

Jajangmyeon price soars 60 times over 5 decades

The price for a bowl of jajangmyeon, or noodles in black bean sauce, has soared more than 60 times to 6,361 won (\$5) over the past five decades, according to market tracker Korea Price Information.

A bowl of jajangmyeon was 100 won in 1970 when the KPI began its first survey, but it had risen to around 2,500 won in 2000.

Over the last five years alone, the price has jumped 26.9 percent largely due to growing ingredient prices.

The prices of flour, cooking oil, onions and cucumbers used in jajangmyeon rose 46.9 percent, 33.2 percent, 166.7 percent and 275 percent, respectively, from 2018.



Average price of a bowl of Jajangmyeon

(Unit: won)

Source: Korea Price Information

1970	100
1990	1,073
1995	2,176
2003	3,083
2011	4,220
2018	5,011
2023	6,361

Main ingredient price growth rate

(% up from 2018)

Cucumber	275
Onion	166.7
Cooking oil	33.2
Flour	46.9

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In trilingual Hong Kong, Korean is new kid on the block

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learners in 2017 based on enrollment figures at universities and private academies.

Korean is offered at six of the city's eight universities, three community colleges, some 20-30 private academies and 20 secondary schools, according to the consulate. At secondary schools, most Korean lessons are taught as extracurricular classes, but some have gone a step further to include the language in their curriculums as a mandatory elective.

The introduction of Korean into the public school curriculum, although still at a fledgling stage, is significant and a testament to its popularity, experts say.

While foreign language subjects are common at international schools, whose number of students account for some 6 percent of the student population, they still play a minor role in the public school curriculum that already has to ensure students speak the city's three official languages.

Under Hong Kong's trilingual and biliterate language education policy, students are expected to be proficient in writing Chinese and English, and to be able to communicate in Cantonese, English and Mandarin.

Professor David Li Chor-shing, an expert in Hong Kong's language education policy, said the launching of Korean classes in public schools shows that school management recognizes that many young people are motivated to learn Korean, and that it could help students with



Students complete an exercise in Korean class at Mu Kuang English School in Hong Kong on March 21. Naomi Ng/The Korea Herald

their future career prospects.

It's clear schools want to give students "an edge in terms of extending their additional language profile to yet another popular language," said Li, who heads the Hong Kong Polytechnic University's Department of Chinese and Bilingual Studies.

That is the case at Man Kiu Association Primary School, an elementary school fully funded by the government but that has more autonomy in designing the curriculum compared to government schools. From September 2022 onward, students in third to sixth grade can choose to study either Korean or French as a mandatory foreign language. Around half in those cohorts, or 200, opted for Korean.

"We want students in the first and second grades to form a strong foundation with their Cantonese and English before they pick up a foreign language, which is a lot easier to master the younger you are," school principal Ivy Yip Shuk-ting said. "Our vision is to broaden students' international horizons," she said, adding that foreign language learning should also be accessible to more underprivileged communities, and not only for those who can afford to attend international schools.

More than a hobby

Teachers say Korean has gained traction in public schools as young



Students show off their love of Korean culture at Mu Kuang English School in Hong Kong on March 21. Naomi Ng/The Korea Herald

people see learning Korean as more than just a hobby.

Lai, who has taught Korean for over a decade, said she has seen a shift in the past two to three years in the reasons young people want to learn the language.

"It used to be K-pop fans wanting to learn how to write 'Oppa, I love you' in letters to their idols," Lai said. "But now, aside from that, it's also students seeing Korea as a study destination or wanting to work there."

The number of Hong Kong candidates sitting for the Test of Proficiency in Korean, which non-native speakers use to apply for universities or jobs in Korea, was 1,757 last year, according to official data. The figure

fluctuated during the COVID-19 pandemic because several rounds of tests had to be canceled. In 2018, there were 2,650 there taking the test.

The government has also taken notice of the steady growth in serious learners. The popularity of Korean has surged so much that the city last year announced it would include Korean as one of the foreign languages in its university entrance examination from 2025. Students can submit scores from the TOPIK to apply for universities in Hong Kong or abroad.

In Korea, foreign students need to score at least a level 3 proficiency — the highest is level 6 — to be eligible for university entry.

After the government's announce-

ment on the inclusion of Korean in the entrance exam, United Christian College, a government-subsidized middle and high school, started offering Korean prep classes in September 2022 for students planning to take the TOPIK.

Sixteen-year-old Bella Li Fu-yuan will be among that first batch of students to apply to university with her TOPIK scores.

"I chose to study Korean because I'm considering studying and living in Korea," said Bella, a student at United Christian College.

Although she has never been to Korea, she can see herself in a few years hanging out on a college campus in Korea and speaking to friends in Korean.

"Studying in Hong Kong is so stressful. In Korea, I can study and see my favorite K-pop stars at the same time. It seems like I would be happier there," Bella said.

Simon Lau Chun-wah, the principal at United Christian College, said the focus is not so much about getting into university.

"At the end of the day, they will speak an additional language and this skill belongs entirely to them," he said.

For other Korean learners, the goal is even simpler.

"I want to be fluent in Korean so there are no barriers to communicating with Koreans," said Mu Kuang student Janice Law Yau-hung, 15.

"If I can communicate with no barriers, I guess it'll seem like I have another place to call home."

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Korean language students in US barracks

Annual Korean speech contest for US soldiers stationed in S. Korea becomes a time-honored tradition

By Choi Jae-hee

Sgt. 1st Class Joseph P. Khamvongsa arrived here in 2018 to be part of the US military forces stationed in South Korea.

Though not necessary for his job, he soon started taking Korean classes out of a desire to better understand the country he was helping to protect.

"I can't forget the first time I had the combo of jokbal (pig's trotters) and soju with my Korean roommate, whom I met while serving at the ex-US military base site in Uijeongbu in the same year," Khamvongsa told The Korea Herald.

"That's when I decided to learn the Korean language to get to know



Sgt. 1st Class Joseph P. Khamvongsa poses for a photo during an interview with The Korea Herald on Jan. 17, at the US military base Camp Humphreys in Pyeongtaek, Gyeonggi Province. Choi Jae-hee/The Korea Herald

more about Korea."

Five years later, after hundreds of hours of online and offline classes, the American sergeant says he now understands almost 90 percent of what his native Korean friends are saying, though some Korean honorific terms and Chinese characters

remain a challenge. "I don't feel that I am sufficiently fluent in Korean, but I can speak Korean enough to have daily conversations with Korean friends," he said, referring to himself as an intermediate Korean learner.

Host country's language, culture

There are about 28,500 American soldiers stationed in South Korea.

Like Khamvongsa, some of them have started studying the local language. Most take courses offered by local universities, while some opt for online lectures.

While there is no official language program offered by the bases, some provincial governments in South Korea, where US bases are located, do provide services for Korean language learners.

Since 2007, Gyeonggi Province has run Korean language classes on a yearly basis for US soldiers and their families with the goal of enhancing their understanding of Korea and to prevent possible conflict with the local community caused by language barriers.

The province is home to Camp

Humphreys, which is the largest US military base outside of the US.

Last year, nearly 300 American servicemen stationed in Gyeonggi Province participated in the year-round Korean education program, which offers both language lessons and cultural experiences, including field trips to traditional markets, trying on Korean traditional attire and cooking Korean dishes.

Annual speech contest

The annual speech contest is an important event for these uniformed learners of Korean.

The event has been held for over 20 years, jointly organized by the SOFA (Status of Forces Agreement) Support Center under South Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the 8th Army ROKA Support Group.

The competition is open to any US soldier assigned to the 8th Army who does not specialize in Korean and who is not a Korean-American.

The latest installment of the contest, held on Sept. 22, had 27 entries in the preliminary round. Khamvongsa was one of the eight finalists. His three-minute speech was about memorable food experiences in Korea.



Participants of a Korean language class, organized by the Gyeonggi provincial government for US troops stationed in Gyeonggi Province, pose for photos in October 2022. Gyeonggi provincial government

Other contestants talked about various Korean topics, including their first impression of the country, their feelings about the Korean military forces and the importance of the alliance between Seoul and Washington.

The symbolic slogan of the Korea-US alliance, "Katchi Kaphshida," meaning we go together, was a popular catchphrase recited by many contestants.

Khamvongsa, who is married to a Korean and is considering retiring here, said he was impressed by some of the contestants who were on detached duty in Korea. "Even though they stay here for less than a year,

they (are) eager to learn the Korean language."

"I think it's beneficial for American soldiers here to learn the Korean language, which is a window into Korean culture. It is a great way of showing respect to the locals we serve and (leaving) a good impression on this country," he added.

Another participant in last year's speech contest, who wished to remain anonymous, said "I used to have a difficult time communicating with Korean soldiers and employees at the military base, but now I can speak simple words and phrases in Korean."

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