



“Exam-Hell” in Korea

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Perhaps you have heard of the terminology “Entrance-Exam Hell”. Yes, it is the term that describes the “rigor” of the entrance exam to colleges and universities in certain Asian countries. The Korean term “Ji-ok” in this “Ip-si-ji-ok” (entrance-exam-hell) is translated to mean “hell”. But perhaps the more correct translation may be “dungeon”, in the sense that it does not carry any religious connotations and that the term just indicates an environment that is very difficult for anyone to survive.

Whatever the correct translation may be, “exam-hell” is the stage a young student goes through in order to enter a good university. All young Korean students know very well that, sooner rather than later, they have to be drawn into the dark mouth of exam-hell! They also know what “rigor”—read: difficult and harsh test—is waiting for them in exam-hell. In fact, a large part of the exam is national and standardized, whose contents are officially required by the Ministry of Education (MOE), one of the more important government agencies in Korea.

The exams and the curriculum leading up to them are national and standardized. Once the exam contents are announced, not only does the “power of exam-hell” reign over the lives of young Korean students, but it also shakes the whole of Korean society. Young students have to plan for their futures accordingly, and parents and all senior members of the family have to consider carefully what they can do for their delicate young. For better or for worse, the future of their young members of our cohort is, by and large, the future of the family.

The power of exam-hell is suffocating. Koreans feel that the preparation time is insufficient. Pressured young souls sometimes feel an urge to ask,

“Why? Do I/we have to go through exam-hell? I mean, may I ask why I should?” The question is not forbidden, at least not in principle; but it is in real life. Grown-ups will immediately say, “No time to waste on such questions! Save time to study more.” Yes, it is madness. But in Korean society—in which “obedience to seniors” is still a virtue—good girls and boys swallow their fireball deep down and walk, bravely, into the path leading eventually toward the mouth of exam-hell.

I fortunately teach at POSTECH, one of the most prestigious institutions in Korea. So I get to meet the most successful students who come through exam-hell in the freshman classes. Yes, they are good! They have mastered the basic concepts and techniques from first-year calculus—differentiation and integration of elementary functions, including some transcendental functions, and even some techniques of integration. The majority of them are ready, without fear, to learn ordinary differential equations, calculus of functions in several variables, and linear algebra. They are ready to absorb new, challenging knowledge. This is admirable! In fact, I remember the conversations I had with several prominent French colleagues on various occasions. They studied the Korean system of education in some of their national committees! I confirmed their finding, saying, “Yes, almost all Korean universities have a rigorous selection process for their entering freshmen.” And they said, approvingly, “Fantastique!” They really admired that part of the Korean system. In this regard, exam-hell can be a system that even a more advanced country can envy.

There seems to be nothing in this world that is just “good”. While exam-hell produces these “able

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and courageous soldiers", I get to witness many more than just a few frail young souls suffering "in the dark". Every year, some commit suicide, leaving a blood-stained note saying something like, "Happiness doesn't come in the order of academic achievements, does it?" Such extreme cases (thank heavens, there are not so many) in the news every year tear my heart apart. Some other young souls *merely* suffer mental difficulties, stresses, and anxious agitated depression. Other students accept their inferiority as "reality" at such a young age—they are not even twenty-years old!—and they try to be ready to live the life of a "delta" or "epsilon"—of the lower classes, as in Huxley's *Brave New World*. It is cruel, but would we say that such casualties just have to occur in any battle? Of course, Korean seniors, including the Korean MOE, do not have such a "hardened" heart to discount all these problems. Even at the time of this writing much effort is being given to correct some of these difficulties—at least I would like to believe so. It is just that these are very hard to resolve; new problems arise as soon as one appears solved.

Yielding unwillingly to the "encouraging" advice not to mourn for the "casualties" too long, shall we now look at the brighter side? How do our successful young people do? Let us not look only at the students at POSTECH but also include those who are in the "better half" of Korean universities (Korea has approximately 200 colleges and universities). It is also true that the "energy supply" of young Korean talent is limited. They show evidence of exhaustion at some stage, usually between the second and third years of their college life. During this period, many male students choose to fulfill their military service, which is mandatory in Korea. The military duty is such a time loss to many, but it is on the other hand viewed as a convenient "escape" from this wandering period—especially from the female point of view. Female students, who are not required to go to the military, also suffer the same wandering stage—they file leaves of absence. Many observers of this situation, ignoring the trauma that has already occurred, call this the "block" that formerly excellent Korean students often face in their academic progress. It is definitely the aftermath of exam-hell and the long effort preparing for it. Obviously students try everything—after all, it is their life—to overcome these "blocks". But why should they have to? A serious, careful study of the system could perhaps improve it, and many of the students could then resume progress in graduate schools or in professional careers. The recent statistics on the noticeable achievements by Koreans in many areas seem to support the observation that students are indeed managing to do this. All the same, I wish that the system could be improved so that the students do not have to suffer through the wandering period so much.

In Korea, entrance-exam-hell is generally understood as "evil". MOE's present intention seems to be to change it into a system similar to that of the United States, namely, each university runs an American-style admissions office. I wonder if they have considered the fact that Korea may be quite different. Last year POSTECH ran such a new system; I was amazed at reading the resumés of the applicants. They may not be going through the old exam-hell, but they are driven to perform many other new things—it is a new exam-hell. It is unthinkable for me and for anyone to insist that the old exam-hell is ideal. But this is the year 2010 and, to Koreans and to anyone, the systems of the more advanced countries are no longer a hidden secret. It is high time to study ourselves and the other systems carefully—together to build a good outcome for all of our youngsters. After all, they are our future, are they not?

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