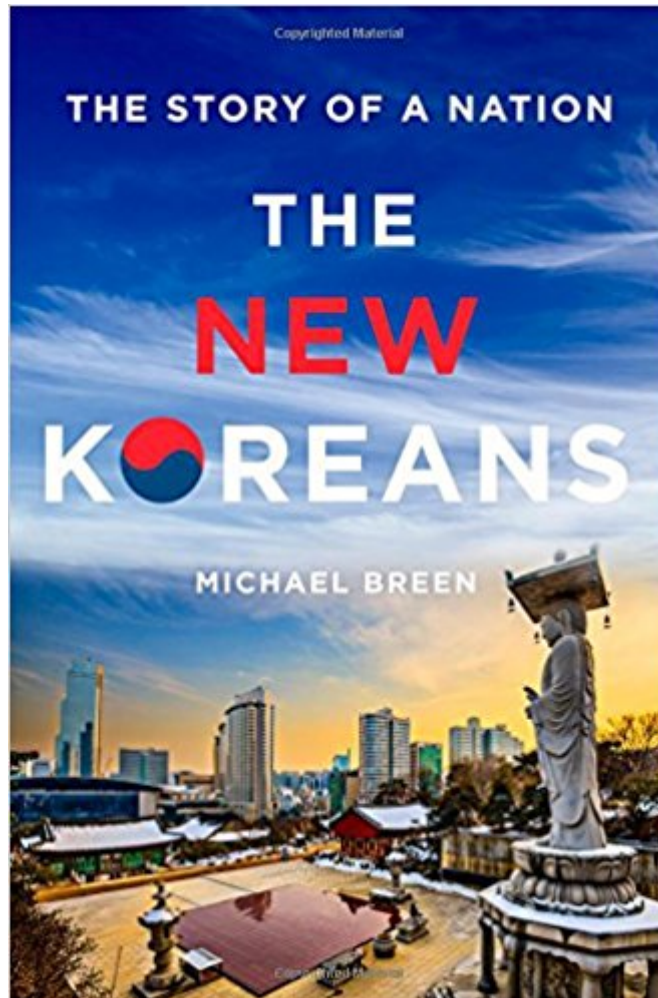




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# The New Koreans: The Story Of A Nation



## Synopsis

Just a few decades ago, the South Koreans were an impoverished, agricultural people. In one generation they moved from the fields to Silicon Valley. They accomplished this through three totally unexpected miracles: economic development, democratization, and the arrival of their culture to global attention. Who are the Koreans? What are they like? The New Koreans examines how they have been perceived by outsiders, the features that color their "national character," and how their emergence from backwardness, poverty, and brutality happened. It also looks at why they remain unhappy with the lowest birth rates and highest suicide rates in the developed world. In The New Koreans, Michael Breen provides compelling insight into the history and character of this fascinating nation of South Korea, and casts an eye to future developments, as well as across the DMZ into North Korea.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"In an age where everyone is sharply critical of everyone else, The New Koreans is a delightful change of pace, pungent observations of Koreans as they see themselves and as outsiders see them, part history, part story telling, all pieces of a beautiful, frustrating, endearing puzzle fit together in a superb way as only a keen, veteran observer as Michael Breen can do." James Church, author of A Corpse in the Koryo "If someone is going to live in Korea or do business with the Koreans, this is certainly the book to read. It gives informative and deep introduction to this fascinating (and not well-known) country, and, in addition, it is an engaging read." Andrei Lankov, author of The Dawn of Modern Korea "Breen is back, and

better than ever. This is a broad and deep exposition of South Korean history, politics, economy and society that will have even the oldest Korea hands going 'I never knew that'. Top drawer stuff." — Daniel Tudor, author of *Korea: The Impossible Country* "As Alexis de Tocqueville did with Americans of the 1830s, Michael Breen probes 21st century Koreans to the very core of their being. Never hesitating to skewer their fascinating idiosyncrasies, he paints a loving and, overall, admiring portrait highlighting strengths that in rapid-fire order have made the Republic of Korea an economic powerhouse and, now, a cultural exemplar. Not only is *The New Koreans* magnificent in its sweep and depth; as a bonus, it's way too much fun to read." — Bradley K. Martin, author of *Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader*

MICHAEL BREEN is a writer and consultant who first went to Korea as a correspondent in 1982. He covered North and South Korea for several newspapers, including the Guardian (UK), the Times (UK), and the Washington Times. He lives in Seoul.

When it comes to writing about Korea — its people, culture, and history — there is no one better up to that onerous task than Michael Breen who has devoted most of his life observing and writing about the country. However, this is more than just an outsider's take on Korea. To be sure, Breen with journalistic flair and cultural sensitivity offers an in-depth look at modern Korea that is unrestrained and honest. This is more than a history of modern Korea, however. Breen endeavors throughout this impressive tome to help readers understand who the Koreans really are through anecdotal musings and historical evidence. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the opening chapter which talks about the Sewol tragedy when a ferry sank off the southern coast of the peninsula in the spring of 2014. This was a rather bold on the part of Breen to lead off with this tragedy, but this chapter and his delicate, cultural understanding set the tone for the rest of the book when he tries to make sense of why something like the tragedy and its aftermath could happen. I remembered when this tragedy happened and immediately on Facebook, foreigners in Korea started to chime in about "their take" on the accident and the "culture" that allowed it to happen. Breen, though, the acute observer of Korea that he is, can analyze something critically without being shackled by his deep appreciation for the country. In the process, he helps the reader understand the Korean psyche and character without running the risk of being biased. One of the things that I liked most about the book were all of his anecdotes and his loving attention to detail. Even for this old Korean hat who has

lived and worked in South since 1990, I learned some new things about my adopted home. Whether it's talking about why there's a wastepaper basket next to a toilet in a public restroom or the manner in which Koreans number and name their streets (one of the first things I learned when I came to Korea and took a taxi in the days before GPS was always to make sure I could tell the taxi driver a landmark to help with navigations) Breen's observations and analyses make for some very enjoyable and insightful reading. Another thing I liked about the book was how he divided the sections and named the chapters, which helps readers develop a better understanding of Korea than by saying this happened, and then this happened because something else happened. We want to know why it took Korea as long as it did to finally rise from the ashes of the Korean War and become the nation that it is today. We want to know why the Chaebol continue to have a stranglehold on the Korean economy and culture. We want to know why men like Park Chung-hee and Kim Dae-jung played pivotal roles in South Korean politics and their legacies that remain until today. We want someone to explain why K-Pop has become an international phenomenon. And yes, we want to know why something like the Sewol incident could happen. If there was one book that I would recommend to anyone thinking about coming to Korea to work, study, or simply visit, I would recommend Breen's book hands down. There's no one writing about Korea these days more knowledgeable and understanding of Korea than Michael Breen. Jeffrey Miller, Bureau 39

All in all a great book. Reading this book gave me a much more nuanced view of the last 150 years of Korean history and development than any other book or source. I have even read some similar books in Korean, but none were nearly as in-depth, detailed, nuanced/unbiased, and interspersed with interesting vignettes and examples. Highly recommended. Despite being married to a Korean, working with Koreans, and talking with Korean friends and family over the last several years I did not know many of the important details or explanations that this book gives for major historical events and trends. Mr. Breen also gives a good overview of the controversial Japanese colonial period in the least biased way I have ever seen (and no, he's certainly not "pro-Japanese"). A couple interesting bits:- Laws still remain in place preventing farms from consolidating, thus hampering agricultural efficiency and yields.- In the (majority of) city districts where garbage bags are just left on the street, the bureaucrats know this is not a very sanitary or pleasant practice but want to conserve the employment of the elderly garbage men/women.- "The head of the sewage disposal department at my local district office said there was no reason to worry about toilet paper in the bowl

because it is designed to disintegrate quickly...a plumber concurred."But the issue with throwing toilet paper into the toilet is actually related to the SEPTIC TANKS

(*ŒfŒ-Œ Œ Œ Œ Œ ŒfŒ-Œ Œ„Œ Œ ŒfŒ-Œ ŒŒ Œ Œ or sometimes ŒfŒ-Œ Œ Œ Œ Œ ŒfŒ-Œ Œ„Œ Œ Œ ŒfŒ-Œ ŒŒŒ Œ ŒfŒ-Œ ŒŒŒ Œ*) and not the pipes or toilets. The septic tanks are emptied too often by the government - toilet paper cannot fully decompose in 6-12 months - and they are too small and lack the multi-stage compartments that developed-world septic tanks feature. And those 3 tidbits, all PRIMARY REPORTING by Mr. Breen, are just in the first 10% of the book! It's well worth the read as the book continues pretty strongly until the end (I already knew most of the "current-day" stuff from the last chapter though, so it was slightly less interesting. But still only one chapter out of, like, 28).

I have had the opportunity over the years to read many books about Korea and Koreans and believe this is one of the best. Breen clearly loves and admires the Korean people, but not to the extent that he is willing to overlook their failures and shortcomings. As a former longtime resident of Korea myself I find much to value in this informative and insightful book and would especially recommend it to anyone who plans to visit the country or relocate there for any length of time. It will definitely provide some useful guidance for interacting with this fascinating country and its people.

I really enjoyed this book. It helped me understand some things I was puzzled about. The author's humor helps lighten the tone, which could have been heavy and academic but isn't.

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