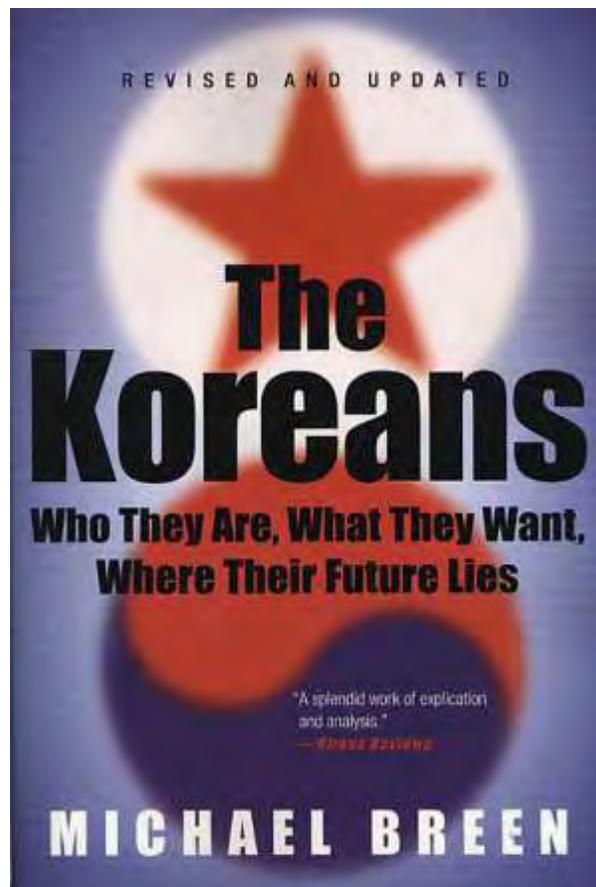


Review: The Koreans: Who They Are, What They Want, Where Their Future Lies

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The Koreans: Who They Are, What They Want, Where Their Future Lies, rev. ed., by Michael Breen, New York: Thomas Dunne Books/St. Martin's Griffin, 2004. Adapted from the Journal of Unification Studies, vol. VI, 2004-2005, pp. 165-68. This book review is posted on the occasions of the 70th anniversary of North Korea's Worker's Party, held on October 10, and South Korean President Park Geun-hye's October 16 summit in Washington with President Obama, both of which may have implications for the future of the peninsula.◇

Although originally targeted for foreign business readers, Michael Breen's *The Koreans* has emerged as a modern-day classic on the Korean character and culture. It is often recommended by Korean studies scholars, alongside such earlier general works as the late Donald S. Macdonald's *Koreans: Contemporary Politics and Society* (now in its third edition, revised by Donald Clark). In its 1999 Korean translation from the original 1998 UK edition, *The Koreans* rocketed to the top ten list of Korea's bestsellers, revealing Koreans' own enthusiasm to understand themselves from an outsider's perspective. The U.S. hardcover edition also appeared in 1999, and the 2004 paperback edition reviewed here is slightly revised with a new chapter on events since 2000.

Breen, a British journalist, originally went to South Korea as *The Washington Times*' Seoul correspondent. He ended up living there, during which time he also served for three years as president of the Seoul Foreign Correspondents Club, and wrote for *The Guardian* and *The Times of London*. He later became managing director of the Seoul office of public relations firm Merit/Burson-Marsteller, and now runs his own company, Insight Communications Consultants.



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Unificationists will remember him authoring in 1997 the meticulously researched *Sun Myung Moon: The Early Years, 1920-53*, based on in-depth interviews with early followers of Reverend Moon. No book has appeared in English since to rival it.

Breen's subsequent book, *Kim Jong-Il: North Korea's Dear Leader* (second ed.), builds on his reputation with *The Koreans*.

For the first-time reader of *The Koreans*, there is one caution: it is not a straightforward read. Breen's technique is to interweave stories and vignettes as examples of what he describes. A given chapter typically is strung together by numerous stories, making the book almost conversational in tone; yet it works. While it takes getting used to, in the end, this technique may be why the book succeeds so well. Breen's book contrasts with the rather unnerving style of fellow journalist Bradley Martin's 2006 880-page tome, *Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader: North Korea and the Kim Dynasty*, which less successfully employs a similar technique of interweaving personal stories and experiences.

The underlying reason *The Koreans* succeeds is Breen has the depth of experience, sensitivity and skill to explain things Korean to a foreign audience. He comes close to knowing what it is like to being Korean without being one, and thus gives the reader a very intimate feeling about the internal universe and perspective of Koreans. It is that quality that surely has astonished Korean readers themselves.

The Koreans is divided into four parts: "Society and Values," "History," "Economy," and "Politics" (with a new concluding chapter on the "Next Generation"). The first part is the strongest and undoubtedly the most valuable. Here Breen's storytelling technique is used to maximum effect. The other three parts function really as an adjunct to the first, and while written as well as could be expected given the book's scope, do not stand as well on their own. Interested readers would do better to consult Bruce Cumings' *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History* (second ed.) for an adequate historical overview; Mark L.

Clifford's *Troubled Tiger: Businessmen, Bureaucrats and Generals* (rev. ed.), for an economic and business overview of South Korea; and, the late Don Oberdorfer's *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History* (third ed., rev. by Robert Carlin) for a solid political history of North-South relations.

There are also several Unificationist-related references in the book. Breen mentions that in 1989 police had to use tear gas to separate students and demonstrating Protestant Christians in Cheonan when the Unification Church obtained government approval to turn its seminary there into Sun Moon University. Just one paragraph is devoted to the Church's founder, in which Breen notes that only Reverend Moon is internationally known among at least 70 South Koreans who have claimed to be the messiah since the 1960s. Sprinkled throughout are mentions of Sun Moon University professor Lynne Kim (her views on male/female relationships in Korea); University of Bridgeport religion scholar Mark Setton (his observations on child-rearing in Korea); and short vignettes on the *Segye Ilbo* and the Tongil Group.

This reviewer was especially intrigued by Breen's discussions of North Korea. We were both guests of the late President Kim Il Sung in April 1994 as part of a visiting delegation of former heads of state and government (accompanied by journalists and academics) led by the Summit Council for World Peace. Breen properly took note of Kim's earthy but poignant explanation to the luncheon guests of *juche*, North Korea's philosophy of self-reliance, which to my knowledge has never appeared in any other publication, before or since. Kim's words bear repeating:

"It's anathema to me to follow others. We can learn from foreigners, of course," he said. "You must chew first. If it's agreeable you can swallow. If it's disagreeable, spit it out. East European countries got indigestion because they swallowed the Soviet Union. If it rained in Moscow, people put up their umbrellas in Berlin. You have to chew first. Then you eat it – in other words, you make it your own. Otherwise, you'll get sick."

Save for the new last chapter, *The Koreans* is up to date only as far as 1999. It covers contemporary Korean history and politics only as far as the first year of Kim Dae Jung's presidency (1998). The new chapter itself takes us to 2003, including the June 2000 summit between Kim Dae Jung and Kim Jong Il and the 2003 election of Roh Moo-hyun with the emergence of a new generation in Korean politics.

The problem is that, as timeless as Korean culture might seem, a lot has changed in South Korea over the last eleven years, with important implications. Notwithstanding the valiant effort in the short new chapter, material in Parts Two through Four has become seriously dated. Korea's most recent changes are profoundly cultural and sociological, not just economic and political.

For example, today foreign businessmen readily admit that South Korea has come a long way since the 1997-98 Asian Financial Crisis, and now welcomes foreign investment; yet the reader would conclude from this "revised" edition that Koreans do not. There has been a huge growth in South Korean civil society since 1998, with its consequent impact on political culture, which is only touched upon in the concluding chapter. The nature of anti-Americanism is given only minimal treatment. And recent socio-cultural changes (admirably detailed elsewhere by Seoul-based scholar Edward J. Button) affecting the span of Korean life, including family values, sexuality, racism and anti-foreigner bias, education, and regionalism, are only briskly mentioned if at all in Breen's closing chapter.

The publisher would do well to commission from Breen a fully revised and updated third edition. If *The Koreans* is to retain its value in coming years to general audiences as well as students of Korean affairs, Breen will have to continue to employ his effective journalistic style in keeping us abreast of how the Korean people are changing and where they are headed.

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