

South Korea

From Illiteracy to Affluence

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1998. 29 MINUTES. VHS. COLOR.

This video, which chronicles the history of education in Korea since 1945, offers important lessons for all Americans, especially for our elected officials. A production of the Economic Development Institute of the World Bank, the video makes a convincing case for why South Korea's investment in its citizens through education is a major factor in the nation's spectacular growth since the 1960s.

The video uses broad brushstrokes to paint a picture of a nation that rebuilt its economy and social structure after 35 years of, at times, violent colonial rule followed by three years of the Korean War. The video points out that through education South Korea has created a work force able to meet the challenges of modern democracy and technology. It goes on to ask: "How could such a poor country afford to educate so many people?" "Who paid for this education?" And finally, "What challenges lie ahead?" as South Korea continues to develop its economy.

Although the video relies on pronouncements of success and falls short in actually showing *how* South Korea managed to leap from poverty to "economic superiority," or from "illiteracy to affluence," it is, nonetheless, informative and engaging in its use of post-war and modern footage combined with compelling interviews and personal stories. Some useful education statistics, presented with appealing graphics, include percentages of K-16 schools that are public versus private and some eye-opening figures about government financing of education—98 percent for elementary and 25 percent for high school and colleges/universities.

The viewer learns that it was the Korean government's "bold" decision to guarantee six years of education to all children—both boys and girls—that paved the way for the so-called economic miracle of South Korea and its transformation from a primarily agricultural economy to that of a modern industrial economy. We also learn that financing from the private sector—mostly parents—has made educational gains possible.

As proof, the viewer is introduced to 22-year-old Chungsun, arrayed in black finery, giving her thesis recital as part of her graduation requirement from Seoul National University, South Korea's most prestigious. We're also introduced to her 72-year-old grandmother, who never went to school. Chungsun's grandmother is proud of her granddaughter's accomplishment, which she feels affirms the sacrifices she made for her children's education. We hear more of the same from Chungsun's mother, and

from a doorman at an apartment complex in Seoul, who managed to provide college educations to all four of his children, including one who went to Seoul National University. Perhaps because their children managed to attain that ultimate prize in South Korea's educational pursuit, a degree from Seoul National, they have no regrets about having had to pay for much of their children's schooling. As Chungsun's mother asks, "If not the parents, then who could one rely on to pay for one's children's education?"

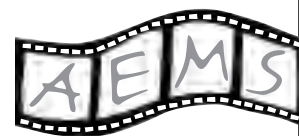
In contrast, and more reflective of the sentiments expressed by many of today's South Korean parents—especially those with middle school and high school aged children—one mother laments the pressures and expense of education. Her family spends about half their household budget to provide the kind of education that will enable her daughter to get into a school like Seoul National. And that is what is bothersome about this video. It presents Korea through a single lens: a nation and people obsessed with the pursuit of education and parents and families willing to make great sacrifices to provide for their children's education. But the viewer doesn't hear about any specific sacrifices; rather, they are spoken about in general terms.

One interesting segment concerns corporate financing of K-12 schools (to accommodate children of company employees) and technical colleges, which train future workers in places like Pohang, one of several industrial cities that have sprung up in once rural parts of Korea. Citing inadequate high school training, some companies have decided to set up training facilities, including colleges. Only in this context do we hear anything about voca-

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tional training or what happens to those who fail to stay on South Korea's fast-moving educational treadmill, or those who can't afford to pay the tuition or the extra tutoring deemed necessary to succeed in Korea's competitive educational environment.

Another segment shows a glimpse of an exam day and how the entire country mobilizes to provide favorable conditions for exam-taking students and their families, including providing police escorts for students late to their exams and banning airplanes from flying over exam locations. Seeing parents smear taffy to the wall of the university of their children's choice, in the hope that their children would "stick" and get into the school, and also seeing parents in prayer outside exam locations are fascinating social commentaries.

The video touches only upon the educational challenges facing South Korea today. One South Korean education official talks about how education in Korea emphasizes rote memorization and does not teach children creativity or independent thinking skills, but very little else is said. For example, what are the implications of growing demands for higher education? Today, one in three high school graduates goes on to college or a university. Are there enough higher education institutions in Korea to satisfy the demand if and when it increases? What about the financial implications of that for individual families and for the Korean government?

Still, despite its shortcomings, the video is worth seeing and using in the classroom—high school and beyond—for a variety of

purposes. For example, to introduce the history and culture of Korea since 1945, teachers could use the video to help students identify traditional values of Korean culture; to identify the changes the culture has experienced since World War II; and/or to identify the changes the culture faces as it continues to develop its system of education. Most especially, the video is recommended viewing for our elected officials and other congressional committee members in charge of education budgets. As the narrator and the video jacket claim, perhaps we can learn something from South Korea: Economic growth isn't possible without a highly educated work force, and to have both, we must invest in the education of our young. ■

NAMJI KIM STEINEMANN is Director of East-West Center's AsiaPacificEd Program for Schools. The program promotes teaching and leadership skills in Asia-related subjects, through residential summer institutes in Hawaii, travel seminars in Asia, and workshops both in Hawaii and on the U.S. mainland. She was most recently the Vice President of Education Programs at the Asia Society. In that capacity, she also served as the Executive Director of the National Commission on Asia in the Schools. In June 2001, the Commission released its landmark report, co-authored by Ms. Steinemann, which outlined recommendations and strategies aimed at improving instruction and learning about Asia in U.S. schools. An early advocate for the use of the Internet to deliver Asia-related content to K-12 classrooms, Ms. Steinemann conceptualized and launched the multiple award-winning AskAsia web site in 1994.

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PHONE: 212-327-9227, FAX: 888-FAX-ASIA (888-329-2742)

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The rich history and culture of Korea, as well as its critical ties to our own nation, provide compelling reasons for including Korea in educational frameworks. *Tune in Korea: Geography and Society* is a solid resource for grades 6–9, laying the foundation for exploration of this culture, its history, and its place in contemporary society.

Produced by the Asia Society with support from the Korea Foundation, the book

