

Can you imagine you can be a certain age in another country but a completely different age in another? Well this is only possible in South Korea. Apparently, in South Korea you turn 1 as soon as you are born. So their number count will start from one. In other countries, when you are born you usually start with the age 0.

This may seem very peculiar but in Korean culture the fetus is considered to be living. So the time you spend in the womb will add on to your age. Furthermore, you do not turn older on your birthday when you are calculating your age. Everyone turns a year older on New Year's Day on January 1st. So in other words, you do not age according to your birth date but according to your birth year. On New Year's day you would also eat what is called 떡국 which is translated as Rice cake soup. This is served once a year and the purpose of this food is to celebrate aging one more year on New Years.



However, we would still distinguish our age in two ways. We could regularly differentiate the age by the year we are born. However, when we are talking about the age that could have been counted from when we are born would be called 만. So they would say “만으로 21” which means they are 21 if counting as international system but their age would still be 22. I think people do this to determine who is older than in a closer social setting.

The real reason why this culture was very interesting was because currently there is a new law that is being approved in South Korea that they will follow the international age system. In 2022, the South Korean Lawmakers have voted to standardize the way the government counts a person's age. One of the reasons why they decided to utilize this is because of the paperworks when it comes to voting rights. However, there is still no guarantee that the new system will be used in more informal circumstances. The reason is because South Korea is a hierarchical society and that means age is very significant. Age determines the way one person speaks to another and the law cannot compel people to stick to one system in those situations. South Koreans have counted their ages in three different ways for decades. The age that counts up every New Year, the age that determines when you can drink, smoke or serve in the military, and the age that follows the rest of the world for legal and official purposes. There is a debate that it is hard to abandon the traditional way of calculating the age because it is so closely entwined to the Korean language. Some say it is important to acknowledge why we have kept using it despite how confusing it is.

I thought this was a very interesting topic to talk about and wanted to share it with others.