

Utopia? 75% Of Young Want To Escape South Korean 'Hell'



The social outcome of Technocracy in South Korea is pretty clear and young people are sounding off: “Escape Hell”. They are highly educated but increasingly limited in life options. □ TN Editor

From afar, South Koreans might appear to be blessed among East Asians.

Citizens of a prosperous democracy that has birthed a hero-to-zero national success story, world-beating corporate brands, a futuristic infrastructure and the glitzy K-pop universe that is beloved across the region, they boast enviable looks, lifestyles and quality of life.

Up close, things look different. According to a recent survey of 5,000 persons, 75% of 19-34 year old natives of the world’s 11th richest nation want out.

The shock finding, reported in the popular Hankyoreh newspaper on December 29, was revealed at Korea Women’s Development Institute’s 119th Gender Equality Policy Forum, in a presentation titled “Diagnosis

of Gender Conflicts from a Youth Standpoint and Suggested Policy Responses for an Inclusive State: A Gender Analysis of Fairness Perceptions.”

The survey found that 79.1% of young women and 72.1% of young men want to leave Korea, that 83.1% of young women and 78.4% of young men consider Korea “hell” and that 29.8% of young women and 34.1% of young men consider themselves “losers.”

Beyond gender differences, the survey suggests massive popular dissatisfaction with local life.

But does it demand that Seoul’s elite sit down and seriously ponder the Korean Dream? Or does it merely reflect superficial talk among youth who live decent lives and have no real intention of leaving?

‘Hell Joseon’

A catchphrase has become current among young Koreans in recent years to describe their country: “Hell Joseon” - “Joseon” being the name of a long-dead Korean kingdom. That phrase is being superseded by a new term, “Tal-Jo” - a portmanteau comprising “leave” and “Joseon,” which, vernacularly, might be best be translated as “Escape Hell.”

“As a joke, we call Korea ‘Hell Joseon,’ but there is another term called ‘Tal-Jo’ which we use a lot more than ‘Hell Joseon’ nowadays,” Park Ji-na, a 20-something Seoul undergraduate, told Asia Times. “Me and my friends just use this in conversation as joke, but if I had a good opportunity to go abroad and work, I would.”

Some say it is far from unique to Korea. “I think there is a middle class crisis in all wealthy countries,” Pae Hee-kyung, who runs an educational institute near Seoul, told Asia Times.

Across the developed, post-industrial world, middle classes are under perceived siege from falling living standards, evaporating opportunities and rising wealth inequality. These trends have arisen against the backdrop of a globalizing world that distributes capital and jobs away from customary centers of investment, manufacturing and related

prosperities.

Some pundits posit that these issues explain Brexit in the UK, the election of Donald Trump in the US and the protests of young Hong Kongers.

Are South Koreans different?

For Korea, the transition from poverty to prosperity and the rise of the bourgeoisie has been shockingly fast: The country morphed from little-known agricultural backwater to global industrial powerhouse in just three decades. While Koreans from the mid-1960s to the mid-1990s could anticipate decent jobs and rising standards of living as growth rates surged, this is no longer the case.

“Here, if you look at your father’s generation, they had less in material terms but they had hopes that, every year, they would be paid more, that they could buy an apartment, and that the price would go up and they would feel a sense of achievement and wealth,” Daniel Tudor, author of *Korea: The Impossible Country*, told Asia Times.

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