trends in South Korea, both adult and adolescent suicide, analyzing the causes and weight of factors of suicide ideation, attempts and completed suicides. Six sources are examined in the review, ranging in publication date from 1993 to 2013. Over the past two decades, the study of suicide in South Korea has generally broadened. Earlier works focus solely or mostly on the effected individual and direct, personal factors such as psychological, behavioral, and interpersonal issues of the effected which resulted in their depression and suicide attempt. As time has progressed, studies have expanded their views on possible causes of self-harming behavior to socioeconomic issues, social norms and, most recently, broad cultural shifts. Once studies began to focus on broader possible factors, scholars have since employed Emile Durkheim's theory on suicide in their studies in different capacities as a basis for looking at these larger causes.

In 1993, Hee-Soon Juon, Jung-Ja Nam, and Margaret Ensminger wrote “Epidemiology of Suicidal Behavior among Korean Adolescents,” a study questioning the causes of self-harming behavior in Korean youth limited to psychological, behavioral, and interpersonal factors. The survey and subsequent analysis, “explore[s] the relationships between suicidal behaviors and family background; social integration; academic stress; psychological distress; and substance use.”<sup>1</sup> The results of the study were consistent with past studies on suicide made in Western nations, with little unique results due to the study’s position in South Korea. The questionnaire, given to over 10,000 South Korean high schoolers, indicated that the psychological issues of depression and heightened aggression influence suicidal behavior in Korean adolescents. Additionally, delinquent behavior, resulting from the student’s relations with their school, including substance use instigates the behavior. This study is congruous with, scholar, Cynthia Pfeffer’s ideas on adolescent suicide behavior factors. Pfeffer attributes suicidal behavior in teenagers exclusively to biological, interpersonal, and developmental factors. The study of Korean adolescents is extremely compatible with Pfeffer’s ideas, focusing solely on the influence of factors found in those three realms. Juon, Nam and Ensminger’s questionnaire presented to students and the resulting analysis pays absolutely no attention to larger societal or cultural dynamics which could possibly be as influential to suicidal behavior as much as, or more than behavioral and interpersonal factors are found to be. Instead, the study limits itself to examining factors directly related to the effected individual: their psychological state, their behavior, and their relationship with people and institutions.

Thirteen years later, in 2010, Myoung-Hee Kim, Kyung-hee Jung-Choi, Hee-Jin Jun, and Ichiro Kawachi published their study titled “Socioeconomic inequalities in suicidal ideation,

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<sup>1</sup> Juon H.S., Nam J.J., and Ensminger, Margaret E. “Epidemiology of Suicidal Behavior among Korean Adolescents.” 664.

parasuicides, and completed suicides in South Korea.” By this point, Emile Durkheim’s theory of suicide had become a standard in approaching the study of suicidal behavior, and can be seen in the foundation of the rest of the selected sources. Durkheim argues that the act of suicide is not an individual act; it actually transcends the suicidal individual’s agency. He contends that social conditions greatly affect patterns of suicide in a community. Durkheim explains that when a society rapidly changes, the common morality that holds society together weakens and ties between individuals and that society wane. With this weakening, citizens suffer from ‘anomie,’ a state of confusion and distress due to shifting social value systems. The confusion and stress can influence an individual to commit destructive, self-harming acts like suicide. Furthermore, Durkheim describes two dimensions that affect suicide in his theory: social integration and social regulation. Social integration,

“...is the extent to which the people in a society are bound together in social networks. High levels of social integration result in altruistic suicide, while low levels of social integration result in egoistic suicide. Social regulation is the extent to which the desires and behaviors of the members of society are controlled by social values and norms. High levels of social regulation result in fatalistic suicide, while low levels of social regulation result in anomic suicide.”<sup>2</sup>

Kim, Jung-Choi, Jun and Kawachi used Durkheim’s general theory to broaden the possibilities of factors to study. They chose to question what social characteristics causes suicidal behavior in South Korea, specifically socioeconomic issues. The scholars first make the point that, yes, psychological distress such as depression is a major factor in suicidal behavior, however, it should be seen as an intermediary outcome of social causes. The study found that low education level and rural living location increases the chance of suicidal behavior for individuals. This is because the more limited access to medical services and the neighborhood having less friendly

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<sup>2</sup> Park, Ben, and Lester, David. “Chapter 3: South Korea.” *Suicide In Asia: Causes And Prevention*. pp. 21.

views on mental illness. When psychological distress arises, individuals in the countryside, and with less education, would have more obstacles and determent from getting help. Elderly Koreans were found to be most likely to succumb to self-destructive behavior due to economic hardship and poverty they face as well as the lack of substantial social protections like a pension system. With this comes inaccessibility to resources, unemployment, and financial loss. Job insecurity was also found to be influential in causing suicidal behavior. This study illustrates the widening of the study of suicide in South Korea, with scholars looking past individual-related factors like in previous studies completed in the 1990s.

Another study published in 2010, “An ecological understanding of youth suicide in South Korea,” written by Seung-yeon Lee, Jun-Sung Hong, and Dorothy L. Espelage, also focuses on greater factors than the effected individual. This study employs the ideas of Durkheim as a broad framework, but then also uses Urie Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model method to ground Durkheim’s theory. Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model positions individuals within a five system levels, all of which need to be examined for context to fully understand that individual’s actions. The study explains each level and discusses factors of suicidal behavior found in each level. First off, Lee and her colleagues explain that one cannot exclusively focus on depression when looking at self-harming behavior, making the point that non-depressed youth are also vulnerable to suicidal ideation and further action. Employing Bronfenbrenner’s model, the scholars explain the first level: the micro-system. The micro-system consists of the effected individual and other who they have relations with. In the context of South Korean adolescent suicide, factors in this level are the parent-child relationship and communication, peer support or lack there of, peer victimization, and school satisfaction or relations with teachers and school peers. The next system level, the meso-system, is made up of “...interrelationships between two



or more microsystems in which the child is involved...”<sup>3</sup> One influential factor that the authors found to be in this system is poor relations between child and parents influencing relations between the child and their peers at school. The exo-system, the third system level, is similar to the meso-system however the child is only embedded in one of the microsystems. For example, mass media and suicide Internet sites as causes of suicidal behavior. The sensationalized nature of media coverage in regards to suicide in South Korea results in many copycat suicides by adolescents. The next largest system, termed the macro-system, is “...commonly referred to as a cultural ‘blueprint’ that may determine the social structures and activities in the immediate system level.”<sup>4</sup> Established parenting practices like harsh disciplinary methods, as well as the emphasis on academic achievement, are both factors found the macro-system. Also in this level is the transition from the collectivism ideology to more of an individualist ideology, which has led to youth struggling with their cultural identity. The fifth and final system level, the chrono-system, consists of changes over time in the societal environment and individual. The scholars explain how the 1997 financial crisis, classified into the chrono-system level, resulted in local currency devaluation and increased unemployment thus widening the gap between the rich and poor and creating a societal rift, producing increased self-destructive behavior in South Korea. Through this example, it is clear that even factors found in the chrono-system level, though grand, still greatly impact individuals’ behavior.

The most recent studies focused on suicide in South Korea still use Durkheim’s theory of suicide being caused by social factors as a foundation, however there has been even further broadening of what those social factors could possibly be. Ben Park and David Lester contributed to the book, *Suicide in Asia*, by co-writing a chapter on South Korea together. In the

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<sup>3</sup> Lee S.Y., Hong J.S., and Espelage Dorothy L., “An ecological understanding of youth suicide in South Korea.” 536.

<sup>4</sup> Lee. S.Y. et al. pp. 438.

chapter, the two men explore the association between suicidal behavior in Korea with large social factors such as birth rate, marriage and divorce rate, as well as unemployment rate, mentioned in previous studies. Park and Lester find that divorce rates were the most substantial predictor for self-destructive behavior, which supports Durkheim's ideas of social integration and social regulation. Divorce lessens the ties between an individual and their social networks, thus increasing the chances of egoistic suicide. Another cause of increased suicide rate was found to be the decreasing frequency in births in South Korea. Unemployment was found to be a major stressor for Korean citizens and an influential factor in self-harm. This is because Koreans place significance on their careers in the process of identity making, so when uncertainty in the workplace and unemployment surges individuals' identities are threatened thus affecting relations and psychological stress. Park and Lester also brought up the influence of the transitioning state of Korea. Traditionally, elderly Korean citizens could trust that they would be taken care of by their children due to neo-Confucian values and filial piety found in Korean society. However, as society has shifted away from traditional values, children are taking less care of their parents and elderly citizens are finding themselves lacking economic protection. Additionally, the economy has no place for elderly citizens and the government does not have a developed pension system in place to help them. This transition that Korea is currently in is resulting in an increased amount of elderly Koreans experiencing suicidal behavior.

In 2012, Seungeun Yang wrote "A Life History of a Korean Adolescent Girl who Attempted Suicide," which looked at a single case study of a female high school student and her life history leading up to her suicide attempt. This work emphasizes the importance of understanding the role of cultural values in suicide behavior. Kim, the female student, grew up in a single-parent household and had medical issues that took her out of school throughout her

adolescence. Both of these facts contributed to her extremely close relationship with her mother. However, because of their closeness and her mother's sacrifices for her, Kim felt an excessive burden to be a perfect child both to overcome the stigma against single-parent households and to repay her mother. Her father's death disrupted the traditional family roles found in Korean culture, suddenly her mother had to become strict and more authoritarian rather than doting and warm like the established role of Korean mothers. The final straw for Kim was the academic pressure placed on her, with this Kim became rebelling resulting in her relationship with her mother worsening and culminated with Kim attempting suicide. Yang infers through Kim's life history that Korean cultural values, specifically the neo-Confucian values of family cohesion and traditional roles, as well as the value on academic success, significantly affected Kim, pushing her towards self-harm.

Ben Park, who co-wrote the chapter on South Korean suicide in 2010, wrote another analysis of cultural causes of suicide in 2013, titled "Cultural Ambivalence and Suicide Rates in South Korea." In a mere three years, Park's progression and broadening of ideas in relation to possible factors is clear. Inspired by Durkheim's anomie, Park terms collective cultural ambivalence as the main cause of suicidal behavior in South Korea. He defines collective cultural ambivalence as occurring in a period of societal shift, when the old set of values loses importance and relevancy, but a new set of values has not completely taken root yet in the society. Park explains that South Korea is currently in a state of collective cultural ambivalence due to the major shift in values that the nation and its people are feeling. With economic industrialization and modernization that occurred in the 1960s, Korea opened its doors to Western, neo-liberal values. A tension formed between these new values and the traditional neo-Confucian value system, causing confusion and distress for citizens because there were, "...no

clear set of social expectations, only conflicting and confusing messages stemming both from mutual-help ethics, the legacy of neo-Confucian tradition manifested in keeping up the interpersonal networking...and from self-advocacy, the Western value of individualism manifested in the neoliberalistic market's push for competition and specialization."<sup>5</sup> The growth in economy and rise of consumerism further pushed Western values into South Korea. Family conflict arose because of generational gaps in terms of value systems; older generations still looked towards neo-Confucian values for social expectations and guidance while younger generations shift their attention to Western values. Park concludes that serious tension still resides in South Korea because though the neoliberal values seem to have taken over in Korea, the tradition of neo-Confucianism is so deeply rooted in Korean history it still has inadvertent power in certain areas of society. This enduring tension continues distress to Korean citizens, which then causes self-destructive behavior like suicide.

The following thesis will continue employing Durkheim's theory of suicide as a substructure, however the thesis will be less framed as a psychological survey and following discussion of results, which the majority of secondary sources on this topic are. The thesis will focus more so on the context and causes, both established and developing, of adolescent suicidal behavior found in sociology, history and politics. The paper will delve into how South Korea's dynamic history helped to construct the current trend of adolescent suicide. The thesis will examine the role of the economy including the consequences with, and fallout of specific economic events. Also, it will evaluate the relationship between the state and traditional values found in the post-war education system that advanced greater emphasis on success in schooling. Surveying the variety of consequences of the IMF bailout, the thesis will look at the condition of

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<sup>5</sup> Park, Ben. "Cultural Ambivalence and Suicide Rates in South Korea." *Suicide and Culture: Understanding the Context*. pp. 238.

South Korean society in terms of the job market, education system, and youth culture in the past two decades.

Chapter 2 will explore the modern history of post-war South Korea and how the historical eras' regimes and citizens' responses have helped in forming the unique Korean understanding of suicide. The history of pressure on the Korean people will be explained and studied in relation to its possible affect on the normalization of suicide. Chapter 3 will examine established causes of adolescent suicide in South Korea. The chapter will focus on the role of Confucian and traditional Korean values in producing elevated stress for adolescent students in the post-war education system. The chapter will connect authoritarian ambitions of the national government for further social control and rapid national development to the creation of the education system. Chapter 4 will connect the shift to neoliberalism after the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis with various changes throughout South Korean society. These changes including shifts in understanding of fundamental economic ideas, a bleak job market, alteration of education culture and support system for students, as well as the rise of the Internet and a worsening of adolescents' body images.

## Chapter Two

For having only been formally established less than seventy years ago, the Republic of Korea has an astoundingly rich and active history. The political and economic path that the nation has taken since the country's founding is complex and compelling. The unique historical eras that have occurred in South Korea since the nation's establishment, and their effects on the Korean citizens give explanation and understanding to the emergence of suicide as an act of dissent. Throughout the developmental era of South Korea, beginning after the Korean Armistice Agreement and continuing until 1979, national leaders had the clear primary goal of major economic growth, rather than the goal being a balance of economic growth and citizen wellbeing and security. This looming pressure from the government to achieve continuous economic gains placed stress on the Korean citizens, whose welfare was being disregarded by their leaders. In the 1970s, labor conditions deteriorated to the point of a worker famously setting himself on fire in protest of such conditions, helping to form the modern understanding of suicide as an act of defiance. In the following era, one of democratization, the pressure resting on the people transferred from economic progress to obedience toward authority. The regimes of this era attempted social control of the citizens through censorship and suppression of dissenting voices. The government's response to events like the Gwangju Massacre and the June Democratic Movement exhibit the level of discontentment within the populace and the desperation of the government for control. The current era of neoliberalism in South Korea has less social control compared to the previous era. The pressure on citizens actually comes from the absolute lack of structural support resulting from the 1997 International Monetary Fund bailout conditions. Examining these periods of South Korean history contextualizes how suicide became normalized

as a response to the regimes' political, economic, and social pressures placed on the people of Korea.

Post-Korean War, the Republic of Korea implemented a developmental state model as a method of rebuilding the nation and improving the economy. The dictatorial regime of Park Chung Hee, lasting from 1961 to 1979, oversaw the complete institution of this developmental model through Park's export-oriented growth model. With the primary goal being economic growth, the state placed little focus on citizen protection in the economic system itself, instead concentrating solely on the implementation of policies that will assuredly result in rapid but enduring economic growth.<sup>6</sup> The creation of large corporations, or *chaebols*, played a significant role in this economic model, with the government giving companies large loans for them to grow to a global scale. These *chaebols* would then supply employment opportunities as well as occupational security for Korean citizens. With Park's economic plan, the South Korean economy flourished into a global power however the Korean people paid for this hasty prosperity with harsh working conditions, low wages, and a lack of economic protection. The daily suffering of individuals as a consequence of South Korea's rapid industrialization was explicitly revealed in 1970 with the self-immolation of Chun Tae-II, a twenty-three year old garment worker. Working conditions in factories and sweatshops had reached subhuman standards. In the garment district where Chun worked and ultimately set himself on fire, workers, "...were laboring in...small two-story compartment[s] filled with material...The ceilings were so low that standing up was barely possible and the air was saturated with fabric dust. During boom seasons they had to work overtime, almost around the clock, with no extra pay; however, they had to endure drastic cuts in work hours or even layoffs when business was slow. In addition, the pay

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<sup>6</sup> Lukacs, Gabriella. "Labor Games: Youth, Work, and Politics in East Asia." *Positions: east asia cultures critique*. pp. 383.

was far below poverty level.”<sup>7</sup> Chun Tae-II’s suicide became a touchstone in Korean history for ‘active’ suicide, when the act of suicide is symbolic or for a cause. This active suicide gained traction especially during the democratic movement in the next decade.

The 1980s in South Korea brought about the democratization era in which the government sought thorough social control of citizens while the populace fought to gain agency and change the political system. The regime of Chun Doo-Hwan employed strict media censorship to regulate public opinion and knowledge after the Gwangju Uprising and subsequent massacre. Criticism of government corruption, and civil unrest continued throughout the decade. Student activists were regularly detained and interrogated about protests and their personal dissenting opinions. In one such instance during the interrogation of Park Jong-Chul, a twenty-one year old Seoul National University student, the police tortured him to death accidentally. The government proceeded to suppress details of his death for months, until late May 1987. Outraged, democratic movement activists planned the June Democratic Movement, a series of massive protests lasting for nineteen days. Suicide as a response to political oppression became a recurrent act during these years, particularly with young activists. This decisive action was meant to challenge the government morally and also rouse public consciousness. Young laborers and students who chose to participate in the protests possessed a strong moral and political conscience, enabling them to critically observe their society, identify issues, and pursue solutions.<sup>8</sup> Committing this extreme act was seen as demonstrating the activist’s commitment to the cause of improving the government and thus the Korean society as a whole.

This era’s oppression of political views critical of the state popularized and fully politicized the powerful philosophy of *minjung*. Korean feelings of failure and weakness in terms

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<sup>7</sup> Kim, Hyojoung. “Micromobilization and Suicide Protest in South Korea, 1970-2004.” *Social Research*. pp. 543.

<sup>8</sup> Park, Byeong-chul. “Political Suicide among Korean Youth.” *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*. pp. 67.



of their history originally created the discourse of *minjung*. In the eyes of Korean citizens, they had a lack of agency in their history. Korean liberation from the Japanese was due to outside intervention, and resulted in dependence on the United States. Korean modernity seemed to always be termed as imposed or reactionary to the nation's decolonization. There was a general theme of negativity throughout the history of South Korea: "...colonialism, foreign interventions, civil war, socialist authoritarianism in the North, the equally authoritarian military dictatorship in the South, and the confrontation between them."<sup>9</sup> Due to this lack of agency in the past, Korean intellectuals and students began to believe they had a responsibility and capability to achieve social change. Reevaluating historical events, Korean intellectuals provided the masses with a unifying political identity. The philosophy of *minjung* advocated democratic principles, with citizens possessing full political agency and endeavoring for freedom, equality, and the reunification of North and South Korea. *Minjung* involved "...complete transformation of political and social structures with class upheaval from below by the oppressed masses to create a politically and economically equal society."<sup>10</sup> Student activists formed a counterpublic of *minjung* through articulating and disseminating issues with the national government such as its political legitimacy, transparency about the Gwangju Uprising, and general corruption.<sup>11</sup> However, activists understood the most powerful form of *minjung* to be complete self-sacrifice for the people. With this understanding, suicide became a rational option in response to political oppression, to advance the nation. Rooted in Confucian moralistic tradition, protesters believed the South Korean government should not compromise basic values for economic growth. This influenced the activists, resulting in them becoming further morally absolute and seeing a clear

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<sup>9</sup> Lee, Namhee. *Making Minjung: Democracy and the Politics of Representation in South Korea*. pp. 3.

<sup>10</sup> Park, Byeong-chul. pp. 69.

<sup>11</sup> Lee, Namhee. pp. 147.

dichotomy between good and evil.<sup>12</sup> Kim Ui-ki, a twenty-one year old student activist who committed suicide in 1980, stated, ““There is only one solution to the problem. There should be no compromise. We are given just two alternatives: exist on our knees, which will let us live temporarily, or stand firmly, which may leave us dead temporarily, but forever alive.””<sup>13</sup> Young activists who ended their lives through suicide rejected succumbing to the corrupt reality of South Korean society in the 1980s, instead choosing to die honorably and earn moral purity and rebirth.

The neoliberalism era commenced with the collapse the Korean economy during the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997. The *chaebol* aspect of South Korea’s developmental economic growth plan had grown too large and the bubble finally burst. Major conglomerates filed for bankruptcy, and turned to the government for massive emergency loans. Foreign investors who had joined the Korean economy in the late 1980s began to withdraw support from the country, and the state did not have the money to help all of the desperate companies or pay back foreign creditors. The government was forced to sign an agreement with the International Monetary Fund, receiving a national bailout from the IMF in exchange for radical adjustment of South Korea’s industrial and financial systems. President Kim Dae Jung, “...adopted a more flexible postdevelopmental state that favored mediation among economic, social, and political forces as opposed to direct intervention in the economy.”<sup>14</sup> While these reforms helped save the Korean economy after the crisis, the consequences on the citizens were staggering. The bailout conditions shifted the economic organization so that the structural support for workers was not present anymore. The changes resulted in a sharp increase in unemployment amongst Korean citizens and began to break down the convention of occupational security, or ‘lifetime

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<sup>12</sup> Park, Byeong-chul. pp. 73.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Lukacs, pp 385.

employment.’ Furthermore, the reforms gave *chaebols* the power to more directly control their investments and employment situations. With less government regulation, large companies were able to concentrate exclusively on boosting short-term profits, and “...numerical flexibility rather than functional flexibility...”<sup>15</sup> These companies began to lay off regular workers, replacing them with irregular workers and only employing irregular workers in the future. In addition to a lack of job stability, individuals hired as irregular workers did not receive benefits such as unemployment and work injury insurance like regular workers did.<sup>16</sup> The South Korean government has enacted legislation in the effort to help irregular workers gain employment stability, compelling companies to transition irregular workers to regular status after two years of employment. However, companies easily work around this law by hiring employees as normal and then dismissing them when they have almost completed two years of work. The economic swing also shifted importance from work experience to flexibility and mobility of employees. Unlike in the developmental era, neoliberal economies reward youthfulness and continuous learning. Companies asserted that this new neoliberal work organization, though lacking in job security, enabled workers to cultivate new skills that would further improve their future employability.<sup>17</sup> Suddenly, individuals in the new economy lacked the support and traditional safety nets they had had in the past. Additionally, the entire paradigm of what made an employee valuable and desired had completely reversed.

The conversion to neoliberal economics radically altered the understanding of basic ideas like human capital, effecting how individuals viewed their self worth. Michel Feher, French philosopher and cultural theorist, expanded upon the difference between the idea of human

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<sup>15</sup> Shin, Kwang-Yeong. “Globalization and social inequality in South Korea.” *New Millennium South Korea: Neoliberal Capitalism and Transnational Movements*. pp. 17.

<sup>16</sup> Shin, pp 18.

<sup>17</sup> Lukacs, pp 389.

capital in liberal capitalism and neoliberalism. Liberal capitalism uses the concept of the free laborer, "...a social being split between a subjectivity that is inalienable and a labor power that is to be rented out. Free laborers think of their labor power as commodity but believe that they themselves are not commodities."<sup>18</sup> To Feher, in liberal capitalism there is a clear distinction between subject and service. In comparison, neoliberalism employs a shifted, new labor subjective grounded on the idea of constant development of the self. Individuals do not own their capital like in liberal capitalism, instead, they are the commodity and continually need to invest in and further develop themselves.<sup>19</sup> With this new neoliberal view of human capital, the economy succeeds the most when there is constant change and variation. The shift in this understanding leads individuals to have a massive sense of uncertainty and to be in a perpetual state of fear and crisis about maximizing their marketability as much as possible. As, "...the demarcation between the negotiating subject and the negotiated commodity [becomes] blurred, individuals lose their sense of autonomy, moral dignity, and political sovereignty."<sup>20</sup> Questioning their abilities and value in the job market, the Korean people have been burdened with new social pressures that they have to adapt to and overcome.

Examination of periods in South Korea's relatively short but dense history elucidates the development of suicide as a social concept, one employed by the population as a response to social and political pressures. A national focus on economic growth and a lack of importance given to individuals' wellbeing and economic security resulted in excessive pressure on citizens and eventually acts of dissent challenging such values. The period of democratization shifted the pressure on citizens from economic stress to the burden of complying with the dictatorial state.

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<sup>18</sup> Cho, Hae-Joang. "The Spec Generation Who Can't Say "No": Overeducated and Underemployed Youth in Contemporary South Korea." *positions: east asia cultures critique*. pp. 452.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Cho, Hae-Joang. pp. 453.

Suicide as a form of protest gained traction especially with student activists and young *minjung* advocates. In the late 1990s, due to the IMF bailout, South Korean economic policies were suddenly adjusted to have much more Western neoliberal aspects. This shifted the entire paradigm of employment and labor in South Korea. The sudden deficiency of structural support and safety mechanisms for employees in addition to a completely different understanding of economic value resulted in new types of anxiety and pressure for citizens.

### **Chapter Three**

While the most recent spike in the national suicide rate in the Republic of Korea occurred at the turn of the millennium, the nation's unique concept of suicide very much predates that time, as can be seen in the previous chapter. Acts of adolescent suicide and suicide ideation that precede the latest surge have particular causes. These causes are rooted in long-established values and connect to historical events, with no linkage to the societal changes of the last two decades. Though these recognized causes still play a role in suicides of young individuals today, the same thing cannot be said about more recent, time-specific causes. This is due to the fact that the emerging causes have manifested as a direct result of economic and cultural changes in the past twenty years. Traditional neo-Confucian beliefs as well as authoritarian political ideas have continued to hold influence throughout the development of modern South Korea, greatly shaping the societal environment that produces suicides of Korean adolescents. Specifically the post-war education system has been constructed with significant influence from these two systems of thought. Neo-Confucian understandings of social relations were employed to assist the authoritative state in controlling the population. Interpretations of social relations such as collectivism and familism were incorporated into the foundation of the modern concept of the education system, benefiting state control, leading to substantial importance being placed on education, and a heavy pressure put on students to succeed in such education.

The modern-day education system of South Korea, crafted after the Korean War, was constructed to be a central tool in the national project to strengthen and develop the country. The state employed traditional values, ones which had existed in the founding Korean belief system centuries ago, to motivate the populace to acquire an education, thus enhancing the nation's economic and social capital. Neo-Confucianism viewed education as a way of social mobility

and access to power. South Korea has long history of equating education with clout. In the Joseon period one of the greatest accomplishments for an individual was passing the civil servants examination, the highest form of educational test. This achievement allowed citizens to rise in social and economic status. This association along with established neo-Confucian concepts of connected social relations resulted in an importance of education as a manner of cultivating the entire country. Dawning on a new period of South Korea post-war, the state designed modern institutions, including the education system, to assist in state control and making national development easier. In the 1960s and 1970s, the dictatorial regime of Park Chung-Hee employed centralized state exams for all students. These exams benefited the state by, "...establish[ing] orderly standards throughout the country...[and] they provide[d] a means by which the state [could] control the content of education and the number of passes at each level."<sup>21</sup> The system also responded to the outspoken desires of the Korean people for education as a way of upward mobility. After becoming liberated, the public embraced the historical significance of education and became determined to achieve comprehensive education. In the 1950s, a foreign observer visiting the country noted, "... '[Koreans] love of education' is such that 'even the poorest will struggle to send their children to school.'"<sup>22</sup> Demand for education was so excessive that parents would personally pay for more than two-thirds of the total cost of education, including tuition fees, materials and supplies, and parent association dues. In 1983 90% of South Korean parents desired for their children to at least graduate from high school, 74% from undergraduate university, and 21% from graduate school.<sup>23</sup> Thirty years later the importance of education can still be seen, with South Korea having the highest rate of citizens in

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<sup>21</sup> Sorensen, Clark W. "Success and Education in South Korea." *Comparative Education Review*. pp. 17.

<sup>22</sup> Seth, Michael. *Education Fever : Society, Politics, And The Pursuit Of Schooling In South Korea*. pp. 97.

<sup>23</sup> Park, Young-shin. "The Educational Challenge of Korea in the Global Era: The Role of Family, School, and the Government." *Education Journal*. pp. 99.

tertiary education in all of the OECD countries. By constructing the education system in such a way it did, the government accomplished both appeasing the people's desires and creating a new tool to subtly control their citizens.

In shaping the system, the state manipulated the neo-Confucian concept of the five relationships: ruler-subject, father-son, husband-wife, older- younger sibling, and peer-peer, to link individuals' actions and personal relations with their larger connection to the government. Neo-Confucian familism, the concept of children and their actions being connected to their family's character and status, already was known to motivate students in working hard at school.<sup>24</sup> Mina, a seventeen year old high school student explained how she understood her efforts in school as effecting her family's social standing. Responding to the question of what her mother thinks about her, she stated, ““She's probably happy with me because I am a good student...My mum likes me to study hard. Because I study hard, my mum thinks nobody in her neighborhood looks down on her as a powerless, divorced woman.””<sup>25</sup> As demonstrated through that Confucian concept, the family unit in Korea is extremely strong. Unlike in Western societies where the strong influence is held by the marital relationship, in societies founded on neo-Confucian ideology, weight is placed behind the parent-child relationship rather than that of spouses.<sup>26</sup> Connectedness between parents and their children is valued more than individuation. This connectedness begins even before birth in the case of the mother-child relationship. In pre-modern Korea, mothers would follow strict guidelines for attitude and behavior during pregnancy as a way of devoting to the child and beginning the bond between the mother and

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<sup>24</sup> Yoon, Kyongwon. “Cultural Practices of ‘Ordinary’ Youth: Transitions to Adulthood in South Korea.” *Asian Studies Review*. pp. 381.

<sup>25</sup> Yoon, Kyongwon. pp. 382.

<sup>26</sup> Chun, Young-ju. “Perceptions of Family Differentiation, Individuation, and Self-Esteem among Korean Adolescents.” *Journal of Marriage and Family*. pp. 453.



child.<sup>27</sup> After the child's birth, mothers would remain close in order to indulge the child and treat its needs. Having a role as a parent is a very significant part of one's identity in South Korea. Korean mothers especially predominantly define themselves by their role as a mother. Thus this pushes their children even more into become an extension of the parent. The close relationship between parent and child results in an exaggerated sense of connection between the children's successes and failures, and their parents. Understanding that, "...their success is not simply for themselves but for their whole family...children usually acknowledge their heavy responsibility to work hard on education."<sup>28</sup> Additionally, in the tradition of filial piety, parents expect their children, usually the eldest sibling, to take care of them when they are old. This expectation leads parents to further depend on the children's educational and subsequent economic success. The state paralleled this engrained familism with the ruler-subject relationship. Citizens' actions, both their successes and failures, were directly linked not only with their families but also with the greater national narrative.

The traditional notion of collectivism also lent itself to this. With a focus on collective good, effort, discipline, and respect for authority, students in the education system understood their hard work as benefitting the public and their hardships as unimportant.<sup>29</sup> The post-war education system created by the state also firmly linked the parent-child relationship with the teacher-student rapport in order to broaden social control. Teachers held absolute authority and taught values through schooling, like parents do while raising children. Corporal punishment, in response to both poor behavior and poor grades, was employed to shape the young students into model citizens. The authoritative rule of teachers in schools paralleled the rule of the state, harsh but supposedly for the benefit of the people.

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<sup>27</sup> Park, Young-shin. pp. 100.

<sup>28</sup> Sorensen, Clark W. pp. 26.

<sup>29</sup> Park, Young-shin. pp. 95.

The importance placed on interpersonal relationships rooted in neo-beliefs by the state was so strong for individuals that adolescents with weak relations saw major personal ramifications. Poor parent-child and peer-peer relations resulted in increased social stress. Students experienced "...bullying, peer rejection, and peer abuse...[which] may have a direct effect on the genesis of at least some suicidal ideations and behavior in adolescents."<sup>30</sup> As stated above, family relations hold significant meaning and considerably influence adolescent psychological adjustment. Adolescents who have worse, more distant relations with their parents tend to have lower self-esteem while; "...adolescents who have more intergenerational fusion with their parents tend to have higher self-esteem."<sup>31</sup> A better relationship between parent and child resulted in greater self-esteem and better mental health for the child. Young individuals who in anyway rejected mainstream social values, such as familism, become isolated from ordinary society, without a sizable support system of friends or family.<sup>32</sup> The lack of emotional support for these people would incline them to perform serious acts such as suicide.

The structure and traditional values behind the post-war education system have consistently contributed to adolescent mental illness and suicide. The South Korean state, exploiting the public's desires for comprehensive education, manipulated key Confucian and traditional Korean concepts including familism, collectivism, filial piety to shape the education system for their assistance. Paralleling the Confucian five relationships with citizens' relationship with the state, the government pushed individuals to view success in education as a duty and a necessary step in helping the nation. The system was altered throughout the regimes to help maintain social control and develop obedient, model citizens. When individuals lacked

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<sup>30</sup> Kim, Y.S., Leventhal, Bennett, Koh Y.J., and Boyce, Thomas W. "Bullying Increased Suicide Risk: Prospective Study of Korean Adolescents." *Archives of Suicide Research*. pp. 25.

<sup>31</sup> Chun, Young-ju. pp. 460.

<sup>32</sup> Park, Byeong-chul. pp. 74.

the necessary social relations, they were bullied and ostracized. Their mental health often deteriorated, leaving them significantly more vulnerable to depression and suicide ideation. These neo-Confucian and authoritarian ideas played substantial roles in the modern Korean education system, which led to an increased amount of importance on education as well as pressure thrown on young students to succeed in the new education system.

## Chapter Four

The amalgamation of South Korea's unique concept of suicide, and the application of traditional beliefs as well as authoritarian ambitions in forming the modern education system have resulted in a overall high rate of adolescent suicide in South Korea. However, these causes do not fully explain the most recent surge in adolescent suicide. To understand, one has to look at the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis and its extensive repercussions. The resulting IMF bailout slingshot the South Korean economy into a new era through radical governmental reforms that ultimately impinged on almost every part of society. The neoliberal values imposed through the restructuring led to major change in economic practices and concepts. The shift to neoliberalism not only affected the national economy and job market but also the education culture and prominent belief system of South Korea. Lastly, the economic reforms extended the power of the Internet, and generated extreme consumerism as well as the Hallyu wave, leading to an inflated focus on physical appearance. All of these side effects of the 1997 financial crisis play a function in the augmented suicide rate of the past near two decades.

The mammoth restructuring of the national economy showed immediate effects, however, they were not advantageous to the public. As the Korean government gave certain control over to the *chaebols*, the conglomerates immediately used their newly given powers by administering sweeping layoffs. The unemployment rate spiked as companies shifted from regular to irregular workers to decrease costs. The trend of irregular workers is still strong in the Republic of Korea today. In 2007 8.6 million Korean individuals were categorized as irregular workers, making up 54% of the total workers.<sup>33</sup> Immediately the unemployment rate, including you unemployment, drastically increased; however, the national unemployment rate has since decreased and stabilized. In 2014, South Korea had the lowest unemployment rate of all of the

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<sup>33</sup> Lee, Ho-jeong. "KTX Struggle Spotlights Labor Problem." *Korea JoongAng Daily*.

OECD nations: 3.5%.<sup>34</sup> However the youth unemployment rate, youth being individuals aged 15 to 29, never has returned to normal, with it reaching 12.5% in February of 2016.<sup>35</sup> A reason for the sustained youth unemployment is due to the fact that there are few prestigious job opportunities for adolescents. In greater quantity are temporary, marginalizing job position that do not actually secure a future occupation for the individual. By reason of the lack of future professional growth potential, even when these jobs do become available, individuals choose not to take them. South Korean adolescents have become dissatisfied with present working conditions further leading them to decline adequate, but not optimal, job offers. This is because they are expecting to find a superior position, one with occupational prospectus and good working conditions, in the future. This phenomenon, termed ‘wait unemployment,’ actually maintain the increased youth unemployment rate because so many individuals are counting on finding those jobs and they never do.<sup>36</sup> Many adolescents choose to prolong their time in university because of companies’ preference of hiring students still in their last year of school. Kang Jin-Ho, a twenty-six year old student at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, “...deferred graduating for years to maximize his employment chances...[He]’s applied for more than 70 jobs already in 2015 and has been rejected every time.”<sup>37</sup> In recent years the declining economic growth of South Korea has also begun to play a major role in the unemployment of youth. In 1989 the potential economic growth rate of the Republic of Korea was 8%, decreasing to 6% ten years later in 1999. Fifteen years later, in 2014, the national potential growth rate is not even 4%, coming in at 3.5%.<sup>38</sup> Whether due to wait unemployment or the dearth of suitable and regular

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<sup>34</sup> “Unemployment.” *OECD Data*.

<sup>35</sup> “South Korea Youth Unemployment Rate: 1982-2016.” *Trading Economics*.

<sup>36</sup> Choi, Youngsup. “Structural Factors behind Korea’s Youth Unemployment.” *Monthly KIET Industrial Economic Review. KOREA FOCUS*. pp. 110.

<sup>37</sup> Kim, Cynthia and Lee, Jiyeun. “Young and Old Fight Over Jobs in Korea as Generation Gap Widens.” *Bloomberg*.

<sup>38</sup> “South Korea Annual GDP Growth Rate: 1990-2016.” *Trading Economics*.

positions, this persistent high youth unemployment rate means a sizable portion of the qualified Korean population is inactive and dejected. These adolescents are stuck in a limbo and become depressed because they are not being able to apply their skills learning throughout the educational career, which they have spent so much time, energy and resources on for the majority of their lives.

Additionally the citizens of South Korea gradually experience rising inequality as a result of the restructuring. The rapid pace of the changes meant the government did not have the necessary safeguards organized, such as an extensive welfare system to manage the effects of the large-scale layoffs and ensuing surge of unemployed citizens. For those people who did maintain their job, suddenly tension between unemployed adolescents and employed older citizens arose. Young South Koreans urged older employees to retire in order to make available more positions for the younger generation. However, the Korean state had inadequate social security systems and safety nets to support early retirees, hence this ploy by adolescents could not have transpired. Youth unemployment affected young citizens in immense ways, for example, plans for future children and the ability to pay taxes and be a productive member of society. With no or constantly changing irregular jobs, adolescents have no hope for saving any large amounts of capital which leads to issues when the government begins to expect them to start paying taxes. The lack of occupation also deters young people from pursuing marriage and children, eroding population growth opportunities.

There is a critical weakness in terms of the connection between the job market and the education system. This weak linkage is, "...undermining the capability of Korea's economy to create employment and adjust to the changes of corporate manpower demands and labor

management practices.”<sup>39</sup> The lack of communication between schools and economic institutions cause universities to produce too many graduates for the quantity of jobs actually available in current Korean economy. Additionally, the school system does not understand the specific abilities needed in the existing economy, thus the institutes cannot adequately teaching their students the necessary skills to succeed in the professional world. Without a solid connection between the education system and the national job market, the probability of adolescents finding a job in the first place, and then actually flourishing at it, is slim to none.

The 1997 neoliberal economic shift also altered South Korean education, both in terms of formal reforms of the system and natural changes in the education culture. Official education reform that occurred post-bailout paralleled the neoliberal ideas of competition and deregulation. Moving away from the preceding ideas of uniformity, standardization and equality, the revised curriculum emphasized student excellence and creativity, in the hopes of preparing South Korean adolescents to join and compete in the global economy.<sup>40</sup> While the public education system maintained a semblance of uniformity, the massive boom of the private after-school sector, which started in the early 1990s, “...emerged as the vanguard of the unchecked privatization and marketization of education,”<sup>41</sup> significantly widening both the education and opportunity gap between wealthy and poor students. This widening gap placed a substantial amount of additional pressure and stress on students and their families, who had to pay for additional lessons.

Regarding changes to the education culture, with the government assuming a more hands-off, permissive role in society, the education system suddenly had much less structural support to protect and foster the young students. This modification of the system was a serious

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<sup>39</sup> Choi, Youngsup. pp. 106.

<sup>40</sup> Park, So Jin. “Educational manager mothers as neoliberal maternal subjects.” *New Millennium South Korea: Neoliberal Capitalism and Transnational Movements*. pp. 103.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

adjustment, but what made it worse was the added stress of an entire change in belief system. The neoliberal restructuring did not stop with the economy, neoliberal capitalist values, specifically individualism, became more accepted throughout society, directly challenging the traditional Korean values centered on collectivism. This tension between traditional and new values generated a slight break down of the conventional family unit. Younger generations began to resist established concepts such as filial piety and the expectation put on children to care for their parents when they grew old. Another neoliberal effect felt by students was the addition of individualism to society in terms of self-understanding. With the introduction of individualism, adolescents were abruptly treated as individuals. The stress and pressure usually felt by students still existed but now, that weight was solely on their shoulders. Neither the government nor the family unit was available to give adolescents the support they had become accustomed to. Furthermore, they could not even rely on the collective due to the recent dissemination of the concept of individualism. The education system itself did not radically change, however external forces had experienced change, which in turn affected each and every student, and their school experience. Young individuals experienced raw exposure to the culture, economy and social organizations. This intensified the stress placed on adolescents tremendously, amplifying emotional fatigue and mental distress. This excessive stress manifests itself through feeling pressured to conform to the mainstream and follow the standard track in education. The standard track involves preparation for the university entrance exam, taking the exam, and entering university.<sup>42</sup> The lack of alternative routes for adolescents stifles many individuals from finding their passion or other abilities. In her analysis of ‘normal’ Korean youth practices, Kyongwon Yoon introduces a student with an experience representative of many in the Korean schooling

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<sup>42</sup> Yoon, Kyongwon. “Cultural Practices of “Ordinary” Youth.” *Asian Studies Review*. pp. 381.



system: “There is nothing else I can do. I don’t have any other skills or talents... So, entering a university is kind of the only hope I can have... To be honest, I often get depressed... When I’m studying is the only time I feel happy. I don’t know what else I can do.”<sup>43</sup> The stress from adults for adolescents to live safely and not deviate from what is considered ‘normal,’ leads the students to feel restrained and like their worth solely is based in their achievements in academics. The single-track schooling system results in students culminating their time in high school not having obtained well-rounded skills. In an adolescent’s journal entry about recovering after a suicide attempt, the young woman, Ji Yeon, explains how gaining hobbies outside of academics assisted her recovery. She stated, “I never really had any hobbies, like sports. But after, through a friend I became interested in them. I found energy through [this]... and it became the source of life.”<sup>44</sup> It has been found that adolescents who lack the expected laser focus on the college-entrance exam actually clearly perceive themselves receiving less respect from their teachers.<sup>45</sup> A seventeen-year-old male student expressed his thoughts, exclaiming, “A school is supposed to be a place where kids prepare for the exam or for something else. But, actually this is not the case. We should only prepare for the exam! Otherwise, we are treated as nobody.”<sup>46</sup> These interviews show an aspect of standardized Korean education that does not respect or nurture individual uniqueness. The identity of Korean youth is increasingly comprised of only the aspect of education. When so much of one’s self is recognized based on one singular element, if one fails in that regard the individual can become utterly lost and question their identity and existence.

The first generation that felt the full effects of the shift to neoliberalism as well as the privatization of after-school tutoring and subsequent increased competitive nature in school,

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<sup>43</sup> Yoon, Kyongwon. pp. 383-384.

<sup>44</sup> Yoon, Ji Yeon. “Endless Life, and Pregnancy.” *Hope Click*.

<sup>45</sup> Yoon, Kyongwon. pp. 382.

<sup>46</sup> Yoon, Kyongwon. pp. 382.

entered college in the 2000s and have been termed the “spec” generation. When comparing the “spec” generation to the previous generation of adolescents, who entered college in the 1990s, the differences are staggering. The previous generation, or “new” generation, participated in a cultural liberalization in the late 1980s, where they resisted the authoritarian education system and gained power as youth in society.<sup>47</sup> That generation chose to focus on freedom from the system, creativity, and creation of national discourse, rather than academic success. This creativity and self-expression manifested itself through Internet companies and cultural industries founded by individuals of the “new” generation.<sup>48</sup> Compared to adults, the “new” generation viewed themselves as cultural consumers rather than laborers or economic producers. The “new” generation, “...were individuals of a consumerist society. At the same time, they were activists in generational politics fighting against the authoritarian culture of their parents’ generation altogether.”<sup>49</sup> However, the “spec” generation did not continue down the path of its predecessor. The aftermath of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, including increased dependency to global capital, adults’ fears of the future, and the privatization of the education sector all influenced the young “spec” generation causing them to return to the traditional schooling system and social roles. Individuals of the “spec” generation placed no importance on freedom or finding oneself, instead they focused on efficiency and effectiveness.<sup>50</sup> Competition between adolescents has reached a new high, with it influencing all aspects of adolescents’ lives. Throughout middle school, high school, and college, individuals participated in hours of after-school lessons and outside activities in order to keep up with others and increase their “specs,” or specifications. Due to this pressure, even personal relations between those in the “spec”

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<sup>47</sup> Cho, Hae-Joang. pp. 439.

<sup>48</sup> Cho, Hae-Joang. pp. 442.

<sup>49</sup> Cho, Hae-Joang. pp. 443.

<sup>50</sup> Park, Sun-Young. “Shinsaedae: Conservative Attitudes of a ‘New Generation’ in South Korea and the Impact on the Korean Presidential Election.” *Hankook Ilbo*.

generation deteriorated and, "...[grew] highly institutionalized, individualistic, and competitive."<sup>51</sup> The powerful effects of the financial crisis were revealed through the adolescents' greatest fear: that of being marginalized, of having an unstable life. What they wanted most was to be mainstream, safe from financial worries, simply normal. Neoliberal work organization combined with stiff competition between students for the best "specs" resulted in the self worth of "spec" generation members being directly tied to their 'market value.'<sup>52</sup> Additionally troubling was the lack of political agency the "spec" generation had, especially after understanding the historic role college students have played as dissenters of convention and elevators of national discourse in South Korea. Through growing up in the newly shifted neoliberal Korean society, these adolescents found the neoliberal idea of human capital, described in Chapter 2, normal.<sup>53</sup> The, "...language of inalienable rights and social justice is no longer relevant to students whose minds and bodies have already been heavily invested in the neoliberal project of human capital development."<sup>54</sup> The "spec" generation was a superstorm crafted together by government policies, the private education sector and individual parents. The "spec" generation, now established in the working world, will have carried over their stress, isolation and competition with them, further transforming the working culture of South Korea.

Another part of the schooling culture that influences the mental health of students is the growing prominence of bullying. In a survey by the Korea Institute of Health and Social Affairs released in March 2015, it was found that one in every three Korean elementary, middle, and high school students had been a victim of bullying at school.<sup>55</sup> Victims of continuous bullying commonly develop severe mental health issues and some go as far as successfully committing

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<sup>51</sup> Cho, Hae-Joang. pp. 447.

<sup>52</sup> Cho, Hae-Joang. pp. 449.

<sup>53</sup> Feher, Michel. "Self-Appreciation; or, The Aspirations of Human Capital." *Public Culture*. pp. 23.

<sup>54</sup> Cho, Hae-Joang. pp. 458.

<sup>55</sup> Kim, Se-jeong. "3 out of 10 students experience bullying in S. Korea." *Korea Times*.

suicide due to their torment. In 2011 after a Daegu middle school student committed suicide, police arrested two of his fourteen-year-old classmates and denounced their harassment of the deceased as a major contribution to the student's self-inflicted death.<sup>56</sup> The victim's suicide note indicated being a victim of frequent harassment that included beatings, extortion, and "...being dragged around by a cord around his neck."<sup>57</sup> Additionally, the police investigated and confirmed the two bullies sent the victim almost ten threatening messages a day for four months, up until the student took his own life. This severe bullying culture comes from the conformist nature of Korean society, further exacerbated by the pressure for normalcy after the 1997 financial crisis. When students analyze others and find differences, a common reaction is aggression and lashing out. In an editorial for the *Korea Herald*, a reporter attempts to explain the culture of bullying in Korean schools:

"Most of us are hopeless conformists who are afraid or hate to be different from others. You need a measure of courage to be different from others, even in a small and insignificant way. Unfortunately, in any conformist society like ours, we tend to ridicule and ostracize this type of person, or at least look at them with suspicion and contempt."<sup>58</sup>

Furthermore, in the past two decades the Internet has grown exponentially and now cannot be separated from youth culture. The 1997 neoliberal reforms and their aftereffects coincided with the explosion of the Internet, which generated a linkage between the two. With the shift to neoliberalism came the concept of globalization to Korea, and the surge in Internet usage at the turn of the millennium became a tool of facilitation for individuals. The stress caused by the range of consequences of the neoliberal reforms coupled with the new force of the Internet opened new arenas for bullying to exploit.

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<sup>56</sup> Koo, Dae-sun. "Bullying forces student to take his own life." *the hankyoreh*.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Watson, Richard. "Wang-tta Bullying in South Korean schools." *Papers of the British Association for Korean Studies*. pp. 121.

Given the magnitude of the Internet in lives of adolescents today it comes as no surprise that cyber-bullying has grown into a prominent threat. The Ministry of Information and Communication and the National Development Agency of Korea reported that in 2008, "...26.3% of elementary students, 81.8% of middle school students, and 93.3% of high school students use[d] a mobile phone."<sup>59</sup> The Internet gives an element of anonymity and equality to bullies that cannot exist with traditional bullying. Cyber-bullying shifts power dynamics between adolescents and makes their roles of observer, victim, and perpetrator, more fluid. Furthermore, the Internet, "...provides a place through which young people are able to separate from their parents and families, thereby expressing their feelings and developing their own identities."<sup>60</sup> Common methods of cyber-bullying include slander and rumor spreading, dissemination of personal information, sexual harassment, and personal threats. The power of cyber-bullying is rooted in the omnipresence of the act itself. These methods of victimization can be constant feature in the bullied individual's life, regardless of their location or precautions taken. A growing harassment scheme involves the widely used mobile instant messenger application, KakaoTalk. Groups of adolescents will frequently invite the victim to a private chat conversation and then commence attacking them with vicious language. In one such situation, Kang Mo-yang, a sixteen-year-old student, took her own life because she could not tolerate the unrelenting verbal abuse she was suffering in a chat room. Her father later explained that his daughter, "...had been habitually bullied by her ex-boyfriend's friends, after she broke up with him... Last May, she got herself into a quarrel with them in front of a convenience store near home, and then she was later invited to a KakaoTalk chat room, where the abusive language continued."<sup>61</sup> Ultimately, the pressure of normalcy resulting from the post-financial crisis fears combined with the timely rise

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<sup>59</sup> Tippett N. and Kwak K. "Cyberbullying in South Korea." *Cyberbullying in the Global Playground*. pp. 203.

<sup>60</sup> Tippett N. and Kwak K. pp. 205.

<sup>61</sup> Jeong Hui-wan. "'KakaoTalk Outcast' Female High School Student Commits Suicide." *Kyunghyang News*.

of the Internet caused an expansion and intensification of the bully culture which is still felt today.

Lastly, these economic reforms led to increased consumerism, as well as globalization and capitalism in the form of the second Hallyu wave. Both of these forces contributed to the unintended consequence of an obvious, hefty emphasis on physical appearance, causing lowered self-esteem and body image in adolescents. Today, Seoul, Korea is known as one of the top shopping destinations in the world. It is not possible for one to miss the copious amount of advertisements around the city, from colossal neon billboards to the pervasive ads throughout the public transportation system: on the stairway walls leading down to subway stations, beneath individuals' feet in the form of fliers, and affixed to the walls of the buses and subway cars. Small shops line the streets, while just a few blocks away is an enormous shopping mall full of international luxury stores. The two major groups who uphold the consumer culture of South Korea, which swelled to even greater proportions in the 2000s, are adolescents and women. Young citizens are a dominant consumer group, "...due to their increasing power, trend-setting and changing tastes" and their practice of conspicuous consumption.<sup>62</sup> Women, especially those aged 15 to 29, play a large role in the Korean consumer culture with the increasing weight placed on physical appearance. By snowball effect the growth of consumer culture amplifies social significance of external beauty, which in turn produces more need for material items, expanding consumerism all the more so.

The Korean beauty industry has particularly thrived in the past two decades because of this consumerism along with the popularization of the global Korean entertainment industry, and the notion formed recently equating beauty with success. After the economic crisis, the

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<sup>62</sup> Kacprzak A. and Dziewanowska K. "Does a global youth consumer exist? A comparative study of South Korea and Poland." *Journal of Marketing and Consumer Behavior in Emerging Markets*. pp. 49.

competition for jobs was so severe that people tried to find any advantage they could. In the end this led to a plastic surgery boom, pushing importance onto one's looks since skills did not give advantage anymore. In 2001, the South Korean beauty market, consisting of cosmetics, plastic surgery and dieting, was estimated to be worth \$7 billion United States dollars.<sup>63</sup> Meticulously managed Korean singers such as the members of the girl group Girls' Generation, internationally known due to the second Hallyu wave, advance the nation's obsession with physical beauty and set unrealistic beauty standards for adolescents. Korean female 'idols,' "...all have small faces, large eyes, and tiny button noses. Chins are pointed, cheeks are wide, and their faces glow artificially, imbuing them with the anime quality."<sup>64</sup> The popularization of K-Pop as a global phenomenon caused young women to actively pursue beauty ideals seen in the entertainment industry, no matter how manufactured they were. This intense focus on body appearance has pushed Korean women, aged 17 to 30, into having the greatest aspiration for weight loss among twenty-two countries in an international study. The greater the attention to physical beauty, the harder the fall of those who believe they do not live up to the beauty standards. South Korean women who see their weight as a severe concern have body distortion, lower self-esteem and a higher susceptibility towards depression.<sup>65</sup> The focus on physical appearance, and the ever-escalating beauty standards supported by South Korea's rampant consumerism and influence of Hallyu has resulted in serious distress on adolescents' personal body image and lowered self-esteem. These worsening outlooks on their bodies and themselves as a whole lead to a host of other psychological issues including depression and suicidal ideation.

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<sup>63</sup> Park, Woochul. "The longitudinal causal directionality between body image distress and self-esteem among Korean adolescents: The moderating effects of relationships with parents." *Journal of Adolescents*. pp. 405.

<sup>64</sup> Stone, Zara. "The K-Pop Plastic Surgery Obsession." *The Atlantic*.

<sup>65</sup> Kim, Oksoo. "Body Weight, Self-Esteem, and Depression in Korean Female Adolescents." *Adolescence*. pp. 319.

The neoliberal economic reforms caused by the Asian Financial Crisis disturbed sectors of the Korean economy beyond simply the national economic structure, culture, and job market. In addition to heightened youth unemployment furthered by the weakening economic growth and the trend of wait unemployment, neoliberalism influenced schooling culture undermining governmental and familial support of students. The strengthening system of individualism connected to neoliberalism pervaded the minds of citizens causing students to be viewed as more autonomous beings, with the stress of education and their schooling failures placed solely on their shoulders. The “spec” generation exhibited the aftereffects of such economic and cultural changes at the turn of the new millennium. Furthermore, the coinciding rise of the Internet enabled cyber-bullying to become a powerful tool for inhibited students to release their pent-up feelings, usually in the form of harassment and aggression towards other adolescents. The shift to neoliberalism also contributed to a rise in consumerism as well as the full globalization of the Korean entertainment industry. These movements generated an emphasis on physical appearance and a development of unrealistic beauty standards, in turn growing the number of adolescents with poor body image and self-esteem, as well as deteriorating mental health.



## Chapter Five

The Republic of Korea is experiencing a problem of suicide. While this situation has been developing since the armistice of the Korean War, it is more recently, only in the past two decades that the prevalence of adolescents taking their own lives has decidedly swelled. This leads to the question of why. What forces are effecting the young Korean population in such a way that the adolescents turn towards suicide for relief? What is this troubling phenomenon rooted to? Through examination of newspaper articles, adolescents' journal entries, and student interviews, an explanation and understanding of the causes of the concerning recent trend can be grasped.

The dynamic history of modern South Korea played a significant role by aiding in the construction of the concept of suicide. The state's control and citizens' responses throughout three different eras of Korea history display how suicide as a response to pressure of varying forms developed in Korean society. Economic pressures placed on the population during the developmental period caused a lack of focus on the people's wellbeing, as well as awful working conditions. Individuals began utilizing suicide as a method of political dissent, a theme that continued during the democratization period of the 1980s. Pressure moved from the economic sphere to the social, with the state focusing its attention on achieving obedience from citizens. Suppressing those critical of the government along with controlling the press in order to maintain power, the government grew more anxious as the movement for democracy intensified. After attaining at least an appearance of democratic government, the nation underwent another significant shift at the turn of the millennium with the region-wide financial crisis and resulting bailout. While there was less overt social pressure from the state, the citizens still experienced a form of pressure due to the lack of structural support in both the economic and educational

sectors. With the restructuring, major concepts such as human capital, and values important in the economy completely changed. The relationship between the state and its citizens, and the resulting pressures placed on individuals laid a foundation for suicide to normalize and continue on as a social problem.

In post-war South Korea, the national government, while constructing the new education system, emphasized Confucian concepts and traditional Korean values to ensure social control and advance the country through its citizens' cultural capital. Drawing on collectivism, familism, and the Confucian concept of social relations, the state paralleled the parent-child relationship with the ruler-subject relationship. This caused individuals, specifically young students, to connect their personal success in education with national development and improvement, placing significant stress on them to excel. Any adolescent with poor social relations, either between parent and child, teacher and student or peer and peer reflected poorly on the person and resulted in personal repercussions. The employment of traditional social values by the state demonstrates the influence the belief systems hold in Korean society still to this day.

The most recent surge in suicide of Korean adolescents occurred due to an amalgamation of the foundation laid by said historical regimes and pressures, the impact of both traditional values and authoritarian ambitions, and widespread unintended outcomes of the economic restructuring after the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis. The reforms implemented due to the IMF bailout understandably impacted the South Korean economy, however not all the change was positive. The restructuring resulted in increased unemployment, a weakening economic growth rate, a bleak job market, and a complete paradigm shift of economic concepts and how individuals were treated as workers. Outside of the economic sector, the neoliberal reforms transformed the education culture and students psyches. While the reforms meant a weakened

government role in the education system, the advancement of individualism brought about by the reforms weakened the family unit and changed how society viewed students. Adolescents found themselves without the support structure and safety nets they had previously had. The coinciding rise of the Internet enabled the adolescents of South Korea to expel some of their building stress and anxiety through the act of cyber-bullying. Furthermore the shift towards neoliberalism progressed capitalism, consumerism, and globalization. The second Hallyu wave occurred, moving it from a regional phenomenon to a global one, further contributing to the enormous emphasis placed on physical appearance in South Korea. As a consequence of this attention on appearance, adolescents who believed themselves to not have the Korean beauty ideals developed lower self-esteem and worse body image. Students connected their apparent lack of beauty with a lack of future success, and the problems then continued to exacerbate on top of each other, resulting in a spiral of decline for adolescents' mental health.

Possible future additions to this research and analysis include the role of media in the South Korean trend of suicide, further research on the evolution of methods of bullying specific to the Republic of Korea, and the government's response or lack thereof to this concerning social problem that clearly is not resolving itself naturally. The media, including the press as well as forms like films and television shows, incorporate suicide into its reporting and plotlines. How much of an effect does this have on continuing the normalization of suicide in South Korea? What is the relationship between the education culture, teachers, and the bullying culture? What is the national government currently doing to take steps to curb the suicide trend, and are any of their approaches actually working? Suicide in South Korea is a complex topic, one of which scholars cannot pinpoint as being caused by a singular issue. Nor is it helpful to merely give an umbrella cause of depression but not delve further into what spurs such despair. The adolescent

suicide situation in South Korea has become a national issue, and it is showing no signs of ending any time soon. Scholarship and research of the phenomenon and its roots must continue, because with understanding a true solution cannot be discovered.

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