The Evolution of Self-Study Education Culture in the South Korean System: From Confucian Tradition to the Era of Smart Education

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Abstract. *Independent education (Korean: jayeol haksup) is a key driving force behind the success of South Korean education. This culture, born from respect for Confucian education and strengthened by the influence of modern competition and digital technologies, consistently places Korean students at the top of PISA, TIMSS, and other international rankings. This article analyzes the historical roots of independent learning, its institutionalization through hagwons, its digital transformation, and government initiatives for "smart independent learning.".*

Key words: *independent learning, jayeol haksup, dohak, hagwon, suneung, smart learning, digital independent learning, educational competition, South Korea.*

Introduction

In South Korea, the phrase "Study by yourself!" (Korean: 스스로 공부해!) is constantly heard from kindergarten all the way to the university entrance exam (수능 – suneung), the most important life test. While the public school provides only the minimum curriculum, academic excellence and social mobility are created through independent learning. This culture is a synthesis of Confucian meritocracy, the 20th-century economic miracle, and 21st-century digital technologies.

Historical Roots

The Joseon Dynasty Period (1392–1910): The ideal of lifelong independent learning

During the Joseon era, the state civil service examination (과거 – gwageo) was the only path to social advancement. Memorizing thousands of Chinese classical texts required decades of independent study. Students spent years studying alone in rural seodang schools, seowon academies, or solitary mountain huts (산방 – sanbang). This was the practical embodiment of the Confucian principles of "靜思" (quiet contemplation) and "修身" (self-cultivation). [1][2][3]

Japanese Colonial Period and Post-Liberation Era (1910–1960s)

Under Japanese colonial rule, Korean youth preserved the national language and culture through secret "야학" (yahak – night schools) and independent study circles. After 1945, because the number

of schools was extremely limited, many succeeded entirely through dohak (independent learning). The "dokhaksa" generation (self-taught individuals) of the 1950s–60s played a crucial role in rebuilding the country. [11][20][26]

The Economic Miracle Period (1960–1980s): State-encouraged independent learning

The Park Chung-hee government transformed the Confucian values of diligence and independent learning into a national economic development strategy. Because public schools lacked resources, private hagwons were allowed to flourish. By the late 1970s, students were spending an average of 4–6 additional hours per day on independent learning. The slogan "Let's study until dawn!" (새벽까지 공부하자) appeared – high school seniors slept only 3–4 hours a day. [40][42][48]

Institutionalization: Hagwons and the "shadow education" industry

According to 2023 statistics, 86% of elementary students, 75.4% of middle school students, and 66.4% of high school students attended hagwons (overall average 78.5%). [30][32] Many hagwons are simply "독서실" (dokseosil – self-study rooms) that provide only a desk, air-conditioning, and strict silence – no teachers. Elite hagwons in Daechi-dong sell video lectures by "star lecturers" that students replay hundreds of times. [31]

Although the government completely banned hagwons in 1980 and introduced a 10 p.m. curfew in 2008 and 2021, independent learning simply moved underground each time (to 24-hour study cafés and online platforms). [50][51][52]

Digital Revolution: From analog independent learning to "smart independent learning"

➢ 2004 onward – EBS (state TV channel) began offering free online lectures

➢ 2010s – Megastudy, Etoos, Orbi, Hydesk and other platforms

➢ 2020s – AI-based personal tutors such as Riiid (Santa), Mathpid, Qanda, Talchul [60][61][63][65]

By 2024, 92% of suneung test-takers use at least one digital independent learning platform every day.

Government Policy on "Smart Independent Learning"

➢ 2011 – "Self-directed learning ability" became one of the six core competencies in the national curriculum

➢ 2013 – Introduction of "0-period" (morning independent study) and "free semester" systems

➢ 2022–2030 – "Future School" project: AI mentors and personalized learning spaces

➢ KERIS (Korea Education and Research Information Service) – free digital content and individualized learning paths [72][74][76][79]

A typical day of a Korean high school student in 2025

07:00–07:50 – "0-period" independent study at school

08:00–16:00 – regular classes

16:30–22:30 – hagwon or 24-hour dokseosil

23:00–02:00/03:00 – AI platforms and online lectures at home

Total independent learning time: 10–14 hours/day [80][85][86]

Criticisms and Future Directions

The biggest criticisms are extreme stress, chronic sleep deprivation (average 5.5 hours), high suicide rates, and social inequality (wealthier families can afford better hagwons and AI tutors). [90][91] The government's response is to increase free high-quality digital resources, provide AI tutors to low-income families, and move away from a "score-only" university admission system by giving weight to essays, projects, and extracurricular activities. [92][93]

Conclusion

Independent learning is the heart of the South Korean education system and the primary instrument of social mobility. From the solitary mountain sanbang of the Joseon era to the student solving math problems at 3 a.m. in 2025 using AI on their phone – the essence has not changed: success is the result only of long-term, highly disciplined, and personal effort. Modern technologies have increased the volume, efficiency, and (partially) the accessibility of these efforts.

The South Korean experience proves that when ancient Confucian respect for education, strategic state policy, and the latest digital technologies unite, the world's strongest and most effective independent learning ecosystem emerges.

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