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“Stuck in Hel Joseon”

The millennial generation’s plight in contemporary South Korea

Ella Holttinen

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Supervisor: Axel Fredholm

Abstract

South Korea is well known for its development miracle: the nation has managed to develop from the state of extreme poverty to the World's 12th largest economies in a period of five decades. However, the negative consequences and side effects of this rapid growth, and issues of the contemporary Korean society has been less discussed, especially from the perspective of the Korean youth. The millennial generation in South Korea is living in a society, which has been drastically shaped by neoliberal policies and globalization. Combining these features with values and ideals of local culture and Confucian heritage, contemporary Korean society is full of complexities.

Based on the media coverage on the current social issues related to contemporary South Korea, there are indicators that the Korean millennials feel "trapped" between the past and present, forced to deal with the expectations of their parents' generation, and the grim reality of competitive and hierarchical society, where hard work will no longer guarantee upward social mobility and social security. From these premises, an expression 'Hel Joseon' has emerged among the Korean youth. 'Hel Joseon' is a comparison between the modern society of today and the pre-modern Joseon Dynasty, and the term entails, that South Korea is hellish hopeless society. 'Hel Joseon' expresses frustration that stems from economic inequality, unemployment despite having a degree from a top university, the hierarchical class system, excessive working time, and alienation from a society that only works for vested interests.

In this thesis, I will discuss 'Hel Joseon' as a part of the larger topic of millennial plight taking place on a global level, in relation to the local cultural conditions and features of South Korea's development trajectory defined by compressed modernization, that have contributed to the hardships of the Korean youth. The theoretical framework of the thesis consists of elements of a strain theory, combined with an application of the concept of relative deprivation. The qualitative research has been conducted as a literature review, that also features interviews with young Koreans, which have been published on online platforms.

In conclusion it can be stated, that the dominance of neoliberal hegemony in contemporary South Korea has resulted in conflicts with traditional Confucian values, which have enabled the conditions for the emergence of 'Hel Joseon'. The millennial generation's plight can be seen to stem from a notion related to the commodification of human capital in the context of the precarious labour market and competitive society. These premises have hampered the Korean millennials transition to

adulthood and shaped the experiences of being a young adult. The hardships related to the phenomena of 'Hell Joseon' have led to a collective notion of "giving up" with various aspects of life among the Korean millennials, and an increasing trend of leaving South Korea for a simpler and satisfying life elsewhere.

Keywords: South Korea, Hell Joseon, millennials, compressed modernity, Confucianism, neoliberalism, human capital, achievement society

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1. Introduction

South Korea's fast transformation from rural to industrial to an information society and one of the World's biggest economic powerhouses hasn't come without side effects. South Korea's development trajectory has resulted in a complex, unbalanced, and uneven society (Hwang & Lim, 2015). The millennial generation is now living under these circumstances and has to deal with a variety of social issues related to unemployment, housing poverty and even giving up with relationships and family to survive in a highly competitive society (Jung, 2017; Cho, 2015, ABC News, 2020; CBC, 2018, California Review Management, 2016).

Frustration related to this grim reality has created an expression 'Hel Joseon' that has been popularized among the Korean millennials. The origins of the expression 'Hel Joseon' can be traced to Korean author Chang Kang-myung's best-seller novel, *I Hate Korea* (2015). Despite the novel's fictive nature, the storyline is based on the reality of the Korean millennials and hardships of the daily life. Chang's novel also reflects the young people's desire to escape from 'Hel Joseon'. (Epstein, Kim & Chang, 2018). Se-Woong Koo, a Korean professor and writer, in turn, summarizes the conditions of 'Hel Joseon', "an infernal feudal kingdom stuck in the nineteenth century" in a web article published on *Korea Exposé* (2015) with following statements:

"(...) what angers the young are obvious: having to sacrifice youth for interminable education, the state and a job one does not believe in; a narrow path to financial security and an even more narrowly defined path to success; growing inequality and hereditary privileges of the haves; lack of social welfare that might cushion the fall to poverty; and elite corruption."
(Koo, 2015 in *Korea Exposé*)

'Hel Joseon' can be seen to be a part of a larger notion of the millennial generation's struggles, which is a prevalent issue in every modern society of today. However, what makes 'Hel Joseon' and South Korea's case to stand out from the narrative is the influence of Confucian heritage. Confucianism has shaped greatly the development processes in South Korea, and the way the society looks like today. Confucian values still impact greatly the contemporary society, which is simultaneously firmly tied into neoliberal hegemony and the notions of globalization (Jung, 2017; Hwang & Lim, 2017; Han & Shim, 2010, Youn-ja Shim, Kim & Martin, 2008).

Thus, I argue based on my research, that ‘Hel Joseon’ is the outcome of South Korea’s rapid economic development, conflicts between local and global, adoption of neoliberal ideologies, and Western mindset, inserted in “a Confucian head”.

1.1. Research aim and significance

This thesis aims to shed a light on the complexity of the issue and examine the experiences of young people, who are “stuck” in Hel Joseon. I also aim to identify features, which have led to the creation of ‘Hel Joseon’ and link it with an analysis of South Korea’s development trajectory and compressed modernity. The thesis topic contributes to the narrative of South Korea’s unfinished development, by addressing societal issues, that will need further attention on a policy level. Moreover, ‘Hel Joseon’ as a concept has not yet gained attention in academic research, thus resulting in a gap in the existing literature.

1.2. Research questions

The topic of this thesis is examined through the following research questions:

Which global and local factors can be seen to have influenced the emergence of the concept of ‘Hel Joseon’?

What are the experiences of South Korean millennials, who are “stuck” in ‘Hel Joseon’?

2. Methodology

2.1. Research design

This thesis work is an exploratory study about the complexities and societal issues affecting millennial generation in contemporary South Korea. The qualitative approach can be seen to be the most relevant for this thesis topic, since ‘Hel Joseon’ is an emergent topic, that has not been researched in social sciences. Morse (1991) has stated that qualitative research design is useful when the concept is “immature” or new, due to a conspicuous lack of theory and previous research, and thus there is a need to explore and describe the phenomena and to develop a relevant theory (Morse, 1991, p. 120 in Cresswell, 2014, p. 152).

The research has been conducted as a literature review. Secondary data has been collected from articles and other online publications. In terms of data collection, no in-depth interviews were conducted, due to challenges related to external obstacles that emerged during the thesis writing process. Instead, I decided to complement my analysis with quotes from news clips and street interviews published on YouTube by online media producers Asian Boss¹ and Arirang Issue². Additional sources for interview quotes and background material include reliable news producers and their South Korea related reportages, which were also published on YouTube.³ Interviews and footage from news reports I chose to use featured young Koreans, ranging from high school students to recent university graduates, which fit to the targeted research group of my thesis.

The collected qualitative data has been analysed by using the Miles & Huberman (1994) framework. The first part of the analysis is data reduction, which refers to editing, segmenting, and summarizing the data, which takes place throughout the whole writing process. Later on, coding, memoing, and conceptualizing is used to reduce the amount of collected data without losing any significant information. Also, data and quotes I have collected from interviews, featured in fourteen different video clips and one podcast episode, have been transcribed and coded as a part of the data processing. The final part of the analysis is drawing conclusions from the data.

2.2. Limitations

‘Hel Joseon’ as a concept has not yet gained attention in academic research in the field of social sciences, nor are the issues of contemporary Korean society for a youth perspective. Also, most of the existing research and publications about millennials are often Western biased and mostly constructed around the experiences of youth in the United States. This can be seen due to the origins of the conceptualization of the millennial generation, which lies in the work of American scholars William Strauss and Neil Howe. The Strauss-Howe Generational Theory describes a cyclical pattern of age cohorts, or ‘generations’, with their peculiar trends and defining behavioural patterns that are connected with the history of the United States of America (van Eck Duymaer van Twist & Newcombe, 2017). In terms of this thesis, I found it limiting to use these studies as a base

¹ Asian Boss is a South Korea-based media startup, that focuses on young people’s opinions and issues. Asian Boss conducts in-depth interviews about actual social issues and phenomena taking place in Asia.

² Arirang TV/Radio is a public service agency that is specialized in Korea related issues.

³ TRT World, South China Morning Post, Al Jazeera, CGTN America, ABC News.

of my thesis work or to be used for making relevant comparisons. However, this realization strengthened my outlook on the context of contemporary South Korea and social milieu where ‘Hel Joseon’ takes place. Thus, due to the scarcity of the existing academic literature, secondary data used in this thesis have also been collected from online publications, including news articles, blog posts, and video clips to get an understanding of how the issues and experiences of the Korean millennials are dealt and discussed in the media.

I am well aware, that the news reportages and street interviews I have used as a part of the analysis can only provide limited insight into the phenomena and the experiences of young people living in contemporary Korea, and cannot be compared to the superiority of primary data from in-depth interviews or longitudinal studies. Therefore, the conclusions about the experiences of the Korean millennials presented in this thesis cannot be generalized to give a holistic view of the phenomena. Thus, the data material I have used cannot be used for making firm conclusions, but it provides a background context and helps to illustrate the different aspects of ‘Hel Joseon’ for this thesis.

One of the biggest challenges with data collection has been language limitations. I have only relied on sources written in English, which obviously rules out a lot of material about ‘Hel Joseon’ published in the Korean language. Also, in terms of the interview clips I have used, I depended on the English translations provided by the publisher. Thus, it should be stated, that in terms of data collecting, valuable information might have been “lost in the translation”.

As already stated above, another limitation that should be addressed is the generalizability of the experiences of the targeted research group. In this thesis, I am discussing about millennials as a homogenous group. In terms of the struggles of the Korean millennials, I decided to leave out the intersectionality aspect of various issues related to e.g. gender, ethnicity, and disabilities. Despite their importance for influencing cause and effect results, the entity of all these factors is too complex to address in terms of my research topic and the frames of this thesis work. However, I am well aware that this decision rules out important issues that are relevant concerning the experiences of being stuck in ‘Hel Joseon’, e.g. in terms of feminist perspective concerning struggles of being a young female in a male-dominated society.

3. Background

3.1. Millennials' struggles – global trends

This section is dedicated to giving a brief overview of what millennial generation's struggles refer to, in order to get an understanding of the background context, where 'Hel Joseon' takes place.

According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (n.d.), millennial generation entails those born between the early 1980s and mid-1990s, whereas some definitions of the term also include those born in the early 2000s. In this thesis, the discussion about the Korean millennials is targeted to those, who are currently in their early to mid-twenties.

Discussion related to millennials is often defined by listing the advantages millennials have over other generations. Thus, it has been argued, whether the millennial generation's hardships are justified: millennials are the most educated generation so far, beneficiaries of global mobility, equipped with advanced technology. Millennial generation is living and operating in an era defined by neoliberalism, the economic policy of deregulation and precariousness, entitlement diminishment, and individualism (Shaun, 2018). These economic, political, and socio-cultural conditions can be seen to shape greatly the prevalent trends and behavioural patterns among the millennial generation (U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, 2012).

Despite various advantages millennials' have, the millennial generation is the first generation, that in terms of upward social mobility is doing worse than the previous generations. Reasons for this can be seen to lay in the social conditions which are influenced by the global recession, and evolvement in personal values and priorities that has shifted away from reaching higher salaries and a wealthy lifestyle. According to The Deloitte Global Millennial Survey from 2019, the biggest trend that defines millennial generation is the rise in individual choices and postponing achieving success markers related to adulthood, such as house ownership, marriage, and having children. Instead of the traditional values, millennials put more emphasis on achieving personal growth, for example, in terms of traveling and doing volunteer work (The Deloitte Global Millennial Survey 2019).

The Deloitte Global Millennial Survey also highlights a variety of both macroeconomic and daily life anxieties that bother millennials, which are affecting their future optimism. Millennials tend to

have low expectations for economic development, which has an impact on their views about uncertain future views. Interestingly, the survey shows that there tends to be greater optimism among millennials in developing nations. For example, Nordic countries such as Norway and Finland – both ranked as the happiest nations on Earth – rank some of the lowest scores while countries in the Global South show higher levels. In terms of future optimism, South Korea ranks 27th, while 39th being the average score on a scale between zero (absolute pessimism) and 100 (complete optimism) (The Deloitte Global Millennial Survey 2019).

3.2. South Korea's experience of compressed modernity: "Development miracle or a story of an unfinished development?"

South Korea has undergone rapid economic development over the last five decades. Thus, South Korea's development model has also been described as a "compressed development" or "condensed capitalist development" (Hwang & Lim, 2015) and "compressed modernization" (Han & Young-Hee, 2010; Chang, 2010). South Korean development model entails that the development of first modernity and the transition to second modernity happened almost simultaneously within a very short period.

The emphasis on economic policies tends to neglect the importance of cultural factors in the process of economic development (Nelson, 2000). As early modernization theories entail, non-western societies were seen to be able to "catch up" only by abandoning their local culture and traditions and assimilating to more advanced and "superior" western ways. Economic development and hegemony of global capitalism push societies towards one direction, but cases like South Korea's and other Asian Tigers countries development miracle shows, how strong impact the cultural heritage has on shaping the development trajectories (Inglehart & Baker, 2000, p.19). Thus, South Korea serves an example of how tradition, modernity, postmodernity, and anti-modernity can all coexist in the present (Hwang & Lim, 2015).

Regarding South Korea's path to modernity, it has been argued, whether South Korea has reached a Western type of modernity, or if the modernization process is still ongoing and unfinished (Hwang & Lim, 2015). South Korea's development model can be defined by state-led modernization, with a strong focus on the role of big conglomerates' monopolistic business practice, attempting to achieve growth via competition. South Korea's "catch up" with Western countries was carried out by "growth first, safety later" type of attitude by public officials, resulting in a welfare-absent

development strategy (Chang, 1999). Thus, South Korea's quantitative growth does not juxtapose with equality and improved quality of life (Hwang & Lim, 2015). Therefore, it could be argued, that South Korea is still a developing nation.

Chang, 2010, describes compressed modernity as “a civilizational condition in which economic, political, social and/or cultural changes occur in an extremely condensed manner in respect to both time and space, and in which the dynamic coexistence of mutually disparate historical and social elements leads to the construction and reconstruction of a highly complex and fluid social system” (Chang, 2010 a, p. 6). Chang argues, that the concept of compressed modernity can be used to interpret and explain the extreme changes, complexities, and imbalances and their interrelationships that are prevalent in contemporary Korean society.

In the process of a compressed and rapid transition to modernity, old and new values clash with each other, which results in anomie. Anomie is the outcome of development, where speed and achievement are viewed as more important values than safety, equality, and sustainability (Hwang & Lim, 2015). Chang (2010) adds to this notion by stating, that when foreign technologies, institutions, and practices are implemented or “borrowed for immediate purposes”, this neglects the local conditions and values, and philosophical and historical foundations. Therefore, without fundamental philosophical or ideological justification, “borrowed modernity” can lead to an emergence of anomie (Chang, 2010 a, p. 24).

Kang (2011, p. 167) discusses South Korea's experience of compressed modernization in a conceptual framework of “developmentalist mentalités”. Kang argues, that throughout the rapid changes in society, Koreans have adopted a collective mindset of developmentalism. Kang describes “developmentalist mentalités” as a way of thinking and behaving in a highly competitive society. “Developmentalist mentalités” and the desire after success and upward social mobility, can be seen as contributors for the nation's development miracle, but it has now become a social ill in the contemporary Korean society, which can be argued to affect especially the Korean youth.

3.3. Confucianism and capitalism – conflicts in contemporary Korea

Korean sociology professor and author Andrew Eungi Kim (2017) argues, that social norms and behavioural etiquette in South Korea are based on Confucian values. These values include filial piety, patriarchy, hierarchy, learning and education, familism, and collectivism (Kim, 2017, p.18).

In today's society, Confucian heritage and Western capitalism co-exist in a complex manner, resulting in clashes between hierarchy and equality, conformity and individualism, traditions of the past, and dynamics of globalization (Youn-ja Shim, Kim & Martin, 2008, p. 24). Therefore, it could be said, that from a surface South Korea looks modern with all the advanced technology and innovations, but attitudes and mentality of the people haven't followed at the same pace as the economic development, stemming from the experience of compressed modernity as discussed in the previous section.

Social issues in contemporary Korea are not just an outcome of the shortcomings of the global and local economy, but one must also look to the cultural heritage to understand the social context where 'Hel Joseon' takes place. It can be said, that Confucianism has had a great impact on creating a social milieu and context, which strengthens a collective notion of plight among the millennial generation. "Confucian ethic", emphasis on education, a desire for success and accomplishment, commitment and loyalty to employers can be seen as a major contributor to South Korea's rapid development (Lett, 1998, p.41 in Youn-ja Shim, Kim & Martin, 2008, p. 18). Today, those same features can be seen to be affecting negatively the millennial generation's outlooks in the future, by creating a sense of fierce competition amongst the youth.

It can also be argued, that pervasiveness of traditional values stemming from Confucianism is conflicting with the attempts to adopt a more global mindset and embracing individualistic lifestyles, which distinguishes the Korean millennials from the global trends among the millennial generation. The contrast stems from the "demanded or obligatory conformity" to the group interest and respecting the harmony and hierarchy within the group (Youn-ja Shim, Kim & Martin, 2008, p. 19). This notion could also be interpreted as a way to "conform" into the unwritten expectations regarding success, and the societally and culturally accepted ways to achieve it. It can be argued, that the Korean millennials find themselves negotiating with the expectations given from above, in contrast to their emphasis on individual decision making. Thus, it could be said, that 'Hel Joseon' stems from the experience of being "stuck" between the past and present, and the conflicts between individual wants and the need to conform and follow the predetermined path.

4. Conceptual and theoretical framework

The phenomena related to 'Hel Joseon' is discussed by using an adapted version of strain theory. Also, a concept of relative deprivation is used as a part of the framework.

While doing the literature research and developing a theoretical framework for my thesis, I came across with Robert K. Merton's strain theory (1938), and Robert Agnew's modified version of the strain theory, a general strain theory (1985), which both have gained popularity particularly in the field of criminology. Merton's strain theory was created around the idea of how the cultural system in the USA was built on the notion of the American dream. Even though Merton's theory was based on the context of 20th century America, it is applicable to any contemporary, western, developed capitalist society. Therefore, I argue, that the premise of strain theory also applies to my research topic and provides a relevant approach to 'Hel Joseon' and contemporary South Korea.

The base for Merton's theory is that Americans were socialised believing in the American dream, which created a consensus that the social and personal goals related to success and material wealth was available to all, no matter of one's class, gender or ethnicity. The American Dream was seen to be possible to achieve with ambition, talent, and hard work. In sum, the general assumption for strain theory is that within societies exist both culturally valued goals and culturally valued means to achieve these goals. The goals are socially constructed and shared assumptions in a given society about what is being valued. However, these goals are not equally attainable for everyone. Thus, Merton argued, that when individuals are facing a gap between the socially emphasised goals and their current status and means to achieve the goals, strain occurs (Hall, n.d.; Thompson, 2016; Wright, 2008; Seepersad, 2010). Merton argued, that when facing a strain, there are five different ways to react: conformity, innovation, ritualism, retreatism, and rebellion. Merton's strain theory is most famously known for the argument, that delinquency and criminal activity is a form of innovation, and a way to achieve personal goals related to wealth and success by illegal means. This shift toward delinquency stems from frustration resulting from the strain.

Agnew's version of strain theory adds up to Merton's definition of when strain occurs (Brezina, 2017). Agnew argues that strain can also emerge from events or conditions that are disliked by the individual or result from negative experiences and failure to achieve positively valued goals. Agnew argues for three different types of coping mechanisms when facing a strain: cognitive, behavioural and emotional (Carey, 2016). In sum, Agnew's general strain theory focuses on the

incapability of the individual to avoid negative emotions, such as frustration and anger, stemming from negative stimuli (Choi, Kruis & Kim, 2019).

Merton and Agnew's arguments also differ in terms of aspirations and *ideal* goals. Agnew's general strain theory entails that experience of strain can also stem from the failure to achieve *expected* outcomes, in the same manner as in the case of failure to achieve *deserved* outcomes (Brezina, 2017). General strain theory also broadens the spectrum of goals and outcomes to more abstract concepts than just economic success or middle-class status. Strain can also stem from the inability to achieve other culturally valued goals, for example, in terms of gender performativity (e.g. failure to meet stereotypical expectations for acting like a female/man) and relationships (e.g. being involuntarily single).

The concept of relative deprivation is closely connected with the different aspects of a strain theory. Relative deprivation refers to the individual's perception of their well-being in comparison to others. Well-being can be measured in many ways, for example, in terms of wealth, income, power, and prestige (Seepersad, 2010). One of the first conceptualizations of relative deprivation by Davis (1959) entails, that the individual experiences relative deprivation when they don't have X, when they perceive similar others that have X, they want to have X, and feel entitled to have X. In sum, relative deprivation refers to the subjective experience of discontentment when being deprived of something to which the individual believes to be entitled to.

4.1. Application of strain theory and the concept relative deprivation

I argue, that in the Korean context and the case of 'Hel Joseon', strains emerge from challenges related to the lack of access to the socially and culturally valued goals, despite personal efforts and hard work. Taking into consideration the analysis of "developmentalist *méntalités*" (Kang, 2011) and Confucian values of conformity, and the "shared" obsession with success and status, a connection to the notion of achieving socially and culturally set goals is very close to Merton and Agnew's analysis. Achieving a middle-class status, and the status symbols it entails is seen as the ideal goal, which has now become more difficult to achieve for the Korean millennials. Thus, the situation has resulted in a notion of giving up, which can be viewed as a collective experience, that has become a defining element of the millennials' identity.

I've adjusted Merton and Agnew's versions of the strain theory with the following statements:

- Instead of delinquency, a collective notion of giving up is a more common way to act to the frustration related to strain. A reason for this can be seen in the norms and social etiquette shaped by Confucian values, including respect for peace and harmony within the community, and the deeply rooted ideal of how hard work pays off.
- In the case of South Korean millennials, assumed abundance of options and possibilities, and means to achieve them cause conditions for the emergence of a (mental) strain, whereas in Merton's theory, strain often stem from lower and working-class experiences about lack of material resources. This 'mental strain' stemming from the differing experiences between reality and expectations, are related to failure to achieve things despite hard work, in a context where the emphasis is put on "the power of positive thinking and right attitude" and "nothing is impossible" mindsets.
- Another main source of emergence of strain is related to social status and socioeconomic background. The Korean millennials are highly aware of the existing class-hierarchy, and how family background affects one's chances in life. This notion can be seen to be connected with the concept of relative deprivation and viewing other's luckier and valuing their chances to become successful based on their family background. The class awareness of Koreans has inspired a "spoon theory", which is part of the same type of terminology as 'Hell Joseon', reflecting frustration related to societal issues in contemporary Korea. The spoon theory entails, that a member of a lower class (a dirt spoon) can never achieve an upper-class status (a gold spoon) (Epstein, Kim, & Chang, 2018, p. 2). This notion emphasizes the experience of lack of upward social mobility, and strain stemming from being born into a wrong social class.
- Due to the competitiveness of the society, facing a failure causes a strain, and a sense of "being kicked out from the competition". This notion is manifested in Korean's obsession with education and emphasis on academic success, and in the concept of studying hard to avoid "being left behind" and thus failing to achieve success in life.
- In Korea, the definition and experience of success, contentment, and happiness are interpreted and valued by others. This notion stems from Confucianism and the collectivistic nature of Korean culture, where the community is prioritized over the individual. Thus, this creates a social pressure to prove one's success by visible, material evidence, such as having a degree from a prestigious university and luxury items. The inability to achieve these success markers causes a strain, and a sense of failure and losing one's "social face".

I draw my conclusions about the collectivistic notion of giving up as an action to strain based on the existing literature and media coverage about societal issues related to ‘Hel Joseon’. I also argue, that the notion of giving up consists of three different “sub-categories”, which are most prevalent among the Korean millennials.

- Conforming to the existing circumstances and accepting reality as it is. The Korean millennials view working hard, and “collecting the right specs” as a way to survive, despite the experience that hard work doesn’t provide any results or rewards. This type of acceptance of the situation can be viewed as an emotional coping mechanism.
- Leaving the existing circumstances and trying to find a more satisfying life elsewhere. The “escape from Hel Joseon” might not even be done with a hope for economic gains or wealthier lifestyle but to leave behind the competitiveness and stress related to hardships of the daily life.
- Suicide as an ultimate form of giving up.⁴

These arguments related to strains and actions to them will be discussed more in detail in the following section.

5. Analysis and discussion: different aspects of ‘Hel Joseon’

5.1. “The Give Up Generation”

Apathy stemming from hopelessness and frustration manifested in the expression of ‘Hel Joseon’ can be seen to have led to a collectivistic notion of “giving up” with various aspects related to transitions to adulthood, such as full-time employment, marriage, family, and house ownership. As briefly discussed in the previous section, the shared experience of “giving up” can be seen to define the Korean millennials. In fact, the millennial generation has been given the nickname of “The Give Up Generation”, referring to the various aspects of life they have been forced to give up. The concept and expression of “The Give Up Generation” was firstly introduced by Korean journalists of *Kyunghyang Shinmun* newspaper in a reportage *Talking About the Welfare State*. Eventually the young Koreans adopted this expression as their own, and it has become a part of the discourse concerning the experiences and hardships of the millennials.

⁴ According to OECD Health statistics, South Korea’s suicide rate in 2016 was 24,6 per 100 000 persons, being one of the highest on a global ranking level.

“The Give Up Generation” consists of different levels of giving up. The ranking starts from giving up with dating, marriage, and children, evolving to giving up with steady employment and homeownership, eventually leading to sacrificing dreams and hopes, before reaching the ultimatum of giving up with life itself (Policy Forum: The Pacific Policy Society, 2015). Various stages of giving up can be seen as actions to strains stemming from a gap between the means to achieve the “components of adulthood”, and individual wants. Based on the interviews of young Koreans and other media reportage about the aspects of ‘Hel Joseon’, the notion of letting go of e.g. family and house ownership seems to be more “forced” due to structural and cultural hinders of the society, in comparison to Western societies, where millennials are postponing or neglecting completely the achievement of traditional adulthood markers based on individual choices. These sentiments are presented in the following quote, which also reflects the individual experience of relative deprivation of the respondent:

Young male: *“I want to hang out with friends and go out on a date. However, if I do that now, I won’t be able to catch up with others. So, I control myself a lot. I can’t complain that we have different starting lines. It’s fine that I start at a different level, but I feel upset when someone else gets additional perks.”*

(South China Morning Post, 2019, *Deepening inequality in South Korea bites struggling youth*)

Based on the street interview clips presented on Asian Boss’s (2019) YouTube video *Do Koreans Want To Get Married*, a conclusion can be made that the Korean youth tend to value interpersonal relationships in comparison to economics. Thus, relationships are viewed as something that are enabled by finances, and something only a few can “afford” in today’s society, as expressed in the following quotations:

Young male: *“And when I see my friends, they’re split, those who want to marry and those who’ve given up on marriage. You’ve probably heard of the term, “non-maritalism”. And I think this phenomenon is spreading.”*

Interviewer: *“What’s non-maritalism?”*

Young Male: *“Because of financial or cultural reasons, people are pursuing a lifestyle in which they forgo marriage and live on their own. I think that’s “non-maritalism.”*

Interviewer: *“If that’s the case, how does this affect lower dating rates?”*

Male: *“You obviously need money to date. But since our society is all about money, I think this also affects teens and people in their 20s.”*

(Asian Boss, 2019, *Do Koreans Want To Get Married?*)

Young male: *“Rather than getting a girlfriend and spending money on her, I think more people are spending that money on themselves, for self-improvement. Maybe that’s why. Like, rather than spending money on dating, since I like playing tennis, I’d rather buy a new tennis racket. Something like that.”*

(Asian Boss, 2019, *Do Koreans Want To Get Married?*)

The notion of giving up with different aspects of personal life can also be seen to stem from the idea of viewing them as hindering factors for personal growth. For example, investment in interpersonal relationships is viewed as secondary in comparison with staying competitive in the hunt for achieving monetary success. This notion can be linked with the concept of strain emerging from the fear of failure and pressure to survive in a competitive society and the concept of human capital in the neoliberal hegemony.

To put in other words, it could be argued, that the Korean millennials tend to give up happiness on the present for the idea of a better future, which is dependent on the number of personal sacrifices and hard work. Simultaneously, there is a sense among the Korean youth that achieving happiness and “adulthood success markers” at a later point in life has become almost impossible. Therefore, related to the notion of giving up with various things in life, the Korean millennials tend to value their happiness by measuring the small aspects of daily life. A Korean term ‘Sohwakhaeng’ is typically used by young people to describe small but certain happiness:

Young male: *“Maybe getting a beer after work is Sohwakhaeng. Young generations are talking about Sohwakhaeng because they know they can’t overcome that big gap between rich and commoners. They are just saying, yeah, I’m satisfied with this.”*

(ABC News, 2020, *South Korea’s hope in hell*)

5.2. “Education fever” and the need to succeed

Stemming from Confucianism, education is viewed as the most important way to achieve success, and this fixation is a dominant feature defining Korean society. A strong emphasis on education has been a major contributor to the nation’s development miracle, but it is also the cause for the current hardships of young Koreans, who are struggling in a competitive society. It has been argued among Korean scholars, that Confucian norms and emphasis on education have a strong impact on young Korean’s transition to adulthood, combined with the ongoing process of modernisation of the country (Choi, 1994, in Yoon, 2006).

“Education fever” began already in traditional Korea. In the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1897) passing the civil service examination ensured the individual’s future and granted a higher status for the family members as well. Despite all the drastic changes the Korean society has undergone, children’s education remains to be a family issue (Kim, 2017, p. 162). Reflecting on Confucian values of familism, the stress and emphasis to study hard to achieve success and good life became the main agenda in the upbringing of the Millennial generation (Yoon, 2006). The obsession with education was boosted by the Asian financial crisis in 1997. In the era of post-economic crisis, precariousness, and increased global competition, academic success is seen as the main determiner for a secure future (Cho, 2015), as reflected in the following quote:

Young male 1: *“The Korean education system still put too much emphasis on the prestige of university brands and certain majors, without considering student’s interests or aptitudes. That’s why everyone says you have to go to university, that you have to be “in Seoul”, and that you have to go to “SKY” universities.”*⁵

Interviewer: *“So if you could get into SKY, you are set for life?”*

Young male 2: *“I don’t think so.”*

Young male 1: *“Me neither.”*

Young male 2: *“I used to believe that. But then I realized it’s never-ending competition and majoring in something that I’m not interested in is also a struggle.”*

(Asian Boss, 2016, *How Important is Going to University In Korea?*)

⁵ SKY universities refer to Seoul National University, Yonsei University, and Korea University – the most prestigious universities in South Korea.

Educational background has a tremendous impact on determining one's chances in life: employment, social status, and even marriage are connected with academic background and having a degree from a prestigious university (Kim, 2017, p. 20). This obsession, or a "diploma disease", creates a fierce competition among Korean youth and a basis for a narrow definition for success. Multiple respondents in street interviews on a video *How Important Is Going To University In Korea* (Asian Boss, 2016) provide a very unanimous picture of the academic stress and academic success as being the main determinant for one's dignity.

Young male 1: *"When you meet friends in your 20's, the first thing they'd ask is where you went to university."*

(Asian Boss, 2016, *How Important is Going to University In Korea?*)

Young male 2: *"Only after you get into university, you'd get treated like a normal human being."*

(Asian Boss, 2016, *How Important is Going to University In Korea?*)

Young male 3: *"First of all, the university entrance rate last year... was almost 80%. So, if you don't go to university in this environment, that means you are in the bottom 20%."*

(Asian Boss, 2016, *How Important is Going to University In Korea?*)

Young female: *"For high school seniors, sleeping 5-6 hours per day would be considered normal. But some would say even that's too much sleep."*

Interviewer: *"I also heard something like... "sleeping 5 hours a day will not get you into university but sleeping 4 hours a day might." Any other similar expressions you know?"*

Young female: *"If you study hard now, your future husband's face will change." Something like that.*

Young male: *"Or "let's get on the Line Number 2!"*

Interviewer: *"What does that mean?"*

Young male: *"Most of the prestigious universities like Seoul National and Yonsei are all close to subway line number 2. So, it's like "let's get on the Line No. 2! If you study for 10 more minutes, the subway line will change!"*

(Asian Boss, 2016, *How Important is Going to University In Korea?*)

This notion of stress related to academic stress is closely related to Confucian value about filial piety. Since Korean parents invest greatly in their children's education, causing pressure and expectations for academic success. Since parents have a lot of influencing power over the education

choices of their children, many young people feel the need to respect their parents' decisions, despite they would be contrary to their interests (Cho, 2015).

Young female: *"I don't think a lot of high school students are given opportunities to question what they want to pursue. They are just told what to study. And even at universities, I've seen many students that don't like their majors."*

(Asian Boss, 2016, *How Important is Going to University in Korea?*)

Moreover, the perception of 'owing' something to the parents in terms of the financial investment they have made for providing the best type of education is deeply rooted in the minds of Koreans. This creates a pattern and a sense of having "to pay back" with hard work to one's parents for the sacrifices they have done, as reflected in the following statement:

Young female: *Frankly, If I could, I'd study less. But if I think about my parent's support, expectations, and how much they've invested in all of this, I can't betray them."*

Interviewer: *"You feel like you owe your parents?"*

Young female: *"Yes, that too."*

(ABC News, 2020, *South Korea's hope in hell*)

Academic stress due to a strong emphasis on education can be seen as a culturally specific factor for strain, leading to the notion of giving up. Thus, the experience of being stuck in 'Hel Joseon' has emerged from the youth's realization, that the emphasis on the importance of education in a neoliberal economy does no longer correlates with better employment possibilities or upward social mobility. This sense of hopelessness was a defining element for many respondents, which can also be seen in the following statement by an interviewed student of a "Korean Harvard", Seoul National University:

Young male: *"In the old days, if you went to a good school, you'd have been guaranteed good jobs."*

Interviewer: *"What about now?"*

Young male: *"Right now, as a Seoul National University student, I feel there aren't many options to choose from anymore."*

(Asian Boss, 2016, *How Important is Going to University in Korea?*)

5.3. Youth unemployment, hierarchical workplace culture and lack of work-life balance:

“No work and no play”

South Koreans have one of the most excessive working hours among the OECD group of advanced economies. According to OECD data from 2018, Koreans work 1993 hours annually, in contrast to the average of 1734 hours (OECD, 2018). This excessive working culture is the outcome of the country's rapid development and experiences of compressed modernity. The major contributor to fast changes and economic development in Korea was an abundance of labourers, who were willing to do long hours for low wages since this was seen to contribute to the greater good of the nation. As a conclusion based on the prevalent trends in South Korean labour markets, it could be argued, that employers still tend to take this mindset for granted. As presented in the following quotation, there can be seen to be a generational gap between the experiences of the millennials and older generations' in terms of youth unemployment. This notion can be argued to be related to the emphasis on gaining success via hard work and personal sacrifices that has been a dominant and defining feature of the social milieu.

Young female: *“Honestly, in Korea, no matter how hard you try, because the opportunities are so few, difficulty in getting a job is the reality. However, the older generation doesn't understand us. They say, “It's because you don't try hard enough!” Because of the frustration or anger stemming from that, that's how the term “Hell Joseon” was coincided.”*

(Asian Boss, 2018, *What's It Like Living In South Korea?*)

In addition to the emphasis on academic background and social status, Confucian values have also shaped the business practices and working culture, in terms of conforming to group interests, valuing harmony over standing out, and respect and acceptance for authority (Youn-ja Shim, Kim & Martin, 2008, p.15). For young university graduates, strict hierarchical corporate culture makes it difficult to be hired in big chaebols and having a well-paid, secure job with social welfare benefits, thus resulting in an increasing rate of youth unemployment. According to International Labour Organization, South Korea's low youth labour force participation rate (28.5) can be seen as the outcome of young Koreans delaying their entry into the labour market, when deciding to pursue higher levels of education (ILO, 2016). Also, many South Korean students postpone their graduation, since the job market continues to be increasingly scarce, and competition even more intense. South Korea's youth unemployment issue is also worsened due to the oversupply of university graduates with homogenous skillsets, as presented in the following quotation:

Young male: *“In South Korea and many other countries there are more job seekers than vacancies and corporations so it’s hard to become employed. The process of resume submission, screening, and interviews is rigorous and it’s taking a toll not just on me but on all job seekers.”*

(TRT World, 2019, *South Korean Economy: Frustrated young people struggling to find jobs*)

BBC’s reportage *“The young Koreans pushing back on a culture of endurance”* from 2020, presents the Korean millennials shifting attitudes concerning the social and workplace norms and expectations. The article discusses “The Give Up Generation” and the Korean millennials growing need to gain satisfaction outside traditional measures of success, based on the realization that the “big milestones” of adulthood are more difficult to reach. Thus, this affects their view on the importance of work-life balance. As the following quotation indicates, the concept of working culture with set hours appears to be one of the main determinants for the quality of life:

Interviewer: *“If you could emigrate to any country, which country would that be?”*

Young female: *“Somewhere with a good social welfare system, like Switzerland. Their standard of living seems quite high. Also, Korea has a very poor working culture, with many people working until late. So, I want to... go to a country where one just works set hours and enjoys life.”*

(Asian Boss, 2018, *What’s It Like Living In South Korea?*)

5.4. Achievement society and human capital: “The importance of having the right specs”

In its simplest definition, human capital refers to a set of skills, that individual obtains via education or training, which increase the productivity of the individual, thus bringing higher returns. In the neoliberal hegemony, human capital is being valued by the “bankability” of the actor, the “employability” of a worker, and the “marketability” of individual’s skillset (Feher, 2009).

Therefore, the individual needs to value different aspects of life, stemming from education to health and even interpersonal relationships, as ways self-improvement. This definition of neoliberalism and human capital is related to Foucault’s theorization about a shift between individual, discipline, and power, which has taken place throughout the changes in the modern era. Foucault argues, that direct punishment and dominance of institutional and cultural power have been replaced by more subtle discipline, stemming from the individual. In this modern discipline regime, individuals adopt “technologies of the self” to improve and manage their productivity. According to Foucault, most of the changes in one’s behavioural patterns are done against his or her real interests, to match external expectations and unspoken demands, e.g. working longer hours in order to please the boss for a

hope for a rise (Taylor, 2005). Korean-German author Byung-Chul Han (2010) refers to this Foucauldian theory with a statement, that the 21st society is no longer a disciplinary society, but an achievement society, where people have turned from being “obedience-subjects” to “achievements subjects” (Han, 2010, p.8). Han also argues, that this paradigm shift refers to a change in social mindset from disciplinary to a “positive scheme of Can”, which entails, that “after a certain level of productivity obtains, the negativity of prohibition impedes further expansion” since positivity of Can is much more efficient than the negativity of should (Han, 2010, p.8). Thus, the complaints and thoughts about how “nothing is possible”, can only occur in a scheme that views that “nothing is impossible” (Han, 2010, p.11).

In the case of Hel Joseon, this type of self-discipline and behaviour is related to the obsession with academic background and constant self-improvement to meet the expectations of the surrounding society. Young people neglect their real interests and even physical needs, such as sleep, in order to meet the standards and ideals given by the larger society. The self-discipline stems from the individual, but still, the pressure and control lies in institutional and cultural power. The millennial generation has been brought up to embrace self-discipline and focus on calculated micromanagement of personal productivity, which has resulted in the millennials, who are obsessed to work towards goals, which are not in line with their real aspirations (Cho, 2015).

Young female 2: *“It’s tough to find jobs right now. I feel that rather than doing what we love, we need to become what the society requires us to be.”*

(Asian Boss, 2016, *Do Koreans Think Korea is Living Hell?*)

A reportage from Arirang News (2016) *“Young Korean job seekers struggle to stand out from crowd”* covers the issue of the importance of prep courses in job-seeking among university graduates. According to data from Saramin, a Korean job-seeking portal, young job seekers use 37% of their monthly living expenses to cover job preparation costs. These extra curriculum classes are seen almost as a mandatory requirement, which creates a situation, where those who can’t afford to take these classes are immediately left out of the competition.

Young female: *“Competition is fierce, regardless of what the requirements are we need to make ourselves more qualified and attractive to employers in order to have a better chance of landing a position.”*

(Arirang News, 2016, *Young Korean job seekers struggle to stand out from crowd*)

According to Cho (2015) the millennial generation can be defined by spec, smart, safety, and survival. For the “S generation”, the importance lies in collecting the right type of specifications and résumé-building activities, in order to achieve long-term, secure employment, and ‘safety’ in the competition where only the fittest survives. Cho (2015) backs up this definition by arguing that, the rapid changes brought by neoliberal reforms facilitated the formation of the social milieu, where young people feel trapped in constant competitiveness and experiences of biosocial reproduction. The notions of micromanagement and collecting right specs can be viewed as actions to a strain stemming from the fear related to “failing”, which would rule out the possibility to achieve success by the culturally defined standards. These experiences were also highlighted among the interviewees, as seen in the following quotations:

Young female: *“Ever since we were young, this is how we’ve been taught. You can’t fall behind and need to compete. You’re always being compared to others. Since the parents were raised that way, they raise their kids that way, too, without realizing.”*

(Asian Boss, 2018, *What’s It Like Living In South Korea?*)

Young male: *“I’m quite worried regardless of how I try to improve my specs I really don’t know what to do now.”*

(CGTN America, 2015, *Youth unemployment, aging population hindering South Korean economy*)

5.5. Precariousness

In terms of economics, the concept of precarity refers to the global expansion of precarious work and a variety of social problems related to it. In social sciences, the concept of precarity can also be linked with broader notions of security, citizenship, and social life (Jung, 2017). Precariousness can be seen as the key concept of defining and shaping the experiences of the millennial generation. In the case of ‘Hel Joseon’, precariousness can be seen as one of the main causes for the uncertainties in the era of post-financial crisis. South Korea’s transition to neoliberal society and the economic recession brought by the Asian financial crisis in 1997 led to the creation of a flexible and precarious labour regime. This resulted in the loss of career prospects and long-term employment – changes, which hit especially the Korean youth (Benson & Ying, 2005, p. 73). The millennial generation is now facing a new type of social precarity that goes beyond the material deprivation, as highlighted in the following statement:

Interviewer: *“Korea suffered economic hardship because of the Korean War. However, it became an OECD donor nation through its incredible development. So, some young people are now calling Korea, “Hell Joseon”. What brought this about?”*

Young male: *“Since the Korean War, people went through both hardship and economic turnaround. But since our generation has only gone through economic hardship, that’s why, in my opinion.”*

(Asian Boss, 2018, *What’s It Like Living In South Korea?*)

The experiences of the millennial generation struggling in the era of precariousness has been captured by Korean authors Woo Suk-hoon and Park Il-kwon, in the book “The 880,000 Won Generation” (2007). In this publication, the authors tell a story about the development and emergence of the young generation they refer to as “the \$830-a-month generation”. According to Woo and Park, the millennial generation who grew up in the era of the post-Asian economic crisis was destined to become members of the poor working class - only a small part of this generation would be able to attain a secure, long-term employment, while the rest would be forced to take irregular jobs with an average income of US\$830 per month (Cho, 2015). The members of the 880,000 Won Generation are stuck in a society, where they earn low salaries despite their university degrees, enthusiasm, commitment, and acceptance of long working hours and lack of work-life balance.

Young female: *“I think Hell Joseon from my perspective as a job seeker means that Korea is a tough place to live because of limited job opportunities and low wages. So, all the frustrations created such expression, I think.”*

(Asian Boss, 2016, *Do Koreans Think Korea is Living Hell?*)

The experience of precarity can be seen to shape the coping mechanisms and ways to act to strains of the millennials. Due to the precarious nature of today’s society, giving up in all its aspects has replaced future optimism among Korean millennials. Concerning the concept of relative deprivation, the millennials tend to view themselves as entitled to the things they are now forced to give up but don’t view themselves capable to achieve them under the current circumstances.

5.6. Leaving abroad – “Escape from Hel Joseon”

Cho (2015) argues, that South Korean millennials have begun to realize that the society offers them limited options in the dominant neoliberal hegemony: studying and working till the point of burning out as “willing slaves” or fleeing, voluntarily or involuntarily, the excessive working culture and demand for constant self-exploitation. This notion was visible in several respondents’ statements, reflecting the desire to “escape from ‘Hel Joseon’”:

Interviewer: *“In the future, would you rather live in Korea or go live in some other country?”*

Young female 1: *“I’d rather go live elsewhere.”*

Young female 2: *“Me too.”*

Interviewer: *“Why?”*

Young female 2: *“I don’t like that only those who get into top colleges get everything in Korea.”*

(Asian Boss, 2016, *Do Koreans Think Korea is Living Hell?*)

Interviewer: *“Would you rather live in Korea or go live in some other country?”*

Two young females: *“Different country.”*

Interviewer: *“Which country?”*

Female 1: *“Just anywhere besides Korea.”*

(Asian Boss, 2016, *Do Koreans Think Korea is Living Hell?*)

Emigration can be seen as a coping mechanism for the hardships of the daily struggles and competitiveness of the society, and it has become increasingly popular among Korean millennials. News reportage from Al Jazeera (2016) about Koreans, who decides to emigrate abroad showcases an interesting trend among the Korean millennials. Today, many young university graduates want to move abroad for a simpler and easier life, even if it would mean performing 3D jobs (dirty, dangerous, and difficult) with a minimum wage. Statistics show, that young Koreans are hesitant to take 3D jobs in their home country, and therefore South Korea suffers from manpower in this field of work (Singh & Siregar, 1997, p. 46). This is an interesting contrast, but it can be seen to reflect the shifting values of Korean millennials, and the desperate need to get out of the sociocultural context, as reflected in the following quotations:

Young male, college graduate, studies to become a welder: *“I felt trapped. Young people fear failure. Even if I collect degrees and work very hard, I might not become a teacher. So, I discovered*

welding. There's a high demand abroad. It's my way out. I want to go to Canada. Living abroad will be easier."

(Al Jazeera English, 2016, *Fleeing South Korea*)

Young male, emigrated to the USA: *"If I stayed in Korea, I'd be working day and night, 24/7, for a big company. When I saw my future, I quit school in Seoul and came here. It's the Korean reality. You're trapped in a system where you have no personal life. It was no life for me."*

(Al Jazeera English, 2016, *Fleeing South Korea*)

This emigration trend has led to a growth of abundance of oversea work agencies, that help people with contracts and working visa arrangements. Many Koreans are willing to pay over 25,000 USD for these arrangements, just to get a job on a farm. The reportage from Al Jazeera (2016) presents a story of a Korean couple in their early thirties with a middle-class background, who decided to leave their steady jobs and emigrate to the USA. They motivate their decision with the following statements:

Female: *"In Korea, I have to worry about what others think. As soon as I leave home, I feel that pressure. People judge me based on how I look. This may seem trivial, but you're trapped in this system. I feel like this is less prevalent in America. I could leave home wearing shorts or slippers without wearing makeup, for example. Life in Korea means respecting norms, even when they don't suit you."*

Male: *"For men, external signs of wealth are very important. We're always being judged on that – your car, the size of your flat. If I have kids, society will judge them... if I don't have a luxury car. It's ridiculous. We have no choice. I don't want to get rich in America. I just want to live quietly, without being judged."*

(Al Jazeera English, 2016, *Fleeing South Korea*)

The dream of moving abroad can give hope, but due to the high cost of arranged emigration, it's only a possible option for the privileged, thus greatly determined by the finances of the family. Therefore, many young people can only afford to dream about escaping 'Hell Joseon', and accept the circumstances as they are. These sentiments were reflected with following statements among the interviewees:

Interviewer: *“Do you have a lot of friends who want to go live overseas?”*

Young male: *“Yeah, I think so. That said, the truth is, most of them never do anything about it.”*

Interviewer: *“So pretty much all talk?”*

Young male: *“Yes. Just wishful thinking, I guess.”*

(Asian Boss, 2016, *Do Koreans Think Korea is Living Hell?*)

Young female: *“It’s really hard these days. Sometimes, I think “I want to escape Hell Joseon”.*

But, it’s less clear for me because I don’t know how. So, I’ll just live in Korea for now.”

(Asian Boss, 2018, *What’s It Like Living In South Korea?*)

6. Concluding discussion

This thesis has aimed to provide an overview of different aspects of ‘Hel Joseon’, and how they are viewed and manifested among the Korean millennials.

The conditions for the emergence of ‘Hel Joseon’ have resulted from conflicts between tradition and global capitalism, and it can also be seen as an outcome of South Korea’s rapid economic development and compressed modernization. The influence of Confucianism values is still prevalent in contemporary society, shaping the social milieu and mindsets, which has resulted in a sentiment among young Koreans of being stuck between the past and present. Cultural influence of Confucianism can also be seen as a major contributor to the differing factors among the Korean millennials compared to the global trends of the millennial generation.

The conclusion that could be drawn based on media coverage about the experiences of the Korean millennials, ‘Hel Joseon’ is the embodiment of frustration related to having to sacrifice youth and transition to adulthood for attaining academic success, fighting over jobs despite having no real desire for the profession, precariousness and lack of financial security which precludes the possibilities for focusing on other aspects of life. ‘Hel Joseon’ also refers to the competition and rivalry amongst the youth itself, which creates a sense of common despair and notion of “giving up”. The hardships young millennials are facing are manifested in their self-deprecating and mocking language. Young people are developing “new terminology” in online communities to describe their experiences of living with no hope in sight. Terms such as ‘Hel Joseon’, ‘The Give

Up Generation’, and ‘The Class Spoon Theory’ can be seen as coping mechanisms, and a way to create a sense of collectiveness among the Korean millennials.

‘Hel Joseon’ has caught attention on Korean and global media, but the phenomena related to the hardships of Korean youth have not been extensively researched in social sciences. Thus, ‘Hel Joseon’ remains to be a fruitful topic for further studies. Moreover, in-depth studies and collecting longitudinal data are required to get a better understanding of the complexity of the issue.

I want to end this thesis with a concluding discussion about different aspects of how the plight of the Korean millennials could be eased, taking into consideration the existing conditions on a local and global level.

The experiences of young Koreans concerning the challenges of being hired, despite their perfect specs and university degrees, tell about required adjustments in labour markets and the need for more fair hiring policies. In the current state, nearly every form of social welfare available to young people is attached to traditional employment. Unemployment benefits and worker’s compensation are not available in the precarious ‘gig-economy’, that employs most of the millennials. In South Korea, the dominance of big conglomerates, or chaebols, can be seen to have biased the labour markets and the working culture as a whole. Getting hired by a chaebol company is still viewed as a way to guarantee a “safe and stable” life, despite this would mean a lack of work-life balance. The desire for getting a hold on one of these jobs is defining the Korean millennials, causing a fierce competition over the scarce positions.

The obsession with education results in an oversupply of university graduates with homogenous skillsets and resumés, which makes the pressure on the labour market worse. A solution to this would be to put more emphasis on vocational job training, to correct the imbalances in the labour market. Though taking into consideration the big cultural value academic success has in South Korea, it is very unlikely to see that more alternative education and career paths would become a mainstream trend in the near future among young people. Instead, as already discussed in the previous section, an increasing trend related to arranged emigration and seeking manual labour jobs abroad has emerged among the Korean millennials. Though, the root cause for this can be seen in the need to leave Korea, in order to liberate oneself from the competitiveness and stress of the society. The reason for this is in the way of how narrowly success is viewed in relation to one’s

profession and the social status it provides. In this social milieu, attaining a vocational education would make the person automatically viewed as a lower-class citizen.

Another, more radical solution to ease the struggles of the Korean youth would be adjustment in social welfare, in terms of launching a basic income, that would be specially targeted to people who are faced with unemployment after graduation. Pilot projects with similar features have already launched by Seoul Metropolitan Government (SMG) couple years ago when the struggles of the young people caught more attention in the media and became a part of public discussion. One of the SMG's projects 'Youth Activity Support Project' was aimed to provide financial support for 3,000 young seekers in Seoul, to help them work and achieve financial independence. The project participants were aged between 19 and 29, and the requirement for their participation was that they had lived in Seoul for longer than a year with low income. The selected participants received 500,000 KRW per month for six months. In the frames the project, long term job seekers and young people from low-income families were prioritized, due to their financial inabilities to provide job training programs and other additional "spec-collecting" activities that would increase their employability (Park, 2016). Basic income would serve as a safety net in the precarious labour market. 500,000 KRW alone is not enough to provide for housing and other expenses, but it would ease the economic situation of the "880,000 Won Generation". The potential risk is, that launching a more universal basic income system would eventually affect negatively the young people's wages in the precarious labour markets, if the additional amount of basic income would be viewed among employers as something, that "allows" to set the minimum wage even lower. It can be argued, whether the notion of South Korea's unfinished development entails, that the future nation's future development should be shaped by adopting features from a Scandinavian welfare model.

The question is, whether the societal issues in contemporary South Korea, which are deeply rooted in the local cultural heritage, can be even possible to change with the implementation of new 'foreign' policy reforms, or whether the shared fixation with attaining success and constant growth will make it impossible to change mind over matter.

Interviewer: *"What steps must be taken for Korea to be less "hellish"?"*

Young male: *"People's perspectives need to change. But that's not easy."*

Interviewer: *"What sort of perspectives need to change?"*

Young male: *"Thoughts such as, "I must be number one at all costs" or, "I must be good at everything". Those thoughts need to change."*

(Asian Boss, 2018, *What's It Like Living In South Korea?*)

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