

The Effectiveness of “Happiness-Oriented” Education Reforms in China, Japan and South Korea

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Abstract. Intense academic competition has long characterized East Asian societies, which brings about health and cost issues for students and their family. Japan, China, and South Korea have recently begun implementing burden-relieving policies framed with a focus on student happiness: Japan has Yutori Education, South Korea has Free Semester, while China has recently begun implementing Dual Reduction Policy (DRP). All three sought to pull children back from the exam machine by cutting class hours, homework, or off-campus tutoring. This study systematically reviews these reforms since 2000, examining their rationales, key features, effects on students’ well-being, unintended consequences, and stakeholders’ perceptions of the happiness-competition trade-off. The outcome demonstrates the similar pattern across all three countries: students in the three countries experienced a reduction in mental health issues in the short term. China had the most notable reduction, Japan the least, and Korea fell in between. Yet, worries about academic performance, shadow education, and the overall widening of inequality were common across all three countries. The study concludes that for DRP to avoid Japan’s abrupt reversal and Korea’s marginalisation, it must simultaneously advance evaluation reform, equitable compensation mechanisms, teacher workload relief, and a broader cultural redefinition of success.

1 Introduction

For the past three decades, East Asian students have been at the top of the TIMSS and PISA leaderboard at the cost of academic burdens, sleep shortage, depression and suicide. In South Korea, children as young as 7 have been sent off to hagwon. Japan contributed the “cram school hell” and the hikikomori phenomenon, while in China, the terms “chicken baby” and “involution” have entered the everyday lexicon, alongside parent WeChat groups that continue to book classes at 2 am. It begs the question, who is this education really for?

In response to the increasing pressure and health concerns for students, in July of 2021, “Double Reduction” Policy appeared, marking a major step in China, which greatly stroke the off-campus training market targeted at teenagers [1]. There were precedents before DRP.

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Starting in 2002 with Yutori education, Japan reduced prescribed curriculum content by 30% and made a commitment that children should “live happily” [2]. In 2013, Korea implemented the Free Semester system that eliminated midterm and final exams in one, entire, middle-school semester so that students could more freely pursue various interests [3]. With each of these changes, the term “happiness” became a part of the official prescribed document. Each in a different way, tried to shift education away from an over-emphasis on exams.

The question is, is cutting burdens actually happy or is it simply a way to push anxiety down? How do parents and teachers and students themselves cross what seems to be a chasm between happiness and competition? These are not just questions for the future of the Double Reduction Policy in China and for the most tightly bound cultural and institutional conundrums of education in East Asia.

To analyse the aforementioned issues, this study examines the body of literature pertaining to the ‘happiness-oriented’ burden relief reforms undertaken in China, Japan, and South Korea since 2000. The aim is to juxtapose the policy logic, consequences of implementation, and the effects of the most prominent overlapping challenges in these countries.

2 Methodology

This study reviews the happiness-oriented burden-reduction reforms in China, Japan, and South Korea from 2000. The author searched Web of Science, Scopus, Google Scholar, and other regional databases using the following keywords: “Yutori education,” “Free Semester,” “Double Reduction,” “happiness,” “student well-being,” and “academic burden” from 2000 to 2025. A total of 51 articles were chosen for this review, of which 12 were from Japan, 15 from Korea, and 24 from China.

The literature reviewed centres on policy rationales, the wellbeing effect, the unintended consequences, and the policy stakeholder’s perception. The literature was analysed thematically and by constant comparison across the three countries. All quotations were checked with the original documents. The review is limited by and large to publications in English, the Chinese language, Japanese and Korean. Other language studies were not reviewed with any methodological system. Given that this research concerned no human subjects, this review was not subject to any strictures regarding ethics. However, sources that were quoted and summarized have been cited in order to avoid plagiarism.

3 Synthesising the effects of happiness education policies in Japan, South Korea, and China

3.1 Japan’s Yutori education and its reversal

Yutori Education, or “relaxed education”, started in Japan in the late 1990s and was fully incorporated in 2002 [2]. One of its focal points was a thirty percent reduction in educational curriculum and the reduction of class time through the introduction of integrated learning time. The main goal of this approach was to develop a “zest for living” and other life skills in students while fostering a positive and free-thinking mindset.

There is almost a consensus in the research literature that “Yutori” did not achieve the educational or social objectives of greater student happiness. Filus conducted research with a broad focus on well-being and a number of the “relaxed” education components with no results in positive well-being or happiness for youth [4]. Yet, the well-being programmes did not significantly lower the levels of bullying, depression, or suicides and did not lower the levels of social withdrawal that Japan was experiencing. The social phenomenon that became

and remained highly visible was the students' disengagement in the social system and in education in general. The Japanese education system was quickly returned to its conservative and Confucian educational ethics due to public outcry. As Filus reflected, the allegiance to democracy, along with the happiness rhetoric and other educational innovations, was primarily for public relations purposes with little educational and social change to support the rhetoric [4].

Evidence contradicts to the notion that lighter academic loads lead to increased happiness. Entrich, utilising reports from the Ministry of Education, concluded that Yutori had neither alleviated real pressures nor did it at all soften the Takemori phenomenon [2]. Rather, mechanisms of fierce international competition were reinstated, but this time, under the banner of internationalisation. Meanwhile, shadow education emerged as demand was created for Juku. PISA outcomes declining stigmatized the curriculum as a failure; its graduates were a "lost generation" in the eyes of the workforce and society. This labelling indicates the extent to which Japan as a whole was willing to grapple with the value issue of happiness or competition.

At the grassroots level, a clear disconnect emerged. Many schools did not fully understand the rationale of either Yutori or its subsequent rollback [5]. Objectives, theory, and expectations of policy outcomes were all badly warped in the flow of policy. While some teachers appreciated the reduction of topics and the increased focus on experiential learning, many teachers felt lost due to a lack of training and materials. As a result of this, educational reforms were often minimal in implementation [5]. Poor communication of constant policy swings magnified the confusion created by a lack of order.

There has been a very small number of defences offered regarding this matter. In fact, attributing the decline in PISA reading-literacy scores solely to Yutori is oversimplifying matters. A deeper conflict goes to the heart of PISA promoting critical reading and Japan's Kokugo curriculum promoting consensual interpretation. More relaxed education did not lower its cultural aspirations. Judging it solely by test scores of international assessments is highly problematic. Nevertheless, international rankings, regardless of these cultural imbalances, were the overriding determinant in a political sense and Yutori's political career finished quite quickly.

Japan's Yutori experience was a manifestation of the happiness-competition paradox, which emerged when policies pursue student happiness by cutting academic burdens yet left untouched the deep-rooted cultural conviction that competitive success was the only reliable path to security and status. Japan's Yutori reform exemplifies this. It aimed to help children "live more happily," yet it backlashed due to the public fury at PISA score drop. The deepest harm was to students who had little if any chronic well-being and were socially ostracized and stigmatized due to their fears of falling behind. Teachers, caught in poorly communicated reversals, could rarely enact the vision. In the end, reducing burdens without touching the competitive culture only intensified underlying anxieties rather than easing them.

3.2 South Korea's free semester/free year system

The Free Semester System, or Free Year in some schools, started in South Korea in 2016, having been piloted in 2013 [3]. The idea was radical: set aside one semester or year at the middle school level and eliminate all mid-term and final exams and, along with that, lessen the academic hours in order to implement exploratory activities, such as career and interest exploration, arts, sports, project-based learning, and clubs. Students get, at least for a short time, some breathing room from the exam treadmill and begin to step away from the educational grind to learn about themselves and what really matters to them.

The empirical research on the impact of the program on the overall happiness of the participants is complex. Park followed several schools in Daegu and reported significant

improvements in the social aspect of the participants with an increase in the number of close friends that they had and an increase in the student engagement in classroom discussions and group works [6]. However, Park did not report any significant improvements on the creativity metrics (remote-associates tests) and well-being (UNICEF life-satisfaction index) indicators. Moreover, Shin confirmed that students of high academic proficiencies had severe and significant exam anxiety during the course of the free semester and exam anxiety fully and almost completely rebounded in the term that followed [7]. Overall, there is the presence of short term bursts of happiness.

Parents' worst fear, namely, a sharp drop in academic performance, did not actually materialise. Jung et al. used inverse-probability weighting to compare pilot and non-pilot schools in Seoul and overall, no significant difference in achievement was found [8]. Choi and Eom, analysing a 2013 longitudinal cohort with difference-in-differences and quantile regression, went further: the programme actually improved maths scores and career maturity, with the strongest lift coming for students who started in the lower and middle ranges [9]. In effect, it raised the floor. These results eased some societal panic about "burden reduction equals regression," though they also highlighted uneven impact. High performers barely noticed any academic jolt, while lower performers sometimes regained confidence.

The most glaring side-effects surfaced in parental satisfaction and private-tutoring spending. Jung, using Gyeonggi panel data and double-difference estimation, showed that parental satisfaction with schools dropped significantly, especially among economically disadvantaged families who feared their children would "fall behind after a semester of play [3]." The hagwon market polarised. Overall hagwon hours and costs declined in high-implementation regions, but only for middle- and low-achieving students [10]. Wealthier families' apprehension that "others are still tutoring," actually increased spending [6]. The arms race the programme hoped to dismantle simply intensified in certain strata.

Students themselves speak in conflicted voices. Jung interviewed seven middle-schoolers who had lived through the free semester [11]. They loved the sudden taste of autonomy, the absence of exams, the freedom to choose activities, the chance to speak up. Yet once the regular term resumed, traditional test culture slammed back. Many felt yanked between two worlds and ended up more disillusioned than before, wondering why a glimpse of another life had to be snatched away.

At the discourse level, ambiguity reigns. "Happiness" became a floating signifier in Korean policy rhetoric. Progressive administrations packaged it as nurturing self-realising neoliberal subjects. Nationalist moments recast it as human-capital reserves for global competitiveness. The Free Semester thus carried contradictory dreams: be your happy self but never lose the race. Such tension necessitated a balancing act of being daring and timorous.

In short, initial improvements by the Free Semester were seen with less anxious feelings about exams, more social interactions and improvements in the grades of some academically weaker students. Then came the deterioration of parental satisfaction and increased spending on hagwons prioritizing wealth inequity. One semester of freedom could not transform the zero-sum system. Still, Korea coped with the paradox and kept the revision system, unlike Japan's swift burial of Yutori.

3.3 China's double reduction policy (DRP)

In July 2021, China's DRP began with the objective of monitoring off-campus tutoring establishments, as well as monitoring the amount of homework given during compulsory education. Yet, over four years later, parents are still trading anxious tips on WeChat chat groups, and underground tutoring classes are once again resurfacing.

Initially, the changes meet the original policy's expectations. A longitudinal study from Beijing in first-difference estimation relations to the DRP demonstrates a clear increase in well-being from less homework and the implementation of intra-school after-school programs [1]. There was less pressure, longer sleep, and more time allocated to extracurricular activities. Students expressed more social behaviours, more time management skills leading to a decrease in anxiety. However, the low SES (Socio-Economic Status) students were found to have a decline in academic performance after DRP, which reflects inequality in educational resources access [1].

The social intricacies of rivalry and joy are multiplied by parents. Luo et al. studied middle-class WeChat groups and noted the absence of elite-track aspirations abandonment [12]. Some individuals attempted to fill in informational voids to access clandestine tutoring. Others believed in "if everyone else stops, I'll just keep going." Some parents send their kids to "interest" classes, which are believed to covertly serve exam purposes. The anxiety shifted rather than decreased. There is, albeit a small, decrease of the after-school burden for working-class children, but exercise books still piled up. Transitioning to premium "non-academic" training for higher tiers was effortless. Emotional distress, if anything, increased rather than subsided.

The narrative for the educators is more complex, as the advertisement of the policy was supposed to allow for more active classrooms; however, in reality, that was not the case. Yiwen et al., through survey, found that teachers commonly reported that extended after-school services lengthened their working hours, and with private tutoring banned, much of the coaching shifted into schools, while opportunities for professional development remained limited [13]. Some teachers were supportive of the policy in theory but felt weighed down by insufficient resources and high regulatory demands. A more comprehensive systematic review has concluded that the workloads of teachers have also increased greatly, which out of necessity has driven some to take on more illicit side jobs to satisfy income requirements [14]. One has to wonder, is this policy a solution to the problems that exist, or is it a problem on its own?

Meanwhile, equity becomes an impending issue. While the policy sought to reduce the equity gap, and more specifically the urban/rural divide, the policy has instead widened the inequities that exist in the rural setting. The ban on tutoring levelled the spending gaps for poorer parents, but in rural areas, where children already faced extreme difficulties, gaps in after-school activities forced children to struggle in even more significant ways. Children of low-income families had free time but were also deprived of any supportive learning.

Moreover, the phenomenon of shadow education continues to grow. Yang et al., describe how, in five cities, legislation aimed at closing educational establishments only made tutors disguise themselves as tutors of "non-academic" courses which made them exempt from the legislation [15]. This shows a mixture of the strengths of the neoliberal education system and the weaknesses of educational service providers of tutoring. The demand sustained and prolonged the offering of covert tutoring services, which challenges DRP's long term effects.

In short, DRP has produced initial improvements in student mental health and sleep but has also increased teacher burden and increased the vulnerability of lower SES families. Overt tutoring has stopped, but competition has reemerged through expensive, clandestine suppliers that further widen the inequality gap. While Japan has fully reversed Yutori, and Korea has enacted a limited one-semester experiment, China has taken the approach of extreme and forceful regulatory cuts to education. All three have succumbed to the same happiness versus competition paradox, however.

4 Critical discussion of results

4.1 Comparative discussion of happiness policies' effects

Since 2000, the happiness-oriented burden-reduction reforms launched across East Asia have differed sharply in design yet converged on one striking outcome where student subjective well-being is concerned. Gains remain limited, fragile, and short-lived. Japan has shown few positive results with the Yutori Education policy; bullying, depression, and hikikomori still exist [4]. Korea's Free Semester policy did reduce exam anxiety and increased sociability; however, the positive effects were short-term, and life satisfaction did not increase. China's Double Reduction policy decreased the rates of depression and anxiety that were mainly present in the pre-phase periods, but low-SES students paid for their happy emotions by losing grades due to the absence of tutoring [1]. In these three countries, the unidimensional shallow improvements to subjective well-being were not a real improvement but a momentary shallow gasp of air burst. They returned to the same place with high anxieties; all the improvements were lost, and the high levels of anxiety returned.

Unintended consequences followed a similar pattern. Among the threats to the policies' future, the opponents' fear of academic downturn is the most prominent, and that fear is what drives the opposition and the reversal of the policies. Japan was one of the first countries to reverse its Yutori Policy, citing PISA rankings [5]. While Korea was able to avoid a pedagogical implosion, parental dissatisfaction was rampant, as the Free Semester was seen as a potential educational neglect [3]. Educational gaps also existed in China, as low-SES children were the victims of many educational policies like DRP [1]. All countries had a significant rise in shadow education. In Japan, there was an increase in demand for Juku [2]. Korean families also had an increase in demand for hagwon [10]. China had an underground, "non-academic" education system as well [15]. Large expenditures and anxious parents were a continual result of educational reforms.

Stakeholders also understand the happiness-competition trade-off differently. Japanese families seem more resistant towards the changes. They believed that any attainment of happiness was predicated on the attainment of academic excellence. At the time, any relaxation of such policies was considered 'lax today, doomed tomorrow,' and such policies were ultimately doomed to total relaxation. Korean parents were situated somewhere in the middle. They tolerated a brief holiday from the pressure relaxation but resumed the arms race as soon as the Free Semester ended, even from wealthy families escalating spending, tacitly accepting the proposition that happiness is only purchasable. Middle-class Chinese parents appear to comply but subvert such compliance through informational arbitrage, delayed overt competition, and shifting to high-priced enrichment programmes, routing regulatory gaps towards capital accumulation [12]. There was no parent group in any of the three countries who believed that happiness stood free from the arms race of competition. The only difference was the style of such resistance: Japan revolting, Korea pausing grudgingly, and China playing a covert game of chess.

All three cases, success or failure, lie at the intersection of two immovable structural pillars. The first was the unchanged, rigid filtering function of the university entrance exams. The second was the collective imagination of East Asia that educational attainment equals social mobility. Locked within these constraints, a unilateral burden reduction tends to fall into a prisoner's dilemma. As long as there is someone, somewhere, still secretly tutoring, no one dares to stop. And as long as the payoff structure of the competition remains unchanged, parents are unlikely to prioritise their child's happiness over grades. Japan was the first, and the fastest to abandon it, taking the most cautionary of tales. Korea mitigated political risk by limiting the experiment to a single semester, and thus, very marginally, preserved organisational life. China wielded the strongest administrative blade to cut the tutoring capital chain, and was met, though, with the richest repertoire of evasion tactics. Together, they reveal an unambiguous and brutal regularity: under the East Asia examination and culture, happiness-oriented reforms that leave the exam system, and the very definition of success,

untouched, tend to provide short-lived, localised and class-skewed happiness adjacencies. Competitive anxiety will always come back, and it will be stealthier, more costly and more inequitable than ever. This is possibly the paradox of East Asian ‘happy education’: the more we strive to ensure children’s happiness, the more evident it is that happiness has already been usurped by the wheels of competition.

4.2 Implications for double reduction policy in China

After four years of the DRP in China, one can note positive short-term outcomes, such as more time for sleep, lower levels of depression and anxiety, and reduced spending by families [1]. However, the sudden pivot from Yutori in Japan, and the Free Semester in South Korea, all seem to tell the same story. Without addressing the inner mechanisms of the competitive culture and the selection system, every reform, no matter how aimed at ‘happiness’, will, in the end, be paradoxically dominated by anxiety. For China, the road ahead will be longer, and more changes will need to be made in numerous areas.

Firstly, policymakers should address the academic decline low-SES students face due to the absence of tutoring. The ban on off-campus tutoring improved overall well-being, yet it led to poorer academic performance among low-SES students [1]. The problem is even worse in rural, disadvantaged locations [14]. One possible solution is to allocate more funding to rural and low-performing schools, train after-school programme staff, create a centralised repository of quality online courses, and possibly even implement education vouchers for low-income families. Only then will one be able to translate the concept of “burden reduction without sacrificing fairness” into actual practice.

Second, the previously unrecognised increase in the volume of work expected of teachers is the primary reason for the unsustainable nature of the system. Numerous provincial studies confirm that the introduction of after-school programmes, along with the use of varied assessment techniques, is leading to the extension of teachers’ working hours without significant improvement to their well-being. A valuable insight gained from the collapse of Yutori was the absence of support for teachers [5]. If China is unable to create positions for after-school programme staffing, increase pay, and reassign non-service hours so that they are no longer counted towards teachers’ regular performance metrics, it is likely that teachers will become highly uncooperative.

Third, shadow education becomes a resilient market. Tutor interviews reveal high-priced private sessions, disguised online classes, and “non-subject” programmes that are academic in all but name [15]. During the Free Semester period, affluent Korean families simultaneously expanded their investment into hagwon [10]. During Japan’s Yutori period, Juku education businesses also thrived [2]. Universal bans achieve little, if anything. The future approach needs to move from pure obstruction to constructive coexistence. This means providing poorly regulated community educational programmes in the non-profit sphere, while sufficiently improving the quality of public schooling, such that the grey market is eradicated.

Lastly, and hardest of all, is the need to initiate true system reform on examination and evaluation. The university entrance examination, which highlights only score has never changed, and this is the root of the problem. If “one point decides your destiny” prevails, neither parents, nor their children, will believe that true happiness exists outside the attainment of overly dominant grades. The current comprehensive evaluation approach is ceremonial in nature. Change that needs to occur is the real expansion of the Strong Base Plan (SBP), and more autonomy to universities in terms of student recruitment. Only then can the tyranny of total score dissolve sufficiently to allow parents and their children, the freedom to simply play. And sleep. And, without the burden of guilt, truly do nothing.

Ultimately, DRP's fate will not be determined by the last four years, but by the next ten years. Japan spent twenty years demonstrating the danger of unilateral cuts. Korea has spent over ten years now explaining the limits of partial experiments. China now possesses the strongest executive power but also has the most complicated class anxieties. If China manages equitable compensation, teacher release, and evaluation reforms, while also engaging her public in meaningful dialogue on what "success" could and should entail, the policy may finally shed East Asia's burden reduction curse. Children may finally gain a childhood that has not been held hostage by test scores.

5 Conclusion

Two decades of East Asian burden-reduction experiments have delivered a conclusion that feels almost cruel. As long as the unyielding filtering of university entrance exams, combined with the widespread view of educational attainment as the primary means for social advancement, exists, we can expect no unilateral attempts at the relief of academic burdens to endure. Japan experienced this with a single drastic policy reversal, stemming from public dissatisfaction and declining educational attainment. Korea purchased institutional survival by limiting burden relief to a single semester, but this still did not prevent affluent families from speeding up the tutoring system. China recorded the biggest administrative attempt to end the capital flow from academic tutoring, only to reveal a hidden market, reinforced social divides, and inventive parents. The result of all this anxiety was simply to be more expensive and to be more hidden.

The same pattern could be seen with happiness gains, which were all very fleeting. Initially, all students reported less pressure and more sleep, but this relief simply evaporated in the same way as high-stakes competition. None of this certainly does not make the effort a failure, as it highlights and adds to the conclusion gained from the stories of all three countries. The conclusion being that progress on the issue of academic burden is not a simple issue of reforming a single isolated policy. The resolution of the issue of academic burden should involve a complete restructuring of the entire educational system.

China now occupies the most priceless window that any of the three countries have ever enjoyed. It is time to move resources to low-SES families, create adequate staffing and compensation for after-school programmes, widen wholesale access to universities, and initiate a countrywide review of what "success" means. Only then will the "healthy, happy growth" slogan be something children can actually experience. Otherwise, DRP risks a repeat of Yutori: short-lived applause followed by deeper involution and even more hidden inequality.

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