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South Korea's G-generation: A nation within a nation, detached from unification

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It is hard enough to be a twenty-something in the best of times, but South Korea's twenty-somethings (the *yishipdae*) are having it particularly tough. This new generation, the 'G-generation', is the focus of critical attention across Korea's intellectual and media forums. They are Korea's most highly educated generation, with unique international experience. They are the first generation whose lives have only spanned post-1987 democratic South Korea.



These expressions of concern by older generations is historically unprecedented in South Korea. A book *88 man won saedae*, decrying the directionless trajectory of these young people, sold over one million copies.

There are mixed attitudes towards these young people: envy of the opportunities available to the *yishipdae*; pity as they find themselves in a postmodern, individualistic world; and fear that they will reject the communal and responsibility that accompanies Korean traditions.

Generally, the commentary is shallow with more than a hint of condescension; poor understanding of the new challenges the *yishipdae* face; and a lack of empathy for their fresh perspective and talents.

The commentary has one thing right: this batch of *yishipdae* are different, not because of their rejection of previous generations' norms, but because this generation has been constructed and shaped by an entirely new South Korean nation. They have a separate personal and national identity.

This is the first generation of South Koreans, who define themselves in terms of the southern part of the peninsula only. They have the least interest in unification relative to previous generations. For those who do desire unification, the motivation is often derived from South Korea-centred goals: unification for the benefit of South Korea or to prevent China's spreading influence over the North. South Korean *yishipdae*

see few similarities with their Northern brethren; demonstrated by their strong aversion to close relationship whether through marriage, business or even as neighbours. Yet 70 per cent of *yishipdae* demonstrate a positive or neutral attitude toward marriage with a foreigner.¹

The *yishipdae* no longer consider ethnicity to be the basis of the Korean nation. In contrast to previous generations, young people show a positive attitude toward the arrival and integration of foreigners into South Korean society.

The term *uri nara* (our nation) is used frequently in the Korean language. For many *yishipdae* however, this refers to the South only. Where unification was a driving force for opposition and protest amongst young people, motivation to come out on the streets in protest is now found in South Korean-oriented issues: environmentalism; personal well-being; and issues of sovereignty and power in relations with Korea's neighbours. Traditional areas of protest such as anti-authoritarianism, labour and anti-Americanism are no longer framed with reference to unification; instead, they are linked to concerns over South Korea's welfare. For example anti-Americanism, traditionally expressed by linking the US military presence to the persistence of division, is now linked to US beef imports or pollution from US military bases. There is little mention of the North. Priorities lie with *uri nara*, South Korea.

Even globalisation, a favourite evil amongst young protestors elsewhere, has been usurped by the *yishipdae* for South Korean nationalist goals. They take immense pride in the spread of Korean culture via the 'Korean Wave', South Korea's sporting achievements and the success of Korean companies overseas. Globalisation is a tool for building South Korea's national brand and to gain international leadership.

The nature of this newly emerged *yishipdae* has relevance beyond driving book sales. Young people have always played an important role in South Korea's politics. Policy directed toward the Korean peninsula may attract powerful opposition from young people if perceived to threaten South Korea's well-being. Demands for stability and gradual reform of North Korea will become the priority. The *yishipdae* demand that South Korea is given proper recognition and equal partnership in the wider Northeast Asian and international political arena. If a younger Korean nation is to be engaged in the difficult issues this region faces, their priorities must be understood.

In addition, South Korea needs to prepare for the complex and divided social system that is developing. There is already a hierarchy of 'Korean' developing within South Korean society. South Koreans and Korean-Americans gain top billing. Others vying for position include Chinese-Koreans and ethnic Korean returnees from the former Soviet Union. North Koreans are left at the bottom.

Korea's new *yishipdae* is not only generations apart but nations apart. The potential for social fissures needs to be addressed by the South Korean government if Korea's social, political and economic progress is to continue unhindered in the fluid Northeast Asian geo-political environment. South Korea's G-generation are more than a social curiosum; understanding them provides a key to South Korea's future.

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¹ Kang, W.T. 2006, 'Korean national and ethnic identity: The meaning of the Korean minjok', in Politics and National Identity in South Korea, ed W.T. Kang, East Asia Institute, Seoul. (In Korean)