

## *Shinsedae:*

### Conservative Attitudes of a ‘New Generation’ in South Korea and the Impact on the Korean Presidential Election

**W**ho are the new generation called *Shinsedae*? Since the early 1990s the term *Shinsedae*, which means “new generation” in Korean, has come to be used to refer to a specific group of people in Korean society. Though there were other terms for this new or younger generation — such as the X-generation and the N-generation — they all share a common denominator of being the “post-386 generation,” which means they are free from ideological or political bias.

The “386 generation,” named after 386 computers, was coined in the 1990s to describe those in their late 30s and 40s who were “born in the 1960s and attended university in the 1980s.” It is the 386 generation who spent most of their youth fighting for democracy under authoritarian rule and who had a shared generational experience and culture for the first time in Korean history. They are now in decision-making positions in all fields, including political, economic, social and cultural areas. The 386 generation will go down in history as a very active and passionate group of people who toppled a military dictatorship of more than three decades and built democracy in Korea.



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The 1990s was an era of a widening generation gap. Farewell to ideology, a new generation emerged — a generation that is heavily immersed in consumption. This group of Koreans was born during a time of rapid economic growth, spent their childhood in a prosperous environment and experienced the 1997 Asian financial crisis. They are substantial beneficiaries of the nation's democracy, which was achieved by the blood, sweat and tears of the 386 generation. And they are the first generation who went abroad for travel and study with the liberalization of overseas travel and the advent of an era of information and communications.

Unlike the 386 generation who fought for democratization and ideological issues, what worries this new generation most is the high unemployment of university graduates. While the 386 generation enjoyed a booming economy with plenty of jobs available, the new generation is struggling with unemployment and riding the tide of “fierce competition.”

When Korea was hit by the Asian financial crisis, they were in high school or college. Raised in an affluent society with full access to the Internet, this new generation witnessed their fathers being kicked out of jobs and their families collapsing. After having to submit resumes without success, they have faced the grim reality that getting a job is crucial but never easy. The Asian financial crisis changed the mindset of this new generation in Korea to put the economy before anything else.

A series of events, such as the Asian financial crisis, the 2002 World Cup where the Korean national soccer team reached the Final Four and the candlelight vigil after two middle school girls were killed by a U.S. Forces Korea military armored vehicle, clearly demonstrated the identity of the younger generation. These young people, who are open-minded, practical and confident, are often indifferent to politics.

### **Conservative *Shinsedae* and post ideology**

Traditionally, the younger generation represented by college students was considered to be liberal and progressive. Yet the long belief that college students are always progressive has collapsed. According to a joint survey by the *Hankook Ilbo* and school newspapers at Seoul National University, Yonsei University, Korea University and Ewha Women's University conducted with 1,089 university students, more respondents answered they are conservative than replied they are liberal, 23% to 21%. While a majority responded they are moderate, on the question of whether to participate in a democratic movement if they were in a situation where there was a democratic movement as in June 1987, more than 60% of the respondents answered “no,” showing a significant setback in participation of the younger generation in social issues.

Although it is said that being rebellious is a privilege of youth, the younger they are, the more

conservative they seem to be in Korea at the moment. According to the survey conducted by the Korea Society Opinion Institute last November, more respondents in their early 20s regarded themselves as conservative than respondents in their late 20s.

The conservative attitude of the new generation is also apparent in their changing preference for political parties. The Woori Party has lost the support of voters in their 20s. Since 2004 support fell about 18% to a support rate of just over 21% in 2006. In the meantime, the approval rating of the Grand National Party (GNP) rose in 2006, with almost one-quarter of the younger generation favoring the party.

In fact, the support gap between the two parties appears to be wider with university students. In a poll conducted with 1,925 college students across the country by *Campus Plus*, a monthly magazine for college students, more than one-third of those polled favored the GNP by a big margin. The Woori Party received less than 10 percent support and the Korea Democratic Labor Party less than 5 percent.

Moreover, Lee Myung-bak, the former Seoul mayor, took the lead among all presidential candidates by garnering support from more than half of the students polled. Trailing behind were former GNP chairwoman Park Geun-hye (15.8%) and Sohn Hak-kyu (14.5%), who has recently withdrawn from the GNP.

As unemployment among the young has emerged as a core problem in Korea, what matters most to this generation is economic wellbeing. Now, their slogan is: “It's the economy, Stupid.” According to a survey conducted by the Federation of Korea Trade Unions, seven out of ten university students surveyed support capitalism. In a poll conducted by the University News Network, students said they value economic growth more than narrowing down disparity in wealth, which is quite a different opinion from that of the 386 generation.

### **Practical nationalism**

*Shinsedae*, the new generation, would go to McDonald's for hamburgers after burning the U.S. flag at a candlelight vigil in a protest against America. They do not think it is contradictory to accept the American culture on one hand, while claiming to condemn a U.S. action. These young people, the first beneficiaries of globalization in Korea, have strong confidence and pride in their country, especially after the Korean national soccer team performance in the 2002 World Cup and with overseas travel and study much more common.

Their version of nationalism — which is based on the belief that Korea is not inferior whatsoever to the United States or Japan — is fundamentally different from the nationalism of past generations with vestiges of Japanese colonial rule of Korea.

Here we can see the emergence of “confident nationalism” for the first time in Korea, strikingly different from the previous “resistant nationalism.” Hence, it may not be an exaggeration to call this new generation full of national pride, “the new people” or “the new race.”

Yet to these young people, nationalism never takes precedence over their pursuit of pragmatic interest, meaning they become nationalistic only when it serves their interest. If there is a conflict between nationalism and pragmatism, the former never trumps the latter. Such a tendency is even more visible when it comes to North Korean issues. According to a survey conducted by the *Chosun Daily* in August 2005 with 813 young people, when asked the question about which side to support if a war breaks out between Washington and Pyongyang, close to two-thirds of respondents said they will support North Korea, while less than one-third answered they will be on the U.S. side. The survey suggests that young people today no longer view North Korea as an enemy or a competitor.

However, when asked if they are willing to bear the cost and burden for reunification, the responses turned negative. The students said it is desirable for the two Koreas to be unified only without sacrifice from their side. A survey of university students in January of this year showed barely a fifth of the respondents think unification is an urgent matter that should be pursued at the expense of national interest. Almost 80% of students either answered unification should take place cautiously to avoid any kind of setback and negative impact on the national economy or preferred remaining divided.

The new generation tends to be fiercely nationalistic particularly toward events combined with sports or the Internet. As seen in the cases of China’s distortion of Northeast Asia history, Japan’s claim of sovereignty over Dokdo islet and whitewashing of history textbooks, and the tragic death of two school girls by a U.S. army vehicle in 2002, Internet-savvy young people exploded with rage and shared and spread their nationalistic messages by leveraging the Internet. Global sporting events such as the World Cup and the Olympics have also witnessed how patriotism of these confident young people turned to nationalism.

Still they express nationalism only when it suits their pragmatic interests. To them, economy and culture are major drivers to go nationalistic. A key example is their shifting support from a traditional ally, the United States, to a rapidly emerging China. When asked which nation will help the development of Korea most a decade down the road, twice as many university students said China will be more helpful than the United States, according to a survey by the *Korea Economic Daily*. The survey also showed that almost twice the number of respondents answered they

have become increasingly favorable to China, compared to the number expressing their growing preference towards the United States.

A survey conducted by the *Chosun Daily* also showed that more than a third of this new generation has a positive impression of Japan, often associating it with its computer games and comic strips. With regard to the question of where they want to immigrate or work, apart from Korea, Australia was ranked first, followed by the U.S. and Japan, respectively.

### **Politics as a Product, New Generation as Consumers**

The new generation does not show a consistent tendency of liberalism or conservatism. Rather to those young people who increasingly go global and digital, all issues are intertwined between individuals and society, production and consumption, and politics and personal life, which lead to more complicated patterns regarding their stance and beliefs.

The same goes for their political attitudes. Most of them are apathetic toward politics, yet actively participate in political events. They don’t read newspapers but are intensely interested in contacting and building relations with politicians through their mini homepages and the Internet. To them, politicians are just celebrities to take photos with when they bump into them on the street. Truly, we are now living in an era where politics has become a kind of product or entertainment.

Then, which presidential candidate will have the greatest value as a product? According to a survey conducted by *Campus Plus*, two-thirds of respondents selected the “strong drive” of candidates as an important factor in deciding whom to vote for. Much less important were morality, previous achievements and political affiliation, which ranked at the bottom, which again demonstrates their ideology-free pragmatism.

Those aged between 26 and 35, also known as the “2635 Generation,” represent 17% of the national population and 24% of the working population, which indicates the strong influence they will have in the next presidential election. Between older conservative people or those over 46 and the progressive 386 generation between ages 36 and 45, this 2635 generation will hold a deciding vote. Even though they are more conservative, it doesn’t mean more votes to a conservative party since they are indifferent to politics. During the 2002 presidential election, only about 57% of these young people turned out to vote despite their strong craze over then presidential candidate, Roh Mu-hyun.

Stronger conservatism of this generation will be a benefit to the Grand National Party. With the next presidential election only six months away, the GNP is now cementing its solid basis for victory. Candidates

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enjoying high popularity among the public are all members of the GNP, whereas the ruling party has not even come up with candidates who are able to compete with them. Worse, taking into consideration serious public disappointment over the current administration and extreme fatigue against reform efforts and progressivism, it may be difficult to expect any sudden changes as were seen in the 2002 presidential election.

That said, there is still room for unexpected changes in votes among the new generation in the election slated for December 19. That may hinge on the image of candidates.

As seen by surveys cited above, young people put personal image over political ideology or political party affiliation when deciding whom to vote for. Not only in politics but in commercial arenas, image now constitutes an important value that drives the sales of products. That leads us to predict heated cyber campaigns and promotions to win the hearts and minds of the younger generation during the next election. Yet, building an image that meets the pragmatic desire of the new generation will require more than fine-sounding rhetoric, especially after the serious disillusionment of voters who followed image and rhetoric in deciding their votes in the election of 2002.

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