

*Collectivism and Competition in South Korea:
Its Impacts on the Professional and Private Spheres*

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Collectivism and Competition

Collectivism and competition in South Korea greatly impact the professional and private spheres. They influence the job market and related industries within the professional field, whilst family structure and dynamics are affected within the private sphere.

Before delving into collectivism in South Korea, let's first define the term. Collectivism is, in dictionary terms, the practice or principle of giving the group priority over the individual. In my perspective, Korean society usually has an ideal and expects its members to fit into it. Members of a highly collectivist society will act according to norms placed by their in-groups. Moreover, Koreans themselves think that is the right approach to life. It is in stark contrast to individualistic cultures whose members act based on their own tastes and personalities. As a Korean, interacting with my people, consuming my country's products, there is always one thing that I am constantly reminded of: That Korea simply lacks diversity.

There are 850,000 people studying to become a public official because it is stable job. Everyone is studying for the Certified Public Accountant (CPA) test, with only 10,270 passing every year. Many study for the LSAT or GRE to prepare to go to prestigious graduate schools overseas and the rest study to become lawyers, doctors, consultants, and every other job that is prestigious with high pay. After COVID-19 hit in 2020, seemingly everyone opted into buying and selling stocks and making that their personality.

Now take a look around at businesses too. Have you noticed businesses are massively focusing on certain trends? One example is malatang, Chinese spicy hot pot. Shops have emerged everywhere since it first became a boom back in 2019. Currently, I'm noticing three trends in Korean life around me. First, the mint chocolate trend with soju, burgers, ice cream, and other confectionaries. Second, the MBTI trend. This is seen in ads for dating apps, study packets, and even asked in interviews for jobs. No one is surprised when someone asks what their MBTI type is anymore. Finally, the "Zero" trend in products, with zero-sugar soju, Coca-Cola

Zero Sugar, Sprite Zero Sugar, and many more. Through these examples, it is clear that Korea is quick to jump on trends unilaterally. This lack of diversity comes from collectivism. Korea wants people to fit in, to create a nice big picture, to be harmonious. You see people squeeze into options that can't accommodate everyone and hence it becomes almost impossible.

You might then ask the simple question, "Why are people opting into collectivism?" I would like to state that being an outlier often brings more harm than good. To continue with a stock analogy, it is high risk, low return. Being part of the collectivist mindset in Korea can be identified by three distinctive factors. The first would be that Korea has a fixation on 'success,' related to one's financial and social status. Living or even succeeding outside of the current paradigm of success does not mean you will be acknowledged for being unique or brave. Instead, you will simply be judged for being 'stupid.' Second, we are not educated about the choices or options we might have in the first place. We are raised to think of happiness in very limited and narrow terms. When you ask young students in kindergarten or elementary school what their dream job is, you will often find them wishing to become public officials or having a high-paying job rather than simply and honestly answering with jobs that might have befitted their personalities more. It is hard to find average children who cry out to become astronauts, presidents, or painters — someone revolutionary. Finally, actively opting out of the standards results in distinctive harmful social disadvantages, such as bullying. This might be perpetuated in schools, companies, within your family, or from your significant other. It can also bring with it often tragic or fatal consequences. Quite simply, in Korea, there is no safe space free of judgement. You suffer from loss of opportunities because you don't have the same background as other people do, and they see you as lesser or lacking in competency. Often you don't get the chance to prove them wrong in the first place. After constant pressure and microaggressions, you eventually judge yourself. Individuals become caught within their very own panopticons, watching to see what complies to norms and what does not.

Collectivism and Competition in the Job Market

In the general process of getting a job in Korea, there are normally seven rounds: Application of documents (resume, cover letters), aptitude test, AI interview, in-person interview (held at the working level), second in-person interview (held by the executives), short internship (about two to three months), and then the final recruitment evaluation and interview. While there are variations of this procedure, such as having only one

interview, no internships or no final recruitment evaluation, this is the general rule.

To start, a resume in Korea may not be what you are thinking. In Korea, companies prepare various questions for applicants depending on the position and the industry. For instance, SK Innovation for sales in green energy provides two questions for applicants. One is “What do you think happiness is and what should an individual and company do to achieve that happiness?” One would have to study how to promote themselves the best they can in that answer by fitting into the talent the company strives for (which is usually shown on the company website or social media channels), showing that they are above average and better than everyone else. They would present this image of themselves through a ‘different’ history of activities. If this process seems excruciating already, then there is the aptitude test and AI interview. The aptitude test is basically a test to test your intelligence and ability to work in a company. It is divided into four parts: language, mathematics, logical reasoning, and character. The first three are self-explanatory, while character is a section that checks your personality, your values and cooperation skills. Companies have different aptitude tests. Samsung has the GSAT, SK has the SKCT, and LG also has its own aptitude test. They all deal with the same four parts, just with different questions in each section.

The AI interviews are new, and feature applicants talking to themselves in a Zoom meeting. A female AI (there is no specific reason as to why it is female) will ask questions divided into three broad sections. During this interview, there is an AI talking but you can’t see them. You get two attempts to answer each question (excluding the AI games). The basic interview involves introducing yourself. You will face questions asking you why you applied to the company and, at the same time, to introduce yourself. Then it will move on to a more in-depth interview that requires you to speak about your personal values. There will also be some rather vague questions as well as sometimes digging in depth into your documents about the specifics of your background and extracurricular activities. The situational interviews provide you with a situation to see how you would react. Finally, the last part features AI games. These are infamous for challenging applicants beyond what they would have reasonably expected. The evaluation under the AI interview is quite different from an in-person one. It is somewhat looser in its standards but also quite scary as it analyzes your personality simply by evaluating the way the interviewee reacts to certain stimuli. There are many parts to the AI games, and the entire test plays out either incredibly quickly or slowly depending on the interviewee. The AI analyzes various factors and then

passes or fails you depending on the type of person the company wants. It has been noted that, despite this being an AI test, gender can sometimes play a role with men often outperforming women or vice versa depending on the industry or company.

You might then wonder what about this is problematic. The main problem I found to be was that there always seemed to be a 'right' answer to questions which otherwise looked subjective. Recruitment has become a whole new process of taking endless tests and evaluations that are rarely used in the workplace or any real-life situations. It should be noted that working-level people and the executives of current conglomerates never underwent this process since jobs were not as scarce in the past. Certifications (computers, Photoshop, English), academies to learn how to write resumes and take interviews, multiple internships, and other processes and procedures the youth of today are expected to undergo were simply non-existent in the past. One company I applied for made it mandatory for me to name my role model. It does not matter whether you actually have a role model; you just have to look for one. Yet, do not be fooled into thinking that you can write down a member of your family or a famous person because this would be an obvious answer, and you would not stand out. Despite being an open-ended question asking for your subjective opinion, these would not be acceptable answers. Therefore, I have to create the most perfect persona to get hired, and as a result, approximately 99% of people lie and exaggerate on paper so as to not get rejected. This results in another problem: the candidates' personalities and answers are all based on lies. A company is simply picking who is the best at exaggerating about themselves — the best con artist. If you are not good with words, you are at a rather large disadvantage. In that case, you must pay someone or go to an institution that does it for you. In short, if you want to be hired, you must be great at gaslighting the entire company.

Few people reading this would want to go through this process. It is the same for us. And it turns out there are 500,000 potential workers not even bothering to look for a job because of the immense pressure. The numbers seem outrageous. Let me draw a simple picture of an average person trying to get a job. When you apply to about 100 companies, you get called for the next round by about three companies. That means you get rejected 97 times. But even at the other three companies, there are at least five more rounds after the first one, and, most likely, you will fail in one of the subsequent rounds too. Then you have to start the whole process over again, applying to the same companies that rejected you before and also to new companies. Every day you receive rejections most of the time rather than notifications for progress to the next round. The constant

rejection destroys your self-esteem because society expects you to have a good job by this time in life. Your mental health deteriorates, hope keeps withering until you give up, or at least take some time away. That is the story of those 500,000 people.

The repercussions of these strict recruitment standards seem quite similar to the CSAT (Korean university entrance exams). On an individual level, there is the loss of self-esteem, constant pressure and, in the end, a loss of motivation. The impacts are then shown on a societal level, in that there aren't a lot of active participants in the market, and since no one is willing to change the standards, we lack diversity. We lack change, and Korea becomes stagnant. Is it any more positive in the private realm, in the way collectivism impacts the family?

The Impacts of Collectivism upon the Family

Collectivism also dictates multiple aspects of family dynamics in South Korea. The ideal family structure in South Korea consists of a man and a woman because we all know that being part of the LGBTQIA+ community is not embraced with open arms. Then ideally you should have one or two children. The ideal distribution of roles would be that the financial support goes to the man and household support to the woman. The children should give back to their parents later on by being successful (filial piety).

When this role is given to the parents, however, they go through a shift in identity. This often results in a crucial part of themselves, the identity they had before having children, becoming lost. This phenomenon impacts women more so than men, who are often more capable of maintaining their corporate self and identity. Often, parents do not get called by their names. They simply become A's dad or A's mom. They say in Korea the only time you hear your own name is in the hospital.

Parents seem to have a specific character and society expects them to act and behave in this way. Society has too much to say about how to do things and individuals merely compete in a broken system that they hate. There are standards and ways to be a 'father': The strong stoic leader of the house who brings in money. He's far from the household, never cries, might beat you if you did something wrong, and you don't expect emotions from this man. I myself wonder what my father's aspirations are, if he ever felt like he wanted to collapse and lean on his family. Yet I have never witnessed sadness or tears, which leads me to the conclusion that he has managed to hide it well. Motherhood continues to prove itself to be harsh, especially in South Korea. This compounds the already serious

physical difficulties of pregnancy and childcare. When we think of mothers, we imagine them to be always giving. Korean mothers give everything to their family, to their children, and all their hopes and dreams are thrown aside just to see their family smile. You see mothers cry just because their child is sick and going through hardship. They are sensitive to the changes in the household. Because they require so much effort to maintain, the relationships between father and children, husband and wife, the husband and in-laws become strained. Yet mothers remain the definition of devotion and unconditional love. Motherhood is beautiful but excruciatingly painful.

In South Korea, there is a certain mentality of children giving back to their parents, who give everything to their children so they can land a prestigious job and become successful. Then the child can finally start to give back to their parents in turn. Thus in Korea people will often refer to *hyodo*, or filial piety. Growing up in Korean society is not easy for children. They will always be mentioned and talked about among parents. They should be respectful, well-mannered, and fully aware of all the mannerisms and the culture. They are expected to be incredibly talented at one particular thing or a bit above average in everything that matters.

Divergence

Then what happens to people who don't fulfill these roles? In general, not fulfilling one's role brings negative impacts to the entire family. We were raised to think like this, as if there were set roles for parents and children. We believe there are invisible guidelines in Korean society. Yet we are in a society where it might seem as if people do not notice your existence. We don't greet our neighbors, let alone know who are neighbors are. We don't casually chat with random strangers on the bus, and we ignore people on a daily basis — especially the ones who 'stand out.' At the same time, if you do stand out, we give disapproving stares and small whispered comments or comparisons and advice on how to 'better' yourself. No one and everyone cares at the same time. This is the paradox of Korean life and its 'empty' collectivism.

A stay-at-home husband who doesn't earn any income but is not great at taking care of the household, because that was never a role assigned to him in the first place, has no use. He is 'broken' in this system. Yet he is not free from disapproving comments from the wife's friends, the children, the other parents at their child's school, or the man's own friends who each have own their wives and kids. Then the man often feels the need to somehow portray himself as a leader figure to make up for his

shortcomings. In doing so, he may become abusive. The wife may not find it to be a problem at first, but can slowly become apprehensive. The relationship between the husband and wife can become sour. Likewise, the mother who works instead of taking care of the household is always under fire at work for not being a great mother. The in-laws disapprove because the wife does not stay home and take care of not only the child but also the husband and the in-laws. As well, the wife is given many duties to assist the in-laws, and this labor taken for granted. The husband can become bitter for losing the reins on the household.

Children have high expectations to meet. Academia is harsh in our society where elementary school kids are pre-learning calculus to increase their chances of going to a prestigious university. They are not given much room to dream of other options or explore their own personalities or strengths and weaknesses through a range of diverse activities. Failing in school often brings harsh words from parents. They are under pressure knowing how much their parents gave to them but, at the same time, the intensity of school is often hard to overcome. Suicide is common among students, and suicidal thoughts even more so.

These roles have such a strong grip on everyone, and not fulfilling them negatively influences relationships. I find it very dystopian to be in a society where you are not given the freedom to make choices that may give you more happiness. It is sad to be in a society where you are under scrutiny for actions that have no negative impact on others. South Korea is hitting an international record low in fertility rates: 0.78 children per women. It is a multi-faceted problem but the stress of parenthood is a huge contributing factor. Many people are not willing to give up so many things for children who are also incredibly expensive in this society.

Consequences and Independence

One interesting outcome of this is the delay in children becoming independent from their parents. South Korea is stepping into the realm of a developed nation yet it is quite odd, and at the same time rather common, for 28-year-olds to live with their parents. According to the EU statistics institution Eurosta, the average age of independence in Korea is 30, whilst in the European Union, it is 25. We usually imagine that when we turn 30, we would already be married and have our own home, yet that is not the usual case in Korea. The average age of first-time married partners is 31.1 years for women and 33.4 years for men as of 2021. It is common for children to move out when they are married. Why so late? Landing a prestigious job takes long years of hard work and effort. The average man

goes to university at the age of 20, which means four years of university as well as two years of military service. There are many cases of taking a gap year or semester to do an internship or prepare for other certifications. Then that man is already 27 years old when he starts looking for a job. Settle into that job with enough money to marry and they will of course be over 30 years old. Military service is also a reason why there is a two-year gap between the genders for first-time marriage age.

The long years of care and support for children also makes it increasingly difficult for parents to let go of their children when they finally do become independent. South Korea has strong ties within the family and there is a family-oriented mentality rooted in our society. Often, mothers struggle the most when it comes to the independence of children. Mothers are forced to give up everything for their children and their entire lives revolve around them for over 30 years. When that long duty is over, there is usually a sudden huge question mark that appears in their life. They are not used to having their own life back, with time to think of their own aspirations and wishes. Hence, a lot of mothers still cling to their children in other ways that may negatively impact the new family their children have started. The in-law world is a rather common phrase mentioned in media, books, and casual conversation among newlyweds and married women. It explains the harsh environment women are usually pushed into to care for their in-laws. The mother of the husband would ask the wife to treat him like a king and do every single thing to assist him because he is her baby, from getting him a glass of water and doing all household chores, to cooking amazing food. This incredibly high standard is expected to be met by the wife due to the mother's inability to move on from her child. It is also pushed by gender inequality that is still pervasive in South Korea.

The MZ Generation: Dreaming of a Bright Future

It is not as hopeless a situation as one might expect, however. Korean society is shifting in mentality. We have already witnessed many shifts in industries, culture, and mentality in general. People are questioning social norms that were once not even considered problematic. It is shown by the 500,000 people not opting to hunt for jobs, and it is proven by the women who refuse to get married and have babies. It is also revealed by the numerous families who have given up on *jesa*, the tradition of ancestor worship (which is only made possible through women's labor, planning, cooking, and cleaning).

Youth Panel

The MZ Generation refers to the new generation, oftentimes pointing out how extreme they are in their demands for looser traditional and hierarchical norms. Policies have to some extent started to reflect the shift. There have been cash handouts to women who are starting families (although this has proven to be unfruitful in raising fertility rates), and there are looser standards within companies with regard to paid leave and more freedom to take days off. At the same time, some policies are also taking a huge step back, what with the current administration's proposed 69-hour cap on the workweek, though this has caused immense social backlash, showing again that our society is not receptive to such policies anymore. Individuals are starting to care for themselves and for their physical and mental health.

As I am on the youth panel of the Royal Asiatic Society, and a member of the young generation in this society, I understand where all these social norms are coming from: The need for economic development and nation-building after the Korean War. Yet times have changed. Being stuck in the past with old values makes society stagnant. Society should be dynamic, for the people within are never the same through the course of time. The collectivism and competition in South Korea are not necessarily an absolute evil. The drive for self-development in this society is incredible, as is the strength and ambitions of Koreans. I cannot deny that we have developed and become who we are today because of fierce competition and collectivism and the willingness of individuals to prioritize the nation over themselves. Nevertheless, free will is important, and options should be available. Korea is a society in which everyone is very likely to jump on the same train simply because everyone else is already on it. I think it is easy to also use this tendency to create another shared mentality of focusing a bit more on the individual rather than the group. I hope that ambitious young Koreans with goals that may not coincide with societal norms are not met with disparaging comments and looks but rather acknowledgement and support. We should not be indifferent to people's dreams. I believe having dreams in this society is such a huge step forward from the past no matter the content of that dream. I have high hopes for the youth in our society. I envision a bright future and I aspire to be part of that change.

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