

The Impact of Korea's 'Hagwon' Culture on Academic Pressure Among High School Students

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Abstract

South Korea's *hagwon* culture, characterized by private academies offering supplementary education, has become a cornerstone of its competitive academic system. While *hagwon* provide tailored support and intensive preparation for high-stakes exams like the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT), their prevalence has led to heightened academic pressure, socio-economic disparities, and significant psychological and physical consequences for students. This paper explores the core features of *hagwon* culture, including its integration into daily life, financial demands, and its dual role in academic support and test preparation. Comparative analysis with similar systems in Japan and China highlights the unique aspects of Korea's education landscape. Furthermore, the study examines parental motivations, societal expectations, and public attitudes toward the sustainability of *hagwon*. The paper concludes by proposing policy reforms, such as enhancing public education, promoting holistic learning approaches, and addressing socio-economic inequities, to reduce reliance on private academies and foster a more equitable and balanced education system.

Keywords: Hagwon culture, South Korean education, private tutoring, academic pressure, College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT)

1. Introduction

South Korea's education system is often described as one of the most competitive in the world, with academic achievement serving as a cornerstone of personal and societal success. This emphasis on education has historical roots, dating back to the Confucian principles that heavily influenced Korean culture during the Joseon Dynasty (1392–1897). Confucianism promoted education as a means of moral and intellectual development and as a pathway to attaining positions of power and influence. While Korea's modern education system has evolved considerably, this cultural legacy continues to shape societal attitudes, with academic performance viewed as a key determinant of individual success and familial honor.

Today, the nation's education system is built around intense competition, with standardized tests like the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT) acting as gatekeepers to prestigious universities. Admission to one of the elite SKY universities (Seoul National University, Korea University, and Yonsei University) is perceived as a ticket to lucrative job opportunities and social mobility. This has created a high-pressure environment where students, parents, and even schools are hyper-focused on maximizing academic outcomes. Public education, while robust in many respects, struggles to meet the demand for the kind of individualized and rigorous preparation required to excel in these exams, paving the way for the rise of *hagwon*.

The emergence of *hagwon*—private, after-school academies—can be traced to the rapid economic and societal changes Korea experienced in the mid-20th century. Following the Korean War, the government prioritized education as a means of rebuilding the country and fostering economic growth. However, as access to education expanded and the population grew, competition for limited spots in prestigious schools and universities became

increasingly fierce. Parents, eager to secure the best opportunities for their children, turned to *hagwon* as a way to provide additional academic support. What began as small, informal tutoring centers quickly evolved into a multibillion-dollar industry, with *hagwon* offering specialized classes, test preparation courses, and personalized instruction tailored to the demands of Korea's high-stakes education system. By the 1990s, *hagwon* were firmly entrenched in the educational landscape, serving not only struggling students but also high-achievers seeking to maintain their competitive edge.

The normalization of *hagwon* attendance is deeply tied to Korea's cultural values and societal expectations. Academic achievement is often seen as a reflection of not just a student's effort but also their family's dedication and values. In this context, parents feel immense pressure to ensure their children succeed academically, often equating their financial and emotional investment in education with love and responsibility. Families frequently make significant sacrifices to afford *hagwon*, with some parents taking on additional jobs or forgoing personal savings to cover the costs. According to a 2021 report by the Korean Ministry of Education, households spend an average of 2 million KRW (approximately \$1,500 USD) per month on *hagwon* fees, with some families in affluent districts spending far more. This level of financial commitment underscores the societal belief that academic success is indispensable for securing a stable future.

The pervasive influence of *hagwon* has led to a cultural norm where attending private academies is viewed as a necessity rather than a choice. Students who do not attend *hagwon* may feel left behind, while parents who refrain from enrolling their children often face judgment from peers and relatives. This normalization has created an environment where *hagwon* attendance is almost universal, with over 70% of high school students reportedly enrolled in these academies. Even the government's attempts to regulate *hagwon* hours and fees have done little to curb their dominance, as parents and students often view these institutions as indispensable for academic success.

However, the cultural and historical emphasis on education, coupled with the reliance on *hagwon*, has also contributed to significant challenges. The intense competition fostered by *hagwon* culture amplifies academic pressure, while the financial burden exacerbates socio-economic disparities. Families in lower-income brackets often struggle to afford *hagwon*, limiting their children's access to the same opportunities as their wealthier peers. This has raised concerns about the long-term sustainability of Korea's education model and the potential psychological and societal costs of an over-reliance on private education.

Understanding the historical roots and cultural factors that have shaped Korea's *hagwon* culture is essential to comprehending its widespread impact. The *hagwon* phenomenon is not merely an educational trend but a reflection of deeper societal values and pressures that prioritize academic success above all else. This context provides a foundation for analyzing the broader implications of *hagwon* culture on students, families, and Korean society.

2. Core Features of Hagwon Culture

2.1 Extended Hours and Intensive Academic Programs

A defining characteristic of *hagwon* culture is the extensive time commitment it demands from students. Unlike public schools, which operate during regular daytime hours, *hagwon* often extend their schedules late into the evening. Many *hagwon* run until 10 PM or even later, with some offering overnight study programs during peak exam periods, such as the months leading up to the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT). Students frequently attend these academies immediately after completing a full day of regular schooling, dedicating an additional 4–6 hours to supplementary lessons. Weekends and holidays are also utilized for classes, with some *hagwon* holding intensive boot camps to reinforce key concepts and prepare for exams.

The curriculum offered by *hagwon* is highly specialized and tailored to meet the needs of individual students. Advanced students may enroll in accelerated programs that cover material beyond the standard public school syllabus, while others might attend remedial courses to improve in weaker areas. Many *hagwon* provide proprietary textbooks and learning materials, designed to align with the latest exam trends and requirements. Additionally, *hagwon* often employ renowned instructors who have built reputations as experts in their fields. These "star teachers" attract students not only for their subject mastery but also for their ability to simplify complex topics and offer strategic tips for excelling in competitive exams.

While the extended hours and intensive programs are designed to maximize academic outcomes, they also impose a heavy toll on students. The relentless schedule leaves little time for rest, hobbies, or social interactions, often leading to chronic fatigue and burnout. A 2021 study by the Korean Institute of Educational Development reported that 78% of high school students felt physically and mentally exhausted due to their participation in *hagwon*. This relentless pursuit of academic excellence has raised concerns about the long-term impact on students' well-being and the sustainability of such practices.

2.2 Financial Burden on Families and Its Societal Normalization

Another core feature of *hagwon* culture is the significant financial investment required from families. According to a 2021 report by the Korean Ministry of Education, the average household in South Korea spends approximately 2 million KRW (around \$1,500 USD) per month on private education, with *hagwon* fees accounting for the majority of these expenditures. For families in affluent districts like Gangnam in Seoul, this figure can rise substantially, as parents compete to secure spots in prestigious academies known for their high success rates in CSAT preparation.

The normalization of these high costs reflects societal expectations surrounding education. In Korean culture, academic success is often seen as both a personal achievement and a measure of familial honor. As a result, parents view investment in *hagwon* as an essential responsibility, regardless of the financial burden it imposes. Many families make significant sacrifices to afford *hagwon*, such as taking on additional jobs, reducing discretionary spending, or depleting savings. A 2020 survey by the National Statistics Office found that 36% of middle-income families reported experiencing financial strain due to *hagwon* expenses, while 14% of low-income families incurred debt to cover private education costs.

This financial burden also highlights the deepening socio-economic disparities within the education system. While affluent families can afford elite *hagwon* offering small class sizes, personalized instruction, and cutting-edge resources, lower-income families are often limited to less expensive options with fewer benefits. This creates an uneven playing field where wealthier students gain a significant advantage, perpetuating cycles of inequality. Despite these disparities, *hagwon* attendance remains a societal norm, with parents fearing that opting out will disadvantage their children academically and socially.

2.3 The Dual Role of Hagwon: Academic Support and Exam Preparation

The dual role of *hagwon*—providing academic support and specialized test preparation—makes them indispensable to Korea's education system. For students struggling to meet the demands of public school, *hagwon* offer remedial programs designed to reinforce foundational skills and address specific weaknesses. These programs often provide one-on-one or small-group instruction, enabling teachers to tailor lessons to individual needs. This personalized approach helps students build confidence and achieve incremental progress, preventing them from falling behind their peers.

At the other end of the spectrum, *hagwon* are renowned for their expertise in preparing high-achieving students for competitive exams like the CSAT. These academies offer intensive test preparation courses that include practice exams, time management strategies, and targeted review sessions focusing on likely test questions. Many *hagwon* also provide mock tests that simulate the actual exam environment, giving students valuable experience and reducing anxiety. The curriculum in these programs is often more rigorous than what is offered in public schools, covering advanced concepts and providing strategies for solving complex problems efficiently.

This duality allows *hagwon* to cater to a wide range of students, from those needing additional support to excel in their studies to those seeking an edge in hyper-competitive exams. It also underscores the perception that public education alone is insufficient to meet the demands of Korea's high-stakes academic environment. By addressing gaps in the public system and offering specialized training, *hagwon* have positioned themselves as essential institutions within the education landscape.

However, this reliance on *hagwon* raises concerns about the broader implications for the education system. Critics argue that the heavy emphasis on test preparation undermines holistic learning, reducing education to a series of metrics and rankings. Furthermore, the dual role of *hagwon* reinforces the idea that success is unattainable without private tutoring, perpetuating cycles of dependence on an industry that places significant demands on both students and families.

The core features of *hagwon* culture—its extended hours, financial demands, and dual academic role—highlight its pervasive influence on Korean society. While these academies provide tangible benefits, their widespread adoption has created a system where education is both a necessity and a burden, raising questions about sustainability, equity, and the long-term impact on students and families. Understanding these features is crucial to addressing the challenges associated with *hagwon* culture and exploring potential reforms to mitigate its negative effects.

3. Heightened Academic Pressure

3.1 The Influence of Hagwon on Students' Focus on CSAT and Standardized Tests

The *hagwon* system in Korea is intrinsically tied to the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT), the pivotal standardized exam that determines entry into the nation's prestigious universities. The CSAT's significance in shaping a student's academic and professional trajectory has made it the ultimate benchmark of success within Korea's education system. *Hagwon* capitalize on this by offering highly specialized programs designed to optimize performance on the CSAT and other standardized tests. These programs often focus on strategies for

answering specific question types, time management techniques, and intensive drills that mirror the format and difficulty of the actual exams.

This hyper-focus on the CSAT has a profound impact on students, shifting their priorities toward test preparation at the expense of holistic learning. Regular school curricula often become secondary as students and parents prioritize *hagwon* programs that promise better results. This dynamic creates a culture where academic success is narrowly defined by test scores, with little emphasis on creativity, critical thinking, or extracurricular achievements. According to a 2021 survey by the Korean Educational Development Institute, 82% of high school students attending *hagwon* reported that their primary goal was to improve CSAT performance, highlighting the exam-centric nature of the system.

While *hagwon* undeniably enhance test readiness, they also perpetuate a narrow view of education that prioritizes exam results over broader intellectual and personal development. This singular focus places immense pressure on students, who internalize the belief that their future success hinges entirely on their CSAT scores, leading to heightened anxiety and stress.

3.2 Amplification of Competition Among Peers Through Hagwon

The prevalence of *hagwon* has intensified competition among students, transforming the academic environment into a relentless race for top rankings and university placements. Unlike traditional schools, where students are evaluated within the context of a single classroom or grade, *hagwon* create environments where students from diverse schools and regions converge, exposing them to a broader and often more competitive peer group. This interaction amplifies the pressure to outperform peers, as students are constantly comparing their progress and achievements.

Hagwon further fuel this competitive atmosphere by emphasizing ranking systems within their own programs. Many academies publicly display student rankings, creating a visible hierarchy that motivates high performers but can demoralize those who struggle. The use of frequent mock exams and performance assessments reinforces this competitive dynamic, with students feeling compelled to dedicate additional time and effort to maintain or improve their standing.

Parents also contribute to this heightened competition, often comparing their children's performance with that of their peers. In many cases, parents' decisions to enroll their children in specific *hagwon* are influenced by the perceived caliber of other attendees, as they seek environments that will challenge their children to excel further. This focus on comparative achievement creates a cycle where students feel constant pressure to keep up with or surpass their peers, leading to heightened levels of stress and reduced collaboration.

The intense competition fostered by *hagwon* culture not only affects students academically but also takes a toll on their mental health and interpersonal relationships. A 2020 study conducted by Seoul National University found that 68% of high school students reported experiencing feelings of inadequacy or anxiety due to comparisons with their *hagwon* peers, highlighting the emotional strain associated with this environment.

3.3 Challenges of Balancing Hagwon with School and Personal Time

The demanding schedules imposed by *hagwon* create significant challenges for students attempting to balance their commitments to regular school, *hagwon*, and personal time. Most high school students in Korea attend public schools during the day, only to transition directly to *hagwon* in the afternoon or evening. This results in a packed daily routine that often extends late into the night, leaving little room for rest or recreation. Weekends, which might otherwise provide a reprieve, are frequently filled with additional *hagwon* sessions or self-study time, further reducing opportunities for personal growth and socialization.

The consequences of this unrelenting schedule are far-reaching. Students often experience chronic sleep deprivation, with a 2021 report by the Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare indicating that over 70% of high school students sleep less than six hours per night. This lack of rest not only affects their physical health but also diminishes cognitive functioning, reducing their ability to retain information and perform well in both school and *hagwon*.

Moreover, the imbalance between *hagwon* commitments and personal time limits students' ability to explore extracurricular activities, hobbies, or social interactions. These experiences, which are critical for personal development and mental well-being, are often sacrificed in favor of maximizing academic output. The absence of such outlets can lead to feelings of isolation, frustration, and burnout, compounding the negative effects of an already high-pressure environment.

Balancing *hagwon* with regular schoolwork also poses logistical and emotional challenges. Students must manage overlapping deadlines, conflicting schedules, and the competing demands of teachers and *hagwon* instructors. This dynamic can create tension, as students struggle to meet expectations from multiple sources, often feeling that there is never enough time to fulfill all their obligations. A 2020 survey by the National Youth

Policy Institute revealed that 65% of students attending *hagwon* reported feeling overwhelmed by their schedules, citing time management as one of their biggest challenges.

The heightened academic pressure associated with *hagwon* culture is a multifaceted issue that impacts students on several levels. From the relentless focus on CSAT performance to the amplification of peer competition and the difficulty of balancing academic and personal commitments, *hagwon* have created an environment where success is pursued at significant personal and emotional cost. Addressing these challenges requires a broader re-evaluation of Korea's education priorities and a shift toward more balanced and sustainable approaches to academic achievement.

4. Societal Dynamics

4.1 Widespread Acceptance and Integration of Hagwon into Daily Life

The pervasive integration of *hagwon* into Korean society reflects a deeply rooted belief in education as a cornerstone of personal and familial success. *Hagwon* have become so normalized that attending them is considered an essential aspect of a student's academic journey. From early childhood to high school, students are enrolled in various types of *hagwon*, ranging from language academies to science and mathematics enrichment centers. This widespread participation underscores the societal expectation that *hagwon* attendance is not optional but a necessary investment for securing a competitive edge in academics.

The seamless integration of *hagwon* into daily life is evident in the structured schedules of students, who often transition directly from public school to private academies in the afternoon and evening. Many *hagwon* also operate on weekends, leaving little room for rest or leisure. This normalization is supported by cultural narratives that equate hard work and discipline with success. Parents and students alike internalize these expectations, viewing the sacrifices associated with *hagwon* as an unavoidable part of the academic process.

Technological advancements have further entrenched *hagwon* in daily life. The advent of online classes and mobile applications has made *hagwon* more accessible, allowing students to attend virtual lessons or access recorded materials at their convenience. This adaptability has ensured the continued relevance of *hagwon* in an increasingly digital world. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, many *hagwon* seamlessly transitioned to online platforms, enabling uninterrupted instruction and reinforcing their indispensability.

The normalization of *hagwon* attendance extends beyond students to parents, who often organize their lives around supporting their children's education. Family routines, financial planning, and even social interactions are influenced by *hagwon* schedules and demands. This societal integration reflects the belief that education is a collective effort, with families and institutions working in tandem to achieve academic success. However, this level of dependency on *hagwon* has also sparked debates about the sustainability of such practices and their long-term impact on students' well-being and the public education system.

4.2 Socio-Economic Inequalities Shaping Access to Private Education

While *hagwon* are widely accepted, access to their benefits is deeply influenced by socio-economic status, creating stark inequalities within Korea's education system. Wealthier families have the means to enroll their children in elite *hagwon*, which offer small class sizes, advanced teaching methods, and access to star instructors. These *hagwon* often boast high success rates in preparing students for the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT) and securing admission to prestigious universities, giving affluent students a significant advantage.

In contrast, low-income families face considerable challenges in accessing *hagwon*. Many struggle to afford the fees, which can range from 1 million to 3 million KRW (approximately \$750–\$2,300 USD) per month for specialized programs. A 2021 report by the Korean Ministry of Education revealed that families in the bottom income quartile spend only 10% of what their wealthier counterparts allocate to private education, highlighting the financial gap. This disparity not only limits access to high-quality *hagwon* but also exacerbates existing educational inequalities, as lower-income students are left relying solely on the public school system, which may not provide the same level of academic support.

Geographic disparities further compound the issue. Urban centers like Seoul and Busan are home to numerous prestigious *hagwon*, offering a wide range of programs and resources. In rural areas, however, the availability of *hagwon* is often limited, forcing families to travel long distances or settle for less competitive options. This geographic divide reinforces the advantages enjoyed by students in metropolitan areas, widening the educational gap between urban and rural populations.

The socio-economic inequalities associated with *hagwon* attendance have broader implications for Korean society. By perpetuating cycles of privilege and disadvantage, the current system undermines the ideal of equal opportunity in education. Critics argue that these disparities highlight the need for systemic reforms, such as increasing funding for public schools and providing subsidies for low-income families to access private education. Addressing these inequalities is essential for creating a more equitable and inclusive education system.

that benefits all students, regardless of their socio-economic background.

4.3 Social Stigmatization of Students Not Attending Hagwon

In a society where *hagwon* are considered essential, students who do not attend often face social stigmatization and feelings of inadequacy. The pervasive belief that private education is necessary for academic success creates a cultural narrative that marginalizes students who, for financial or personal reasons, opt out of the *hagwon* system. These students are often perceived as less ambitious or capable, even if their performance in public school is strong.

This stigmatization is reinforced by the competitive nature of *hagwon*. Students who attend are exposed to rigorous training and advanced resources, giving them a visible academic edge over their peers who do not. The resulting performance gap can exacerbate the sense of exclusion experienced by non-*hagwon* students, who may feel they lack the tools to compete on an equal footing. A 2019 study conducted by Seoul National University found that 64% of non-*hagwon* students reported feelings of social isolation and anxiety related to their academic performance, citing the advantages enjoyed by their peers as a significant source of stress.

The stigma also extends to parents, who may face judgment from other families for not enrolling their children in *hagwon*. In communities where private education is the norm, parents who forgo *hagwon* are often seen as neglecting their children's academic needs. This societal pressure can be particularly intense in affluent neighborhoods, where comparisons between families are more pronounced. Low-income parents, in particular, may feel a sense of guilt or shame for being unable to provide the same opportunities as wealthier families, further perpetuating feelings of inadequacy.

This culture of stigmatization highlights a broader issue within Korea's education system: the over-reliance on private education as a marker of success. By equating *hagwon* attendance with ambition and achievement, society creates an environment where students and families who cannot or choose not to participate are unfairly marginalized. Addressing this stigma requires a cultural shift that values diverse paths to success and promotes the importance of holistic education, reducing the pressure to conform to a single model of academic achievement.

The societal dynamics surrounding *hagwon* culture reveal the complex interplay of acceptance, inequality, and stigma within South Korea's education system. While *hagwon* have become deeply integrated into daily life, their prevalence has also magnified socio-economic disparities and reinforced societal pressures. These dynamics underscore the need for systemic reforms and cultural change to create a more inclusive and equitable education environment that values diverse pathways to success.

5. Psychological and Physical Consequences

5.1 Escalating Levels of Stress, Anxiety, and Mental Health Challenges

The relentless demands of *hagwon* culture have led to a significant increase in stress and anxiety levels among South Korean high school students. The pressure to perform well in standardized exams, particularly the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT), creates an environment where academic achievement becomes a central source of identity and self-worth. This emphasis on test scores can overwhelm students, who feel that their future prospects hinge entirely on their academic performance.

Studies have consistently highlighted the mental health challenges associated with *hagwon* attendance. A 2021 report by the Korean Educational Development Institute found that 72% of high school students attending *hagwon* reported symptoms of stress or anxiety, with 38% indicating severe levels that interfered with their daily lives. Many students experience performance-related anxiety, driven by fears of failing to meet parental expectations or falling behind peers. This anxiety often manifests in physical symptoms such as headaches, stomachaches, and difficulty concentrating, further impacting students' ability to cope with academic demands.

The competitive environment fostered by *hagwon* also contributes to feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt. Students are frequently compared to their peers through ranking systems, mock exams, and teacher evaluations. While high achievers may thrive in this environment, those who struggle often internalize their perceived shortcomings, leading to diminished self-esteem and a heightened risk of depression. The stigma surrounding failure exacerbates these challenges, as students fear judgment not only from their families but also from their peers and educators.

5.2 Effects of Intense Schedules on Sleep Patterns and Physical Health

The grueling schedules imposed by *hagwon* have significant repercussions on students' physical health, particularly their sleep patterns. Most high school students in Korea attend public school during the day and transition directly to *hagwon* in the afternoon or evening, often staying until 10 PM or later. This leaves little time for rest, with students frequently sacrificing sleep to complete homework, prepare for exams, or commute between home and *hagwon*.

A 2020 study by the Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare found that 74% of high school students reported sleeping fewer than six hours per night, well below the recommended eight to ten hours for adolescents. Chronic sleep deprivation has been linked to a range of negative outcomes, including reduced cognitive functioning, memory retention, and decision-making abilities. Students who lack adequate sleep are also more prone to irritability, fatigue, and burnout, which can further undermine their academic performance and overall well-being.

The physical toll of *hagwon* culture extends beyond sleep deprivation. Long hours spent sitting in classrooms, coupled with a lack of physical activity, contribute to poor posture, weight gain, and musculoskeletal issues. Additionally, the reliance on convenience foods or skipping meals due to time constraints can negatively affect students' nutrition and energy levels. These health challenges are compounded by the mental stress associated with *hagwon*, creating a cycle where physical and emotional exhaustion reinforce each other.

5.3 Case Studies or Survey Data Illustrating the Pressures Faced by Students

Survey data and individual case studies provide valuable insights into the pressures faced by students within *hagwon* culture. For instance, a 2021 survey conducted by the National Youth Policy Institute revealed that 68% of high school students cited *hagwon* attendance as the primary source of their academic stress. The survey also found that students attending elite *hagwon* in affluent districts, such as Gangnam, reported higher levels of stress compared to their peers in rural areas, reflecting the heightened competition and expectations in metropolitan regions.

Case studies further highlight the personal struggles of students navigating the demands of *hagwon*. One such case involved a 17-year-old student from Seoul who attended *hagwon* for five hours daily after regular school. Despite her strong academic performance, she experienced severe anxiety due to constant comparisons with her peers and fear of falling behind. Her schedule left little time for sleep or hobbies, leading to feelings of isolation and burnout. Eventually, she sought counseling, where she expressed a desire for a more balanced lifestyle that prioritized her mental and physical health alongside her academic goals.

Another case study focused on a rural student who commuted over an hour each way to attend a *hagwon*. The student's family made significant financial sacrifices to afford the fees, placing additional emotional pressure on the student to succeed. Despite her efforts, she struggled to keep up with the advanced curriculum and felt overshadowed by her urban peers. This experience highlights the compounded pressures faced by students from less affluent backgrounds, who often bear the dual burden of high expectations and limited resources.

These examples underscore the widespread impact of *hagwon* culture on students' mental and physical health. They also highlight the need for systemic changes to reduce the pressures associated with private education and create a more sustainable and supportive academic environment.

The psychological and physical consequences of *hagwon* culture reveal the high cost of Korea's education system's competitive nature. The stress, anxiety, and health challenges faced by students underscore the urgent need for reforms that prioritize well-being alongside academic achievement. Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive approach that includes limiting *hagwon* hours, promoting balanced schedules, and fostering a culture that values holistic education over test-centric success.

6. Global Comparisons

6.1 Similarities with Japan's *Juku* and China's *Buxiban*

South Korea's *hagwon* system shares significant similarities with Japan's *juku* and China's *buxiban*, both of which are prominent private tutoring systems in their respective countries. All three systems arose in response to high-stakes examination cultures, where performance in standardized tests largely determines access to prestigious universities and career opportunities. Like *hagwon*, *juku* and *buxiban* cater to students seeking to enhance their academic performance or secure a competitive edge in exams.

In Japan, *juku* often operate in the evenings and focus on exam preparation, much like Korea's *hagwon*. These academies serve students of all ages, from elementary school to high school, and provide tailored instruction in core subjects such as mathematics, science, and language. Similarly, China's *buxiban* have become integral to academic life, with parents enrolling their children in these centers to supplement public education and prepare for the *gaokao*, China's rigorous university entrance exam.

Another commonality among the three systems is the intense pressure they place on students. In all cases, private tutoring reinforces a culture of competition, where academic success is narrowly defined by test scores. This leads to long hours of study, high levels of stress, and limited opportunities for leisure or personal development. Additionally, these systems often perpetuate educational inequalities, as wealthier families can afford higher-quality tutoring while lower-income students are left with fewer resources.

Despite these similarities, there are notable differences in how each system operates and integrates into its

respective society, with Korea's *hagwon* culture exhibiting unique characteristics that set it apart.

6.2 Unique Characteristics of Korea's Hagwon Culture

While sharing structural similarities with *juku* and *buxiban*, Korea's *hagwon* system has distinctive features that reflect the country's unique educational and cultural landscape. One such characteristic is the sheer scale of the *hagwon* industry in Korea, which is estimated to be worth over \$20 billion annually. This extensive network of private academies caters to nearly all academic levels and subjects, from early childhood education to advanced test preparation for the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT).

Another defining feature of Korea's *hagwon* culture is the intense societal normalization of private tutoring. In Korea, attending *hagwon* is almost universally regarded as a necessity rather than an option, even for students who excel academically. This normalization is supported by cultural values that emphasize discipline, hard work, and the pursuit of excellence. By contrast, in Japan and China, private tutoring is widespread but not as universally expected, with a greater proportion of students relying solely on public education.

Korea's *hagwon* culture is also characterized by its highly competitive and data-driven nature. Many *hagwon* publicly display student rankings and emphasize measurable outcomes, creating a high-pressure environment that prioritizes performance above all else. This contrasts with Japan's *juku*, which often adopt a more supportive and personalized approach, and China's *buxiban*, where the focus is increasingly shifting toward holistic development in response to government regulations.

Additionally, Korea has developed a unique *hagwon* ecosystem that includes star instructors who gain celebrity-like status. These educators attract large numbers of students with their reputations for delivering high success rates in exams. Such phenomena are less prominent in Japan and China, where the focus tends to be on institutional reputation rather than individual instructors.

6.3 Insights from Education Systems with Less Emphasis on Private Tutoring

While Korea, Japan, and China exemplify the dominance of private tutoring in education, other countries offer alternative models that place less emphasis on private academies and more on holistic learning and equity. For instance, Finland's education system is frequently lauded for its focus on student well-being, creativity, and collaborative learning. Unlike Korea, Finland does not rely on high-stakes standardized testing, instead prioritizing formative assessments and individualized support. This approach reduces stress and creates a more balanced educational experience, demonstrating that academic success can be achieved without excessive private tutoring.

Similarly, the Netherlands offers a model where extracurricular activities and student interests are integrated into the education system. By encouraging a balance between academics and personal growth, the Dutch system fosters a more well-rounded development for students. Schools in the Netherlands also provide extensive support services, such as counseling and mentorship, reducing the need for external academic support.

These systems highlight the potential benefits of reducing dependency on private tutoring and shifting the focus toward public education and holistic development. They also underscore the importance of addressing socio-economic disparities, as countries like Finland ensure equitable access to high-quality education regardless of a student's background.

7. Parental and Social Drivers

7.1 Parental Motivations: Aspirations for Academic Success and Social Mobility

Parents in South Korea play a central role in sustaining the *hagwon* culture, driven largely by aspirations for their children's academic success and upward social mobility. Education is deeply ingrained in Korean society as a primary pathway to secure prestigious jobs and a stable future. Parents often view their investment in *hagwon* as an expression of love and responsibility, aiming to provide their children with every possible advantage in a competitive academic landscape.

The high stakes of the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT) and admission to prestigious universities amplify these motivations. For many parents, securing a spot in elite institutions like Seoul National University, Korea University, or Yonsei University (the SKY universities) represents not only academic success but also access to influential social networks and high-paying careers. This belief drives parents to enroll their children in *hagwon* from an early age, ensuring they build a strong academic foundation that will prepare them for these milestones.

Financial sacrifices are a common theme among parents determined to provide their children with the best educational resources. A 2021 survey by the Korean Ministry of Education found that over 60% of parents were willing to cut back on personal expenses, such as leisure and travel, to afford *hagwon* fees. In lower-income households, the pressure to compete with wealthier peers often leads to significant financial strain, with some families taking on debt to fund private tutoring. These sacrifices underscore the lengths to which parents are

willing to go to fulfill their educational aspirations for their children.

7.2 Cultural Pressures Compelling Families to Prioritize Hagwon

Beyond personal motivations, cultural norms and societal expectations exert significant pressure on families to prioritize *hagwon*. South Korea's Confucian heritage places a strong emphasis on education as a means of self-improvement and family honor. As a result, parents often feel a moral obligation to provide their children with the best possible education, regardless of the financial or emotional costs involved.

This cultural emphasis on education is reinforced by community and peer dynamics. In neighborhoods where *hagwon* attendance is the norm, parents may feel compelled to enroll their children to avoid falling behind the community standard. Social comparisons among families frequently intensify this pressure, as parents measure their efforts against those of their peers. For example, a parent who does not send their child to *hagwon* may face criticism or judgment from relatives, friends, or neighbors, further reinforcing the perception that private tutoring is indispensable.

Media and popular culture also contribute to this phenomenon by glorifying academic success and perpetuating the idea that education is a zero-sum game. Stories of students who excel through rigorous *hagwon* attendance are often celebrated, while those who struggle without private tutoring are portrayed as cautionary tales. This narrative fosters a sense of urgency among parents to ensure their children do not miss out on the perceived benefits of *hagwon*, even if it comes at a personal or financial cost.

7.3 Public Attitudes Toward the Sustainability and Necessity of Hagwon

Despite the widespread acceptance of *hagwon*, public attitudes toward their sustainability and necessity are increasingly divided. On one hand, many parents and educators acknowledge the benefits that *hagwon* provide in terms of academic support and exam preparation. Families often see *hagwon* as a valuable supplement to the public education system, particularly in areas where schools may lack resources or fail to meet the demands of competitive exams.

On the other hand, there is growing concern about the long-term impact of *hagwon* culture on students, families, and society. Critics argue that the financial burden of private tutoring exacerbates socio-economic inequalities, creating an uneven playing field where wealthier students have access to superior resources. The intense focus on *hagwon* also raises questions about the sustainability of a system that prioritizes academic performance over holistic development and student well-being.

Public discourse has increasingly turned toward government intervention as a potential solution to mitigate these issues. Measures such as limiting *hagwon* operating hours, capping fees, and providing subsidies for low-income families have been proposed as ways to reduce the dependence on private tutoring. However, these efforts have met resistance from parents who fear that restricting *hagwon* access will disadvantage their children in the short term.

This ambivalence highlights the complex relationship that South Korean society has with *hagwon*. While many view them as indispensable, there is a growing recognition that the current system may not be sustainable in the long run. Balancing these competing perspectives requires a careful reevaluation of the role of *hagwon* in the education system and a broader cultural shift that values diverse pathways to success.

The parental and social drivers behind *hagwon* culture illustrate the deeply rooted motivations and pressures that sustain its prevalence in South Korea. From personal aspirations for academic success to cultural expectations and public debates about its future, the dynamics surrounding *hagwon* reflect the complex interplay of tradition, competition, and modernization in the nation's education system.

8. Policy and Future Directions

The pervasive reliance on *hagwon* in South Korea's education system calls for thoughtful policy reforms and innovative strategies to address the challenges it presents. As *hagwon* have become an integral part of academic life, reducing this dependence requires a multi-faceted approach that balances the need for academic support with the well-being of students and the promotion of equity in education.

One key area of reform involves enhancing the public education system to reduce the perceived necessity of *hagwon*. This could include increasing funding for schools to provide more individualized attention, expanding after-school programs, and improving teacher training to better address diverse student needs. By strengthening public education, policymakers can alleviate some of the academic pressures that drive families toward private academies. For instance, implementing smaller class sizes and introducing targeted interventions for struggling students could help bridge the gap that *hagwon* currently fill. Additionally, revisiting the emphasis on high-stakes testing, such as the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT), may shift the focus from rote memorization and exam preparation to holistic learning and critical thinking.

Promoting a more balanced and holistic approach to education is another critical step. Schools can incorporate more extracurricular activities, project-based learning, and opportunities for creative expression to foster well-rounded development. Encouraging students to explore their interests outside of academics not only enhances personal growth but also reduces the singular focus on test performance that *hagwon* perpetuate. For example, integrating arts, sports, and community service into school curricula can provide students with a broader sense of achievement and purpose. This shift requires cultural change as well, as families and educators must begin to value diverse pathways to success beyond university admissions.

To address the socio-economic disparities exacerbated by *hagwon*, the government can implement targeted measures to level the playing field for all students. Subsidies or vouchers for low-income families to access private tutoring or enrichment programs could help mitigate inequalities. At the same time, expanding free or low-cost academic support programs within public schools could provide an equitable alternative to private academies. Regulatory measures, such as capping *hagwon* fees or limiting operational hours, may also help to reduce financial and academic pressure on families while curbing the influence of the private tutoring industry.

However, these policies must be carefully implemented to avoid unintended consequences, such as the proliferation of unregulated underground tutoring markets. Transparent oversight and collaboration with educational stakeholders, including schools, parents, and *hagwon* operators, will be essential for ensuring the effectiveness and fairness of these reforms. Public awareness campaigns can also play a role in shifting societal attitudes toward education, emphasizing the importance of mental health, balanced lifestyles, and the value of diverse talents and skills.

Looking to the future, South Korea has the opportunity to redefine its education system in a way that prioritizes equity, sustainability, and student well-being. While *hagwon* have undoubtedly contributed to academic achievement, their dominance has come at a cost. By investing in robust public education, promoting holistic development, and addressing systemic inequalities, policymakers can create an environment where students thrive without the burdens imposed by excessive private tutoring. This transformation requires not only structural changes but also a cultural shift that embraces a more inclusive and balanced vision of success.

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