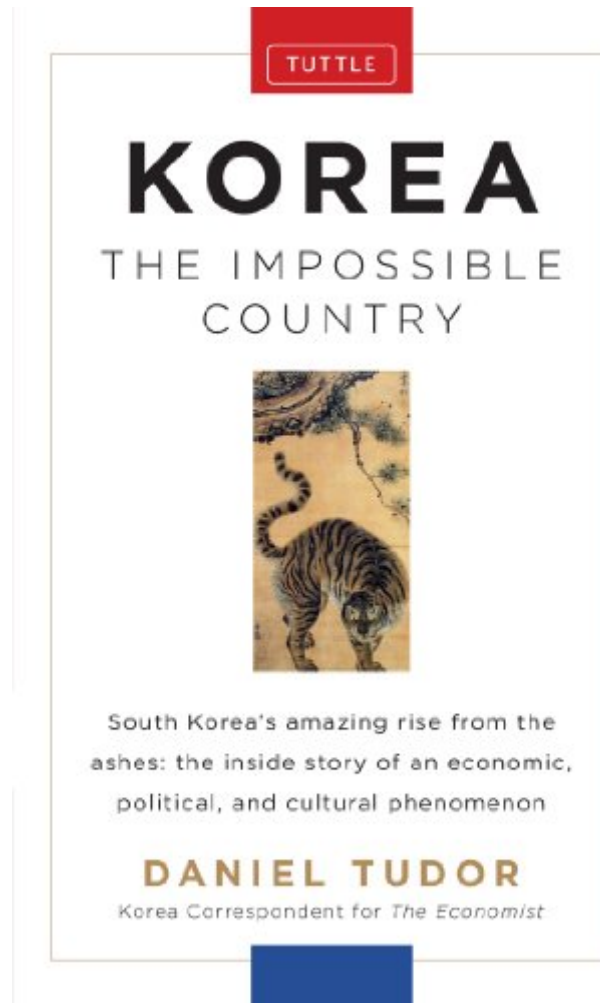




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# Korea: The Impossible Country



## Synopsis

South Korea's amazing rise from the ashes: the inside story of an economic, political, and cultural phenomenon Long overshadowed by Japan and China, South Korea is a small country that happens to be one of the great national success stories of the postwar period. From a failed state with no democratic tradition, ruined and partitioned by war, and sapped by a half-century of colonial rule, South Korea transformed itself in just fifty years into an economic powerhouse and a democracy that serves as a model for other countries. With no natural resources and a tradition of authoritarian rule, Korea managed to accomplish a second Asian miracle. Daniel Tudor is a journalist who has lived in and written about Korea for almost a decade. In *Korea: The Impossible Country*, Tudor examines Korea's cultural foundations; the Korean character; the public sphere in politics, business, and the workplace as well as the family, dating, and marriage. In doing so, he touches on topics as diverse as shamanism, clan-ism, the dilemma posed by North Korea, the myths about doing business in Korea, the Koreans' renowned hard-partying ethos, and why the infatuation with learning English is now causing huge social problems. South Korea has undergone two miracles at once: economic development and complete democratization. The question now is, will it become as some see Japan, a rich yet aging society, devoid of energy and momentum? Or will the dynamism of Korean society and its willingness to change enable it to experience a third miracle that will propel it into the ranks of the world's leading nations in terms of human culture, democracy, and wealth? More than just one journalist's account, *Korea: The Impossible Country* also draws on interviews with many of the people who made South Korea what it is today. These include: Choi Min-sik, the star of "Old Boy". Park Won-soon, Mayor of Seoul. Soyeon Yi, Korea's first astronaut Hong Myung-bo, legendary captain of Korea's 2002 FIFA World Cup team. Shin Joong-hyun, the 'Godfather of Korean Rock'. Ko Un, poet. Hong Seok-cheon, restaurateur, and the first Korean celebrity to 'come out'. And many more, including a former advisor to President Park Chung-hee; a Shaman priestess ('mudang'); the boss of Korea's largest matchmaking agency; a 'room salon' hostess; an architect; as well as chefs, musicians, academics, entrepreneurs, homemakers, and chaebol conglomerate employees.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Tudor achieves a sweeping overview of South Korea that gives Westerners just enough information to feel as if Korea isn't completely foreign. His emphasis centers on business and culture, though he covers history and food and other subjects. I would have liked to have had a chapter to read about current and future military aspects, such as North and South Korea's cyber war capabilities, but there are plenty of other books that cover those topics. Overall it was enjoyable and educational.

I live fairly close to Korea and many of our neighbors and tourists are Korean. I have been through Korea a number of times. However, I knew little about Korea's history. The book was a great help. The history chapters were a bit dry and they could have benefited from some maps and time lines. The facts and figures were helpful.

The subtitle of this important book stems from two extraordinary facts about South Korea: that in the space of two generations it has gone from being one of the poorest countries in the world to being a member of the OECD (the group of rich countries), and it has gone from being under the rule of US-backed military dictatorships to being a thriving democracy. Such dramatic changes make the country worthy of study on a number of fronts and Daniel Tudor has made a strong effort to help us understand this remarkable, if also darkly flawed, state. The book begins with a brief history of Korea

from ancient times up to the division of the peninsula in 1948 and the ensuing civil war that ended in 1953. The overview introduces some key themes about relations with China and Japan, the influence of religions and Confucian ethics, attitudes to outsiders and the consolidation of the national culture with its own script and origin myth. The main body of the text is divided into five parts. The first looks at the influence of shamanism, Buddhism, Confucianism and Christianity, and then the rise of industrial capitalism and democracy. Tudor covers each of these social influences well but makes insufficient distinction between elite and popular culture and how these played out differently over time. This would have helped to explain some apparent anomalies later in the book. The second part looks at specific cultural traits and how they influence both attitudes and behaviour. These include social bonding and attachment, status competition, maintenance of 'face', melancholy and joyfulness, family structure and obligations, and 'neophilia' - that Korean obsession with the latest thing. Many of these traits can be seen in other Asian countries but Tudor tries to give them a particular Korean flavour and for the most part succeeds. In the third part of the book the focus shifts to politics, including relations with North Korea, the links between politics and industrialisation, and the melding of political and business cultures. There are also chapters on the drive for perfection and the current mania for learning English - or rather, for acquiring a certificate to say you have passed an English exam. Much about Korea's industrialisation has been better explained by the Cambridge economist Ha-joon Chang and there is a lot of repetition of facts and arguments in this section that showed the need for some judicious editing, but there is plenty of interest to digest. The repetition unfortunately continues in the following part of the book, which shifts from cultural analysis to descriptive accounts of housing, diet, cinema, the music scene and the party culture (North Korea has a party culture as well, of course, but only with a capital 'P'). These chapters read more like a travel guide or a series of magazine articles. There is little insight into why popular culture has taken its current forms, except in the field of music. Tudor completed the manuscript of this book before the extraordinary phenomenon of PSY and his Gangnam Style song, and I wondered how Tudor would have explained it. The Gangnam area of Seoul gets a number of mentions, though, and you can see why its inhabitants are so ripe for ridicule. The final part of the book looks at ideas about nationalism and cultural identity and how these are changing. There are chapters on the gay subculture and the role of women, but again the accounts are more descriptive than explanatory. Change is happening but it is very slow. Korea is rich, its culture is influential in Asia and it has some global companies that are titans of modern capitalism, but the picture is not all rosy. The country has the highest suicide rate in the OECD and the second highest globally (take a bow, Lithuania). Koreans work some of the longest hours in the industrialised world and take very

few holidays. Like workaholics everywhere, they are hopelessly unproductive as a result, languishing in the bottom ranks of OECD productivity. Work culture is hierarchical, bureaucratic and conformist, and industry mainly relies on copying innovation from elsewhere. Creativity outside the arts and computer industry is thin on the ground. Discrimination against women is still strong, as is active prejudice against gays, even though homosexuality is not illegal. Before World War II, the elite culture was based on neo-Confucianism but shamanism and Buddhism were popular among the poor and in rural areas. Women in poor and rural households had greater autonomy to go about in public and participate in work than their rich sisters, and in the chapter on gay culture Tudor notes that same-sex couples were regarded as unremarkable in rural society before the twentieth century. Today the elite culture of politics and business is dominated by a fundamentalist form of Protestant Christianity, yet 70 per cent of the population is not Christian and animist faith persists. All through this book I saw signs of an elite-popular divide in terms of culture and beliefs, and found it frustrating that Tudor did not discuss this and its impact on social change. While he does not shrink from discussing the negative aspects of Korean society, Tudor is at times a little defensive, trying to paint a positive image overall. He is worried that people might think that Koreans are shallow. K-Pop is so mindless and manufactured that it makes Stock-Aitken-Waterman look like profound intellectuals. Koreans are obsessed with luxury goods and showing off, and there is an inexhaustible passion for looking good, with spending on cosmetics, clothes and plastic surgery all exceptionally high. Advertisements for tongue operations to improve your English appear regularly in the media. Shallow? Never crossed my mind: in modern capitalism this sounds like the height of sophistication. At least Koreans have the ability to laugh at themselves. If you watch Korean comedy shows on TV or enjoy PSY's mockery of the consumer culture, you will see there is cause for hope. Tudor believes that the adaptability of Korean culture and the determination and cohesion of its people will ensure that progress continues. I think he is right and that the shallow bits will be taken with a grain of salt. Korea tells us a lot about how, and how not, to live and this book is a reliable companion in explaining how the place works. I would have appreciated much less repetition in the text and more use of the religious, structural and cultural themes from parts one and two in explaining why the society looks and acts the way it does in the latter parts of the book, but by and large Tudor takes us into an Aladdin's cave of ideas and information that makes this 'impossible' country far more plausible. Highly recommended.

I read this completely thru. Before I traveled to Korea on a MBA class trip I had read about half and I finished the other afterward. I wish I had planned better and read the more interesting parts first.

First off there isn't enough out there about Korea that's not about North and South or about the Korean War. Second, what's left is travel guide or monotonous history books. I usually read outstanding books fiction and nonfiction so this was an interesting read because it wasn't quite edited well and had some quality issues but since I was interested in the subject I happily keep reading. One note: while I was in Korea, I was too uncomfortable to ask about cheabul or unhappiness. I wish I had finished the book prior.

Well researched and written. While it did not answer all the questions, the explanations given in the book sound credible and I was happy to have read the story the incredible history of Korea only short while ago.

I learned a lot of background cultural information about Korea from Daniel Tudor's Korea: the Impossible Country. Tudor does a good job explaining the various world views that helped shape the character of the country. I would recommend this book to anyone who plans to travel to Korea to visit or to live or to anyone already living in Korea who wants to find out more about the country. I won't bore you here with too many of the details, but it will be clear to anyone reading the book how important Park Chung-Hee is as a figure who shaped the modern Republic of Korea (South Korea). Also, Tudor goes a long way in explaining how Confucianism and Buddhism have above all influenced the cultural practices of modern Korea. Most prominent is actually Confucianism which exists in polite public society in its current form and extends all the way back to roughly 500 years or so, the way it was practiced during the time of the Joseon Dynasty. Anyway, recommended.

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