

The Preliminary Analysis of the Entrance Examination Repeaters in East Asia

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Abstract

In East Asia, where the competition for the university entrance examination is intense, there is an option to repeat the preparation for the next year's examination. This option, to be the examination repeaters (ER) has not been academically focused on. Now that the capacity of universities has been expanded and these countries are facing a low birth rate, the issue of ER doesn't seem to be a serious problem. However, in some countries, the rate of ER is increasing. This study aims to explore the factors that affect the rise and fall of the number of the ER. Through literature research, it examines the history and recent situation of the ER in East Asia: Japan, China, South Korea, and Taiwan. These regions show different trends of the shift in the number of ER. From a comparative perspective, the factors that affect the number of the ER are derived and categorized into educational, social, and personal. Educational factors include the situations of high school, university admission, higher education, private education, and lifelong education. Social factors include the state of the labor market, national consciousness and the societal images created by the media. Personal factors vary, but they can be raised in terms of personal experience, desire, and parents' aspirations. In conclusion, although the educational system has changed to prevent repetition and the low birth rate affects the state of the labor market, the college wage premium still exists, and personal aspirations are increased by the media and decreasing competition.

Keywords: Entrance Examination Repeaters, East Asia, University Admission

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Introduction

In East Asia, if students want to study at universities, they generally have to take entrance examinations and win the competition. It is widely recognized that East Asia is characterized by intense competition in university entrance examinations. For students who don't succeed in their first attempt, there is an option to spend an additional year preparing for the next exam cycle. These students are called the 'examination repeaters (hereafter, ER).'

Traditionally, ER have had a somewhat negative image, as they are seen as those who failed to meet the standard university admission requirements. The existence of ER is often viewed negatively, particularly in Japan, where it is tied to the so-called '*examination hell*.' This refers to the grueling process of cramming for exams, often at preparatory schools. As early as the 1960s, Japanese scholars like Gotoh (1961) called the phenomenon of repeating exams as a very serious problem:

Since the majority of ER are students who failed university entrance examinations, it is natural that ER is closely related to university entrance examinations. ... This simple scheme, in which passing an academic achievement test is all that is required, has created *a very serious problem*. (Gotoh, 1961, p. 90; translation from Japanese; emphasis added)

Ono (2007) also expressed the ER (*ronin*) as an extreme manifestation of examination hell:

"In Japan, the high value placed on college prestige leads to intense competition among high-school students to enter top colleges. These students undergo a phase termed *examination hell* in which they cram to prepare for the annual college entrance examinations. *An extreme manifestation of examination hell is the ronin phenomenon.*" (Ono, 2007, p. 271; emphasis added)

Despite the negative perception, being an ER is not always seen as entirely detrimental. Especially in Japan, Many ER are viewed as the person who spend their time preparing for a second chance as a period of self-improvement. They attend preparatory schools, which often offer more flexibility and focus on entrance exam preparation than traditional high schools. According to Fukaya (2002), preparatory schools can help ER students develop a deeper understanding of their goals and foster important attitudes toward learning. In this sense, the life of ER is not merely a period of failure, but it can be a time of growth and reflection:

In particular, since preparatory schools are designed for entrance examinations and are not restricted in the same way as high school, many ER *acquire an attitude toward learning and deepen their way of life through preparatory schools*. In this sense, the life of ER is not only a negative period, but it is also a time in which many things can be acquired through life at preparatory schools. (Fukaya, 2002, p. 452; translation from Japanese; emphasis added)

Between many countries, there is confusion about the term examination repeaters. In this paper, examination repeaters refer to students who take the option to repeat the preparation for the next year's examination. In addition, there are various types of ER. In terms of their goal, some ER failed all their attempts in the previous year, while others aim for prestigious universities despite having received admission by other universities. In the terms of place where they prepare, some ER attend preparatory schools, but others study independently.

At least, the ER is seen in at least these 4 regions. This paper focuses on these 4 regions. Each region in East Asia has its own term for ER. In Japan, these students are known as *ronin* (浪人), a term originally used to describe masterless *samurai*, symbolizing their unstable status. In South Korea, they are called *chaesusaeng* (재수생; 再修生), while in China they are referred to as *fù dú sheng* (复读生), and in Taiwan as *chóng kǎo sheng* (重考生). While the names differ, the phenomenon of students repeating exams is seen across the region.

ER has been regarded as the symbol of the entrance exam competition. It also has contemporary significance for comparing ERs in East Asian countries. In current East Asia, the capacity of universities has been expanded, and each country is facing a low birth rate, so the competition rate is decreasing. However, the rate of the ER is increasing in some countries. This cannot be simply explained by the perspective of competition.

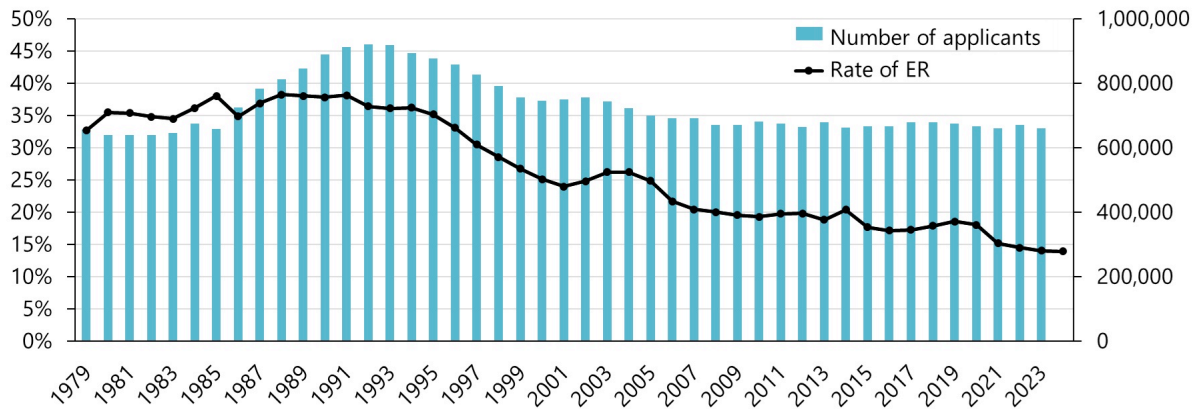
Several studies have examined the ER phenomenon. In Japan, Tsukada (1999) conducted ethnographic research, highlighting how ER students experience a period of self-reflection and reassessment. In South Korea, studies like Choi et al. (1989) and Lee (1980) examine the ER issue from a policy perspective, showing how societal and policy changes influence the number of ER. Regarding ER in China, Yang (2014) pointed out that the factor that creates ER is not only the entrance exam policy but also the dual social structure between urban and rural areas. Although studies have been conducted in these countries, it is necessary to present a framework that combines these findings in order to make comparisons.

This study aims to explore the factors that affect the rise and fall of the number of the ER. The research method is literature research. It examines the history and recent situation of the ER in East Asia, mainly in Japan and South Korea. Data of ER used in this study is based on national entrance examination applicants because of the limits of statistics. This is specifically because some countries don't offer the data of university aspirants and entrants, distinguishing the ER and high school students.

1. ER in Japan

In Japan, the examination repeaters are called *ronin*, and it has been a notable part of the educational landscape for over a century. The ER phenomenon has existed since the 1890s (Sekiguchi, 1956). Students who failed to gain admission would spend an additional year or more preparing for the next round of entrance examinations. In Japan, there are specialized preparatory schools known as *yobiko* that cater specifically to ER. These schools have a long history, with some of the largest and most well-known institutions, continuing to operate today. These schools offer a specialized curriculum designed to help students succeed in their university entrance exams. The development of preparatory schools was brought about by the discrepancy between the capacity of universities and the preferences of students, and the introduction of the Common First-stage Examination (Tsukada, 1999).

As mentioned above, the cause of the ER phenomenon has been regarded as the intensification of the competition in Japan. As Figure 1 shows, the number of applicants is decreasing because of the low birth rate. Along with this trend, the moderating competition rate leads to a decrease in the rate of the ER.



Note. The graph was created from MEXT. (1979-2022). School Basic Survey and National Center for University Entrance Examinations. (1981-2023). National Center for University Entrance Examinations Directory.

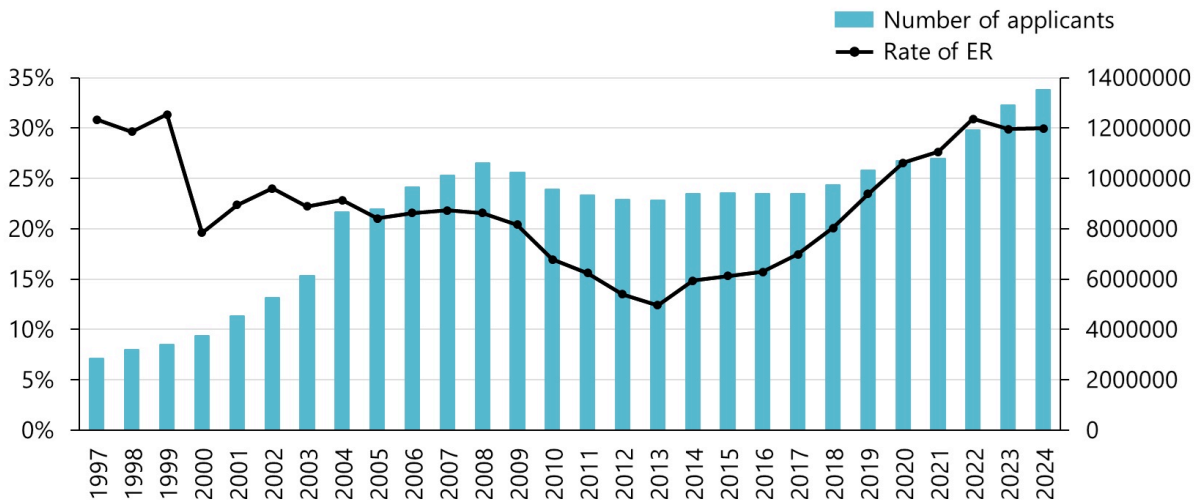
Figure 1: The Rate of Graduates in Applicants of the Center/Common Test

2. ER in China

Next, in China, Examination Repeaters is called *fù dú shēng*. The Gaokao, China's national university entrance examination, is known for being one of the most challenging exams in the world. For many students, failing to achieve a high enough score to enter their desired university leads them to become ER, retaking the exam the following year.

The issue of ER has been unevenly distributed across regions, with rural areas seeing a higher rate of repeaters compared to urban centers. Policy measures have been introduced to address the ER phenomenon (Yang, 2014). In 1999, some local governments in China began banning ER from studying at public high schools. By 2002, the national government also implemented similar measures, encouraging students who had failed to either enter vocational education or pursue employment. However, despite these policy efforts, the number of ER remains high. As Figure 2 shows, the rate of ER is usually changing along with the change in the number of applicants. In 2024, the rate of the ER is estimated to be beyond 30%.

Yang (2014) identified several key factors contributing to this trend. These include the demand for higher education far exceeding the supply, the low acceptance rates at top-tier universities, and the societal emphasis on attending prestigious institutions. Moreover, the job market's increasing competitiveness, along with the growing popularity of private preparatory schools, has perpetuated the need for students to improve their scores and secure a better future.



Note. The numbers of ER for the years 2000 and 2011–2024 represent estimated values based on the numbers of regular senior secondary school (普通高级中学) graduates. The graph was created from the Department of Development & planning, Ministry of Education, the People’s Republic of China. (1997–2010). *Educational Statistics Yearbook of China* and Ministry of Education (http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_sjzl/moe_560/2022/).

Figure 2: The Rate of Graduates in the Previous Year in Applicants of Gaokao

3. ER in South Korea

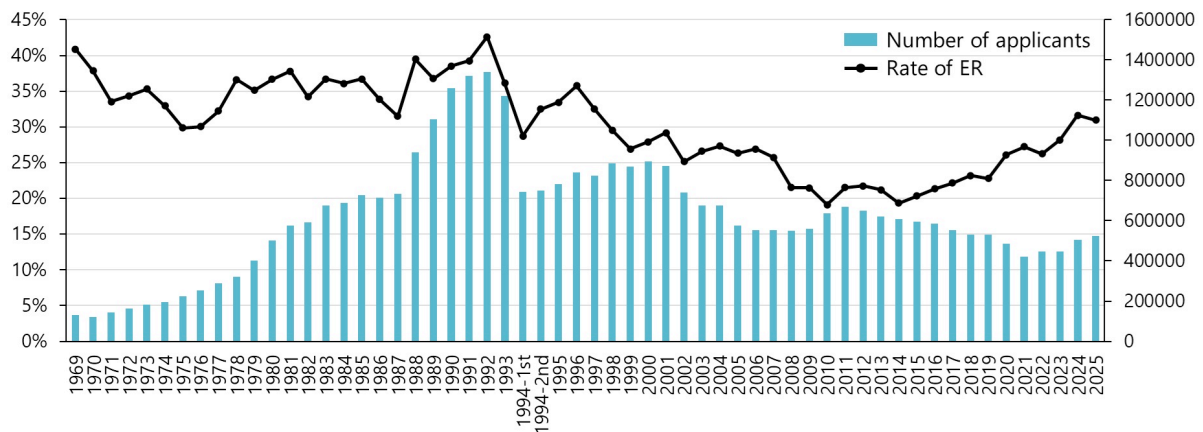
The Examination Repeaters (ER) in South Korea, where they are referred to as *chaesusaeng*, have been repeatedly focused on. This section outlines the policies and significant events that have shaped the phenomenon of ER in South Korea.

In 1974, the high school equalization policy was introduced to reduce competition for high school entrance exams. However, while this policy helped to balance the competition for high school admissions, it had the unintended consequence of intensifying the competition for university entrance. In 1980, the July 30 Education Reform Measures brought significant changes. One of the key reforms was the prohibition of private tutoring for students and students who repeated their entrance exams more than twice faced penalties, such as point deductions on their test scores.

Despite these efforts to curb the phenomenon of ER, the number of repeaters remained high. By 1994, the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT) was introduced. This new exam required students to demonstrate higher-order thinking skills. As a result, parents became increasingly anxious, leading to a rise in private tutoring. Consequently, the number of ER continued to grow as students sought additional help to improve their test scores. Finally, in 1997, the Asian Financial Crisis had a significant impact on South Korea’s education system and labor market. Following the crisis, qualifications in specific fields such as medicine and law became more important than the prestige of the university itself. This led to an increased demand for repeaters in these highly competitive areas.

In the 2000s, screening mainly using the Comprehensive High School Records, not written tests, became popular. This institutional change means examination repetition is less effective because it mainly focuses on written test preparation. However, in the past 10 years, the rate of ER has been increasing.

As Figure 3 shows, the rate of ER decreased in the 1990s and 2000s, and it decreased in the year near the CSAT introduction and financial crisis. Also, it decreased in 2008, when the admission officer screening was introduced. However, the rate of ER has been increasing since the 2010s, despite the number of applicants gradually decreasing.



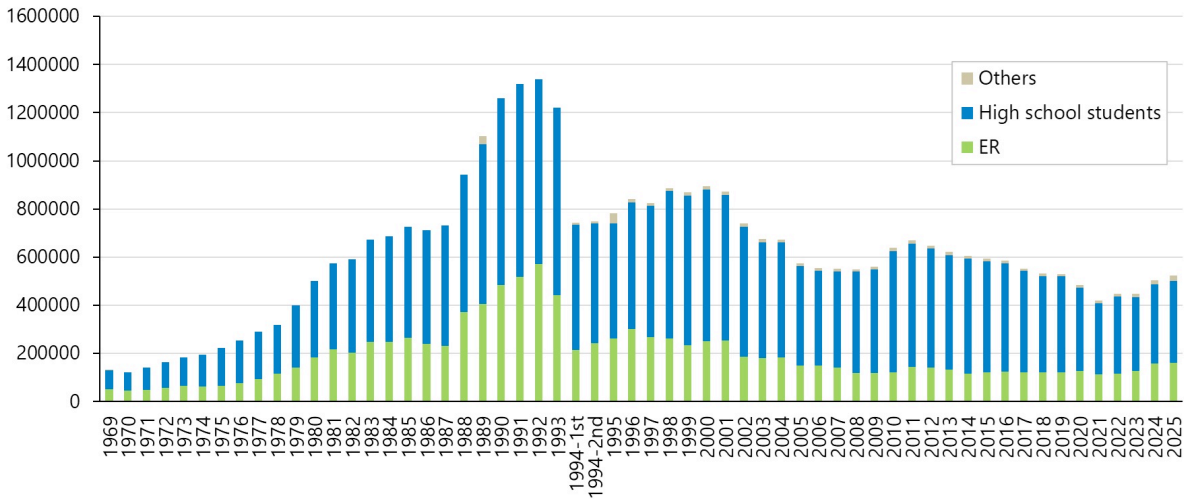
Note. The data is based on the number of takers for the National Entrance Examination, except for 1988-1993 whose data is based on applicants for junior college, teachers' college, and university. The data for 2024 and 2025 is based on the number of applicants, including applicants who don't actually take the CSAT. In 1994, the CSAT was implemented twice. The graph was created from the Ministry of Education, Republic of Korea. (1971-). *Statistical yearbook of education*, and Korea Institute of Curriculum and Evaluation (KICE). (2013). *A 20-Year History of College Scholastic Ability Test*, KICE. (2014-2023). Press release on analysis of the College Scholastic Ability Test performance, and KICE. (2023, 2024). Press release on application results for the College Scholastic Ability Test.

Figure 3: The Rate of Graduates in Test Takers of the Entrance Examination in South Korea

Not only the rate of ER is increasing, but the number of ER is also increasing (see Figure 4). The number of ER in 2025 is reported 161,784, accounting for 31% of all applicants (KICE, 2024). This number is the highest in the last 20 years, and the rate of ER exceeded 30% for the first time since 1999.

In South Korea, previous studies pointed out the factors of ER. Lee (1980) categorized the factors of ER into inner factors and outer factors. The inner factors are the education population, the screening system for university entrance, curriculum; while the outer factors are employment structure, personnel system, structure of national consciousness. Sim (2009) focuses on the inner factors, especially the characteristics of the screening system. Sim also raises the influence of career education in high school as one of the inner factors.

Sim (2011) categorized the factor of ER into social structural, educational, and personal consciousness factors, so it can be seen as adding the personal factors into Lee's study. Social structural factors are academic meritocracy and university hierarchy. Educational factors are the capacity of higher education, studying abroad and graduate school system. Personal consciousness factors are the desire for fulfillment of personal goals and parents' education fever.



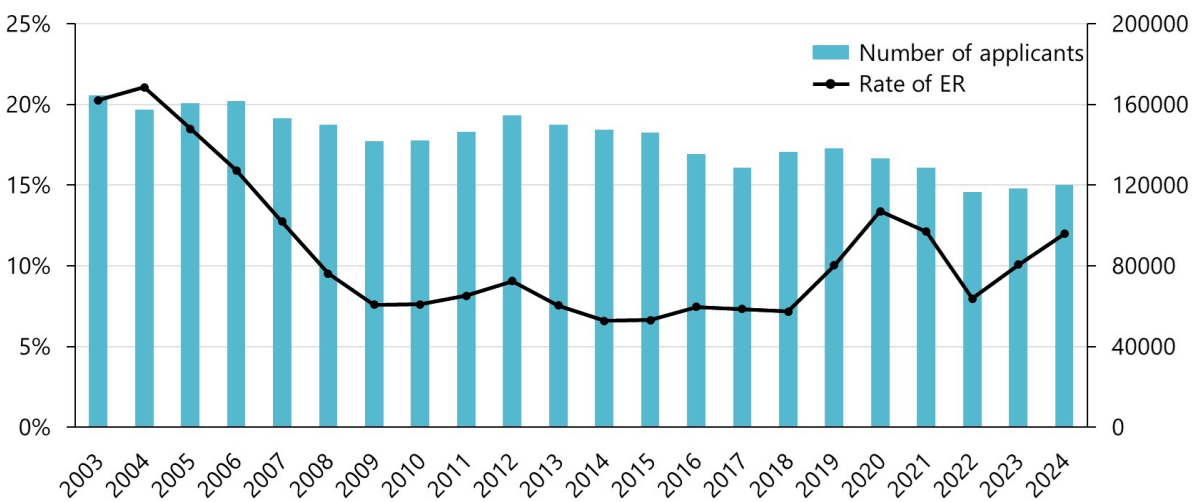
Note. The graph was created from the same resources as Figure 3.

Figure 4: The Number of Graduates in Test Takers of the Entrance Examination in South Korea

4. ER in Taiwan

The ER phenomenon is popular also in Taiwan. At least in the 1970s, the existence of the ER was reported (Hwang, 2008). Compared with the early 1990s, when the rate of ER in all applicants was over 40%, the rate in the recent 20 years is lower.

However, as Figure 5 shows, a similar tendency of change can be seen in the rate of ER in South Korea. In addition, the rate of the ER significantly decreased in 2022, when the reform of the university admission system was carried out. To sum up, similar to South Korea, the number of ER is increasing, while the rate of ER is increasing.



Note. The graph was created from the College Entrance Examination Center. (2003-2024). Statistical Chart of the General Scholastic Ability Test.

<https://www.ceec.edu.tw/xmdoc?xsmsid=0J018604485538810196>

Figure 5: The Rate of Graduates in the Previous Year at the General Scholastic Ability Test

5. Consideration From a Comparative Perspective

In this section compares the situations of the ER between four regions and summarizes the factors that influence the rise and fall of ER in East Asia.

When categorizing the four regions mentioned, distinct trends can be identified (see Table 1): China exhibits an increase in both the number of ER and the total number of applicants. South Korea and Taiwan show an increasing number of ER despite a decline in the total number of applicants. Japan demonstrates a decrease in both the number of ER and the total number of applicants.

Table 1: Current Status of ER in Four Regions

		The number of ER	
		Increasing	Decreasing
The number of applicants	Increasing	China	
	Decreasing	South Korea, Taiwan	Japan

This section presents a framework summarizing the factors that influence the rise and fall of ER in East Asia, based on insights from previous studies (Table 2). These can be broadly categorized into three types: educational, social and personal factors. Educational factors can be categorized in terms of high school, university admission, higher education, private education and lifelong education. Social factors can be categorized in terms of the state of the labor market, national consciousness and the societal images created by the media. Personal factors vary, but they can be raised in terms of personal experience, desire and parents' aspirations.

While this framework is derived from prior research, it is refined to align with the realities of contemporary society. The influence of social media, for instance, cannot be ignored. Social media shapes personal aspirations and perceptions of university rankings, significantly impacting the motivations and decisions of ER students in the 2020s. Furthermore, the expansion of the concept of lifelong education can be another factor that influences the decision to become an ER. This shift reflects a growing emphasis on continuous learning and its impact on individuals' educational pathways.

Table 2: The Factors of ER in East Asia

Factors	Details
Educational Factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High school system, curriculum, career education • University admission system • Capacity of higher education, overseas study, graduate school system • Private education • Lifelong education
Social Factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employment structure, personnel system • Structure of national consciousness • Societal images created by the media
Personal Factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal learning experience, information that students have • Desire for fulfillment of personal goals • Parents' education fever

Conclusion

To conclude, in East Asia, the factors that affect the rise and fall of the number of ER can be categorized into educational, social, and personal factors. Although the educational system has changed to prevent repetition, and the low birth rate affects the state of the labor market, the college wage premium still exists, and personal aspirations are increased by a decreased competition rate. In addition, the effect of social media and lifelong education, which were not so popular when previous studies were conducted, cannot be ignored.

Comparing the ER phenomenon in different countries offers an understanding of the characteristics of each screening system, social structure, and educational culture concerning university admission. Future research will aim to incorporate data from additional countries to expand the scope of this analysis.

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