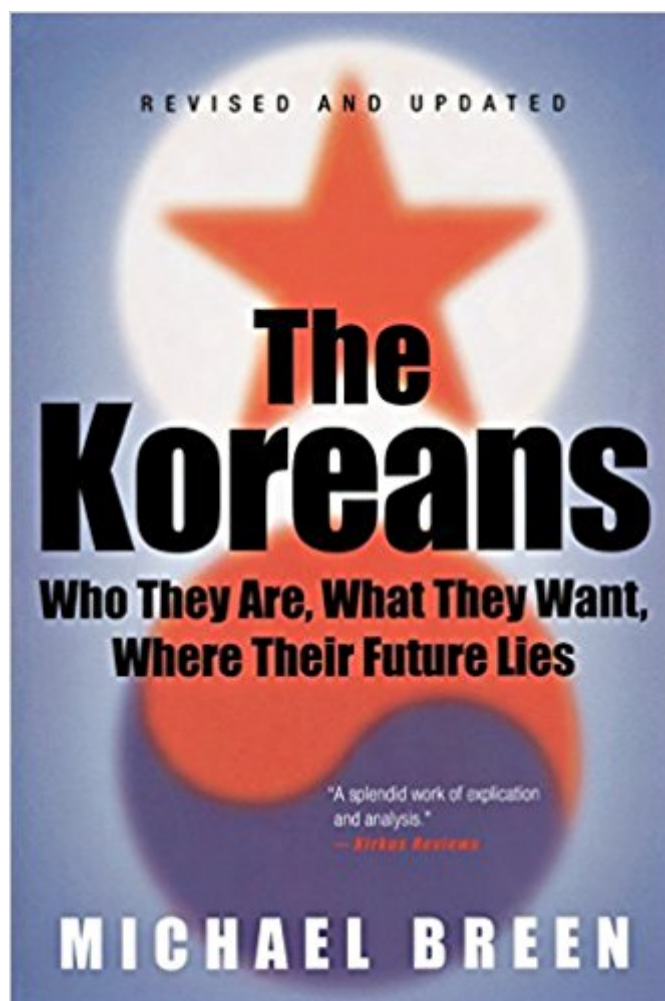


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# The Koreans: Who They Are, What They Want, Where Their Future Lies



## 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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

A veteran British journalist examines the history, culture, and economy of North and (principally)

South Korea, where he lives for half of each year. Realizing that most readers know Korea only because of the war (1950-53) or because of the communist North's nuclear potential and noisy aggressiveness, Breen limns with patience and perspicuity an engaging portrait of this least-known of the major Asian economic powers. He describes, for example, the "fierce sense of identity" among Koreans and concludes that in Korean society "you are your DNA. He examines Korean religions and educational systems, observing that the peninsula's undergraduate programs are inferior because students experience "no pressure to perform as undergraduates. In a rapid summary of Korean history, Breen notes that the Koreans "have remained a distinct people" for centuries, despite domination by China, Japan, and others. He has a powerful command of anecdote and detail, illustrated for example in his description of community-wide rock fights in the 19th century to settle public disputes and in the horrible image of the 100,000 pickled Korean noses the 16th-century Japanese warriors took to their country to certify their body counts. Breen credits the late South Korean president Park Chung-hee for providing the leadership that propelled his nation into the front ranks of economic powers, but he also presents a devastating analysis of the pervasive bribery and corruption in the Korean business, education, medical, and legal systems. In a clever though questionable analogy, Breen attempts to infer broad cultural truths from the "lawless, selfish and rude" behavior of South Korean drivers, asserting that "traffic behaviour illustrates how society regulates itself. In general, a splendid work of explication and analysis by one who admits to being both charmed and angered by his subjects. -- Copyright ©1999, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

“Michael Breen illuminates through countless anecdotes and personal observations the weird and wonderful ways of Asia's most paradoxical, polarized country. Few Koreans, let alone foreigners, have a better understanding than Breen of how a people can be alternately warm and ruthless, shrewd and childlike, tolerant and pigheaded. This is a thoughtful, passionate, and enlightening look at the world's eleventh largest economy and one its oldest cultures; required reading for the neophyte and Korea hand alike.”

— Steve Glain, former Seoul correspondent, *The Wall Street Journal*

“Michael Breen gives readers an insight into the history and character of a complex people which helps us assess how they might deal with the current complex period in their development.”

— Catherine Lee, Seoul correspondent, *The Economist*

“For anyone who wants to know Korea and the Koreans better, this book is an excellent place to start. Michael Breen's achievement is to have gotten under

Korea's skin. His portrait of Koreans is at once highly personal and convincingly recognizable. both engaged and engaging, this book comes as close as an outsider can get to an insider's account of contemporary Korea [and its] undoubted importance as a key player in the global economy of the twenty-first century. • Aidan Foster-Carter, Korea expert, Leeds University

Great book that offers a lot insight into the people, their history and how their history has formed their modern society. I have been to Korea and have studied their history and Mr. Breen's book is spot on. The book is accurate in the cultural aspects and insightful on the more modern state. I highly recommend this book who wants to learn more about Koreans.

I found this book an enjoyable and worthwhile introduction to Korean culture and history, and to the South Korean psyche in general. While some of the information is a bit dated, the most interesting and useful sociological insights are likely as relevant today as when the book was written. The Koreans is a primer in four parts: Society and Values, History, Economy and Politics. The Society and History sections were the most interesting to me, and least impacted by the passage of time (much of the economic and political information is a decade or more out of date). Mr. Breen, an English journalist who has lived in South Korea for decades, explains numerous aspects of the Korean mind and culture -- as he sees them -- in terms Western readers will appreciate and comprehend. Whether you're simply interested in knowing more about South Korea, or you have Korean friends you'd like to understand on a deeper level, Breen's work is an ideal place to begin your journey.

Loved this book!! I'm not often in love with non-fiction books. This actually had me feeling sad that I was at the end of it. He does such a great job of explaining the nuances of Korean society. He gives a brief history of the country followed by more details of more modern events. He also goes into business practices, and explains cultural differences. It is fascinating to read about a country coming to terms with democracy from a completely non-western perspective (their's not his). Of course, there is the added filter of Michael Breen being a British journalist and not American, like myself. Luckily, I am more familiar, in general, with British culture, so that wasn't too tricky. However, that layer was there. I wish there was a book as good from the American perspective--I haven't seen anything out there yet. I would completely recommend this book to anyone who is wanting to find out more about how Korean society works and why it works that way. It is actually not a very large book for all of the information it contains. And the reading, as informative as it is, is not dense or boring.

His style is very accessible. He also has updated the book, as the years have gone by since he first published it. This is great, because Korea is in the midst of a major growth spurt, so being up to date is pretty tricky. I actually want to read it again.

As a Korean-American, I've learned a lot more about Koreans which I've never thought about or recognized. I can see that his view about Koreans is very honest and critical yet very thoughtful and passionate. His hands-on experiences starting from 80's in almost every field as a foreign journalist will give you a very comprehensive understanding about the streams of Korean people's political, economic and cultural behaviors. I highly recommend this book for anyone who wants/needs to know more about Korean people and the working system.

Michael Breen has a unique and valuable perspective. If you're interested and are versed on post-WWII South Korean history, I recommend this book. I would not recommend this book as your introduction to modern Korean history and culture.

My interest in Korea stemmed from a possible job opportunity in the country. I had little to no knowledge about the country's history, its people, or its culture, and I knew I would need a book that could give me a proper introduction without overwhelming me. I selected this book, and I was not disappointed. Breen is a self-educated man when it comes to Korea. His writing takes on a narrative tone that is both personal and candid, and I suspect that this is a direct influence of him being a journalist. After the first chapter, I was drawn into this world that was miles away from my own, and yet I felt as if I were visiting it personally thanks to Breen's descriptions and insights. The only drawback of this book was the chapters dealing with business and economics. Though this is a very crucial aspect to Korean culture, the text tended to be heavier than previous chapters. The pages didn't turn as easy, and I believe that the reader would have been better served had she not been submerged into numbers, statistics, and percentages. Other than this, Breen provides an excellent introduction into a country that most Americans know little about, and thanks to this book, I plan on investigating more on the topic.

This book is what it is -- a broad brushstroke of Korean society based on one man's experience. Breen's observations are insightful, entertaining and witty (as are all Englishmen?); however, at times he betrays a paternalistic attitude toward Korean society (as do all Englishmen?). This is not a scholarly book nor a history text (Hallelujah!), yet it provides a clear and concise account of Korean

history. If you want a dissertation, go to a university. If you want a brief and readable introduction to Korean people, then start here. Just remember that stereotypes do not define everyone within a group, but often have an origin in truth.

This book provides a great perspective of Korean culture.

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