

## *Seishun*

In the silent and gloomy room, all I could hear was the sound of pencils. I was sweating in the stuffy atmosphere. No one complained. They just stared at their textbooks. The long frustrating lesson made me regret coming to this cram school during my stay in Korea. I finally heard someone's voice and turned around. The boy behind me was being yelled at by our teacher. He had gotten a math question wrong. I was nervous about making a mistake myself after that. When the class was finally over, I couldn't help rushing past the other students to get out first. I remembered what had brought me to such a harsh place, feeling an acute headache like I had never experienced.

Before going to Korea, I was a normal Japanese student. My mother is Korean, but we have lived in Japan since I was three. One day, there was a call from my grandmother in Korea and she asked us to go back to our hometown for a month. We hadn't been there for two years due to COVID-19. I was looking forward to playing basketball with my cousin again, but I didn't want my studies to suffer. I was obsessed with getting good grades at that time. I am usually annoyed by the long flight time to Korea, however this time it passed quickly. After arriving at my grandmother's home, I was reunited with my cousin, his parents, and my grandmother. Later that day I begged my aunt for a chance to experience Korean education and keep up with my studies. To my great disappointment, she said that Korean cram schools are too harsh for me. I knew that Korea's education system is the toughest in the world, and I should have given up then and there, but I was stubborn. My aunt finally said, "All right, I've given in to your enthusiasm." and booked some classes for me. I felt dissatisfaction with her reserving only one day. How ignorant I was!

I was proud after the lessons. I felt as if I had survived a day on a desert island. I got into my uncle's

car, fell asleep immediately and I only noticed we were home when the car stopped. Then, I waited for my cousin to get home from his cram school. After a while he finally came back, but something was wrong. He looked just like a withered plant. He ran into his room without saying anything. I was worried about him, so I entered his room and he burst into tears. "I'm sick of studying!" he screamed. Listening to him, I realized what I had experienced at the cram school was something he suffered every day. Korean students are expected to overcome it. I picked up his dusty basketball, put my arm around his shoulder and took him straight to the park. When we got there, I told him about a Japanese word which doesn't exist in Korean - *seishun*. It relates to being young and making the most of our time; doing things we enjoy when we can. He thought for a moment, then smiled, took the ball and ran. He was like a caged bird released. After that, my cousin changed. He vowed to make the most of his *seishun*. He used to study all day, but now he makes time to enjoy drawing. No matter how much pressure he faces from now on, it won't deprive him of his *seishun*.

My month in Korea was eventually over. I didn't go back to the cram school. During the flight home, I couldn't help crying when I thought about my cousin. I also remembered how obsessed I had been with grades before the trip. My harsh experience and my cousin's tears had changed me. The intensity of the Korean education system and the motivation of the students impressed me at first, but it is very different to Japan. I told my friends about my experience and how lucky we are to be able to enjoy our *seishun* without such terrible pressure. I still believe that studying is important, but so is a balanced life – we are only young once. [697 words]