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Unruly Narrative: Negative Media Rhetoric in Contemporary South Korea

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Abstract

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By Seung-Hyon Lee

This thesis aims to discuss how three indispensable yet broken societal systems in contemporary South Korea have led to the collective frustration of the South Korean psyche. Despite South Korea's lauded progress in recovering from periods of extreme poverty and suffering under Japanese colonial rule which ended in 1945, there has been a lack of global awareness of its social problems. The outside world remains uninformed that South Korea has become a trauma conscious society, represented by the mounting frustration of South Koreans who feel manipulated, stifled, and abused.

By dissecting popular contemporary media platforms in South Korea, I explore the active dialogue and interaction which both actors and online media consumers present. Through such bimodal representations in contemporary media, I aim to overtly reveal the societal undercurrents of a nation desperately suffering. Media has become a vehicle in which citizens have reflected their underlying discontent, which is deeply rooted in national culture. Throughout this thesis, I commonly refer to such individuals and groups on virtual communities as netizens. The term 'hell Joseon' broadly refers to the state of living in South Korea as an inescapable reality of 'living hell'. It has become popular among South Koreans since 2015. This interdisciplinary study reveals that South Korea has lost its linchpin of stability and happiness; the perception of 'hell' has extended far beyond ordinary individuals and has come to define the consciousness of an entire nation.

I divide my thesis into three chapters; each represents a common, relatable facet present in the everyday life of a South Korean. The four chapters are: the origins of negative media rhetoric, the corporate life, the education system, and the virtual celebrity culture. Throughout the thesis, I do not treat each facet as independently contributing to the mass negative rhetoric. Rather, the unique interplay between all four facets manifests itself into a complicated system of widespread negative rhetoric. First, I briefly explain the origins of negative media rhetoric and describe the manifestation of such rhetoric in the context of South Korea's neoliberal reform period, which transpired after Japanese colonial rule and the Korean War. Second, I discuss the grueling education system in South Korea, in both the public and private sectors. Both public and private schools have gained notoriety for their long and draining hours, inflicting 'unreasonable' stress and financial burdens upon individual students and families. Third, I discuss the corporate culture in South Korea through a famous, 20-episode fictional series called Misaeng. The show tells the story of a young contract-employee named 'Jang Geu-Rye' working to survive and become a regular full-time employee. It has gained nationwide popularity for narrating and representing the chilling realities of corporate life in South Korea. The behavior of netizens on multiple online communities reflects the resulting angst and negativity which many individuals have come to harbor. Finally, I discuss the birth and rise of popular virtual entertainment streamers who have rattled the silent psyche of millions. This is something which has been rarely or never seen in the past and which is now vividly portrayed in the form of negative media rhetoric in contemporary South Korea.

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Introduction

Media has become an essential tool representing the minds and voices of the South Korean people. For this thesis, popular mass media comes in the form of entertainment and online platforms such as *Misaeng*, YouTube, Afreeca TV, and DC Inside. Regardless of gender, age, or ideological differences, Koreans have found ways to utilize media platforms to connect with like-minded individuals and share their emotions.

With the popular emergence of mass media in South Korea, I observed a unique pattern in South Korean culture surrounding the discourse of 'hell Joseon', a term which I first read in a book titled *Korea's Quest for Economic Democratization* by Youngmi Kim. In one chapter of her book, *Hell Joseon: Polarization and Social Contention in a Neo-liberal Age*, she notes how popular platforms such as "Twitter, Snapchat, and Line have transformed not only how Koreans communicate, but also the way in which grievances are aired and discontent is channeled."[1]

In Kim's book, she also states that the financial disparity which exists among different individuals in South Korea is one of the many reasons why South Koreans are generally discontent about their state of living. Youngmi notes how the divide between the have's (*kap*) and the have-nots' (*eul*) is becoming wider in society, leading to a greater gap in socioeconomic status between individuals and households.[2] Her observation made me wonder if there was any connection between angry rhetoric in the media and dissatisfaction with one's socioeconomic status. From there, seeing troubles in the corporate system, in the education system, and in celebrity culture, I began to wonder if there was a larger, unidentified societal problem in South Korea.

[1] Kim, Youngmi. *Korea's Quest for Economic Democratization Globalization, Polarization and Contention*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.
[2] Ibid, 1

Thus, for my thesis, I investigated the discontent and fury found in South Korean media rhetoric by hypothesizing about their origins of discontent. Furthermore, social media platforms and online communities such as YouTube, Afreeca TV, and DC Inside have allowed me to trace both the direct and indirect interactions between ordinary netizens and streamers. This directly provides a unique space not only for adults to express their discontent, but where young Koreans can come together to question and defy the 'norm'. This is significant because when one investigates the root causes of negative media rhetoric, it reveals that the education system is a major factor. I hypothesize that the established norm of success in South Korea has depended heavily on one successfully surviving the harsh years of a testocracy. Matriculating into a prestigious college, then entering a large corporate firm is regarded as the pinnacle of achievement for a South Korean. I have found an inextricable connection between powerlessness in corporate culture, desperation in the education system, and the feeling of irrelevancy in celebrity culture manifesting into one pained voice in media rhetoric.

The desire to connect different societal issues in South Korea to negative media rhetoric arises in part from a fascination with South Korea's rise from ashes as an economy. Could it possibly have emerged from such circumstances unscathed?

It was not long after Korea's liberation from the torturous Japanese colonial rule in 1945 when it found itself scrambling to recover from a brutal war. The Korean war which ended in 1953 left South Korea in a state of devastation with casualties numbering over a million. In the aftermath, there were attempts to revitalize the country's national infrastructure and economy as well as reinvigorate the perished hopes of the people of Korea. However, these efforts came at an enormous cost under the authoritarian regimes of ex-presidents Syngman Rhee and Park Chung-Hee. South Korea is now a nation unrecognizable from what it once was roughly half a century

ago. The country now boasts the 11th largest economy in the world with the nation thriving with global popularity in technology, education, fashion, food, and music.

In 1960, the country's per capita income was less than $100; now it stands at $12,000. South Korean male students reported the second-highest mean score of 528 in mathematics [jointly with Estonia], after Japan, which ranked first with a mean score of 532. South Korea also boasts cutting-edge technology with global companies such as Samsung and LG leading at the forefront, with an annual revenue in 2019 totaling "230.40 trillion won and 27.77 trillion won in operating profit [approx. 218 billion US dollars and 25 billion US dollars, respectively]." K-pop groups such as BTS routinely rank first on billboard charts worldwide. The marketization of popular fire noodle snacks produced by Samyang has reached accumulated sales of over around 1 trillion won [approx. 900 million US dollars] as of July 2019. The producer of the noodles, Samyang, reported that foreign markets account for 80% of total sales of the product. South Korea has successfully exported its popularity overseas and has leaped far ahead of the poverty-stricken, desolate nation it was in the past.

Despite the incredible financial success that South Korea has enjoyed since the turn of the 21st century, the nation has unfortunately failed to address and tackle lingering setbacks in three foundational areas. The main issues are the abuse of powerless employees in corporate culture, the effort-to-reward ratio within the education system, and the manifestation of hateful rhetoric in popular celebrity culture. These degrading societal issues have become ingrained in the lives of ordinary South Koreans at a rudimentary level, and thus there is an imperative need to review and analyze them. I will explain each foundational area individually and then collectively. I hypothesize that the critical breeding ground for the three system degrading facets emerged

during the early reform periods of the 1960s, during South Korea's recovery from Japanese colonial rule and the Korean War.

Research Methodology

Throughout this thesis, I explore diverse media platforms in South Korea. They include a fictional TV series called *Misaeng*, YouTube, Afreeca TV, and an online community thread called DC Inside.

In the movie *Misaeng*, I first analyze the rhetoric and dialogue of individuals in a corporate firm in South Korea. I explore the relationships between gender, rank, and affiliation. This provides the unique opportunity for me to analyze the dynamic interplay of not only employees of a subordinate rank but also between corporate bosses. I also analyze the powerlessness evident among young employees in South Korea who struggle to adapt to the strict hierarchical corporate culture. Reflecting more than rank, this powerlessness extends to females of a higher rank. The working class in South Korea can relate to the struggles of the employees and bosses depicted in scenes of *Misaeng*. I investigate powerlessness from this vantage point.

Second, I analyze YouTube and Afreeca TV streamers. I observe and analyze the rhetoric about them and what goes on between them and netizens. I even explore the interaction between streamers themselves. Another platform I investigate is DC Inside. From this platform I get the clearest view of the netizens' perspectives about the world of online streamers and their emotions about the reality of living in South Korea. Although netizens largely remain anonymous, it is their comments that are investigated and not their persons. Their comments are expressive and reveal the hidden sentiments of many South Koreans. As a result, these Netizens are valued as representative of South Koreans and their views on lingering issues. There is no

concern about bot usage because while netizens upload their comments under pseudonyms on DC Inside, their IP addresses are always displayed. This lends credibility and authenticity to their comments.

I have used the McCune-Reischauer system of romanization for certain Korean vocabulary words, but not all names.

Origins of Negative Rhetoric

Economic Origins

During Park Chung Hee's authoritarian rule, neoliberal market reforms actively reshaped the rustic setting of the nation. Some of his reforms would lead to harmful establishments in the corporate sector that cannot be easily removed today. Park was able to take advantage of what is described as a "nascent group of industrial capitalists who were invited to enrich themselves in the process."[3] He first imposed heavy restrictions upon political opponents. With these measures in place, he could easily arrest those who were found guilty of corruption. Now free to pursue his own economic agenda, Park closely monitored and even emulated aspects of the Japanese model of market reform. Moreover, he stressed the importance of an export-oriented economy. In David Harvey's book titled 'A brief history of Neoliberalism', it states "The Korean state supported this [Japanese] export-led strategy by mobilizing internal savings, rewarding successful businesses, … Steel, shipbuilding, petrochemicals, electronics, automobiles, and machinery."[4]

Businesses began to flourish as South Korea's economic reforms took shape and yielded progressive results. Park, in the meantime, would show great favoritism to those who were loyal

[3] Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. MTM, 2019. p. 107
[4] Ibid

to him as South Korea molded its socioeconomic potential. Chaebols[5], as businesses considered loyal to powerheads are called, flourished in this economy. Already by the mid-1980s, three chaebols accounted for one-third of the national product.[6] By that point, the chaebols had accumulated enough power and influence in the nation to begin dismantling the state's impressive regulatory apparatus. Furthermore, "The close and often corrupt nexus of power that bound the leadership of the chaebols and the state so closely together proved very hard to break."[7] However, it is important to note that South Korea did not completely imitate foreign models when systematizing and implementing the nation's economic policies. The book *The Park Chung Hee Era: the Transformation of South Korea* describes that while South Korea "heeded U.S. advice on macro policy guidelines or used Japan as its benchmark in its design or micro industrial policy, foreign ideas were adopted only partially and selectively through syncretic learning processes."[8] The lingering effects of Park Chung Hee's neo-liberal policies are clearly visible to this day. While the nation has rapidly advanced under its own agenda, aspects of the public's suffering and discontent during the process were, unfortunately, not fully resolved.

Since solidifying their power and authority, large chaebol companies now run South Korea's economy. With unparalleled authority and nepotism having come to define the chaebols' identities, they now represent South Korea's leading companies that dictate the lives of millions of Koreans and guide the trajectory of the entire nation. Concurrently, competition has become intense and college graduates are finding it increasingly difficult to land a job at large

[5] Chaebols are individuals in South Korea known to run large conglomerate businesses who possess great authority and influence
[6] Harvey, 107
[7] Ibid, 108
[8] Vogel, Ezra F., and Byung-Kook Kim. *The Park Chung Hee Era: the Transformation of South Korea.* Harvard University Press, 2013. p. 68

corporation run by a chaebol. The chance to work at companies such as Samsung is regarded as a dream for young college graduates who shed blood and tears to go through the process of getting recruited. However, the process is far from easy. The promise of working at such large companies in South Korea "offers not only a good salary and benefits but also holds the key to a good marriage in this Asian country where Confucian traditions run deep."[9]

Interestingly, chaebols have not always flourished in South Korea despite their commanding influence and authority. The image and reputation of the chaebols reached a low point in the 1970s and 1980s particularly among their own employees.[10] Despite such occurrences, the desperation of university graduates to land a job at a conglomerate firm remains a dream in most cases. In the past, efforts were made to contain the sheer influence of such chaebols and large companies. The South Korean government ordered the conglomerates to hold their '*ipsashihŏm*' or entrance examinations on the same day so that graduates from the most prestigious and best schools could not monopolize the available jobs. President Kim Young Sam[11] attempted to purge corruption in his first three years in office. He vowed to impose institutional reforms by "limiting campaign spending and regulate political fundraising", as well as conducting investigations into the "slot machine and Tongwha Bank affairs."[12] Despite such attempts to purge widespread corruption, government officials were quick to point out that they had no intention of dismantling the conglomerates as that would cripple the nation's economy. By 2000, leading chaebol groups like LG, Samsung, and Hyundai had become the nation's dominant companies as the Samsung group alone now constitutes "roughly 20 percent of South

[9] Park, Ju-min. "South Koreans Cram for Dream Jobs at Samsung." Reuters, Thomson Reuters, 8 Nov. 2013, www.reuters.com/article/us-korea-samsung-students-idUSBRE9A704D20131108. Retrieved February 24, 2021.
[10] Lafayette, De Mente Boye. *Korean Mind: Understanding Contemporary Korean Culture.* Tuttle Publishing, 2018. p. 114
[11] President of South Korea from 1993-1998.
[12] Yoon, Sanghyun. *South Korea's Kim Young Sam Government: Political Agendas*. University of California Press, www.jstor.org/stable/2645497?read-now=1. Retrieved February 21, 2021. p. 512

Korea's gross domestic product."[13] The salaries of workers at small to mid-sized companies were "less than half of those made by employees at large companies"[14] according to 'Statistics Korea', which goes on to show the pressures faced by South Korean graduates. One student identified as 'Kang', a graduate of a four-year institution who searched for a job in Seoul, said in an online Korean newspaper article published in 2020: "what is the point of even trying if I can't get in?"[15]

Origins of the Education System

Following the end of the Japanese colonial occupation, Korea was faced with the task of reforming its education system. Under Japanese rule, both the Korean language and ways of thinking were suppressed, and the question now stood as to how the Koreans would go about implementing change. Under the influence of USAMGIK[16], Korea set to re-establish its previous systematized model heavily influenced by the Japanese. However, Korea re-introduced the dominance of the Korean language in textbooks and centered the overall school curriculum on the Korean language and culture. The underlying agenda of the reform was called the '*saegyoyugundong*' or the New Education movement, which was fostered around the educational philosophy of John Dewey.[17] It set to create "an equal opportunity for all and the development of self-reliance and individual responsibility." The idea challenged students to think independently and aimed to "provide a foundation for the reconstruction of the social order into a

[13] Marlow, Iain. "South Korea's Chaebol Problem." The Globe and Mail, 24 Apr. 2015, www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/international-business/asian-pacific-business/south-koreas-chaebol-problem/article24116084/. Retrieved February 28, 2021.
[14] "SME Workers Earn Less than Half of Conglomerate Employees." Korea Times, 22 Jan. 2020, www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/biz/2020/08/367_282341.html. Retrieved March 3, 2021.
[15] "'어차피 떨어질텐데..." 청년들 취업의 꿈 접었다." Www.donga.com, 24 June 2020, www.donga.com/news/Society/article/all/20200625/101676074/1. Retrieved February 20, 2021.
[16] U.S. Military Government in Korea
[17] Beach, J. M. *Children Dying Inside: A Critical Analysis of Education in South Korea*. San Antonio; Southwest Press, 2011. p. 36

progressive cultural identity."[18] By championing democratic ideals and abolishing communist elements, the U.S. promoted a decentralized education system strictly opposed to the bureaucratic systems of Germany and Japan.

In the classroom, the U.S. sought to give students more autonomy than teachers, an idea "diametrically opposed to that of the Japanese."[19] Central figures such as Yu Ok-kyom and O Ch'on-sok, along with English trained Korean educators Paek Nak-chun (George Paik) and Kim Hwal-lan (Helen Kim) played key roles in reshuffling the thoughts and structure of the educational philosophy of South Koreans, aiming to balance native cultural aims with American educational qualities.[20]

Despite such efforts to reorganize the education system, there was little that changed in the curriculum in the early years. Korea remained highly authoritarian and centralized in 1946 and 1947 despite efforts at active reform. Administrative efforts were made to appoint local school boards imitating the American model, as this was seen as a possible solution to resolve key issues. Several changes were made to shift authority and responsibility to local councils and communities. Things remained highly centralized as "61.7 percent of the funding for elementary schools came from the central government and 38.3 percent from local government sources."[21] Yet, the seeds were planted for people to self-actualize and recognize that they were stuck under authoritarian rule.

But there was something else which happened amid reform efforts. Under the brief three-year American occupation from 1945-1948 as well as under new agendas promoted by the South

[18] "Establishing the Educational System, 1945–1951." Education Fever: Society, Politics, and the Pursuit of Schooling in South Korea, by Michael J. Seth, University of Hawai'i Press, 2002, pp. 34–73. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt6wqt47.6. Accessed February 10, 2021.

[19] Beach, 36
[20] Ibid
[21] Ibid

Korean government from 1949-1951, there was also a change of course in the nation's drive for educational success. After intermittent periods of unrest, enrollment in both primary and tertiary education progressively increased. By November 1947 there were "20,545 students enrolled at 29 colleges and universities compared to 3,039 Koreans attending 1 of 19 institutions of higher learning. Since 1945 and the end of the Korean war, South Korea has developed into a nation which boasts the "highest share of young adults with tertiary education, with students entering tertiary education at a younger age than the average for OECD countries…Enrollment rates in early childhood are high in 2018-2019."[22] In Sungwoong Kim's 'Rapid Expansion of Higher Education in South Korea: Universal Higher Education in a Hurry' it was noted that approximately 11,300 students were enrolled in around 50 higher education institutions, a number which starkly contrasts to some 3.5 million students surveyed in 2005. In 2006, approximately half of the entire population aged between 18 and 21 matriculated in four-year institutions, with "70% of 25–32-year-olds having a tertiary degree in South Korea as of 2019 compared to 45% on average across OECD Countries."[23]

Despite South Korea's rapid advancements in promoting the importance of education, it has unfortunately become a hub of intense competition, emphasizing the need to 'succeed' at all costs. In Korea, success largely equates to receiving high exam scores, acquiring personal licenses—including foreign language tests such as the TOEFL or TOEIC—gaining admission to elite colleges, and landing a reputable job at a large sized firm.[24] An entire nation, consumed by "education fever" (*kyoyungnyol*), is the "institutionalized drive for academic, social, and

[22] "EDUCATION AT A GLANCE." (Korea) OECD at a Glance, OECD, www.oecd.org/education/education-at-a-glance/EAG2019_CN_KOR.pdf. Retrieved March 2, 2021.
[23] Overview of the Education System (Korea), OECD, gpseducation.oecd.org/CountryProfile?primaryCountry=KOR&treshold=10&topic=EO. Retrieved March 3, 2021.
[24] Beach, 14

economic success.[25] Private education can be divided in to four key areas: private K-12 schools, private colleges and universities, private tutoring (*kwaoe)*, and after school academies (*hagwons)*. In 2008, despite attempts to restrict hours of operation, it was narrowly upheld by the constitutional court in 2009.[26] From sending young children as young as the age of four to hagwons ranging from martial arts, music, fine arts to language and mathematics, the nation's obsession with education has fueled extreme anxiety and mental stress. This manifests itself in online media rhetoric in South Korea.

Celebrity Culture

On September 26, 2020, BTS, the seven-member male K-Pop group shocked the world when their song 'dynamite' topped billboard charts.[27] With the boom of *hallyu*[28], or the Korean wave which first sprang up in the late 1990s with the support of Kim Dae Jung's[29] administration, it has established fan bases across the globe and has been described as South Korea's secret weapon, soft power[30], a term first coined by an American political scientist, Joseph Nye in 1990. According to the ministry of foreign affairs[31], the number of hallyu-related organizations have been on the rise, "increasing by 7% and the number of members by 36%."[32] In exports, hallyu generated $9.48 billion in exports and hallyu-related exports and cultural content generated $4.42 billion, a 2.8 percent jump from 2017."[33]

[25] Ibid
[26] Ibid, 16
[27] "BTS." Billboard, www.billboard.com/music/bts/chart-history.
[28] A term referring to the international popularity of South Korean culture including music, movies, arts, and food
[29] South Korea's president from 1998-2003
[30] Nye, Joseph S. "Soft Power." Foreign Policy, no. 80, 1990, pp. 153–171. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/1148580. Accessed 24 Mar. 2021.
[31] Culture and the Arts. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea, www.mofa.go.kr/eng/wpge/m_19851/contents.do.
[32] Korean Culture and Information Service (KOCIS). "KOREA.NET." Hallyu (Korean Wave) : Korea.net : The Official Website of the Republic of Korea, www.korea.net/AboutKorea/Culture-and-the-Arts/Hallyu
[33] "Hallyu Export Earned $9.5 Billion in 2018." Korea Times, 3 May 2019, www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/art/2020/02/732_268277.html.

It is important to understand the timeline of South Korea's journey to cultural success. Hallyu can be divided into two distinctive, historical phases: hallyu 1.0 and hallyu 2.0. Dal Yong Jin, author of the book *The Rise of the New Korean Wave*, characterizes hallyu into two major historical developments: "hallyu 1.0 from 1997-2007 and hallyu 2.0 new Korean wave from 2008 to present."[34] Primary genres in hallyu 1.0 were soap operas, TV dramas, and online games, while hallyu 2.0 has included K-pop, animation, social media. There are major differences vis-à-vis major regions of consumers and followers, with hallyu 1.0 including consumers mainly in East Asia, while hallyu 2.0 has extended its audience to Asia, Europe, and North America[35].

With the growing influence of social media in peoples' lives, the popularity of hallyu has gone beyond representing popular movies and music [K-pop]. Individual broadcasters known as 'broadcasting jockeys' have been on the rise on popular platforms such as YouTube and Afreeca TV, making their names known to both domestic and international consumers. I would characterize the rise and proliferation of individual broadcasters as a third Korean wave, or hallyu 3.0 from the onset of 2018 until present. While hallyu 2.0 was characterized by individuals and groups sponsored by official entertainment industries and organizations, the recent rise of broadcasting jockeys has stirred nationwide interest known for producing a diverse range of contents known as '*mukbang*' eating shows or '*bo-ra*' (personal radios). These are just a few areas which were previously unseen in popular media.

One notable domestic platform which has become increasingly popular in South Korea is called Afreeca TV. The multi-million-dollar platform was founded in 2011 by American college educated CEO Seo Soo Kil. On this platform, individuals can freely broadcast themselves doing

[34]Jin, Dal Yong. New Korean Wave: Transnational Cultural Power in the Age of Social Media. University of Illinois Press, 2016. https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/10.5406/j.ctt18j8wkv.4.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A94e64db860cb9eb2d1a6bddf200a5587

[35] Ibid

anything so long as they do not violate the terms and conditions. These activities often include broadcasting sexually explicit parts of their bodies, or other acts considered inappropriate for non-adults such as smoking or drinking. Broadcasting jockeys stream live shows on the app, which are downloadable on various electronic devices such as computers and phones. Streamers can also get paid in the form of 'balloons' in which 1 balloon represents 100 korean won [approx. US $0.09]. Streamers are then allowed to cash out the balloons into Korean won, after taxes. Streamers often record live broadcasting videos and upload them on YouTube, in which they also generate profit by utilizing such platforms.

With the rise of popular streamers on Afreeca TV, given its low barrier to entry and cost-free registration, they have been recognized as 'unofficial celebrities.' However, public response from netizens and consumers has stirred anger and controversy. Online streamers on Afreeca TV and YouTube have been heavily criticized for making easy money from sitting in front of a camera and doing whatever they want. They are seen as making a fortune while the rest of the population struggles.

Education

Education is an obsession in South Korea. It is common for children to study up to seventeen hours a day while parents work tirelessly to support their children's education. For many young South Koreans, going to hagwons has become an unquestionable norm. While some students get extra academic assistance at hagwons, psychological stress and mental breakdowns have resulted from ridiculously long hours of studying. These have come to test the patience of young children and adolescents.[36]

[36] KBSEntertain, director. 안녕하세요 - 끝없이 이어지는 학원 지옥에서 탈출하고픈 11 살, 20141208. YouTube, YouTube, 9 Dec. 2014, www.youtube.com/watch?v=zY0Clm1ASKo&t=965s.

In the KBS entertainment show titled '*Annyeonghaseyo*'[37], an eleven-year-old student named Min Seo Hee appeared as a guest and shares her emotional experiences and struggles attending more than twelve hagwons. The title for that episode was 'the 11-year-old who wants to escape from hagwon hell.'

Min Seo Hee on the show *Annyeonghaseyo*, 7:38. The sentence translates as "my body does not feel like it used to as before."

At the start of the show, Min emphasized that she was unable to sleep until 1 AM due to a myriad of assignments from both school and hagwon. Min attended hagwon in almost every subject area taught at school. She admitted to attending hagwons for English, math, Korean language, art, taekwondo, book class, economics, history, politics, geography, natural science, and world history. She reported that she came back home as late as 8-9 PM. However, Min resumed her studies after coming back home and stressed that midnight always approached "fast".

[37] This was aired on 2014/12/08 Monday 11:15 pm on KBS 2TV.

Min expressed her exhaustion resulting from attending long hours in so many hagwons. One of the TV hosts on '*Annyeonghaseyo*,' Kim Tae Gyun, interrupted at the start of the show and expressed that "elementary school kids went to more hagwons, not any less than upperclassmen". He further implied that hagwons were a common destination where friends would meet each other and socialize. Vivid scenes illustrated adults on the show nodding and agreeing with each other, with Shin Dong Yup admitting that he sent his own children to hagwon, too.

When Kim looks at Shin and states, "You don't know which hagwons your child goes to, do you?" proves that it is almost a norm that a parent knows about a child's schedule by heart. This goes onto emphasize that parents are equally informed and pay a great deal of attention to their child's educational endeavors. A clear message is sent out to viewers that it is more than a responsibility to share the burden of the child attending hagwons and going through the resulting academic stress. Despite differences in roles where parents offer verbal support and instructions to the stressed-out child, the education fever has come to consume the entire nation across several generations.

It becomes an obligation for parents to devote their blood and sweat to the success of their children. Shin is casually mocked by other TV hosts when he admits to not knowing about which hagwons his child attends. Such a response reveals the utmost commitment and responsibility that parents in South Korea take on. When the audience hears about Min's overloaded hagwon schedule, they opened their mouths and stared at each other in awe. While Min, admitted to watching *Superman* and *Running Man* – two popular entertainment shows in South Korea – she smiled at the end as she stated that she spent every day working and

completing assignments. A direct message on her face implied that the time she spent working on assignments far outstripped her free time.

Min's brutal experience—despite being only eleven years old—was evident from her testimony that if she could not complete an assignment by 12 AM, she would continue working on the assignment until any time between 1 and 3 AM. The next day, she would wake up at 7:50 AM and go to school by 8:15 AM. It was evident that there was something clearly wrong about how Min was being sent to hagwons. What is troublesome is that it took something so extreme for parents to clue into the fact that their children might possibly be over-burdened. Even more troublesome is that when Min stated how "I feel that my body is tired and it doesn't feel like what it was in the past," people half-jokingly smiled and laughed at Min because they did not acknowledge her symptoms. Hagwons and the education system in South Korea were consuming an eleven-year-old girl, yet Min was not given the choice to quit. While talking to her parents about quitting, her mother shouted at Min and told her to just "go attend." Desperation in the education system has a two-fold meaning. People study desperately to achieve their dreams. At the same time, people might be desperate to quit under the crushing burden of the workload. But that is less apparent, because from childhood people are never even given the choice to quit. Those who do take extreme measures, even taking their own lives sometimes.

When Min's mother spoke among the audience, she responded to Min's overbearing academic life by stating that "every Korean parent who has a child would understand my situation". She further noted that it was common for parents to send their children to three different hagwons for one subject. This highlights the extreme desperation for success in the psyche of Korean parents as well as in children. As the video concludes, Seo Hee admits that she

was sent to a hagwon on her birthday. She could not even get to celebrate her birthday because her childhood was all business.

Goshiseng

For many people in South Korea, getting into college does not mark the end of an already grueling education process. Just like the *suneong*, many Koreans undertake another strenuous study process to become civil servants, teachers, or tax accountants, just to name a few respectable occupations. This is because these jobs offer steady income and are therefore considered stable. But to officially become a civil servant or a teacher, for example, one must take the national exam. Due to the high level of competition[38] and the rigor of the exam, however, many spend months or up to years studying for the exam. Some even depart their homes and leave for a place called the *goshichon*, a place named after *goshiseng*, which is a densely populated area with prep academies and housing for those preparing for the exam. Those who prepare for the exam are commonly called a *goshiseng*, *suhumseng*, or a *gongshiseng*, depending on which type of exam one is preparing for.

Goshichon is a unique place where many examinees force long study hours upon themselves, and they are willing to isolate themselves by renting out tiny rooms measuring only 3.5 square meters. Goshiwon[39] is a building which houses examinees, and it is usually privately run and contains dozens of rooms on multiple floors. Noryangjin, a district in Seoul, is one of several highly populated areas where examinees end up preparing for the goshi. While those in their teens prepared to get into colleges, one student notes that she is "devoting her 20s to

[38] "올해 9 급 공무원 공채 경쟁률 35:1." 한겨레, 14 Mar. 2021, www.hani.co.kr/arti/politics/administration/986682.html. Compared to 2020, applicants for a grade 9 civil service examination (the lowest rank of 'assistant') rose by approx. 6.9%, with 198,110 new applicants.

[39] Rooms include a bed, a desk, a shower, and a small toilet which one can barely fit into. Some rooms are so small that it is impossible to fully stretch ones legs on the bed without touching the walls. Every small noise could be heard, as one person noted "it is even possible to hear someone breathing next room".

become a civil servant for her future."[40] Choi In Hee was a student preparing to become a teacher who knew the harsh realities that she faced, and thus she checked herself into a goshiwon. With others studying hard, she knew that it was impossible for her to focus and study without isolating herself.[41]

Yet, with acceptance rates being so low, no amount of studying guarantees success. This is what is so unbearable for examinees. Because even should they desperately put themselves to a metaphorical hell to achieve their dreams and pass their exams, the competitive and corrupt work system cannot accommodate everyone and many leave empty-handed. Lee, Yong Ho, one of many examinees, shows an understanding of his predicament:

> "Even if I risk everything and give everything I have, only a few make it through. Less than 10%, maybe even 5% make it through" – Lee Yong Ho, 28 years old.[42]

South Koreans are not masochists or robots. Many desire to escape being cooped up for most of the day. A twenty-five-year-old, Lee Sang Won laments: "I want to quickly escape this place and play".

The desperation and drive surrounding the brutal process of passing a national test can be reflected below from someone who goes by the alias SS:

> After three years of studying for the exam, I feel like I'm an exception. I get these thoughts countless times throughout the day. Still, I persisted and checked and thought that this would be the last time studying for the exam. But while I was studying for the exam yesterday, tears rushed… It seems like everything would be

[40] KBS Documentary, director. [다큐 3 일] 그럼에도 불구하고-노량진 고시촌 (1/2). YouTube, YouTube, 16 Jan. 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=wqKl8UbNuzw&t=605s. Retrieved February 13, 2021.
[41] Ibid, 4:09
[42] Shown at 13:30.

over if I study for one more year, but that thought itself is an addiction. I no longer think this is the path for me.[43]

What is most tragic about SS's comments is that SS's only solace is that he can cling onto a dream for a little while longer. He does not like his prospective chances of passing his examinations. But he survives – though exhausted – by convincing himself that he can take another test should he fail.

Many students repeatedly retake the exams even if they do not pass, as the system lets anyone take it for as long as they want can be deceiving to some. This gives many people the false hope of making it to the finish line if they try hard enough. However, that is not the case. And, in the end, this desperation manifests itself in anger and desperation through negative rhetoric.

The *Suneong* Again

Despite the usually grueling experience, entering a hagwon is a considered a privilege. Kim Chi Hyun went around trying to register for lessons at hagwons but found that none accepted him. This was because he had no previous experience in attending hagwons, which made the hagwons worry that he may affect the atmosphere of the learning environment. This left Chi Hyun in shock, so he attended a local university instead. The level of education at hagwons is thus comparable and maybe even better than some universities. Soon after, he took out his deposit without his parents knowing, and told his mother, "I'll give it one more shot." He cried and soon devoted himself to taking the entrance exam for the third time.

There are even entrance exams to get into a hagwon. Furthermore, only one in 50 pass this entrance exam. It is mentioned in the video that students are "drilled endlessly", but people

[43] Ss. "꿈 같던 4 년을 뒤로하고 난 물러간다... - 공무원 갤러리." *디시인사이드*, 18 Apr. 2021, gall.dcinside.com/board/view/?id=government&no=13755109. Retrieved April 20, 2021

endure because they believe that attending hagwons is a privilege. People are people so desperate for success that they are willing to be treated in such a sub-human manner so long as they attain satisfactory results.

Part of the reason, however, why students are willing to endure so much is because they feel inferior. Not in only is the idea that students have no room for error ingrained at a young age, but students are trained to believe that their results are never good enough. Thus, inferiority complex (*yŏltŭnggam*) is one of the many reasons to explain the desperation of South Korean students. In the video, Jang Ho describes that he believed that he was behind everyone else. "The people around me were all good at studying, and all of them ended up going to colleges. However, for me, I was left behind and felt inferior." [44]

Though students feel stressed from hagwons, they also feel that they owe much of their success to hagwons, should they attain it. Given that Lee later reveals that his experience of studying for the exams paid off as he replied "Now I don't feel inferior and there is no need to feel that way" it reveals a unique aspect about hagwons and their role in the education system in South Korea.

A loss of identity

In South Korea, once a student commits to taking the *suneong* exam, the eight-hour long college entrance exam held once a year in November, they sacrifice everything. Throughout the process of preparing for the exam, many distance themselves from family and friends, and they lock themselves up for up to 15 hours a day in classrooms and private study spaces. It is considered normal for one to give up basic hobbies and completely dedicate himself to the due

[44] Journeyman Pictures, director. "Academic Pressure Pushing S. Korean Students to Suicide." YouTube, YouTube, 10 Aug. 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=TXswlCa7dug. Retrieved February 18, 2021.

process. As a result, desperation and anxiety slowly consumes the individual preparing for the exam, as many students describe the process as "battle against oneself".

First, I watched a YouTube video titled: "The things I gave up while studying for my 3rd Suneong."[45] It interviews four students, Lee Jang ho (2), Kim Chi Hyun (3), Lee Ha ram (2), Kim Su Sung (2) who took the *suneong* at least once. Each of the four individuals in the video discusses the opportunities they gave up and the hardships they experienced during their tough journey of studying for the *suneong* multiple times. I took the responses of the four individuals and the responses by the netizens to analyze the sentiment surrounding the pressures of a *chaesusaeng.*[46]

In the video, Chi Hyun notes that he had gained over 30kg while he studied for the exam, emphasizing that "he gave up everything for an educational degree." Previously he aspired to become an actor and thought that a college degree was not as important. However, once Chi Hyun faced the harsh realities of how valuable an educational degree was in South Korea, he committed himself to the arduous process of studying for the exam. Once he committed, he now had to give up the ordinary things he loved doing. In his leisure time, he loved to dress up nicely and spend time focusing on his style. However, once he chose to devote himself to studying for the *suneong*, he gave up his hobby and interests. He spent 15000 won [approx. US$15] on three black shirts. From his 30kg weight gain to changing his dress code to three black shirts, he underwent a physical transformation, a sign of change signaling monotony and suffering.

Like Chi Hyun, Su Sung also underwent a transformation. While Chi Hyun visibly changed in appearance, Su Sung started to talk less to his mother at home. Once Kim Su Sung woke up, he only spoke 6 words. The six words [same in English and Korean] were: "Mom, I am

[45] Korean college entrance examination
[46] Person who takes the *suneong* more than once

leaving the house." The only other time he spoke was briefly when he interacted with a waitress at a restaurant. Su Sung notes that he lost the ability to socially interact and communicate properly with the people around him, and he was unable to answer her clearly.

Public reaction

Netizens, who remained anonymous, agreed with the opinions presented by the individuals. In the comment section, one anonymous viewer nicknamed 'hehet' with the second most likes (535 likes) for the video commented: "I can't agree with you more that one becomes deprived of social interaction." 'Mum moom mi,' another user in the comment section responded by saying, "after taking the *suneong* 4 times and entering college, it [social interaction skills] improved." Another response in the comment section named 'Rupi' wrote, "While studying for the *suneong*, I lost the ability to socially interact, my skin and digestive system suffered, but the one thing I earned was the ability to eat alone." In South Korea, it is common for students preparing for the *suneong* to grab a quick meal by themselves because they do not have the time to socialize. Rather, we see that the act of eating alone reveals something more than just practice. It represents one's separation from friends and a lack of social interaction. People cannot even eat in peace. While eating, Ahn, confessed that she thought about studying and worried about what to materials to review next after she returned to hagwon.

In the comments section, one of the most popular comments "Why am I tearing up even when I'm only a 12th grader in high school," by an anonymous user. "Whatever I do these days, I only cry" received the most likes. This expresses the desperation and anxiety consuming a high schooler preparing for an exam. With only one chance to take the exam in the last year of high school in South Korea, it is understandable that the video plays more than an informative role. It helps foster awareness and motivates the students who are preparing for an exam. One comment

by ‘Lee Jun yong’ went: “With those who are watching, if you throw your phones out of the window, your grades will go up by 2 grade points. While most of the comments translated to “Good luck, we support you”, a user nicknamed ‘g12’ said: “I am also retaking the *suneong*. Do not even dream about retaking the *suneong*. Every day, the anxiety consumes me and is overwhelming.” Because so many people go through the same hardships there is a common understanding among those who go through the education system in South Korea. People show solidarity in their suffering and desperation.

A view from the outside world

In a KBS documentary, 12-to-13-year-olds talked to Harvard students on a bus and told them about their academic lives. When asked what time they went to bed, their responses ranged from 11 pm to half past midnight. When asked whether their academic lives affected their social lives, there was a unanimous response. One girl responded, “If I receive a bad score, then friends will look down upon me. If she finds out that I’m not good at studying, they will not play with me.” People cannot hang out with those who are less intelligent than they are because they are judged by the peers they associate with as well. Thus, when one receives low scores, it is difficult to make friends. Social interaction then is inextricably linked to one’s performance in school.[47]

Corporate Culture and *Misaeng*

Misaeng, which translates to incomplete life, narrates the story of Jang Geu Rye, a 26-year-old high school graduate who is offered an internship position at a large trading firm called

[47] KBS Documentary, director. 미국의 하버드생들이 대치동학원가에서 놀란 이유는? + 한국 고 3 들과 수학 대결! [공부하는 인간]. YouTube, YouTube, 28 Jan. 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=ntHnStApzd8. Retrieved April 4, 2021.

'One International.' As a previous baduk[48] player, he enters One International with no prior experience at working at a corporate firm. A handful of interns go through a rigorous training process for several weeks, and the company executives select four interns on the final day. Among those selected, Jang is the only employee who remains a contract worker.[49] Once picked, each intern is relocated to a small sales team consisting of three to four workers, each in charge of a different position. Although *Misaeng* is a fictional entertainment series portraying the lives of working employees in a South Korean corporate industry, it has gained enormous popularity among white-collar workers for its accurate representation of the working conditions at a corporate firm in South Korea.

In each episode, the idea of 'hard work' is both valued and emphasized. Hard work represents the very backbone and fabric of what is required by an employee in South Korea to thrive, let alone survive at a company. When Jang works night shifts as a driver accompanying drunk businessmen before he enters One International, a senior customer emphasizes "you should break a sweat and work hard." The line aforementioned immediately sets the minimal standard for what is expected in South Korean corporate firms. Hard work, however, in this context, not only equates to work ethic. In South Korean corporate culture, hard work requires subordinates to accept '*bip'yŏng*' or "criticism." It is expected that superiors can outwardly criticize workers in a one-way direction, without a chance for those in the subordinate position to talk back. This means that the higher the rank of superiors, "the more immune they were to criticism – a principle that invariably resulted in superiors assuming an infallibility that made ineptitude, inefficiency, and corruption a commonplace factor."[50] In *Misaeng*, public scolding and embarrassing an employee in front of others is common, while it is not so common to see

[48] Traditional Korean version of the game of go
[49] Contract worker
[50] De Mente, 59-60

such things in other countries. Consequently, such distinct norms of culture and characteristics in South Korea contribute to the 'negative' rhetoric outlined in the title of this thesis. De Mente notes that it is shocking for outsiders to see the way bosses criticize subordinates for failing to performance expectations.

In episode 1 of *Misaeng*, before Jang enters One Interntional, his mother instills confidence and belief in Jang. She states that the Chairman of Sungwon Inc. would not have landed him a job if he was not qualified enough. Immediately, parental expectations come into play, with parents trusting their child to thrive and succeed in a company environment. Such rhetoric leads children into silent acquiescence. In accordance with parental expectations instilled from their childhood, young Koreans like Jang do not see the possibility of refraining or 'quitting' as a viable option. In South Korea, parents can expect such demands from their children, a moral force of the concept called *eunhye*.[51] This part is worth mentioning because employees feel powerless and pressured even before they enter a company. When employees enter the company, this acquiescence continues.

In the first episode when Jang enters his team after being selected in the final round, Dongsik, the assistant manager escorts him to the rooftop of the firm's building. Immediately, Jang is greeted with questions asking about his qualifications. Dongsik asks Jang, "You received your GED, and that's it?" Moments later, without giving Jang enough response time, he is asked if Jang can speak a foreign language other than English. Once the simple conversation between Dongsik and Jang ends, Jang is asked what he has done so far in his life. Jang soon comes to feel helpless and useless, quickly developing the image of an unwanted employee at One International. The expectations and rhetoric of Dongsik deliberately aim to take away Jang's self-esteem. Such attitude and rhetoric displace Jang's confidence, further restraining his ability

[51] Pg. 61 "benefits" and is one of the most important terms in the Korean

to explore his potential. This characterizes the silent yet overt expectations of a competitive corporate firm in South Korea, establishing a firm barrier between a new employee and one's boss. *Misaeng* provides a chilling insight to the 'negativity' surrounding an employee's existence at the firm. The existence of an elitist mindset in large corporate firms in South Korea is evident from the simple conversation which took place between Dongsik and Jang.

Feelings of worthlessness and ineptitude are common consequences of discrimination at the hands of leaders in South Korean corporate firms. Discrimination not only exists between bosses and subordinates, however, but also between peers of the same rank. Rumors quickly spread establishing Jang as an employee who landed a job thanks to someone pulling strings for him rather than having the necessary qualifications for his position. As a result, Jang is constantly degraded by other interns and becomes a constant target of ill-abuse and discrimination. Peers use the argument of surviving long and tiring college years which one describes as a "warzone" as justification for attacking Jang. This speaks to a deeper underlying issue regarding the limited benefits of having a stellar college career. Regardless of academic success, most people end up just being cogs in the corporate wheel with nothing to show for what they have achieved. Negative media rhetoric not only exists among individuals like Jang who lack credentials, but also among those who possess the right qualities for success.

Discrimination against women

Misaeng also depicts struggles for women working in South Korean corporate firms. Women are often objectified and degraded. More than that, they are typically seen as the inferior gender incapable of producing quality work at the same standards as men. Every little mistake of theirs is blown out of proportion, more so than for male employees. A boss even goes as far as to tell a female employee that she will be unable to marry if she keeps up with her

current standard of work. Even if she were perfect, it would not have changed anything. The stereotypical image in South Korea that females are incapable of competing with men is deeply ingrained in the corporate culture.

For example, Ahn, one of the interns at One International, establishes herself as one of the smartest and most talented interns. Being the only female in her cohort of new interns, she stands out as the 'ace' and is constantly lauded by the bosses of other teams. However, because she is female, she is constantly put at a disadvantage compared to her male counterparts. During a presentation, scenes vividly portray a foreign boss groping Ahn. The direct message which can be interpreted from this scene is the allowance of women to be physically treated as objects for pleasure, recognized less for their talents or potential. The surprised and flinched expression of Ahn, who remains silent and still while such physical interactions occur reveals the transparent 'normalized openness' of the patriarchal society of South Korean corporate firms. These outwardly place women in such positions of disadvantage and mockery, regardless of their intelligence or skill. South Korean films thus accurately depict the disadvantaged positions of women at work. Many voices have called for active changes to give women more authority, a voice, and freedom to participate and make important decisions. However, corporate industries in South Korea remain male-oriented.

Furthermore, young, powerless women like Ahn in the corporate culture must passively accept *bip'yŏng* like her male counterparts. Yet, they get further marginalized by their bosses because they are female. Like Jang, Ahn's boss calls her to the rooftop to scold her for not being able to complete a task. Assistant manager Ha – Ahn's firect boss – expresses his disapproval about her incompetence and is displeased with the result she produces. But to take it further, Ha stressfully admits that he hates working with women, as he labels the female gender as the root

cause of the mistakes in his department. Such scenes narrate how women are marginalized and abused in office politics.

Not only is objectification and discrimination a problem for women, but bosses have found ways to further defend their behavior. For example, a boss publicly rebukes Ahn outside when she is with Baek-ki. Shouting and scolding her actions, he comments, "I'm worried about you because you are like my daughter."[52] He says this not because he is worried, but to manipulate Ahn into tolerating further demeaning works. The boss verbally makes Ahn assume she is like his daughter, masking his discrimination as love. In South Korea, when a boss establishes a mutual bond of companionship between himself and a subordinate, it provides a unique space for the boss to exercise toxic authority. By accepting his inferior as both a 'friend' and a 'subordinate', the boss can abuse his underling yet bandage the damage with a sense of affection. The superior may temporarily alleviate his abuse, but the sense of powerless remains embedded in the psyche of the employee.

Ahn's case is not the only one in the movie which highlights the harsh working conditions of women. In episode 10, the exchange of dialogue between Chung and an intermittent boss reveals the silenced frustration of women being unfairly treated in the corporate workplace. Manager Park remarks that "Coffee served by women tastes the best" in episode 10. Furthermore, he makes continuous comments about the sexual beauty of her body, hinting onto the notion that it is indeed pleasurable for men to enjoy such a visual company. Such blatant rhetoric directed at women reveals their disadvantages and struggles in the workplace. Given that it is a common practice for interns to do basic chores such as making coffee, Manager Park's open discrimination of the status of the employee due to her gender adds to the negative rhetoric. This is despite the verbal warning of Park's male coworker, who stated, "Come on, these days

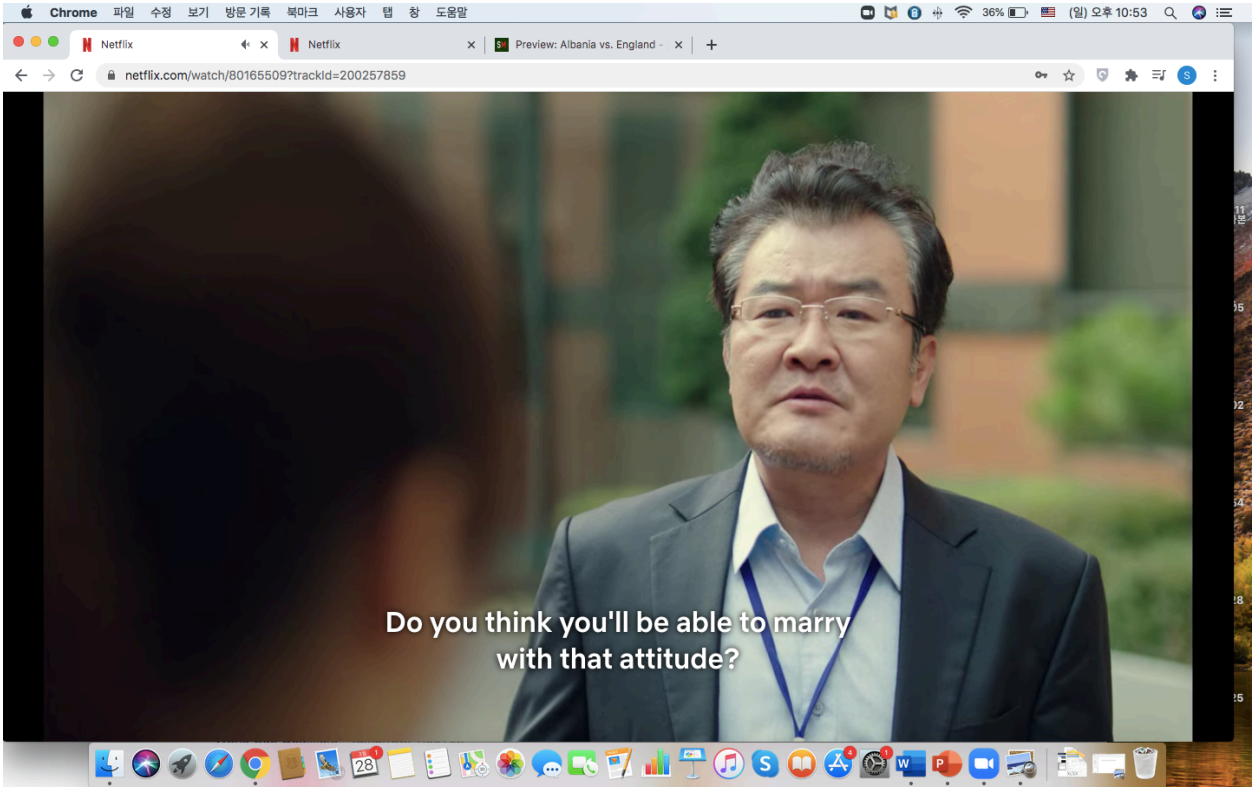
[52] Episode 14, 35:40

your comments can get you in trouble." Despite reforms and agendas prioritizing the needs of women in the workplace, the remarks of the higher-ranked managers reveal the continued existence of gender-based marginalization. This is another problematic aspect of society that South Koreans feel frustrated about.

Even should a case arise in which a woman attains a higher-ranking position within a company, she is still subject to the same degradation by men. Powerlessness is an unchanging theme for women regardless of their position. Manager Shin — one of the few female managers at the company — feels powerless, as she must do all the house chores and take care of her children at the same time. Nobody stood up on her behalf when several male managers were making sexist remarks at a meeting. At 24:00 of episode 5, another employee, Sujin, suddenly loses consciousness and collapses to the ground. It is later revealed that Sujin is pregnant and that she collapsed due to exhaustion. However, director Ma, one of the highest bosses on the team, becomes infuriated. He angrily shouts "How many children is she going to have?... Doesn't she already have two kids?" Manager Chung, a subordinate to Ma, agrees with Ma's statement saying, "Jeez, why did she get pregnant again?" Chung labels her as "self-centered" as Ma replies by saying "she just gave birth, and she's pregnant again". Manager Shin, one of the few female bosses at the firm, listens to such dialogue from her colleagues but only from a distance. One of the male bosses continues by saying, "We gave her a break when she had her first two kids". Manager Shin can only watch powerlessly without saying anything. She does quip sarcastically saying, "working moms are always the bad person at home, at work." If there is one word to sum up the sentiment of a pregnant woman at work, it would be "excuse". One of the male managers explicitly says, "as soon as we train them, marriage, pregnancy, husband, and kids are their usual excuses". In a society with more women's rights, witnessing such a thing

would be inconceivable. A collapsed woman is a human needing assistance and should not be the subject of scorn. Thus, the absence of any sort of sympathy – with men standing still to watch the collapsed woman while the majority of those who helped were female – reveals that South Korea remains a deeply gender-divided society.

A boss reprimands Ahn. *Misaeng*, Episode 14 35:00



The Treatment of New Employees

[53]

In *Misaeng*, incoming employees take on a variety of stressful tasks unrelated to work. It is a given that they must oblige to these unrelated tasks, and many run personal errands for their bosses. Even after they have established themselves as official employees of the company, however, they are pressured into continuing such servile behavior. They often must go out and purchase cigarettes for their bosses or even make them coffee. The downside is that Jang and his peers often feel that the work they do is useless. There is a kind of psychological play at work, in which each time they comply to do menial tasks, they are admitting their powerlessness. Jang's peers slowly get tired of life at One International for not being able to take on corporate tasks. Interestingly, they are often unwilling to speak up about their displeasure. Sometimes they lash out, but for the most part they cap their frustrations. The most common strategy is to endure. Baek-ki, one of Jang's peers, urges Seok-yul to "just wait". Baek-ki admits "all we can do is

[53] "Go to the 15th floor and get me some coffee please, or you can buy coffee at a café" Jang's peer making coffee as ordered by his boss" Episode 15 2:53

wait" for the right opportunity to be thrown at them. In the meantime, all interns realize that they are powerless despite being employees of the firm. This is not unlike the goshiseng who clings onto a false sense of hope in repeating exam after exam. The workers surely feel powerless, but they find ways to endure by lying to themselves. Karl Marx wrote about religion being an "opiate for the masses", and similarly it seems that South Koreans find their own way to deal with the pain inflicted on them through a system that abuses them.

In *Misaeng*, it is seen that eventually new employees figure out that effort and hard work are not enough for them to impress bosses and earn the fair treatment that other higher-ranking employees at One International enjoy. Despite the new employees staying alert and being responsive to take on chores in everyday affairs including errands, recognition is hard to get. This is evident when Ahn becomes frustrated from working tirelessly for her bosses.
Ahn complains "Working hard doesn't work" at 12:55 episode 9. What is more important is that she notes "it [the situation] gets worse if she doesn't [continue working]". It is clear from the frustration and anxiety on Ahn's face when she talks to Baek-ki outside of the One International office that to endure is to survive. She needs advice and asks Baek-ki what she should do, clearly feeling hopeless at that moment.

Baek-ki washing a trash can for Ahn's boss. Episode 9, 11:16

Often, new employees have already gone through a grueling education system just to get where they are. But to make matters worse, entry-level workers soon find that they lack skills that are not even taught in school. There is another form of social schooling that they must quickly become adept in, or they risk being shunned. It just adds to the feeling of powerlessness that so many new employees feel.

They want to be accepted into their respective teams at work and not be so called "slaves" who just runs errands, but they are often in over their heads before they even begin. Ahn goes on to say to Baek-ki, "School has not taught me the necessary people skills to have people open up to me…It's not taught in English or math subjects…I'm doing everything that I can think of." She finds it difficult to talk to her bosses, but it is clear from scenes in the movie that she does the best she can in obeying orders and running constant errands.

The trouble is that bosses are not willing to educate new workers, empowering them. Instead, they want to keep distinctions between hierarchical levels at work and assert their own

dominance. Moreover, they believe that the system is not in need of change. In *Misaeng*, while new employees constantly run personal errands during normal business hours, bosses at the firm in the movie see it as a norm. When Baek-ki was washing the trashcans at the toilet, Dongsik watches Baek-ki in silence and does not take action to ask or stop what he is doing.

In one scene, manager Park forgets to bring his boots in his office and orders Jang to bring them. Jang complies, but he only hands them to Park. This irks Park, and he tells him to put the boots in the right position so he can wear them comfortably. Jang is momentarily paralyzed and left speechless at this brazen display of dominance. Park continues by having to spell out exactly what he wants saying, "what should you do? You should put it down". The extent to which subservience is demanded in South Korea is truly appalling.

Celebrity culture

The Afreeca TV broadcasting jockey Hzeziu, one of the most successful in the field, on the day she earned $120,000.

Social media platforms have become fundamental necessities for young South Koreans. The proliferation of technology on easy-to-access devices such as cellphones and computers has enabled far greater access to virtual broadcasting platforms. Afreeca TV and YouTube are two of the most popular social media platforms in South Korea, which allow people to record themselves and virtually interact with anonymous viewers. Popular streamers on Afreeca TV are known as "Broadcasting jockeys," a term coined by netizens since the advent of the platform. According to a survey by the Ministry of Education 2021, the fourth most popular job among elementary school students was being an online streamer, ranking right after jobs such as being a doctor or a teacher.[54]

According to South Korea's domestic stock exchange (KOSDAQ), stock prices for Afreeca TV have almost tripled since November 2016, skyrocketing from approximately 24,000 won to roughly 80,000 won in April 2021.[55] The popularity of an increasing number of Broadcasting Jockeys has made them YouTube stars as well. In a feature unique to its platform, Afreeca TV allows streamers to earn money amid entertaining the audience through a tipping system, as opposed to merely from ads. From *mukbangs* to *jambangs,*[56] popular users on the network can earn money by doing anything they like before an audience. Using recordings of live streams on Afreeca TV, streamers frequently upload edited videos on YouTube to attract a wider range of audiences.

As Afreeca TV has gained widespread popularity in recent years, streamers have become a sensation domestically and globally. With almost anyone being able to earn money as an online

[54] 문서뷰어, moe.go.kr/sn3hcv/doc.html?fn=5377e11fe37f8b343454e2831fea37f9&rs=%2Fupload%2Fsynap%2F202104%2F. Retrieved April 3, 2021.
[55] This is equivalent to a rise from US $20 to $70.
[56] Eating shows and sleeping shows

streamer, an increasing number of young people dream of becoming streamers to get rich quickly. Broadcasting jockey Hzeziu made it to the headlines when she earned as much as $120,000 a day, a practically unattainable figure for a working-class citizen of South Korea. Domestic reactions have thus not been too welcoming of the financial success of the streamers. The public has felt left behind by people who they see as cheating the system and making easy money.

The outcry, however, stems from something deeper and more sinister. It reflects the collective abuse that South Koreans face. Starting from their grueling time in the education system all the way up to their adult lives in a corporate system designed to cheat and oppress them, this frustration and resentment has inevitably manifested in hateful rhetoric even when directed at each other. It is different from tactics used to eliminate competition in a free-market economy. The reason is that most South Koreans are pushed through a cruel system that shapes one's thought in such a way that people feel that they need to be rewarded at the end of the process.

On November 2, 2018, a nine-year-old girl, a famous YouTuber named 띠예 (Dee yeh), uploaded an ASMR[57] video[58] [just under five minutes] of herself eating green caviar. The video gained just under 20 million views and quickly became viral on the internet. Although reactions by viewers on YouTube were mainly positive cheering Dee Yeh on, other streamers and online YouTubers started creating hate videos and publicly uploaded them on numerous online platforms.

An anonymous YouTuber nicknamed 'mommy son video bakjae' uploaded a video with his face covered targeting Dee Yeh. In his five-minute video, the YouTuber goes onto explain how Dee Yeh is too young to operate her own channel and should be reported for violating terms

[57] ASMR refers to the good sensations people feel when watching a certain genre of positive videos.
[58] "바다포도 먹어보기 소리완전좋음♡ 설참." YouTube, YouTube, 2 Nov. 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=Let0ywNsJxU&t=43s. Retrieved February 17, 2021.

on YouTube. However, his true intentions are revealed at the start of the video, when he explains how hard it had been for him to gain viewers and become successful on YouTube. The anonymous user confessed, “This spring I started running my own ASMR channel. To successfully operate this ASMR channel, I worked part time jobs for several months in order to purchase a 700,000 won mic and 800,000 won camera package in order to film videos along with other tools required to film an ASMR video.”

From analysis of this streamer’s rhetoric, he was clearly fueled by jealousy and anger. Yet, that jealousy was aggravated by a young girl, Dee yeh, receiving attention and garnering financial success without much input and effort. This success had aggravatingly eluded the older YouTuber. Rather than wanting the young girl to fail in the first place, ‘mommy son bakjae’s’ fury and anger came from not receiving adequate support and having a taste of success himself. Thus, despite efforts to restrain himself, he needed to lash out at someone. Towards the end of the video, ‘mommy son video bakjae’ shows himself reporting the video of Dee Yeh eating green caviar. Bakjae goes onto comment:

“A child in elementary school should be running around and freely playing” 4:35

4:38 “Let’s not let a child earn income through money”

4:42 What will happen if a young child goes “money, money, money?”

Although most of the audience supported Dee Yeh, she had to re-upload her videos numerous times due to viewers reporting them for violating rules. It was later revealed that Dee Yeh did not violate rules on YouTube. At one point, her parents uploaded a notice on YouTube clarifying the fact that Dee Yeh voluntarily uploaded and edited videos herself, and that she was not being coerced to film or upload the videos by her parents in any way. The attitude and ways in which people vent their anger and frustration on successful streamers reveals that South

Koreans are at a tipping point. Basic desires to exhibit common decency are superseded by said frustration and anger towards their confining circumstances.

Profiting off hate rhetoric – A channel created just to target online streamers and broadcasting jockeys

Jung Bae Woo[59], a male YouTuber, rose to fame on YouTube for reporting incidents of online streamers on various broadcasting platforms including Afreeca TV. Chung exclusively reports incidents involving Afreeca broadcasting jockeys by investigating details surrounding their private lives. After gathering evidence of their faults and wrongdoings, he then creates videos for public viewers to watch and access on YouTube.

After Jung's videos gained popularity, his channel simultaneously managed to mobilize viewers who were critical and negative towards the lives of broadcasting jockeys. These people were able to come together and share their negative views. This could only be made possible in a society that is bursting at the seams wanting to vent its disapproval on matters. Jung's channel is now one of many popular communities gathering and profiting off hate rhetoric. Since he emerged, there have been many who have followed in his footsteps.

On April 17, 2021, Jung reported an incident surrounding two famous Afreeca male streamers, K and Seya, who reportedly went to a massage parlor. In the video, Jung presents a recording of an unidentified female broadcaster on Afreeca TV who apparently saw K and Seya at the clubs engaging in promiscuous activities. The comments reveal the sheer animosity directed towards the broadcasting jockeys. This shows how upset the public was and how willing they were to express and vent their anger with other netizens. One person made the following comment:

[59] "정배우 : 사건사고이슈." YouTube, YouTube, www.youtube.com/channel/UCVWN__TENeCRT8P6B6SwNog. Retrieved April 10, 2021.

> These scandals will affect celebrities, but Broadcasting Jockeys usually possess a dirty image, so they won't be as heavily affected. Broadcasting Jockeys did the Broadcasting jockeys.

Il-cheon, another broadcasting jockey, received 68 likes on a comment saying,

> It's not just once or twice that these celebrities got caught engaging in [dirty] acts like this. It really is problematic.

Despite the anonymous woman in the video who later uploaded an apology video stating that her accusations were false, it was clearly noticeable that the public sentiment towards broadcasting jockeys was rife with hate and animus. It is clear from the comments that the public channels their hate through the broadcasting jockeys. Often this hate even masquerades itself as righteousness. Other times people's comments are simply cynical.

Another online community

DC Inside is an online community where people can create anonymous accounts and talk about diverse subjects. Of the many threads which exist in the community, a thread exists for broadcasting jockeys. Unlike YouTube, where the uploader can delete and censor unwanted comments, in bang gel provides a unique space for the public to interact and share their thoughts and feelings about online streamers.

On one thread, an anonymous user commented:

> "Broadcasting jockeys are attention seekers. Don't bother meddling in their affairs because it is a waste of your energy."

On another thread one anonymous user expressed his anger and resentment at broadcasting jockeys for making easy money. While he was serving at a restaurant, he met a broadcasting jockey who shouted, "Thank you! Once he received 1500 balloons", which equates

to around 150,000 won before taxes. The server lamented how he received 80,000 won for a whole day's work as a server at a restaurant, while the broadcasting jockey made money so easily. He even admitted to feeling worthless and jealous for two entire days. Then, he noted, "I should just get back to work." One anonymous user understood his frustration and replied, "Who doesn't want to become a broadcasting jockey?"

It seems that it is simply jealousy being the cause of hate rhetoric in these communities. But the argument is more complex. As discussed above, powerlessness and desperation play into the psyche of the South Korean mind. People are not so much jealous as they are frustrated with their lack of mobility in the economy and even socially. They are thus taking their anger out on those perceived to have unearned success.

Apologizing to Survive: A Pattern of Repeated Apology

In 2020, the Internet was shocked when famous broadcasting jockeys uploaded videos of themselves apologizing in front of a camera. For many reasons including illegal advertising[60] and disappointing the public, famous broadcasting jockeys including Tzuyang, Banzz, MBRo, Ddeonggae, and Bokki apologized and took a leave of absence away from the cameras. The public's fury and anger were directly depicted on the streamers' channels, revealing the negative rhetoric coming from the audience. Although most of the apology videos have been taken down, MBros video is still up. Sinoni commented, "Money really scary." The user was disparaging the YouTubers for being willing to do anything for money. A user named Tae hyun Kim made a comment that received 2100 likes. It said, "People are blinded by money." Nayeo Nee Ya commented with great approval, "Once people earn money, they do change."

[60] Illegal advertising was a huge scandal in 2020, when online streamers did not publicly advertise that they were being paid for the products they were receiving.

These comments show that the public lies ready to pounce on streamers for making even a single mistake. Streamers make good targets because for those who have mounting anger towards the corporate and educational systems. The reason is that streamers start out as everyday people, but somehow, they find a way to escape oppression from the corporate world and the education system. It just seems unfair to everyone else, who consequently see streamers as a perfect target. The dominance of negative rhetoric by the public reveals that people now take the feeling of irrelevancy and powerlessness to media platforms.

A popular streamer couple who go by the names Chulgu and ozilhye, respectively, and who stream on both Afreeca TV and YouTube, went viral when they posted a video about their attempts to enroll their child into school. What happened was that parents filed complaints to prevent Chulgu's child from attending the same school as their children because it could badly influence their children's learning environment. This is clear-cut evidence that there is a divide between streamers and the public. To say bad things online is one thing, but to try to separate one's kids from another because of one's profession speaks into a deeper matter. This deeper matter must be linked to desperation and powerlessness in other spheres of life.

In this video[61] many viewers did not empathize with Chulgu's family. Narikas said, "Even if I were a parent, I would not feel bad [and oppose] the admission of their child." Even more direct, an anonymous user wrote, "A place where people lack basic manners and persona…Although they may be stars on the internet, in reality, it makes sense to distance yourself from them." That viewers held grudges against online streamers is most evident.

Conclusion

[61] "철구 딸 연지 초등학교 인스타그램 난리난 상황." YouTube, YouTube, 7 Dec. 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=CD9YN5ZOeOE. Retrieved March 2, 2021.

This thesis explored how three indispensable facets in contemporary South Korea have led to the collective frustration of the South Korean psyche. With the media playing an imperative role in reflecting the societal status of South Korea, many South Koreans end up feeling manipulated, stifled, and abused. The feelings are produced from an amalgam of linked experiences in South Korean systems, namely the corporate system, the education system, and in celebrity culture. The corporate system leaves many people feeling powerless, namely women and most entry-level workers who find it difficult to climb up the corporate ladder. Similarly, desperate students in the education system harbor feelings of hopelessness as they often learn that no matter how hard they try, they will not be able to achieve their dreams. The combination of experiences obtained through the corporate and education systems are discovered and analyzed through hate rhetoric in celebrity culture, or at least through various media platforms. There is incessant stigmatization of online streamers, and overall, there is a trajectory of hate stemming from angry netizens who are students and workers for the most part. What is seen through the complex interplay between the three systems is ultimately a nation desperately suffering but unable to properly voice its pain. At first, it was thought that South Korea was trauma conscious, but if the nation cannot realize that often it is only able to lash out through deflection, then it cannot be truly trauma conscious.

Some questions remain unanswered. Is hate rhetoric enough for angry netizens? Will there be a bubble that soon bursts in which mass rebellion ensues? Are there other societal systems that exist in Korea which can be attributed to negative media rhetoric? To what extent has the legacy of Japanese colonial rule influenced the cultural conditions of negative media rhetoric? And some questions beg more questions. For instance, when the mob of those who are oppressed and chewed up by an unfair system do become trauma conscious, what can they

achieve as a collective? How will other media platforms in the future shape how people in South Korea react to societal systems? How will this affect the discourse of negative media rhetoric in South Korea?

Yet, to an extent there is an understanding of how people often find a resolution within these broken systems in South Korea. For those who go through the examination process many times but ultimately end up failing, many still find a way to put their education to use. Many end up at hagwons, a place where they can teach the next generation and instill hope in future exam takers. Indeed, with the help of those who could not previously succeed in the competitive work force and elect to be hagwon teachers, some do make it past the competition. And for those who suffer from a feeling of powerlessness in the workforce, many find other ways to satiate themselves in a country that boasts one of the best entertainment industries in the world.

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