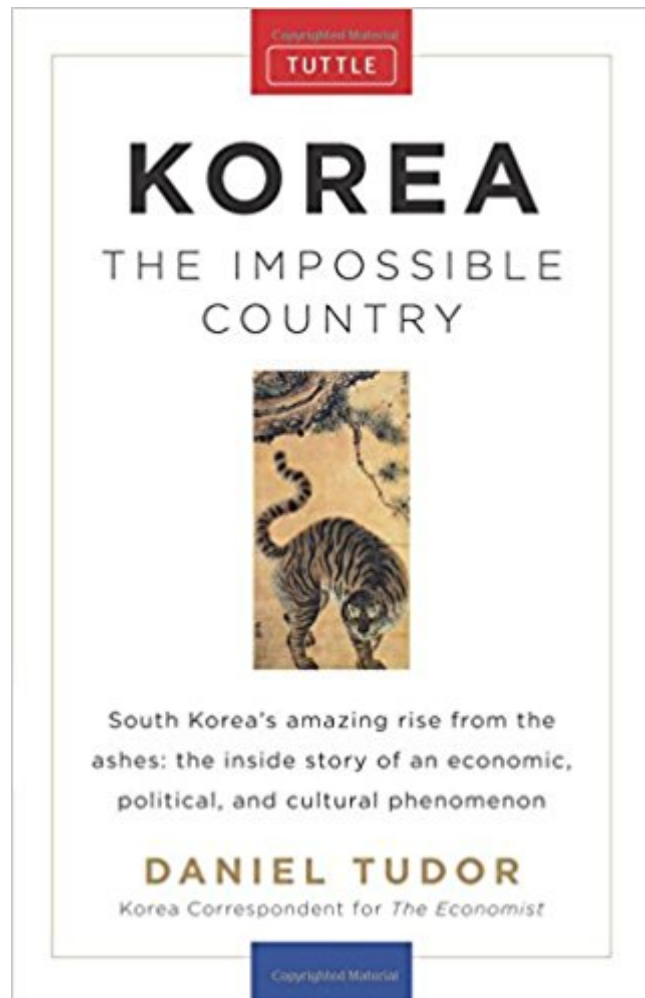




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# Korea: The Impossible Country



## 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—as well as the opportunity it has now to welcome outsiders into its fold—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

Hardcover: 336 pages

Publisher: Tuttle Publishing; Hardcover with Jacket edition (November 10, 2012)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0804842523

ISBN-13: 978-0804842525

Product Dimensions: 5.1 x 1.4 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 stars Â Â See all reviews Â (100 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #101,963 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #8 in Â Books > History > Asia >

Korea > South #51 in Â Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Social Sciences > Specific

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## Customer Reviews

The world has seen many books about countries, cultural regions and growing economies in Asia. Not necessarily about Korea in particular but Japan's longstanding history as a global cultural and economic powerhouse as well as China's recent economic stellar rise and its immense history have attracted pundits, commentators, critics and dubious self-proclaimed experts to share their two cents worth. Most of them shouldn't have. It is against this backdrop that Mr. Tudor's book is refreshingly insightful and beautiful to read. There are three aspects about it that stand out in particular: Analysis, scope and humility. 1. Mr. Tudor is never satisfied dealing with the subject matter of his book on an observational level. Instead, in each chapter he leaves the level of observation and enters the realm of analysis. He offers surprising, succinct and powerful insights into why Korea is how it is. It never becomes absurd though. Many have tried to do similar things with China (a country in which I have lived and worked for several years). Confucius and the Cultural Revolution have been used to explain every single aspect of contemporary China, however unrelated. Mr. Tudor doesn't fall victim to this obsession. He knows when to warn the reader of the limitations of his own analysis. 2. Mr. Tudor does a brilliant job in presenting Korea from many different viewpoints, including modern pop culture, history, economy and general society. He connects dots that only a true subject matter experts can see. He doesn't present the different aspects of South Korea in isolation but instead shows the reader relations between them. Every chapter of this book hence offer several eye-openers. Also, Mr. Tudor impresses by appearing really savvy in all the areas he covers.

Korea has achieved what many thought impossible - in a couple generations, the country has rebuilt itself from war-torn devastation to a first-world country known for many reasons. At present, the country faces a number of other issues, possibly considered 'first-world problems', that have to be

addressed to continue its success. If you're interested in seeing how Korea got to where it is today (and why things are the way they are), a glimpse of history provides the context. The book starts with a very good review of Korean history, complete with the nuances (and without the nationalist tint) seen in Korean sources. If you're familiar with the country's back story there are few surprises here, but a tale on the country's most recent history is more helpful after seeing how it got here. The first major section, "Foundations", sets the tone for the rest of the book. The major religions of Korea - including a very good chapter on shamanism - all receive relatively equal treatment. I was a bit surprised to see almost no discussion on Korea's non-religious - those who have given up religion or don't see a place for it. The final chapter, a section on the battles for Korean democracy, should be required reading for any expat interested in intelligent conversation with a local. The second part discusses the power of jeong (the shared connection and obligation), the dilemma of competition, han (a deep sorrow fueled by uncontrollable tragedy), and to a lesser extent heung (a devil-may-care spirit of joy). As these are the cultural codes of Korea, they merit the attention of would-be expats or anyone studying the people.

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