

Who We Are?

Who we are : Loss of individuality through others

One spring afternoon on the last Saturday of April 2001, my neighborhood childhood friend committed suicide. As it was midterm exam period for most schools, I unfortunately could not be with him. We (all his classmates include I) were filled with regret that we weren't able to help him even though we silently knew what had driven him to jump off a fifteen-storey apartment with just a letter left for his parents.

Ten years later, my circle of childhood friends keep in touch through internet, phone calls, text messages and occasionally meeting up. The Ten years is an entire lifetime of changes. Once students who wore the same uniform, had same hair style, similar backpacks, went to school at same time, studied in one class with same book under the same schedule for the same reasons, we were now living our own lives. We were no longer the mass-produced factory products we used to be ten years ago.

There is a term called helicopter parents in Korea. It refers to parents whose lives revolve around their children. Although their intentions might be to provide the best they can for their children, they might not be aware that such intentions are actually hurting their children. In Korea, most parents desire for their children to study hard and well, be accepted into a good university, choose a good major (ones that can promise high-salaried position with integrity, such as doctors, lawyers, professors, etc), have good jobs, meet a good partner, have children and have a happy life. Thus, parents pour all their interest and effort into their children's studies from an early age.

Schools also strive to send their students to a good university (high-ranking university) to a good major (one that promises employment, for example Departments of Medicine, Dentistry, Education, Business, Law and Engineering). Parents and schools think that such students can be their pride.

Having spent our school days under such expectations of parents and education system, we find ourselves as adults all of a sudden, with each one of us living our own lives, with a career we might or might not desire. Some of us are living the lives our parents wanted, some living what they themselves had wanted, and some living a life even they didn't know whether their parents wanted or they themselves wanted. Some friends, having just recently realized they'd been living the life their parents wanted, quit their jobs and went back to university to find what they want. Suddenly we became curious what our friend might be doing now, if he hadn't ended his life ten years ago. All that remained of him was his hovering existence in a group photograph we took wearing the same school uniform.

My friend, who now only exists in my memory, also lived under helicopter parents. His father was a professor at a prestigious university, and his mother was also very well-educated. His older brother was a model student in the region and in his school. He was the type of son his parents expected and desired, who eventually was accepted into a university and major respected by others. Shadowed under high expectations and under such an overachieving brother, my friend refused to be his parents' dummy and eventually chose to depart from them. All we remember of him is the bald-headed middle school student dressed in a school uniform ten years ago.

However, the people in that group photograph, with same hair style, uniform and shoes, with just different faces, no longer exist. I wonder if we were to take a group photograph now, what it would look like. My work intends to capture ourselves in the past and in the present together in a group photograph.

As far as I can remember, my friend also grew up in his parents' expectations. His father was a professor at a prestigious university, and his brother was a model student. His brother grew up to his parents' expectations, and eventually ended up in a university that's praised by others. The expectations and interest people placed on my friend's brother passed down on him. Now, 10 years since then, Korean society has opened up a bit more, and parents seem to be more willing to support their children in what they want to be. But at the time, all that most of parents wanted was for their children to exceed in academics. My friend was a bright student, but fell short of his parents' expectations and was always compared with his brother. Although my friend had many friends and had many things he did well besides studying, his parents just wanted to him to study well, go to a good university and have a good job, rather than respecting his uniqueness and helping him find the right path for himself.

Studying was the key to all success in my parents' generation. They believed that exceeding in school guaranteed a successful future regardless of the social status or wealth of the family. Such convention still prevails today. My friend refused to be his parents' dummy, and decided to end his own life. All I remember of him now is the boy in school uniform with shaved head 10 years ago.

Through this work, I wanted to focus on the idea of predominant way of thinking that's passed down from generations to generations, and also capture the generation today that's much more open than generations before. This work juxtaposes the school uniform from my parents' generation, and the position of hands that signify the only freedom students have in the classroom. Interesting note about school uniforms in Korea is that although uniforms today have changed and modernized, some schools still use uniforms from my parents' days. I also wore old-fashioned uniform. The school uniform I use in my work is the old-fashioned uniform that's the most representative and dominant style of uniforms in Korea.

Every day, over 40 students gather in a classroom, wearing the same uniform looking at the blackboard in front of them. At a glance, they look like the same student. Sitting for over 10 hours in the class room filled with rules and restrictions, the students find their own sense of freedom. While their bodies sit in the desk and face the black board, their hands are free to send and receive messages with each other, and pass around notes. They quietly put their hands in the desk to take out snacks, and even read comic books under the desk. Within the uniformity, the 40 students release their sense of individuality through their hands. In this work, I made 20 male school uniforms and 20 female school uniforms. All uniforms look the same, but instead of the labels, I embroidered the name of my classmates on each one of the uniforms. Portraying the hands of freedom moving busily under the desks, the 40 pairs of hands underneath the uniforms express different gestures. The juxtaposition of the uniforms and the hands signify the juxtaposition of fixed ideas in my parents' generation and individuality in my generation.