Who Are Korean Millennials?: Educational Attainment

By Hyunjoon Park

Korea has experienced remarkably rapid expansion of education during the last few decades: “Although educational expansion, more or less, has occurred in many industrial countries as well, the degree of South Korea’s educational expansion has been so dramatic that few other countries have achieved a comparable increase in the past 30 years” (Park 2007: 180). With the considerable degree of educational expansion, Korean young people are now one of the most highly educated populations in the world (OECD 2012). In other words, one of the major characteristics that define Korean Millennials should be their high level of educational attainment, which contrast the relatively low level of educational attainment among their parent and earlier generations.

Figure 1. Educational Attainment of Korean Millennials
(aged 25-29 in 2010 Census)
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Figure 1 presents the educational distribution of those aged 25 to 29 in the 2010 Korean Census. Those who were aged 25 to 29 in the 2010 Census were mostly born between 1980 and 1985 (publicly available Census data do not provide the exact birth years and months). Korean Millennials are defined as those who came of age in 2000s, and therefore those born between 1980 and 1985 constitute Korean Millennials. The data used to create Figure 1 are available from Korean Statistical Information Service.

The figure shows the proportions of Korean Millennials who have five different levels of educational attainment: 1) middle school or less, 2) high school, 3) junior college (mostly 2-3 years of higher education), 4) university (4 years of higher education), and 5) master/Ph.D. Those who did not finish college education were classified as high school graduates, while those who did not finish high school education were defined as middle school graduates. However, those who are currently enrolled or in the status of leave of absence are treated as if they finished the given level of education.

In addition to Korean Millennials, the educational distributions of those aged 55 to 59 in the 2010 Census are presented for comparison. Those aged 55 to 59 in 2010 are selected for comparison because of the age gap (30 years) from Korean Millennials (assuming that they represent the generation of Korean Millennials’ parents).

In Figure 1, evident is the increase of educational attainment among Korean Millennials compared to their parent generation. Almost half of Korean Millennial men have a university degree, while only 19 percent of Korean men aged 55 to 59 in 2010 had a university degree. If junior college is included, 73 percent of Korean Millennial men have tertiary education, increase from 24 percent among the generation of their fathers.

The increase of education among Korean Millennial women is even more impressive. 48 percent of Korean Millennial women have university education, which is in sharp contrast to 8 percent among the generation of Korean Millennial women’s mothers (aged 55 to 59 in 2010). When both junior college and university categories are combined, three out of four Korean Millennial women have tertiary education, compared to only 11 percent among Korean women aged 55 to 59 in 2010. Because of the more substantial increase of education over time among women than among men, gender disparities in education almost disappear among Korean Millennials.

Note on this brief. As described above, those currently enrolled in college or in the status of leave of absence were treated as if they finished college. This research brief will be updated using the 2015 Census data when the data become available. In 2015, those born between 1980 and 1985 are mostly at 30 to 34 when most of them would finish education.

References: