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P.S. Leshakov, V.M. Vakhrusheva

Transformation of Meritocracy in the Korean Society: From Confucian Examinations to AI-Driven Stratification

Abstract. This study examines the socio-economic and cultural evolution of the meritocratic paradigm within the Republic of Korea (ROK) from a macro-sociological and institutional perspective. The concept of meritocracy, while originating in the Confucian examination system as a tool for governance and statecraft, is understood here in a specific sense that gradually drifted toward the "just reward" idea by evolving from a strict administrative system into the guiding principle of a societal construct. During the rapid macroeconomic modernization known as the "Miracle on the Han River" from the 1960s to the late 1990s, the ROK successfully capitalized on this cultural reverence for education, transforming academic attainment into the primary driver of vertical social mobility and establishing a pervasive "effort=success" social contract. However, following structural shocks like the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis and the subsequent deregulation of higher education, university enrollment underwent an exponential surge, crossing a 70% saturation plateau by 2007. By correlating macroeconomic data with educational trends between 1980 and 2024, this research demonstrates that hyper-democratization has triggered severe credential inflation. In the twenty-first century, education has transitioned from an engine of social fluidity into the primary determinant of social stratification. The compounding effects of structural inequality and stagnant social mobility have driven a profound psychological shift within the South Korean public consciousness, displacing the traditional meritocratic ethos with a cynical "resource=success" model. Key findings of this research reveal a profound structural crisis in the contemporary South Korean meritocratic model, categorizable into three core thematic domains: the educational arms race, credential devaluation and social pessimism. In response to this crisis, the contemporary South Korean state is pursuing targeted interventions to restore the legitimacy of its meritocratic ideals, shifting the national focus toward a post-growth economy centered on social equity and quality of life.

Keywords: meritocracy, social inequality, education, South Korea, social ladder, dual labor market, human capital.

Authors: Pavel S. Leshakov. Ph.D (economics). Senior Research Fellow of the Center of Korean Studies, Institute of China and Contemporary Asia of the Russian Academy of Sciences. (Address: 117997, Moscow, Nakhimovskii pr., 32).
ORCID: 0000-0002-8282-9933. SPIN-code: 2247-1360. E-mail: pleshakov@hse.ru
Veronika M. Vakhrusheva. Bachelor's degree student, Asian Studies, Faculty of World Economy and International Affairs, National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE University) (Address: 105066, Moscow, 21/4 Staraya Basmannaya St., 3).
ORCID: 0009-0000-1486-7113. SPIN-code: 4850-2446. E-mail: vmvero@yandex.ru

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П.С. Лешаков, В.М. Вахрушева

Трансформация меритократии в корейском обществе: от конфуцианских экзаменов к стратификации под влиянием ИИ

Аннотация. В статье рассматривается социально-экономическая и культурная эволюция меритократической парадигмы в Республике Корея (РК) с макросоциологической и институциональной точек зрения. Концепция меритократии, возникшая в рамках конфуцианской системы экзаменов как инструмент управления государством, понимается здесь в специфическом смысле: постепенно сместившись в сторону идеи «справедливого вознаграждения», она превратилась из строгой административной системы в руководящий принцип общественного устройства. В период стремительной макроэкономической модернизации, известный как «чудо на реке Хан» (1960-е — конец 1990-х гг.), РК успешно использовала традиционное почитание образования, превратив академические достижения в главный фактор вертикальной социальной мобильности и закрепив в обществе расхожий «общественный договор» по формуле «усилия = успех». Однако после структурных потрясений, таких как Азиатский финансовый кризис 1997 г., и последовавшей дерегуляции высшего образования число студентов стало расти экспоненциально и к 2007 г. преодолело плато насыщения в 70%. На основе сопоставления макроэкономических данных с образовательными тенденциями за 1980—2024 гг. в исследовании показано, что гипердемократизация вызвала серьёзную инфляцию дипломов. В XXI в. образование из механизма социальной подвижности превратилось в главный фактор социальной стратификации. Совокупное действие структурного неравенства и застоя социальной мобильности привело к глубокому психологическому сдвигу в общественном сознании Южной Кореи: традиционный меритократический этос уступил место циничной модели «ресурсы = успех». Ключевые результаты исследования указывают на глубокий структурный кризис современной южнокорейской меритократической модели, который можно разделить на три тематические области: гонку образовательных вооружений, обесценивание дипломов и социальный пессимизм. В ответ на этот кризис современное южнокорейское государство проводит целенаправленные меры по восстановлению легитимности своих меритократических идеалов, смещая национальный фокус в сторону постростовой экономики, ориентированной на социальную справедливость и качество жизни.

Ключевые слова: меритократия, социальное неравенство, образование, Южная Корея, социальный лифт, дуальный рынок труда, человеческий капитал.

Авторы: Лешаков Павел Семёнович. Кандидат экономических наук, старший научный сотрудник Центра корейских исследований Института Китая и современной Азии РАН (адрес: 117997, Москва, Нахимовский пр., д. 32).
ORCID: 0000-0002-8282-9933. SPIN-код: 2247-1360. E-mail: pleshakov@hse.ru
Вахрушева Вероника Максимовна. Студентка бакалаврской программы «Востоковедение» факультета мировой экономики и мировой политики НИУ «Высшая школа экономики» (адрес: 105066, Москва, ул. Старая Басманная, д. 21/4, стр. 3).
ORCID: 0009-0000-1486-7113. SPIN-код: 4850-2446. E-mail: vmvero@yandex.ru

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Over the past few decades the Republic of Korea has demonstrated spectacular economic growth and rapid technological advancement, positioning itself as a global powerhouse. Beneath this facade of developmental success, however, lies a complex matrix of deep-seated social challenges. One of the most acute is the "race for higher education", a phenomenon fueled by rigid meritocratic expectations and increasingly constrained pathways for vertical social mobility. As socioeconomic stratification deepens, children from affluent backgrounds disproportionately monopolize admission to prestigious universities, thereby converting parental wealth into academic credentials and exacerbating systemic inequality. These problems have deep historical roots, linked to the socio-economic transformations that shaped the Korean society at the turn of the twenty-first century.

This obsession with academic credentials, coupled with declining social mobility, is the cumulative product of historical modernization initiatives, compressed economic growth and deeply entrenched cultural values that equate educational attainment with human worth and social success. While meritocracy was long championed as the ultimate engine of democratic equity in post-war Korea, it has increasingly mutated into a mechanism for the reproduction of class privilege.

This article aims to analyze the evolving meritocratic perceptions within the South Korean population and to track their shifting dynamics throughout the twenty-first century. Furthermore, it evaluates the structural effectiveness of the contemporary Korean meritocratic model as a tool for moderating social inequality, ultimately assessing the future viability and development prospects of meritocracy in an era of deepening social polarization.

The Concept of Meritocracy

Traditionally defined as a system of governance predicated on individual merit, the term "meritocracy" was first brought into mainstream discourse by British sociologist Michael Young in his 1958 political satire "The Rise of the Meritocracy: 1870—2033"[1], where it was originally intended to have a pejorative meaning. Young traced the intellectual lineage of merit-based systems back to classical antiquity, most notably through Plato's philosophical frameworks. Simultaneously, he cautioned against the systemic by-products of its widespread implementation, warning that meritocracy could exacerbate social inequality, foster entrenched elites and ultimately devolve into a mechanism of societal fragmentation and injustice. In contrast to this Eurocentric timeline, contemporary literature offers a significant revisionist perspective. Scholars such as Bell (2012), Poocharoen and Brillantes (2013), Babcock and Freivogel (2015), Seo (2015) and Zhang (2015) present compelling evidence that the foundational tenets of meritocracy actually emerged in Asia[2]. Supporting this thesis, John M. Hobson, in his debated work 'The Eastern Origins of Western Civilisation', proposes that the doctrine of individual merit originated in China and was subsequently transmitted to the West through the dissemination of Confucian texts[3], although this specific idea remains highly controversial among historians.

[1] Young M. The Rise of the Meritocracy, 1870 — 2033. — London: Thames & Hudson. 1958. (p. 160).

[2] Kim Chang-Hee, Choi Yong-Beom. How Meritocracy is Defined Today: Contemporary Aspects of Meritocracy // Economics and Sociology. 2017. № 10(1):112.

[3] Hobson, J. M. The Eastern Origins of Western Civilisation. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press. 2004.

Meritocracy, as a model of socio-economic relations, according to the definition by scholars Kim Chang-Hee and Choi Yong-Beom, is "a system of social relations in which an individual's advancement in society is based on their abilities and merits, rather than on their family status, wealth, or social background"[1]. Within this approach to meritocracy, it is believed that the agents who make social development possible are individuals with exceptional abilities, and, consequently, those with ability have a right to social rewards and privileges. However, critics of meritocracy argue that this discourse symbolizes the concept of "fair ability", while its actual purpose is to justify the privileges of a narrow elite and consolidate their advantages, leading society into the so-called "meritocracy trap"[2]. D. Markovits points out that "meritocracy" is a cover used by small, privileged groups to justify their position, rather than a means to achieve social justice[3]. Thus, through meritocracy in a neoliberal society, where the role of private capital is profound, elites who already possess wealth and power utilize "abilities" as a justification for their status, thereby driving a wedge into social stratification and reinforcing an unjust structure.

Western and Eastern Approaches to Meritocracy

Meritocracy operates primarily as an evolving intellectual construct. Consequently, specific merit-based practices within a society may vary depending on context and culture.

Analyzing the dynamics of attitudes toward the very concept of meritocracy in scholarly works from negative to more positive Kim Chang-Hee and Choi Yong-Beom conclude that "the practice of meritocracy can vary significantly between Western and Asian nations, as well as among and between individuals within those cultures"[4]. The primary distinction lies in what constitutes "abilities" within the Western and Eastern models, and how this definition influences the perception and implementation of meritocratic principles.

Within the Western approach, abilities are viewed as the result of personal effort, talent and initiative, serving as key drivers of success. The emphasis is placed on transparent, objective evaluation systems and the equality of opportunity. For instance, the United States developed and implemented a system of uniform standardized testing for admission to prestigious universities to ensure that every individual could realize their potential regardless of social origin, as well as secure scholarships fully covering the cost of tuition at top-tier institutions. Within this system, success and vertical social mobility are increasingly based not only on formal knowledge and technical skills but also on personal attributes such as communication skills, emotional intelligence, teamwork and adaptability — the so-called soft skills[5]. Competition is considered the driving force of progress, while continuous self-education becomes a necessary prerequisite for successful adaptation in a rapidly changing world.

[1] Kim Chang-Hee, Choi Yong-Beom. How Meritocracy is Defined Today: Contemporary Aspects of Meritocracy // Economics and Sociology. 2017, № 10(1):112.

[2] Meritocracy trap — the concept that meritocracy has shifted from meaning 'the rule of the deserving' to a system used by economic elites to perpetuate inequality.

[3] Markovits Daniel. The Meritocracy Trap. U.K.: Penguin. 2020.

[4] Kim Chang-Hee, Choi Yong-Beom. How Meritocracy is Defined Today: Contemporary Aspects of Meritocracy // Economics and Sociology. 2017. № 10(1):112.

[5] Soft-skills — universal socio-psychological skills, independent of any specific profession, that determine a person's effectiveness in work, communication, and teamwork.

Traditionally, the Eastern approach to understanding meritocracy is considered to possess distinct features shaped by Asian cultural values[1]. Within this framework, individual abilities are often viewed as qualities shaped by education and personal development, deeply connected to one's social roles and family responsibilities. The Eastern approach is anchored in the values of harmony, collectivism and respect for elders; thus, it emphasizes the significance of social ties, deference, adherence to filial piety and the recognition of each individual's contribution to the common good. Concurrently, this leads to a diminishing prioritization of competitive drivers in favor of robust regulatory frameworks by the state. K.V. Asmolov notes that "within the Confucian paradigm of fairness, the idea of social equality and equal opportunity for all is viewed differently[2], as the ethical aspect prevails over the social one, meaning that equal opportunities were historically constrained by rigid hierarchical roles".

This divergence in conceptualizing meritocracy is further reflected in the contrasting attitudes toward the learning process displayed by students from Western versus Asian backgrounds. Drawing on a 20-year longitudinal study tracking student behavior across 14 elite American universities with a particular focus on the motivation and academic performance of domestic U.S. students and various Asian diasporas, Kim Young-Choon (김영준) concluded that Korean students exhibit a distinct mindset. Specifically, they perceive university entrance examinations as a guaranteed passport to a successful life. Consequently, "once they cross the university threshold after exerting maximum effort, they begin to think they can rest and relax, much like someone who has already achieved everything."[3] This behavior may suggest that, despite traditional collectivist values, for Korean students, competitive examinations and admission to a top-tier university serve primarily to validate their existing status and individual merit, reflecting localized egotistic traits, rather than acting as a springboard for subsequent growth and development. A similar attitude regarding admission to South Korea's three most prestigious institutions, the "SKY" universities, is documented by Andrei Lankov, who observes that "in the minds of Korean applicants and their parents, getting into these universities is roughly equivalent to entering paradise or ascending to heaven"[4].

Thus, it can be concluded that the Western model of meritocracy places a premium on ability as the product of individual effort, talent, and initiative. Under this framework, continuous development through formal and self-directed education is deemed highly viable, reflecting an individualistic and optimistic outlook regarding human potential. Conversely, the Eastern approach more frequently conceptualizes ability as an extension of one's inner spiritual and social "destiny." Within this paradigm, adherence to traditional values, collective harmony and respect for social hierarchy take precedence; consequently, the cultivation of ability is oriented toward maintaining societal balance and order rather than pursuing individual advancement.

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[1] Jang Eun-Joo. Confucian Characteristics of Korean Democracy: An Approach from a Republican Perspective // Journal of Confucian Philosophy and Culture. 2020. Vol. 34. Pp. 155—83.

[2] Asmolov K. V. Korean Political Culture: Traditions and Transformations. Moscow: Dmitry Pozharsky University, 2017. 704 p. (Chapter 1). (In Russian)

[3] 김영준. 한국의 능력주의, 미국의 능력주의 [Kim Young-choon. Korean Meritocracy, American Meritocracy]. Hankyoreh, July 17, 2022. URL: https://www.hani.co.kr/arti/opinion/column/1051003.html (accessed: 15.01.2026). (In Korean)

[4] Lankov A. Not Only Kimchi: The History, Culture, and Everyday Life of Korea. Al'pina Pablisher. 2024. 608 p. (Chapter 43.) ISBN: 9785002232338. (In Russian)

The Korean Model of Meritocracy and the Influence of Confucianism

Confucianism, which profoundly shaped the cultural and political ideology of Korea, placed a premium on education and adherence to a strict corpus of ethical and regulatory codes that meticulously governed interpersonal relationships, social order and state administration. Within this framework, the status of state officials was determined not merely by individual merit or ancestral lineage, but by profound erudition in canonical Chinese texts, such as the Classic of Filial Piety (Xiaojing) and the Analects (Lunyu), alongside their corresponding behavioral protocols and administrative norms. To attain high government office, candidates were required to pass highly structured civil service examinations. This institutional practice transformed the selection process into an objective evaluation, thereby mitigating the influence of hereditary privilege. The historical trajectory of these bureaucratic examinations dates back to the Silla Kingdom in 788.

Consequently, traditional examination mechanisms, rooted in the historical evaluation of knowledge and moral virtues through state examinations, laid the cultural foundations and established the cornerstone principles for a professional bureaucracy, although that system in traditional Korea was heavily constrained by a hereditary aristocracy that transformed exams into a tool for entrenching elite privileges.

The Republic of Korea commenced its modern history in August 1948, following its liberation from Japanese colonial rule and the partition of the peninsula along the 38th parallel. Amidst the post-war dictatorial regime, industrial development opportunities were restricted exclusively to entrepreneurs who actively supported the Syngman Rhee government or held membership in the ruling Liberal Party. This dynamic fostered a symbiotic alliance between state authorities and private capital, giving rise to the chaebols — large, family-controlled financial and industrial conglomerates. Following the 1961 military coup, General Park Chung-hee assumed power. As Kurbanov S.O. notes, a defining feature of Park's economic strategy was the rigorous state regulation of these chaebols[1]. The government incentivized conglomerates whose corporate activities aligned with national strategic plans. Concurrently, by closely monitoring their production outputs, the state ensured that the burgeoning economic influence of these corporations did not translate into political power. By engineering conditions conducive to the rapid expansion of chaebols, the nation rapidly transformed into a prosperous, industrialized, export-oriented economy. During this era of intense economic growth, human capital and the Korean population's capacity for industrious labor played a pivotal role. Nevertheless, access to higher education remained tightly regulated by the state through strict enrollment quotas. According to Andrei Lankov, the military governments feared an overproduction of university graduates, which led to a strict regulation of the higher education sector as the number of universities was reduced from 71 to 44 and enrollment quotas were slashed from 91,000 to 55,000 to match the actual market demand for highly qualified specialists[2].

[1] Kurbanov, S. O. History of Korea: From Antiquity to the Beginning of the 21st Century. St. Petersburg University Press, 2009. 680 p. Pp. 304, 328. (In Russian)

[2] Lankov A. Not Only Kimchi: The History, Culture, and Everyday Life of Korea. Al'pina Pablisher. 2024. 608 p. (Chapter 43.) (In Russian)

This rapid economic growth drove high social mobility and led to the emergence of a strong middle class. Within this environment, meritocratic systems existed alongside the entrenched privileges of the economic elites. However, because the vast majority of the population worked remarkably hard, a widespread social belief emerged: that merit and perseverance directly guarantee success. This "effort=success" paradigm became the core ethos of South Korean meritocracy, a dynamic that persisted until the early 1990s.

During the intense democratization of Korean society between 1993 and 1994, the government liberalized access to higher education. As a result, the number of high school graduates entering universities escalated rapidly. However, this sudden democratization of access also triggered an unprecedented level of competition within the educational sphere.

In contemporary South Korean society, the concepts of meritocracy and social justice remain highly salient. However, recent public discourse has increasingly highlighted a crisis of meritocracy, driven by widening educational and economic disparities, which has prompted demands for a re-imagined model of justice based on genuine fairness. Higher education, which historically served as a reliable vehicle for upward vertical mobility, is no longer a guarantee of financial well-being. This intersection of inequality and modern meritocratic institutions, including state examinations and corporate recruitment, has captivated both academic circles and the broader public. A prominent example is Park Kwon-il's (박권일) recent book "K-Meritocracy" which won the grand prize at the 2022 Lotte Publishing Culture Awards. Park characterizes Korean society as one that tolerates inequality but fiercely opposes injustice, emphasizing that public discontent stems from flawed processes rather than disparate outcomes. Within this cultural framework, socioeconomic inequality is deemed acceptable not merely as a product of market competition, but as a morally justified outcome reflecting differences in individual ability and effort. For South Koreans, the mechanisms for recognizing merit, particularly standardized examination scores, must be strictly impartial because a transparent selection process serves as the ultimate tool to legitimize social hierarchy and maintain collective harmony. Conversely, sociologists from Ewha Womans University argue that a critique of Korea's modern meritocratic model requires examining how specific historical, political, and economic processes culminated in the current social landscape, how these conditions deteriorated, and where the trajectory is heading today[1].

Human capital as a strategic resource

Amidst the rapid economic growth and modernization of the Republic of Korea, meritocratic ideals predicated on fair competition and desert-based[2] rewards became deeply entrenched in the social consciousness. These ideals postulated that labor, diligence, education and individual achievements constitute the primary metrics of social status.

[1] 신혜진. 한국 사회의 메리토크라시 (Meritocracy) 특성 비판 [Shin Hye-jin. A Critique of the Characteristics of Meritocracy in Korean Society] // The Korean Journal of Chiristian Social Ethics. 2022, №53. Pp. 35—78. (In Korean)

[2] Desert-based rewards refer to the philosophical concept of distributive justice where goods, wages, or social status are allocated to individuals based strictly on what they personally deserve in virtue of their efforts, virtues, or achievements, rather than external entitlements or inherited privilege. (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. URL: https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/desert/)

In recent years, however, the visibility of structural inequalities and persistent barriers to social mobility has transformed this framework into a subject of intense public concern. This shift raises a critical question: how relevant and sustainable are meritocratic principles under contemporary conditions, what role does educational accessibility play, and how does social inequality constrain social mobility in the twenty-first-century Korean society?

To establish a more comprehensive understanding, it is necessary to examine the foundational period of South Korea's economic development by comparing the dynamics of per capita GDP with university enrollment trends. In evaluating higher education accessibility, analyzing the absolute number of admitted students can be misleading due to demographic fluctuations. Consequently, it is methodologically rigorous to analyze the enrollment rate, specifically the percentage of university matriculants relative to the corresponding youth population cohort.

Following the Korean War and the subsequent division of the peninsula (1950—1953), the nation experienced rapid economic development, with the era known as the "Miracle on the Han River" tracing its origins back to the 1960s. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, while focusing heavily on industrialization and export-oriented sectors, the government prioritized educational development as the cornerstone of modernization. Examining the period from the 1980s to the 1990s, Oh Jiho concludes that while the Republic of Korea serves as a prime example of a nation that successfully leveraged human capital to achieve meritocratic success, it subsequently faced structural challenges in human capital management that exacerbated inequality[1]. Although human capital development triggered economic growth and technological innovation, it concurrently widened social disparities. Because access to premium education and quality healthcare became concentrated among wealthier, privileged strata, these groups were able to invest disproportionately more in expanding their skills and knowledge, thereby consolidating their elevated social status. Consequently, talented and highly educated individuals from affluent backgrounds secured monopolized access to prestigious positions and critical resources, while marginalized segments of the population remained on the periphery. This dynamic engendered a vicious cycle of entrenched social stratification, converting human capital development into a mechanism that reinforces existing class division rather than bridging them.

According to World Bank data[2], South Korea achieved upper-middle-income country status in 1995, recording a nominal GDP per capita of approximately $8,000 (at current prices), which surged to over $34,000 by 2023 (Fig. 1) serving as a testament to profound economic transformations. However, the 1997—1998 Asian Financial Crisis severely impacted the domestic economy, causing GDP to contract by 5.1% in 1998. This period marked a critical structural turning point, triggering a permanent deceleration of economic growth rates. The crisis forced the nation to thoroughly reevaluate its domestic priorities, while precipitating massive job losses and fundamentally reshaping the structure of the labor market.

[1] Oh Jico. Meritocracy as an Ideology for Neoliberalism: A Korean Case // Journal of Confucian Philosophy and Culture. 2023. Vol. 41.

[2] World Bank, GDP per capita, Country official statistics, Korea. URL: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?locations=KR (accessed: 01.12.2025).

Despite these setbacks, post-crisis economic recovery was rapid: between 2000 and 2010, GDP expanded at an annual rate of approximately 4—5%, with economic growth reaching 3.3% in 2013. However, these robust macroeconomic indicators were accompanied by intensifying competition for admission to prestigious universities.

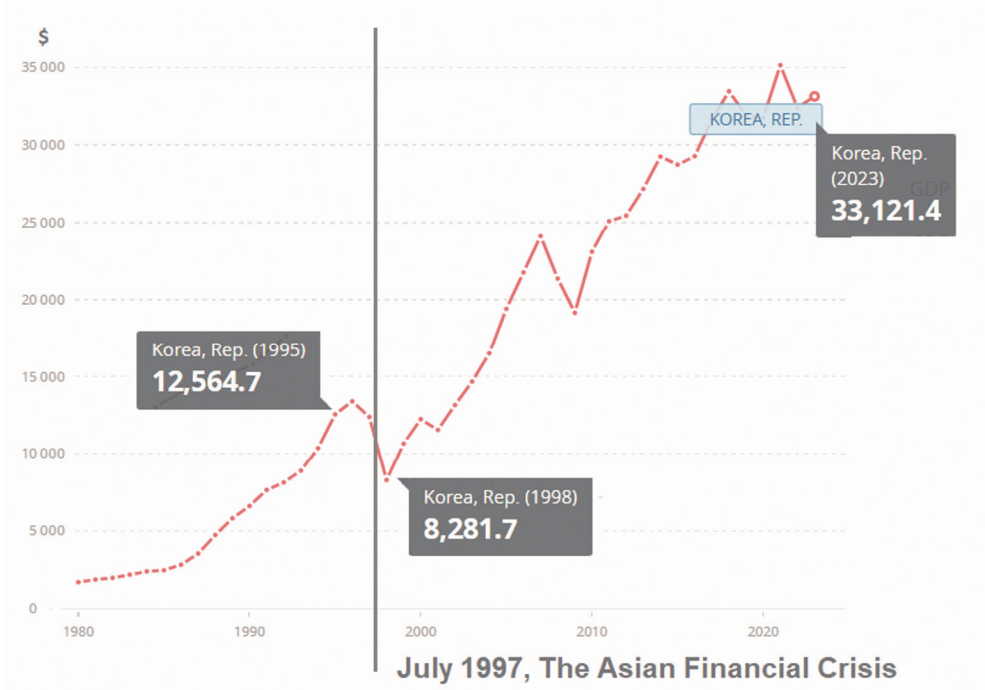

Figure 1. Trends in South Korea's Per Capita nominal GDP, 1980—2023.
Source: World Bank, GDP per capita, Country official statistics, Korea.

The beginning of a profound transformation in South Korea's educational meritocracy model can be identified between 2007 and 2009, when the hyper-inflation of university degrees began to undermine higher education as a reliable mechanism for upward mobility. During these years, the university enrollment rate surpassed 70% of the corresponding youth cohort for the first time, subsequently reaching a saturation plateau (Fig. 2), that shifted competition from simply obtaining a degree to securing admission into elite institutions. Nowadays this high-enrollment trend has proven persistent; for instance, in 2024, over 74% of high school graduates enrolled at universities which shows a figure that has nearly doubled since 1995[1].

An analysis of the trends illustrated in Figure 2 reveals a sharp, exponential increase in the university enrollment rate starting in 1994. This surge coincided with the abolition of state-enforced university admission quotas. Furthermore, the 1993—1994 period marked the piloting and subsequent official implementation of the College Scholastic Ability Test

[1] Jun L. Yoon. University enrollment rate South Korea 1980—2024. Statista. 2025. URL: https://www.statista.com/statistics/629032/south-korea-university-enrollment-rate/ (accessed: 01.12.2025).

(Suneung), the standardized national examination for university admission in the Republic of Korea.

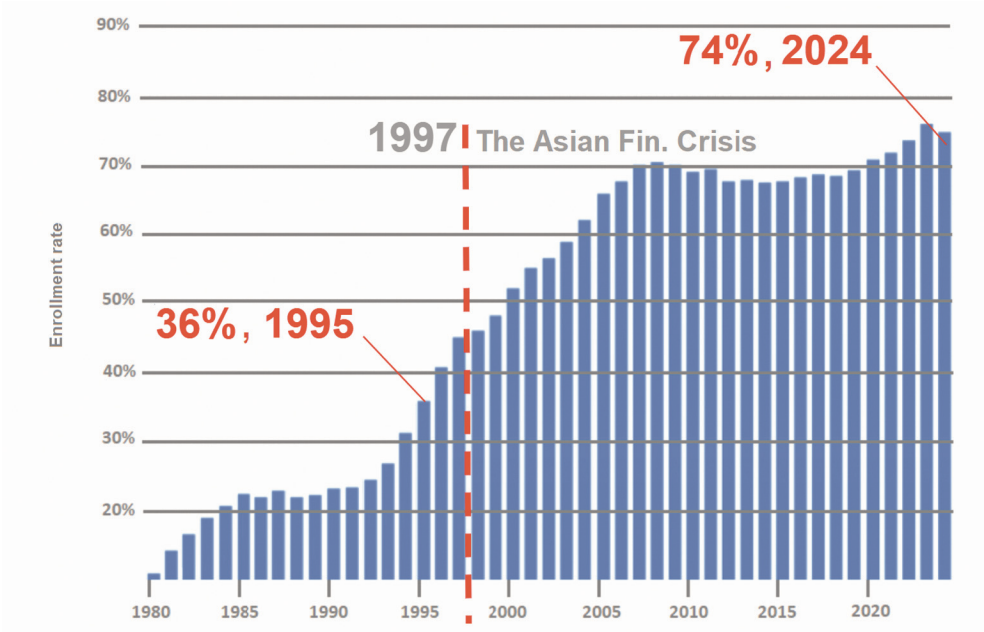

Figure 2. University Enrollment Rates in the Republic of Korea, 1980—2023.
Source: Compiled based on Statista data, University enrollment rate in South Korea from 1980 to 2024.

Particular attention must be paid to the fact that the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis did not diminish the youth population's aspiration to obtain higher education. While the state executive branch and economic elites sought to navigate and overcome the crisis, the majority of the citizens, who had previously identified as middle class, confronted the harsh realities of widening income inequality, domestic market stagnation and employment instability.

Currently, for the past 15 years, over 70% of South Korean youth have successfully attained higher education, with a continuous influx of newly credentialed specialists with elevated career expectations entering the labor market annually. This hyper-educated workforce is driven by a deep-seated meritocratic belief that an elite corporate position is the only valid marker of personal success. However, as M.P. Kukla points out, a structural imbalance between the growth trajectories of small businesses and large conglomerates has led to "ingrained preferences among Korean university graduates to seek employment exclusively within major conglomerates or public sector entities."[1] V.G. Samsonova analyzing the South Korean labor market observes that social inequality and labor market dualism directly fuel the country's record-low fertility rates and systemic demographic crisis. She projects that without structural reforms the resulting labor force contraction by 2050 could

[1] Kukla M.P. Republic of Korea: Towards a Creative Economy // Asia and Africa today. 2016. № 9. (In Russian)

depress GDP by 28.4%, thereby exacerbating social polarization and intensifying elderly poverty.[1] Ultimately, this projected demographic and economic collapse reflects the extreme socio-economic costs of a hyper-competitive meritocratic race, where the pressure of achieving validated success dismantle the very foundations of social reproduction.

Korea's "broken social ladder"

During the era of rapid macroeconomic growth, known as the "Miracle on the Han River", spanning from the early 1960s to the late 1990s, the Republic of Korea exhibited remarkably high levels of social mobility, driven by mass urbanization, a structural shift toward industrial and professional employment, and the rapid expansion of a stable middle class. In recent decades, however, the phenomenon of the "broken social ladder" or stagnant social mobility has emerged as a central theme within academic discourse. Major media outlets[2] regularly draw public attention to systemic inequities, while social activists and non-governmental organizations continuously advocate for the mitigation of educational barriers, the expansion of social welfare programs, and the eradication of deeply structural inequality.

Consequently, a profound sense of pessimism regarding the future and the viability of vertical mobility has penetrated the South Korean society. According to a comprehensive survey[3], conducted by the Ministry of Data and Statistics in May 2025, which sampled approximately 34,000 individuals, 54% of respondents evaluated the probability of social mobility for the next generation as low. Furthermore, 74% of those surveyed reported anticipating that their household's financial situation over the coming year would either stagnate or deteriorate.

According to a 2024 report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the social mobility coefficient in the Republic of Korea is estimated at approximately 0.45 on a scale from 0 to 1)[4], a figure that falls below the average for the 38 OECD member states and reflects a persistent downward trend in upward mobility over the last two decades. This negative dynamic signals a transition from the flexible social scaling of the early modernization era into a period of rigid structural persistence and entrenched social inequality.

Socioeconomic disparity and discrimination remain among the most acute challenges confronting modern Korean society. This crisis is inherently linked to the rigid institutionalization of a dual labor market, which is strictly split into regular and non-regular em-

[1] Samsonova Viktoria. The Labor Market and the Economic Development of the Republic of Korea // Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation Institute of China and Contemporary Asia Russian Academy of Sciences — Moscow ICCA RAS, 2025. 188 p. (In Russian)

[2] 신혜진. 한국 사회의 메리토크라시 (Meritocracy) 특성 비판 [Shin Hye-jin. A Critique of the Characteristics of Meritocracy in Korean Society] // The Korean Journal of Chiristian Social Ethics. 2022, №53. Pp. 35—78. (In Korean)

[3] Kim Seung-hyeon. South Koreans Pessimistic on Social Mobility // The Chosun. November 11, 2025. URL: https://www.chosun.com/english/market-money-en/2025/11/11/454PNO63VFCU7FQFBNWYWN3VPI (accessed: 01.12.2025).

[4] OECD Economic Surveys: Korea 2024 // OECD Publishing, Paris. URL: https://doi.org/10.1787/c243e16a-en (accessed: 01.12.2025).

ployment tracks due to a substantial proliferation of precarious, non-regular jobs. The core issue of this disparity lies in its structural design: it creates a closed system wherein access to high-paying, stable employment is effectively blocked for individuals who do not possess a degree from an elite university[1].

Following the introduction of the standardized national examination, competition for admission into top-tier universities intensified dramatically, particularly within legal, medical, and engineering faculties. However, the true educational arms race was catalyzed by the aftermath of the 1997 financial crisis. To maximize an applicant's probability of success, families are frequently required to make massive capital investments in their child's education. Consequently, a social paradigm emerged in South Korean society where exam preparation commences as early as primary school. This shift generated an immense market demand for private supplementary tutoring. This shadow education sector encompasses hagwons[2], private tutors, and preparatory courses, essentially any resource capable of increasing the likelihood of admission to a top-tier university, which simultaneously exacerbates social inequality. Shin Nam-ho, a prominent educational policy expert, underscores that this educational disparity has become a primary driver of broader social inequality, pushing marginalized strata toward systemic poverty and severely constraining their capacity for income growth and vertical social mobility[3].

The intense pressure for upward mobility in South Korea's hyper-competitive society has tightly linked financial investment to academic exhaustion, making South Korean students among the most heavily burdened in the world. According to 2022 data from the Ministry of Education, the average household allocated approximately 12% of its income to a child's education[4]. Crucially, high-income households (earning over 8 million won per month) expend significantly more, averaging around 648,000 won, whereas lower-income families spend roughly three times less on educational needs.

As the prestige associated with elite credentials grows and competition within the educational sphere intensifies, expenditures on shadow education continue to escalate. According to a 2024 OECD report[5], per-student spending on private supplementary tutoring exceeded 440,000 won in 2023. This highlights a significant growth trajectory when contrasted with the period's lowest expenditures of 2013, where the spending equaled approximately 290,000 won when adjusted for 2023 prices, representing a nearly 1.5-fold increase between these specific tracking points (Fig. 3). Furthermore, the report underscores that “private education spending is positively correlated with parents' income and academic achievement”.

[1] 신남호. 고교학점제, 사회개혁 없이도 작동할 수 있을까? [Shin Nam-ho. Can the High School Credit System Function Without Comprehensive Social Reform?] // The Edu. December 19, 2025. URL: https://www.te.co.kr/news/article.html?no=27600 (accessed: 02.02.2026). (In Korean)

[2] Hagwons — private supplementary education institutions that students attend after daily school sessions. Most South Korean pupils begin their enrollment here at the age of 5 year old.

[3] 신남호 교육칼럼] 우리의 교육불평등과 대안들 // 정미하. April 12, 2019 [Shin Nam-ho. Educational Column: Our Educational Inequality and Alternatives. April 12, 2019. Jeong Mi-ha]. URL: https://vop.co.kr/A00001397519.html (accessed: 02.02.2026). (In Korean)

[4] Park Jun-hee. Spending on private education surpasses W26tr in 2022 // Korea Herald. March 7, 2023. URL: https://www.koreaherald.com/article/3076418 (accessed: 01.11.2025).

[5] OECD (2024), OECD Economic Surveys: Korea 2024 // OECD Publishing, Paris. URL: https://doi.org/10.1787/c243e16a-en (accessed: 01.12.2025).

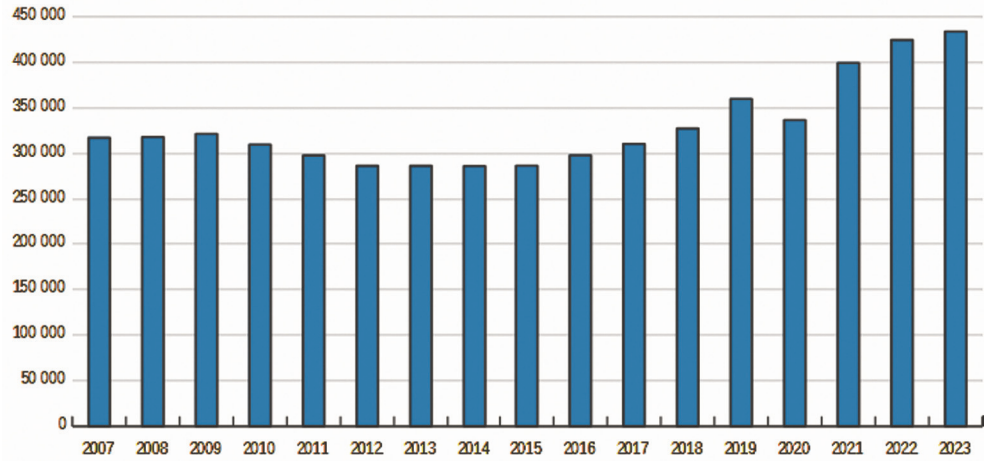

Figure 3. Monthly private education expenditure per student, at constant prices (2007—2023).
Source: OECD Economic Surveys: Korea 2024, Korean Statistical Information Service.

Thus, in the twenty-first century, education operates as the pivotal mechanism of social stratification in South Korea, ultimately triggering the stagnation of vertical social mobility.

State Intervention and Educational Accessibility

Government policies designed to mitigate educational disparity typically focus on providing state assistance to schools in low-income districts and enhancing learning conditions. The South Korean trajectory, however, diverged significantly, necessitating regulatory measures specifically designed to decelerate the intense educational arms race. For instance, in 2006, the state imposed a strict 10:00 PM curfew on the operation of hagwons[1]. Nevertheless, deeply ingrained cultural paradigms regarding higher education as the exclusive avenue to socioeconomic success remain potent. This persistent societal expectation exerts immense pressure on the youth population, precipitating high stress levels and pervasive psychological challenges tied to intense academic competition.

Social policy in the Republic of Korea, irrespective of political orientation, whether conservative or progressive, remains fundamentally focused on addressing long-standing, systemic societal issues. These priorities include depressing unemployment rates, generating high-quality employment opportunities, curbing the unchecked influence of major conglomerates and contracting broader socioeconomic inequality. Such policy interventions underscore the critical need to dismantle chronic structural imbalances accumulated over decades, a task that demands sustained, targeted state intervention.

In 2013, President Park Geun-hye implemented systemic measures aimed at stimulating economic growth and generating new, high-quality employment opportunities within

[1] Han Sang-hee. Private education costs fall for 1st time in decade // The Korea Times. 15 February, 2011. URL: https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/southkorea/20110215/private-education-costs-fall-for-1st-time-in-decade (accessed: 20.02.2026).

the framework of the "creative economy" paradigm. The core tenets of this initiative focused on "forging new industries and novel products, both goods and services, predicated on innovation, culture, small and medium enterprises, human creative potential and robust support for startups"[1].

This attempt to revitalize the economy proved successful, prompting the subsequent administration of President Moon Jae-in to sustain the strategic focus on innovation and digitalization. A cornerstone of Moon's social policy was a 16% increase in the minimum wage in 2018, which served as a critical driver for upgrading quality of life and stimulating domestic demand. Concurrently, the education sector underwent a series of structural shifts. In 2019, the early childhood curriculum framework (covering ages 3 to 5) was reformed to introduce a play-based learning methodology designed to foster creativity and individualized developmental approaches. In practice, however, many parents expressed disappointment with the integration of play-based pedagogy, preferring the highly structured thematic lesson plans previously utilized[2]. To expand access to educational resources for primary and secondary students, the government launched an online learning platform in 2021 that provided open access to digital textbooks across various subjects. Additionally, an artificial-intelligence-driven digital assistant was introduced for elementary school students to practice English speech proficiency, acting as a structural substitute for private tutoring services[3].

In 2023, following sharp criticism from President Yoon Suk-yeol regarding the configuration of standardized testing, the Ministry of Education announced comprehensive plans to streamline examinations by eliminating highly complex items known as the notorious "killer questions" that exceeded the scope of the standard public school curriculum[4]. While reflecting a pragmatic, populist measure designed to alleviate immediate public discontent, this state intervention marks a critical step toward reshaping the high-stakes academic race. Previously, the inclusion of examination questions requiring advanced university-level knowledge directly stimulated the expansion of the private tutoring sector, which thrived by drilling students on specialized techniques to solve these problems.

Following the impeachment of President Yoon Suk-yeol, Lee Jae-myung assumed the presidency in the summer of 2025. In the realm of social policy, President Lee has largely adhered to the trajectories established by his predecessors, both conservative Yoon Suk-yeol and progressive Moon Jae-in, thereby emphasizing policy continuity in addressing systemic social challenges and executing a targeted expansion of the state welfare apparatus.

As part of institutional efforts to reduce social friction and ease societal pressure on the youth population, the Republic of Korea continues to implement a comprehensive suite of

[1] Kukla M.P. Republic of Korea: Towards a Creative Economy // Asia and Africa today. 2016. № 9. (In Russian)

[2] Lee Ji Young, Wright C. A., Michnick Golinkoff R., Hirsh-Pasek K. Another case of the theory to practice gap: South Korean early childhood education and care // Early Childhood Research Quarterly. 2023. Vol. 65. Pp. 385—395.

[3] Education in Korea 2021 // Ministry of Education. P. 31. URL: https://kecmy.com/upload/files/1660704640_1432b584e91934246517.pdf (accessed: 20.02.2026).

[4] Kim Han-joo. Gov't to exclude 'killer' questions from college entrance exam: presidential office // Yonhap News Agency. June 19, 2023. URL: https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20230619003100315 (accessed: 20.02.2026).

state regulatory mechanisms. Outlining the cornerstone strategies for South Korea's national development agenda in 2026, President Lee Jae-myung championed the directive of "inclusive growth predicated on the equitable distribution of opportunities and public goods"[1]. This paradigm serves as a direct conceptual extension of President Moon Jae-in's "income-led growth" model, which previously facilitated systematic increases in the minimum wage and mandated the reduction of the statutory workweek from 68 to 52 hours in 2018. Building upon this foundation, in September 2025, Lee Jae-myung proposed a further reduction of the workweek to 4.5 days by 2030 without a corresponding reduction in base wages[2]. This intervention is strategically designed to stimulate fertility rates and enhance overall quality of life. The same article in "The Korea Herald" highlights a report[3] by the Sustainable Growth Initiative (SGI) confirming that "reduced working hours can boost job satisfaction and spur consumption due to increased leisure time". Shifting the public focus toward "here-and-now" lifestyle consumption could foster an enhanced sense of life satisfaction and personal success across society.

Conversely, this reform risks driving up labor costs, a dynamic that would disproportionately penalize small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). As documented by BusinessKorea, Song Chi-young, head of the Korea Federation of Micro Enterprises, cautioned that "overtime pay liabilities would heavily drive up labor costs and render small businesses economically vulnerable"[4]. Consequently, these heightened financial burdens could trigger sharp contractions in payroll capacities, thereby inadvertently exacerbating the pre-existing crisis of high youth unemployment.

Building upon Yoon Suk-yeol's standardized testing reforms, the administration of Lee Jae-myung plans to overhaul the administration and evaluation framework of the College Scholastic Ability Test (*Suneung*), which accommodates approximately 500,000 examinees annually. By 2030, short-answer and constructed-response items are projected to constitute 50% of the examination content. Experts from the national teachers' union note that this structural shift represents a radical departure from South Korea's traditionally dominant multiple-choice format[5]. This initiative can be interpreted as a mechanism to enhance the validity and fairness of assessment outcomes. Constructed-response tasks require examinees to demonstrate actual comprehension and articulate independent reasoning rather than merely selecting a predetermined option, thereby drastically reducing the probability of chance guessing. Furthermore, this assessment format motivates

[1] Kim Hye-lin. 2026 is 1st year of Korea's great transformation, big leap // Korea.net. URL: https://russian.korea.net/NewsFocus/Policies/view?articleId=286200 (accessed: 01.02.2026).

[2] Ahn Sung-mi. Plan aims to boost work-life balance, but firms fear competitiveness will slip // The Korea Herald. September 29, 2025. URL: https://www.koreaherald.com/article/10585955 (accessed: 20.02.2026).

[3] SGI BRIEF vol. 34. 임금과 노동생산성 추이, 그리고 근로시간 단축의 영향 [Trends in Wages and Labor Productivity, and the Impact of Reducing Working Hours]. September 23, 2025. DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.20090.35520.

[4] Jung Min-hee. Korea's Labor Productivity Lags Behind in 4-day Workweek // BusinessKorea. September 22, 2025. URL: https://www.businesskorea.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=252651 (accessed: 15.08.2026).

[5] Lee Han-seop. The initiative is overly focused on manpower training // Korean Teachers and Education Workers Union. January 07, 2026. URL: https://learningsuccess.blog/news/education-ai/south-koreas-ai-education-push-raises-questions-about-deep-learning (accessed: 20.02.2026).

the cultivation of higher-order cognitive processing and creativity, the attributes critical for the long-term success of students and, by extension, for the meritocratic principle of talent selection.

Concurrently, the state continues to operate a universally accessible, complimentary online academic support platform designed to democratize access to knowledge irrespective of socio-economic status. A prominent emerging trend within this ecosystem is the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI). While the previous administration had planned the nationwide deployment of AI-powered digital textbooks by 2028[1], an empirical pilot program launching AI textbooks for English and mathematics across select primary and secondary classrooms in early 2025 faced critical setbacks. By August 2025, the pilot was deemed unsuccessful, and the digital materials were stripped of their official curriculum status[2]. Although Lee Jae-myung and Yoon Suk-yeol were defined by intense political rivalry, the termination of this project was predicated on strictly objective criteria; the platforms suffered from insufficient beta-testing, hardware overheating and factual inaccuracies. Nonetheless, structural interest in leveraging AI within the educational sector remains high.

In November 2025, the Republic of Korea unveiled its ambitious “AI for All” national initiative[3], which is structurally designed to position the country among the world's top three global hubs for artificial intelligence development1. A cornerstone of this reform is the establishment of an “AI Innovation Talent Corridor,” dynamically linking secondary school curricula with specialized undergraduate and postgraduate academic programs. The empirical foundation for this initiative was laid during a pilot project launched in July 2025 across Gyeonggi Province, which continues to evaluate the effectiveness of AI-driven pedagogy and assessment metrics in middle and high school classrooms for Korean language, social studies and natural sciences.

Furthermore, the systemic deployment of artificial intelligence is anticipated to prompt the formulation of hyper-individualized learning trajectories and personalized professional pathways. By providing highly precise, objective and data-driven diagnostic mappings of each student's cognitive strengths and vocational aptitudes, these technologies aim to optimize the macroeconomic allocation of human capital and cultivate a highly competitive workforce.

In the Republic of Korea, an innovative approach to human capital management is inextricably linked to the active participation of the nation's largest conglomerates, reflecting a broader structural shift within contemporary corporate recruitment practices. As an illustration of this trend, in the spring of 2026, the LG Group announced the establishment of South Korea's first corporate-embedded AI Master’s degree program officially accredited

[1] Ministry of Education. Briefing on the Plan for AI Digital Textbooks // Press release. June 06, 2023. URL: https://english.moe.go.kr/boardCnts/viewRenewal.do?boardID=254&boardSeq=95291&lev=0&m=0202&opType=N&page=2&s=english (accessed: 20.02.2026).

[2] AI-powered textbooks fail to make the grade in South Korea // Rest of world. October 15, 2025. URL: https://restofworld.org/2025/south-korea-ai-textbook/?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email (accessed: 20.02.2026).

[3] Choi Jeong-yoon. W1.4tr blueprint to teach AI from elementary school to the workplace // The Korea Herald. November 10, 2025. URL: https://www.koreaherald.com/article/10612847 (accessed: 20.02.2026).

by the Ministry of Education[1]. Characterized by tuition-free enrollment and a highly rigorous, competitive selection process, the initiative focuses fundamentally on the cultivation of practical proficiencies, human potential and advanced scientific achievements, as underscored by LG Chairman Koo Kwang-mo (구광모). The corporation is architecting a comprehensive, AI-driven educational ecosystem designed to identify and nurture exceptional talent across multiple demographic tiers. This pipeline extends from the "LG Discovery Lab" for adolescents to the "LG Aimers" initiative, culminating in the "LG AI Academy" for accelerating internal workforce expertise. By anchoring advancement in demonstrated knowledge and technical capabilities rather than external socio-economic variables, this corporate framework actively shifts the educational paradigm away from traditional, credential-focused hierarchies toward a performance-based meritocracy centered on practical skills and equal opportunity.

Concurrently, generating structural pathways for social mobility requires sustained state support for entrepreneurial initiatives and the expansion of opportunities for individual self-actualization. In alignment with this economic directive, President Lee Jae-myung has sustained robust legislative and financial backing for state programs optimized for startups and venture capital enterprises[2].

The nation's sustained commitment to digitalization, alongside the expansion of the creative and green economies, indicates that the Republic of Korea is gradually transitioning toward a macroeconomic paradigm characteristic of highly advanced post-industrial societies: the post-growth economy. Within this emerging framework, gross domestic product expansion is displaced as the primary indicator of national success. Instead, the strategic focus pivots from quantitative accumulation to quality of life, long-term environmental and systemic sustainability, and social equity, which are the ideals that are inherently and organically intertwined with a re-imagined model of meritocratic justice. In the South Korean context, this re-imagined framework manifests not as a static system, but as a societal shift toward balancing high-stakes competition with state-enforced opportunities, transforming merit from a tool of rigid social stratification into a mechanism for sustainable, quality-of-life development.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the defining characteristic of South Korean meritocracy lies in the profound tension between its historical Confucian foundations and modern individualistic aspirations. While the traditional system was rooted in statecraft and collective duty, contemporary practices have shifted toward a highly individualized validation of personal status. Consequently, success in competitive selections and examinations is increasingly perceived not as a tool for maintaining static social roles, but as a high-stakes mechanism for individual economic survival and social advancement.

[1] 정미하. "AI 중심은 결국 사람" 구광모 회장 의지 담긴 LG AI대학원 개원 // ChosunBIZ. March 04, 2026. URL: https://biz.chosun.com/industry/company/2026/03/04/56DL7GEMZNDIJF4UV6QVW5ENRU/ (accessed: 15.03.2026). (In Korean)

[2] Kim Hye-lin. 2026 is 1st year of Korea's great transformation, big leap // Korea.net. URL: https://russian.korea.net/NewsFocus/Policies/view?articleId=286200 (accessed: 01.02.2026).

Contemporary South Korean society increasingly exhibits profound pessimism regarding the actual prospects for vertical social mobility. This trend is accompanied by an intensifying crisis of meritocracy as a system of social relations, wherein the foundational modern belief in an equitable evaluation of individual ability and the just reward of industrious labor, which originally powered the country's era of economic rise, nowadays is systematically eroded under the weight of escalating socioeconomic inequality. Within the public consciousness, the modernization-era "effort=success" paradigm is rapidly being displaced by a "resource=success" model. For South Korean society, this transformation represents far more than a temporary by-product of decelerating macroeconomic growth; rather, it marks a qualitative paradigm shift in how social justice is perceived and operationalized. This volatile social dynamic is further compounded by the fact that the Republic of Korea is navigating a severe, protracted demographic crisis characterized by historically low fertility rates and a rapidly aging population structure. Consequently, this dynamic reflects a profound collision between competing perceptions of meritocracy, leading sociologists, like Oh Jiho[1], to warn that the contemporary Korean model risks devolving into a legally institutionalized mechanism designed merely to legitimize and validate "elite capability".

In the coming years, the government of the Republic of Korea plans to implement a policy agenda targeted at sustainable development and the equitable distribution of public goods. Among the interventions directly designed to reinforce meritocratic principles, a major overhaul of the knowledge-evaluation framework within the national university entrance examination is anticipated. Specifically, the integration of constructed-response questions is expected to incentivize the cultivation of practical, real-world skills while ensuring a more objective assessment process. The Republic of Korea's strategy for sustaining meritocracy demonstrates a long-term, systemic approach anchored in overhauling the talent evaluation framework, democratizing equal access to knowledge, and implementing cutting-edge, AI-driven innovative technologies.

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