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# Chasing “Spec”

How the Younger Generation Seeks to Restore the Life-World

“**S**pec (sŭp’ek)” is a neologism derived from the English word, specification, which is now very widely used both by university students and countless ordinary Korean citizens. The original meaning of specification is “a detailed description of how something is, or should be, designed or made,” but the meaning of this word has been broadened to mean “a detailed description of how someone is”. For most university students, “spec” refers to everything they need to prepare for getting a good job while they are still at school. The requirements are a good GPA, a high official English proficiency test score, and a number of licenses and certificates. In this way, university students use their “spec” to identify themselves as highly qualified in an increasingly competitive society.

The emergence of this word is the result of the ongoing global recession. Beginning in 1997, a number of large enterprises, Woosung Construction, Hanbo, Sammi, Jinro, and Daewoo Motors, went out of business because of the Asian currency crisis, with the nation itself coming very close to bankruptcy. As a result, the Korean government

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decided to ask the International Monetary Fund for a short-term loan to overcome its economic difficulties. In response to the situation, many companies in Korea restructured themselves in order to survive; and there were few jobs available for those who were looking. The unemployment rate, in turn, increased drastically. Ten years later, the nation is faced by another major financial crisis, which was triggered by the Subprime Mortgages Crisis in the United States. The Subprime Mortgages Crisis not only threatened the Korean economy but causes shock waves around the world. Eventually, many Korean companies became reluctant to recruit new employees, concentrating instead on restructuring to become more efficient. With these changes taking place, the unemployment rate in Korea increased once again. At present, there are approximately 3 million people without jobs.

In order not to be out-competed, many university students in Korea have exerted great efforts to equip themselves with impressive “spec”. Some students are even postponing their graduation in order to earn a grace period for more preparation, so that they can make their “spec” more attractive. An appealing “spec” requires at least five things: the individual must graduate from a renowned university with outstanding GPAs. Second, he or she must earn a high score on an official English proficiency test such as TOEIC, TOEIC Speaking, or OPic (Oral Proficiency Interview-Computer). If this person does not have a score that is higher than the score the company requires, he or she cannot even apply for the job. Third, the candidate must have a license or certificate such as MOS (Microsoft Office Specialist). Fourth, the candidate should have some experience of language study abroad. Finally, the individual should have some previous internship experience. On top of the pressure to earn good grades,

preparing all these extra requirements in just four years is almost impossible. In consequence, many students go to institutes to prepare their “specs,” when they have no classes at school. And these days, ambitious high schools students, even before beginning their university education, are attending English institutes in order to ensure a high score on one of the English proficiency tests.

Not so surprisingly, the concept of “spec” has become a serious concern for the universities. The percentage of their graduating students with jobs has become a very important issue. Some universities are even advertizing themselves by boasting about the high employment rates achieved by their graduating students.

As the situation grows worse, the younger generation in Korea is enthusiastically chasing a better “spec” for their future. Achieving a decent “spec” to land a good job has become the main purpose of their lives. The paranoia about “spec” reflects the standard of value in our society. In the terribly competitive situation, economic survival has emerged as the most important value for many Koreans. Some might argue that this standard of value represents the loss of humanity. They suggest that this value allows materialism to control human consciousness. However, it might also be argued that chasing “spec” could be viewed as the “life-world” for younger Koreans. For Edmund Husserl, the life-world (in German, *Lebenswelt*) is the fundamental concept for all epistemological enquiries. Husserl insisted that the real meaning of life could only be recovered by the restoration of this life-world. The life-world is not ideological or abstract but rather the real world we experience while we breathe. Chasing “spec” might be seen as the means by which the younger generation

can overcome their sense of human alienation. That is, the young generation of Korea might be able to find the real meaning of their lives by chasing appealing “spec”. Whether this chase will yield genuine gratification in the long run is a moot point. It is simply that the conditions of the world they find themselves in press them onward to grapple with “spec”, whatever philosophical ramifications it might or might not have.