

DANIEL TUDOR, *Korea: The Impossible Country*, Rutland, Vt. Tuttle Publishing, 2012.

South Korea has attracted a great amount of academic attention in the past few decades, first as a result of its impressive economic transformation and, after that, due to the rise of Korean soft power in the form of *hallu*, 'Korean Wave'. *Korea : the impossible country* provides a comprehensive, non-theoretical overview of South Korea's development into a modern country and the look of Korean society today. The book is both descriptive and analytic and succeeds in covering all main aspects of Korean history, culture and society in a concise and easily accessible way. The author, Daniel Tudor, is a former Korea correspondent for *The Economist* who has lived in South Korea since 2004. The reason behind the subtitle claiming Korea to be an 'impossible country' is twofold. Firstly, Tudor maintains (and many others would confirm) that South Korea has written 'the most unlikely and impressive story of nation building of the last century' by transforming itself from a poor dictatorship into a rich liberal democracy in the course of only five decades. Secondly, however, Tudor calls South Korea impossible because it 'imposes unattainable targets to its people' who strain to perfection in all areas of life, including education, career progress, physical appearance and even match-making. By pointing out and analysing this contradiction the book in fact gains relevance beyond its Korean scope and also invites the reader to reflect on the issue of impossibility in the context of other countries. Although the publication does not

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include a complex, theory-based analysis of the issues it covers, it does provide a noteworthy empirical contribution to the field of Korean and Asian studies.

The book is divided into five thematic parts ranging from early history to the modern Korean society and beyond. Each of these sections includes five short chapters. Although it follows a certain chronological order, the reader can also select to read chapters separately. This is why there is a degree of repetition and overlapping between the chapters. The first section, titled 'Foundations', provides the reader with a broad historical overview of the Korean peninsula and the South Korean state with detailed description of the four main religions: Shamanism, Buddhism, Confucianism and Christianity. It also covers the great transformation from an impoverished, colonial Korea into a modern democracy and discusses the somewhat specific phenomenon of capitalism with a Korean face. Tudor manages to spotlight both patterns of continuity and change in the Korean context and construct a convincing grand narrative of the Korean success story from rags to riches.

The second section, 'Cultural codes' highlights a number of important attributes of the Korean culture, many of which like *jeong* and *han* lack a proper English translation. The author places some of these concepts in the Asian cultural heritage context and others in the more recent framework of rapid double transition. Those foreigners who have either lived in Korea or who have Korean friends or relatives are likely to experience a series of 'moments of realisation' when reading this chapter, recognising many of these phenomena as something they may not have considered but would have noticed.

The third section '*Hyun-shil*: Cold reality' addresses the negative side of the 'impossible country'. It is also the only section that discusses North Korea despite the title of the publication suggesting the reader assume otherwise. As is the case in every country, some aspects of Korean culture and society can create limitations and restrictions for the members of the social group leading to stress and unhappiness. As discussed in this section of the book, it is the endless striving towards self-improvement that can turn the contemporary Korean life into a stressful nightmare despite the high standard of living. Tudor discusses the difficult context that children, as among the most vulnerable members of the society, face given the immense pressure aimed at them to perform well in everything they do.

The fourth section of the book is called 'In the Hours Not Spent Working'. It gives an insight to the aspects of Korean life that have little to do with work: housing, cuisine and popular culture. Like in the previous chapters, Tudor tackles a number of foreign stereotypes about Korea, also in regards to the popular dog-eating myth. As a whole, the section provides the reader with a fascinating analysis of contemporary Korean ways of doing things which links back to the first chapter and the broad topics of continuity and change, but in a more concrete framework.

The final section, part 5 titled 'More of 'us', less of 'them'', summarises the core themes of the book. It discusses a recent shift in the Korean society from a

closed ethnic community to one that is becoming more tolerant of ethnic and sexual minorities, as well as the development of women's rights in Korean society. Although the country is considered a fully-fledged liberal democracy, Tudor demonstrates that civic rights are still not fully guaranteed for the entire population and social equality remains a goal for the future. The infamous 'Korean Wave', *hallyu*, is also discussed in detail, but also problematised in an interesting way. Tudor raises the issue whether the government is in fact going too far with its emphasis on K-pop as the primary cultural export.

The chapters are well-written in a reflective essay-style manner and feature general facts, the experiences of the author himself, those of average Koreans, as well as the comments of scholars and experts. This technique allows the author to embrace a comfortable middle ground between official and unofficial language, general and specific information and factual and entertaining content. Although the chapters feature text only, there is a 8-page colour photo attachment that links some of the topics to visual material. Perhaps there could have been even more pictures.

One of the core aims of the book is to provide an in-depth analysis of today's Korea. Indeed, the parts where Tudor reflects on the specific character of Korea and Koreanness constitute the strongest part of the book. He manages not only to highlight and describe such complex socio-cultural phenomena as *han* and *heung* (deep sadness and pure joy), but also contemplates the origins of such concepts. It is in this context that he also backs up his arguments with expert knowledge, but yet avoids making explicit and simplified statements. In addition, he gives examples of how these central cultural codes translate into everyday life and draws parallels to other Asian and European cultures, which helps the reader to gain a deeper understanding of the concepts. Furthermore, the book is clearly tailored for the practical use of its target audience since it provides separate chapters dedicated to the status of foreigners, especially Westerners, in South Korea, as well as detailed recommendations for those aiming to do business with Koreans. It is in these parts that the competency of the author really shines through. Personally I also enjoyed the analysis of the 'dark side' of South Korean society, linking to one of the highest suicide rates in the world. Not only did Tudor convincingly describe the roots and the current state of the pressures present in today's society, but he also optimistically points out the emergence of new tendencies like the increasing focus on mental well-being of Korean citizens. Although old habits die hard, it is South Koreans, the masters of change, that the author sees capable of correcting the flaws of their society.

Another core aim of *Korea: the impossible country* is to provide a semi-academic analysis of the two astonishing transformations: the 'miracle on the Han river' and the subsequent process of democratisation. Attempting to meet this goal, Tudor manages slightly worse than in the case of reflecting on the unique attributes of Korean society. He presents the reader with a historical narrative that fails to address the full complexity of the transformations adequately. Presumably the

'evening out' of the events is a conscious choice of the author in order to make sure the publication is comprehensible to readers from non-academic backgrounds, as well as scholars. Moreover, presenting various theories, complex explanations on why certain events took place and alternative interpretations about their meaning for the historical processes would certainly make the book a heavier read than it is now. Having said that, while engaging in Tudor's evaluation of the double transformation I couldn't help but wonder, in many instances, *why* it was exactly the given events that took place and not the opposite ones that seemed more likely in the given situation. *Why* is it that Koreans *en masse* decided to embrace democracy and what makes Korean democracy so stable today? *Why* is it that Koreans were and remain to be so comfortable with tremendous changes in their society despite being a tradition-oriented society at the core? What is it that really makes Korea *different* from its neighbouring countries? While the book sets out to answer these fundamental questions of transition, it only manages to address them half-heartedly.

Another shortcoming of *Korea: the impossible country* is its obvious bias towards depicting South Korea in a positive light. Thus titling the book differently, say, for example, as *The ode to South Korea* could have been more appropriate. Those readers who expect a realist depiction of South Korea's history and society as well as a complex analysis of the country's dark side are bound to be disappointed. Tudor's Koreans are not just ordinary mortals on earth, but a unique and heroic people destined to triumph; even the century-long troublesome history until the 1950s was nothing but a mere overture to the greatest success stories in human history. One can't help but wonder: how is it that the very same lionherated Koreans that happened to reside in the northern end of the peninsula ended up as citizens of the poorest and least democratic state in the world.

Despite being overglorified, South Korea's story from rags to riches does manage to provide food for thought for even those readers who question the simplicity of its foundation. A number of potential recipes for success are discussed in detail. Moreover, it is a fact that a number of countries striving to perform a similar leap of economic development and democratisation look to South Korea for policy advice.

One more section that deserves to be highlighted is the author's belief that the South Korean progress has never really come to a halt. Even as a consolidated liberal democracy with a functioning market economy, the society is still very much in motion. The changing status of women as well as ethnic and sexual minorities are a good example of this. Today's generation of Koreans is inherently different from that of their parents. Attitudes have already become more liberal and tolerant, and in the 21st century one can even talk of a multi-cultural Korea. According to the author, Korea seems to be evolving in a different direction from its neighbours in terms of the development of far right movements and extreme nationalism. Is that perhaps because South Korea never really considered itself

similar to those countries, proudly even rejecting the notion about democracy being inherently opposed to Asian values? Do Koreans relate more closely with Westerners? Although *Korea : the impossible country* gives no direct answers to these kinds of questions, the book serves as an excellent starting point for those who wish to become more familiar with the small country. In fact, anyone with even a slight interest in Korea or in transitions to democracy and/or market economy should not skip the chance of reading this volume, a wonderful summing up what today's South Korea is all about.

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