At the end of the year, the mass media in Korea was busy picking up keywords that describe Korean society in the year 2015. For Koreans in their twenties, one of the most referred-to buzzwords is “hell-Chosun.” This bizarre combination of two words—“hell” and “Chosun”—circulated widely among the young generation. “Hell” implies all the negative and depressing features of South Korean society today. For example, South Korean teenagers have to study at hak-won (private tutoring institutions) after school and are only able to go home around midnight—all for the goal of getting into a prestigious college. College graduates, of course, have their own competition of acquiring a secure and well-paying job. But the most serious problem is that these efforts do not necessarily guarantee success. It is not so difficult to imagine then why many young people in South Korea are pessimistic about their own futures and the society in which they live.

The other half of the phrase, “Chosun,” refers to the last dynasty of the Korean monarchy. The term is frequently used to insinuate that, like the Chosun dynasty, the Korean government today is unable to cope with global trends. From its conception, the Chosun dynasty subordinated itself to China’s Ming dynasty, promising gifts in exchange for the Ming court’s approval. In addition, Chosun society was pre-modern: it had a strong class system, severe gender inequality, and poor leadership. Because of this “humiliating” history, “Chosun” is not a flattering term—particularly when used by progressives in Korea. The fact that this word is being invoked today, with all of its negative connotations, again underlines the unease and anxiety that South Korean youth are feeling toward their society.

Another buzzword related to this phenomenon is the so-called “spoon theory,” which stems from the well-known English idiom of “born with a silver spoon.” South Korean youths creatively developed a theory to classify “spoons” into three types: a gold spoon, a silver spoon, and a dirt spoon. A gold or silver spoon refers to people born to a wealthy or relatively well-off family. On the other hand, a dirt spoon indicates someone born to a low-income family—someone who will ultimately have to make a living on
“Spoon theory” acts as a reminder of the country’s inequality and it not only discourages South Korean youth, but also their parents, who often feel guilty for not providing their kids with so-called gold or silver spoons.

**Inheritance of Wealth and the Myth of the Self-Made Man**

Both “hell-Chosun” and the “spoon theory” indicate the demoralized state of the South Korean youth. Older generations worked hard and sacrificed much in order to escape from absolute poverty. Their experiences suggested that if individuals simply try hard, society will reward them with a chance to become rich and successful. They believed that while life was tough, they had the power to determine their own futures. Unfortunately, the situation surrounding South Korean youth in 2015 is quite different. Class hierarchy is now considerably more rigid, which makes climbing the socioeconomic ladder much more difficult. Twenty years ago, college students who went to top universities were almost automatically recruited by large, major corporations and given steady jobs. Now, the best students at top universities have to compete intensely for even mediocre jobs. This is partly due to the fact that, compared to twenty years ago, a much higher number of people in their twenties now hold a bachelor’s degree. For example, only 33.2 percent of high school graduates went to college in 1990. In 2009, the amount increased to 77.8 percent. As more college students are out in the job market, competition becomes harsher.¹

Another phenomenon that reflects the disenchantment of South Korea’s youth is the overwhelming number of self-help books. Many of these books are aimed at reminding young people that, while life may seem to be unfair, their situation will improve once they dedicate themselves to a particular path. For instance, the intellectual celebrity Kim Nando has published a book titled “Ap’unikka Ch’ôngch’ŭnida” (Being Young is Painful), which has sold millions of copies as a must-buy title for young South Koreans. But, contrary to what those books tell young readers, they no longer believe that dedication or commitment guarantee success. Instead, they believe that their futures—successful or unsuccessful—are predetermined by the socioeconomic status of their families.

According to the 2015 Asan Annual Survey, attitudes toward the poor and the rich vary greatly across age groups.² When asked why the rich are rich, 67.8 percent of people in their twenties answered that they are rich because they have rich parents. This number was even higher among those in their thirties, scoring 76.4 percent. On the contrary, South Koreans who are sixty or older showed a more optimistic view by answering that rich people worked hard to become rich. As for why the poor are poor, 49.4 percent of South Korean youth answered that the poor must have parents who are also poor. Again, 54.2 percent of people in their thirties answered the same way.

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[40] Georgetown Journal of Asian Affairs
On the contrary, Koreans who are sixty or over stated that the poor are poor because they did not work hard.

In a more direct sense, the survey asked respondents if they thought that South Korean society allows for social mobility. 56.7 percent of those in their twenties answered negatively. This pessimistic perspective is, again, more prevalent among those in their thirties. About 61 percent of the respondents in their thirties thought it was not possible for one to climb the socioeconomic ladder; the likely reason is that those in their thirties have actively participated in the labor market and so have directly confronted the class ceiling. What is most astounding is that elderly people, nearly across the board, believe that anyone in South Korean society can improve their socioeconomic situation simply through hard work. As high as 70.3 percent of those in their sixties or over agreed as such.

Furthermore, many in their twenties feel that the lives of their children will not be better than their own, with 53.6 percent saying so. Again, we find a contrast with the older generation: as many as 80.8 percent of those in their sixties or older are confident that future generations will be much better off than themselves.

Indifference toward Politics and Political Parties

Job insecurity, a rigid class structure, endless competition, and the virtually ceaseless effort needed for daily survival have made South Korean youth apathetic toward politics and political solutions. Therefore, it should not come as a surprise that 74.6 percent of those in their twenties responded that they do not support any political party. 31.2 percent of them even answered that they are not at all interested in political news. This lack of interest in politics is also displayed in the low voter turnout by South Korean youth in elections. According to the exit poll for the Eighteenth Presidential Election in 2012, the number of individuals in their twenties who voted was 68.5 percent, which was the lowest across all age groups and lower than the average turnout of 75.8 percent.

In general, the young generation tends to consider themselves liberal and are not particularly appreciative of conservative politics. This tendency is, of course, not exclusive to South Korean youth, but can be found practically everywhere. In any case, the ruling Saenuri Party and therefore, President Park, are not very popular among this age cohort. While the Saenuri Party has been enjoying, on average, around 30 percent of support in the Asan Annual Survey, only 11.8 percent of the young generation supported the party. Note that this result does not necessarily mean that the younger generation is more inclined to support the progressively-minded opposition party, the

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5 Asan Annual Survey 2015.
New Politics Alliance for Democracy (NPAD), either. The support for them is, in fact, even lower than that for the Saenuri: only 9.1 percent of those in their twenties support the NPAD.

Conservative presidents, of course, usually have trouble winning the support of younger generations, and President Park is not an exception. When asked whether or not they approved of how President Park was handling her job as president, 79.1 percent of those in their twenties disapproved. This is quite an incredible divergence from people in their sixties or older, of which 78.5 percent approved of her presidency. Considering that she garnered over 30 percent of votes from Koreans in their twenties in the 2012 presidential election, her popularity is certainly dwindling.6

Since the 2002 presidential election, in which a clear and divisive generational gap appeared, the South Korean youth has tended to support the progressive opposition party when it comes to actual voting. The Saenuri Party claims to care about increasing their share of youth voters. Yet, in reality, there is little reason to increase its popularity among the younger generation: support for President Park from the elderly is so remarkable that it needs only support from them plus a handful of youth votes to win elections. Thus, even though President Park repeatedly mentions and stresses issues like “youth unemployment” in her speeches and economic policies, she and her party have little practical reason to appeal to youth voters.

Who Will Win the Youth Support? And Does It Matter?

The next logical question is: which party—if any—will be successful in garnering support from the South Korean youth going forward? If the South Korean youth votes are not a priority for the Saenuri Party, does that mean the NPAD is more likely to win their support? Not necessarily. On the contrary, the NPAD is regarded as having already failed in its attempt to become a viable alternative to the Saenuri Party. Since its loss in the 2012 presidential election, the NPAD (known then the United Democratic Party and now, most recently, known as the Deobul-eo Democratic Party) has never recuperated, and its support has not exceeded 30 percent, whilst the Saenuri Party has successfully maintained approval ratings of 40 percent overall according to a Gallup poll.7 In fact, NPAD is very much seen as an “establishment party” in the eyes of many young South Koreans. Disappointed with the inattentiveness of established political elites and frustrated with their own demoralizing situation, the South Korean youth does not seem willing to lend support to any political party.8

8 This is how Ahn Cheol-soo came into the political scene. Ahn, as an outsider to politics, received huge support from the younger generation.
In her speech at the National Assembly in 2015, President Park used the term “youth” thirty-seven times—more than the number of times she said “people.” However, there is criticism that her policies are not lining up with the contents of her speech. She somehow linked youth issues—particularly youth unemployment—to the enforcement of labor reforms, which is her primary policy goal during the remainder of her term. In addition, while the welfare budget for citizens over sixty-five in 2015 was approximately 1,100 U.S. dollars (1.3 million won) per capita, budget outlay for the youth employment program was only about 230 U.S. dollars (260,000 won) per capita. The same goes for NPAD, for they, too, fail to provide realistic policy options. Why are both the current government and the NPAD neglecting youth issues?

For one, parties have to be efficient in distributing their resources in order to attract the electorate, and it is likely that this logic determines the neglect of South Korean youth. Keep in mind that the number of voters varies significantly across different age groups. According to the 2015 population survey, Koreans in their twenties only constitute 16 percent of total eligible voters. Whereas the largest electorate group, at 23 percent of total eligible voters, are those in their sixties or over. To make matters worse, Koreans in their twenties do not turn out to vote to the same degree that voters in their sixties do. Therefore, from a political and electoral perspective, it may be rational for political elites to pay less attention to the South Korean youth while, at the same time, paying lip service to youth issues. After all, a political party’s primary goal is to be elected.

**Why the Youth Still Matter**

The South Korean electorate generally determines how they vote based on only a few criteria. One of the most well-known criteria is national security and, to be more specific, the government’s stance toward North Korea. Traditionally, conservatives prefer a hardline policy toward North Korea, whereas liberals tend to prefer engagement with the North. Interestingly enough, the young South Koreans most likely to label themselves as liberal today are as conservative and hawkish toward North Korea as individuals over sixty years old. This appears to be good news for the ruling conservative Saenuri Party.

The twist, however, is that national security issues and government policy towards North Korea are not as important as they once were. Currently, the most important election issue is the country’s economic welfare. For example, according to the Asan Institute’s opinion poll in October 2015, 39.3 percent of respondents thought that

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12 *Asan Annual Survey 2015*. 

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creating jobs was the most important issue in South Korea. Also, economic equality and income redistribution were considered important by 13.5 percent and 13.4 percent of respondents, respectively. In addition, the young generation is more liberal and progressive in terms of economic issues than other demographics. They emphasize the redistribution of wealth more than economic growth. But, more than that, it is clear that they long for a society that is governed by fair rules. Essentially, South Korea—a country that was once geared almost entirely towards economic growth—is changing in meaningful ways, and the young generation is driving this change.

South Korea’s youth have indeed often led major political movements in the country. During South Korea’s democratization period, the youth—particularly college students—played an essential role in leading the movement. In 2002, Koreans in their twenties and thirties led the anti-American movement caused by an accident in which a U.S. armored vehicle killed two Korean junior high school students. This anti-American sentiment was translated into support for a progressive presidential candidate, Roh Moo-hyun, and it was again the South Korean youth who were at the center of that year’s election campaigns. Given the potential for South Korean youth to instigate meaningful political change in their country, it is not surprising that the disposition of the South Korean youth has been of interest to both neighboring countries and other observers, such as the United States.

At this moment, though, due to the fact that young individuals constitute a relatively small fraction of South Korea’s overall voting bloc given their persistently low turnout, South Korean youth continue to remain relatively unimportant in the eyes of South Korea’s major political parties. Nonetheless, these parties’ leaders must understand that the youth will someday replace them as the leaders of their country. It is the current generation of leaders’ responsibility to leave a healthy society for the youth to lead. A significant step toward doing so would be to put more effort toward resolving the major problems currently afflicting the youth in South Korea today.

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