For one high school student in South Korea, the top priority includes admission to a good university—and a new cell phone.

For Jeong Hye Jin, 15, the long, sweltering summer wasn’t much different from the school year. She commuted to her high school by day and to private classes in the evening. Summer school was mandatory, not for students who had fallen behind, but for those who, as she put it, “have a chance of getting into good universities.” Not attending was never an option for Jin, who ranks 17th out of 430 students in the 10th grade at Young Hoon High School, in a working-class neighborhood in Seoul, South Korea’s capital.

A desktop calendar in her bedroom states in her bold, clear handwriting: “Korea University Department of English Language Education. Class 2008.” (In Korea, the year you enter college is your class year.) But if getting into what is considered the country’s third-best university is her long-term ambition, there is also a goal that is closer at hand: getting a new cell phone.

TEXT-MESSAGE WHIZ

“I’ve been asking for a new phone forever—since last year!” Hye Jin says. Good grades earned her mother’s promise to buy her a new model.

Hye Jin, who has had a cell phone since the seventh grade, sends text messages without even glancing at the keypad. In class, she looks straight ahead, holding a pen in her right hand, punching away messages with the left on her phone under her desk.

A new phone, a good university (goals shared, no doubt, with an equal degree of burning intensity by her peers) set the rhythm of Hye Jin’s summer. In a country where every teenager’s existence seems centered on entering a top university—which can determine one’s future in South Korea much more than in the United States—such conformity is the norm.

AN ERA OF CHANGE

Hye Jin’s is a generation coming of age in a fast-changing society. She has only the slightest knowledge of the military governments that ruled South Korea until the 1980s. In the years since, and especially since the financial crisis and deepening democratization of the 1990s, South Korea has transformed itself into the world’s most-wired society and the leading pop-culture exporter to the rest of Asia.

Longstanding assumptions about women’s roles, marriage, and South Korea’s relations with North Korea and the U.S. have been up-ended in half of Hye Jin’s lifetime. The dizzying changes have created new possibilities, but they have also made Hye Jin’s mother worry whether her daughter is tough enough for a radically different world.
Korea, the top priorities—and a new cell phone

The principal of Hye Jin's high school says her generation demands more freedom—as evidenced by its fight to choose its hairstyles, which are restricted by most schools. Young Hoon High School now allows students to select some of their summer-school teachers; and this school, like others, no longer inculcates the fierce anti-Communist attitude that was standard until a few years ago.

As for Hye Jin, she thinks North Korea is a "poor country," not a "bad country." Like most South Koreans of her generation, though, she is against the peninsula's reunification as too heavy a financial burden on the South. (See "Korea: And Then There Were Two," p. 16.)

"We'll become poor," she says.

PARENTAL PRESSURE

Hye Jin's mother, Lee Yang Ja, 40, recently retired from her job as a bank teller; her father, Jeong Byeong Sam, 43, is a union organizer at the same bank where her mother worked. Hye Jin also has a 12-year-old sister, Yu Jeong. Her family lives in a 25-story high-rise that is part of a housing complex. Private classes for both girls cost the family about $1,200 a month—a hefty sum that dissuades many South Koreans from having more than one or two children.

"I invest in my kids and expect to see returns reflected in good grades," says Hye Jin's mother. "I'm not satisfied. I don't think she's trying her best."

Hye Jin returns home from her evening classes around 11 p.m. Then, she watches television or updates her blog on the Cyworld site, where about a quarter of South Koreans have blogs. Going to sleep around midnight, she awakens at 6 a.m.

Hye Jin's father sees possibilities for his daughters in a society where women's standing has risen considerably. A change in the centuries-old family-registry system in the next two years will even allow women to become the legal heads of households.

"This is the era of women," he says.

Hye Jin, who wants to become an English teacher, is aware that opportunities will be greater for her than they were for her mother. "When we start working," she says, "there will be fewer instances of men asking women to pour tea or calling you 'Miss so-and-so.'"

But work is at least six years away. More pressing is Hye Jin's new phone. She can still type without glancing.

"Since the keypad is the same," her first text message went, punctuated by semicolon emoticons expressing effusiveness and embarrassment, "I can write the same way;"

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