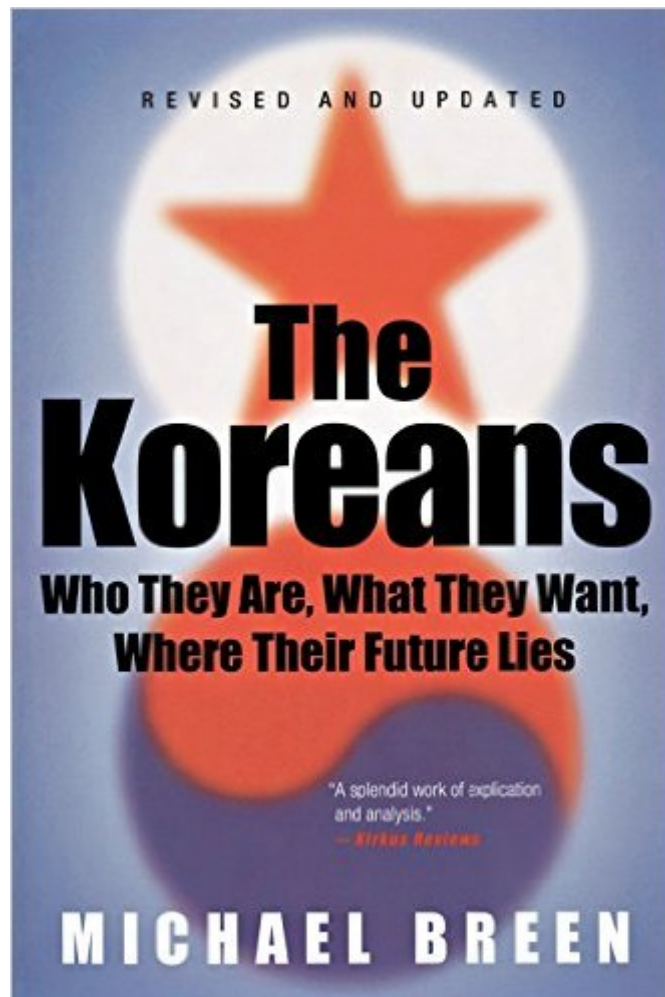


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The Koreans: Who They Are, What They Want, Where Their Future Lies



Synopsis

The rise of South Korea is one of the most unexpected and inspirational developments of the latter part of our century. A few decades ago, the Koreans were an impoverished, agricultural people. In one generation they came out of the fields and into Silicon Valley. In 1997, this powerhouse of a nation reeled and almost collapsed as a result of a weak financial system and heavily indebted conglomerates. The world is now watching to see whether the Koreans will be able to reform and continue their stunning growth. Although Korea has only recently found itself a part of the global stage, it is a country with a rich and complex past. Early history shows that Koreans had a huge influence on ancient Japan, and their historic achievements include being the first culture to use metal movable type for printing books. However, much of their history is less positive; it is marred with political violence, poverty, and war--aspects that would sooner be forgotten by the Koreans, who are trying to focus on their promising future. The fact that Korean history has eluded much of the world is unfortunate, but as Korea becomes more of a global player, understanding and appreciation for this unique nation has become indispensable. In *The Koreans*, Michael Breen provides an in-depth portrait of the country and its people. An early overview of the nature and values of the Korean people provides the background for a more detailed examination of the complex history of the country, in particular its division into the Communist north and pro-Western south. In this absorbing and enlightening account of the Koreans, Michael Breen provides compelling insight into the history and character of this fascinating nation.

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Customer Reviews

I purchase this book a week before I left Seoul, in June of 1999, after 5 years living and working, for

and with the Korean people. As I read the first chapter on the long flight back to my home in Ireland, I immediately knew this book was going to be everything I had hoped it would be and wished I had access to such a book 5 years earlier before I arrived in Seoul. Mr. Breen, like many other authors starts by giving a brief outline of Korea's troubled history and how this history has effected the Korean people. What separates this book from many other books on Korea is Breen's emphasis ,as the title suggests, on how Koreans behave and why they act that way. Breen explains many aspects of modern Korea(really South Korea) culture, which took me 5 years to understand and appreciate. He discusses areas which most foreigners who visit Korea for a short period of time will probably never notice or if they do not fully ubderstand. An example of such an area is the structure of a Korean office and the importance of desk position, chair size etc. etc. Finally, the book is very well written and an easy read. Breen manages to describe Korea and "The Koreans" in a clear and un-pedantic style accessible to everybody. I would recommend this book to anybody who is planning a trip to Korea for either business or pleasure. For any business traveller, I also recommend Mark Cliffords excellent history of Korean industry "The Troubled Tiger".

Mr. Breen's book is filled with insights about the Korean people. I recommend this book without any reservation to anyone interested in Korea and the Koreans, and I think that the two groups who will particularly appreciate this wonderful book are foreigners living in Korea, and expatriate Koreans living abroad. As a Korean who has spent quite a number of years abroad(England and Japan), I have always been weary of the many, many aspects of the Korean psyche and character which must seem strange to foreigners, but never quite been able to put a finger on it. This book not only achieves just that in flying colours with a mixture of vivid anecdotes and scrupulous research, but it also sheds some bright light on WHY we Koreans do what we do - be it "good" or "bad" in the eyes of foreigners. I should note that another gem about this book is that the author has sprinkled it with an abundant portion of English humour("English" here in the sense of "English weather"), and while reading some pages, I was rolling on the floor laughing with stitches. Highly, highly recommended for anyone with an interest in Korea.

I enjoyed reading this book and it had much interesting information about Korean people. But I couldn't help but feel that it was written by an "ethnocentric" (to be polite) British person who was stuck in the 80s and 90s. Much of the commentary is outdated and irrelevant. The author relies on personal anecdotes most of the time and while this might be entertaining and seem relevant to some (mostly English teachers who have lived in Korea for a couple of years), it just doesn't give a

full and complete picture of Koreans. I kept thinking, "Well, let's also hear the Korean side of the story!" Anyhow, you get a sense of negativity and condescension in the writing, leaving a somewhat bitter taste in the mouth. Much of the writing is full of contempt. It could have been a much better book with just 10% more positivity, research, understanding, and cultural sensitivity. Does the book have useful information about Koreans? Yes. Does it give you an idea of what Koreans are like? Yes. But does it also stereotype and generalize from the sole perspective of a biased Westerner? Yes. Korea is one of the most rapidly changing societies in the world. A Korean person of the 80s and 90s is not the same Korean you see today. Breen takes an opportunity in the update at the end of the book to say that the modern Korean of the 21st century is a totally different species. It's almost like saying, "Everything I just said I take back! Here are the new Koreans!" Instead he could have benefited from portraying an overall picture of Koreans in changing times rather than fitting them all into one box. Conclusion: My advice is to read the book, but with a grain of salt that it is dated to the 80s and 90s and over-generalizes.

I have lived in Korea for three years, and never read anything so vivid and insightful into the Korean society, history and culture. The author explains each point with countless examples to prove his point, in such articulate detail I can't imagine any book which explains Korea better. Michael Breen talks about Korea and the foreigner's love / hate relationship with the country, and how Korea tends regardless to captivate and interest foreigners, which I could directly relate to. In addition he explains the history in a fascinating and colorful chronicle, and gives a vivid description of what exactly has shaped the Korean mind and their attitudes towards outsiders. If someone was interested in Korea, this is the first book I would recommend.

The Koreans is a balanced reference work for people with a curiosity about modern Korea. It would probably make a good textbook for college students too. I lived in Pusan for one and a half years and there just aren't too many good books on Korea. The author's points are largely correct, but he sometimes exaggerates, maybe to support his case. Although the author's book jacket bio mentions that he used to write for the Unification Church-owned Washington Times, it makes no mention of his previously published biography of the Rev. Sun Myung Moon's early years. I don't know if Breen himself is a member of the Unification Church but the full text of his Moon book is posted on the church's official website under the heading, "Bibliography of Our Publications." Regardless of the author's affiliations, The Koreans is a fair treatment about a country not many people know about.

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