2016

Daniel Tudor, Korea: The Impossible Country (2013)

Jiyeon An
University of Rhode Island

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/mgdr>

Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), [Economics Commons](#), [International Business Commons](#), [Marketing Commons](#), [Other Business Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

An, Jiyeon (2016) "Daniel Tudor, Korea: The Impossible Country (2013)," *Markets, Globalization & Development Review*: Vol. 1: No. 2, Article 6.

DOI: 10.23860/MGDR-2016-01-02-06

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/mgdr/vol1/iss2/6>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@URI. It has been accepted for inclusion in Markets, Globalization & Development Review by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@URI. For more information, please contact digitalcommons-group@uri.edu.

Markets, Globalization & Development Review

Daniel Tudor, Korea: The Impossible Country (2013)

“I’m going to South Korea.”

This phrase could be interpreted differently depending on the time period of its utterance. South Korea is a country that has successfully reinvented itself more than once. Going to South Korea was associated with a war-torn region in the 1950s and 1960s, an economic miracle on the Han River in the 1970s to 1990s, and a cool Asian youth culture since the millennial turn. Daniel Tudor, a long-term foreign correspondent in South Korea and the author of this book, dubs South Korea “The Impossible Country”. He provides a couple of reasons why South Korea deserves this epithet. One is its successful economic growth and the other is the country’s remarkable transition from a military dictatorship to a vibrant democracy.

Tudor’s explicit positioning towards the subject, South Korea, helps us to identify where he stands. He celebrates the country’s capitalist economic development and western style democracy, anchored in the paradigm of modernization. Like Durkheim and Weber (Hunt 2014; Morrison 2006), the author emphasizes tensions between traditional groups that are rooted in East Asian time-honored values and the aggressive modernizing forces characterized by division of labor, urbanization, globalization, and new technologies. Indeed, South Korea provides a compelling example of the dynamics of globalization and market development. To present his sweeping view of South Korea, Tudor offers 28 short chapters organized in five major parts: *Part I- Foundations*, *Part II-Cultural codes*, *Part III-Hyun-Shil: Cold reality*, *Part IV-In the hours not spent working*, and *Part V-More of “us,” less of “them.”*

Considering his modernist view, we might say that Part I and Part II explain the conditions of modernization and Part III, Part IV, and Part V discuss the phenomena and processes of modernization. Part I describes the values of the pre-modernization period in South Korea, including shamanism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. This part is useful for the later chapters, such as Part III and Part IV, to explain why traditional groups are resistant to modernizing forces. Part II demonstrates how an individual is related to a society in South Korea by introducing commonly experienced social emotions there. This introduction to social emotions is helpful in explaining the post-2000 worldwide popularity of Korean cultural creativity called the Korean wave (Hong and Kim 2013). Therefore, as a modernist, the author attempts to demystify South Korea’s transition to a successfully

modernized country from an unknown, war-torn, and tradition-bound Asian country.

Although he views South Korea as “the other,” he, a UK-born and bred 21st century Korea correspondent for *The Economist*, does not forget to add some compassionate twists in his discursive journey. Unlike other books, this book includes a field study and first-hand interviews to illustrate many aspects of South Korea. In addition, the portrayal of local people helps to capture an insider’s perspective, which attenuates his potential bias as an outsider, an Oxford graduate, an English speaker rather than a native Korean speaker. In this way, this balanced view enhances our understanding of how South Korea has evolved across multiple dimensions, ranging from political and economic to social and cultural domains.

The book begins with Part I about East Asian traditional values and religions. He allocated the first few chapters out of 28 chapters to describe conventional values in South Korea, which might be helpful to a non-native of Korea. But for me – born and raised with a thorough native understanding of Korea – this large section of the book seemed unnecessarily long, even though I realize such lengthy detail may benefit readers unfamiliar with Korea. Religions were important at some points in Korean history; for example, the Koryo and Chosun dynasties promoted Buddhism and Confucianism as the nation’s religions respectively. At the present juncture, however, South Korea is far from being a religion-driven country. A recent study from Gallup International (2012) reported that 46% of South Koreans identified themselves as being irreligious or atheists, similar to other modernized East Asian countries such as China and Japan. Of course there have been some high-profile Korean-born religious leaders such as Moon Sun Myung (commonly known as a founder of Unification Church) and Seungsahn (as a leader of Kwan Um School of Zen), but the influence of religious beliefs varies across people, time, and place; and has waned greatly in recent decades.

One of the most notable parts of the book is Tudor’s perspective on South Korean capitalism and democracy, which constitute fundamental elements to make South Korea appear “unique, vibrant, rising” (p.10). He suggests that Korean capitalism is characterized by *Chaebol*, sprawling conglomerate businesses similar to *Zaibatsu* in Japan. In addition, Koreans’ big dedication to education and literacy helps democracy flourish because every citizen is easily able to participate actively in political life. To illustrate, the grassroots protest movements fought against dictatorship, leading to a direct popular vote-based presidency with a five-year term and no possibility of reelection. In addition, governors, mayors,

and provincial and municipal legislatures are elected by direct popular vote. We may argue that this healthy competition makes democracy thrive.

The author covers the cold reality of South Korea by focusing on the political, economic, social, and cultural aspects of South Korea in Part III, in addition to East Asian traditional values and religions (Part I). The term 'cold reality' was adopted to evoke the rhetoric of cold war, against the hot war, which describes tensions among those with different beliefs as mentioned in Part I. To illustrate, the topic of reunification with North Korea has been a hot potato in the cold reality because it acts as a pressure point. For those separated from family left behind in North Korea, this issue is a family issue and, for them, it is imperative for the two Koreas to be reunified for recovering oneness and loyalty; however, for modernists with strong economic concerns, reunification – if it happens – is merely a decision on economic development and, for these people, the decision should be made by cost-benefit analysis.

In Part II, Tudor introduces Korean cultural codes, such as *Jeong*, *Han*, *Heung*, and *Chemyon*. *Jeong* is defined as “feelings of fondness, caring, bonding, and attachment that develop within interpersonal relationships” (p.92). *Han* refers to “deep sadness” (p.121), and *Heung* is “pure joy” (p.121). *Chemyon*, or face, is associated with “an old-fashioned word, and one that encourages stereotypes” (p.112). These commonly experienced social emotions in South Korea play important roles for Korean cultural creativity, which is linked to what Koreans do in the hours not spent working (Part IV).

The four types of social emotions have inspired the Korean wave. For example, *Dae Jang Geum*, a heroine of a megahit Korean TV show series, is struggling with *Han* because of abusive treatment from someone in a position of power. But she outperforms in her domains, such as cooking and medicine, with a full measure of *Heung*. She is later recognized and celebrated in the Korean court society, shares *Jeong* with her royal community, and keeps her *Chemyon* as a master chef and nurse. This narrative sounds familiar to the Korean wave because it captures how South Korean society works. South Koreans' most valuable resources are not tangible ones such as oil and minerals, but intangible ones such as human resources. The social emotions are pillars to create a sense of community in South Korea, which helps them to overcome intense competition and merit-based ranking systems that pervade all South Korean communities.

Tudor describes Koreans as “the Irish of the East” (p.250) and introduced the concept of *Eumju-ga-mu* (“drinking, singing, and dancing in

a karaoke-type room”). “Koreans are a people who love singing and dancing and the time-honored tradition of getting drunk. Korea’s own self-image of *eumju-ga-mu* certainly lends credence to that perception, and when followed, this motto naturally results in many an entertaining evening” (p.250). This tradition helps to cope with “the powerlessness of the suffering to remedy the situation” (p. 121). According to the OECD (2014), South Korea was reported as the number 3 country with longest work hours. *Eumju-ga-mu*, after business hours, is presented in a popular musician Psy’s “Gangnam style” music video. In the lyrics of “Gangnam style”, the rule of daytime is to keep one’s face to meet the expectations by appearing warm, humane and quiet. But, at night time, groups of people drink, sing, and dance together with *Heung* and *Jeong*, the high of Korea social emotions that are the opposites of *Han* and *Chemyon*.

Tudor evidences a keen interest in capturing the current genuine face of South Korea. He has refined his interest and published another book *A Geek in Korea: Discovering Asia's New Kingdom of Cool* (2014) as a sequel to the book under review here. Tudor views globalization of South Korean culture successful with a caveat. In this 2014 book, Tudor points out that the nature of youth culture is seeking something new persistently, and this faddish property is threatening the survival of the Korean wave. The global popularity of Korean youth culture was possible by new digital media rather than traditional mass media. Psy’s “Gangnam style” became well-known because of millions of YouTube views and instant online conversations. This logic for bottom-up popularity is different from how traditionally dominant culture, such as Japanese culture and western culture, earn popularity – in a top-down manner. As long as the Korean wave formats keep inventing themselves and widening their audiences, the Korean wave could remain young and exciting in the current fragmented cultural realms.

Part V, titled More of “us,” less of “them”, discusses what aspects make Koreans in-group people and out-group people. Defensive nationalism (Chapter 24) examines the sources of Korean national pride. One is hostility towards Japanese colonization (during 1910-1945) and the other is pride from big fandom surrounding national sports team in the World Cup or the Summer/Winter Olympics. This is made possible by the fact that roughly 50 million South Koreans speaking a unique language called Korean are concentrated in a heavily populated area roughly the size of the U.S. state of Indiana. “Given Korea’s history of invasion, division, and war – and long status as a pawn in the game of larger powers” (p.121), it is not surprising that Koreans strive for strong oneness, which could have the consequence of marginalizing minority groups. To

illustrate, Korea has not been welcoming descendants from interracial marriages since 1990s as well as children from out-of-wedlock births. As a country that is dubbed “The Impossible Country” (p.10) with “unique, vibrant, rising” (p.10) qualities, Koreans need to address this challenge of marginalizing and discriminating against certain categories of people.

Although the author does not delve into how South Korea continues to develop in conditions that can be very much regarded as postmodernist, it is a worthy topic that can be researched further. While Tudor’s book provides a good foundation, we may need a postmodern perspective on how South Korea intertwines its market growth and globalization combined with postmodern technology and culture. South Korean market development and globalization are not linear but interrelated. These dynamics can be understood as a product of “unprecedented developments in several technologies and watershed transformations in culture” (Firat and Dholakia 2006, p. 123). Market development in the postmodernist era can occur with the forces of globalization intersecting with the fragmentation of culture and technology. Kia and Samsung, for example, keep their youthful brand personalities with hyperreality by going to places all over the world to enchant their globally diverse consumers. Korean e-sports brands, such as Lineage and Dungeon Fighter, create the borderless enclavization of massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG). Korea’s history of invasion, division, and war encourages cultural influx and multiplicities to capture wide audience attention through various narratives with movies, TV shows, and pop music.

South Korean market development is possible thanks to the weaving of globalization and technology. This knowhow can be disseminated to other developing countries and possibly create developmental impacts. South Korea successfully combatted poverty and established systems for sustainable growth. As a consequence, it changed from a recipient nation to a donor nation of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)’s Development Assistance Committee (DAC), an achievement worthy of being celebrated. Unlike other recipient countries, war-torn South Korea leveraged foreign aid strategically to assimilate technology as well as to establish modern education and political systems.

The Korean diaspora can be a source of market development in the new era. South Korea has less than 50 million people speaking its unique language, with its own unique Hangul alphabet. It is geographically a peninsula next to North Korea and located between influential major countries of China and Japan. This condition was not originally favorable

to exchange of knowledge and to promote wide-ranging international trade. To address this challenge, the Korean diaspora helped to develop new technologies and to build well-known brands such as Hyundai, Kia, and Samsung. In addition, foreign educated Koreans were able to read a diversity-preferring entertainment market and set up entertainment management companies to organize the Korean wave, such as award-winning movies, K-pop songs, and TV shows.

In addition, the Korean wave can thrive with influences from other cultures. Firat and Dholakia (2006) suggest five components of processes associated with postmodern conditions: fragmentation, decentering, juxtaposition, hyperreality, and difference. This framework might be useful for better understanding how cultural creativity evolves with market. To illustrate, multi-person online role-playing games made by South Korean companies are enjoyed in worldwide game-based enclaves with avatars, and K-pop music videos with phantasmagoria images are consumed in a ubiquitous fashion. Technology brands and high openness to innovation in South Korea could keep thriving via postmodern cultural creativity.

Clearly, Tudor's book helps enhance our understanding of how a capitalist market economy has developed at a nation state level. As a native Korean-speaking scholar and a first-time reader of a book on South Korea written in English, I found reading this book quite pleasant. It may come from Tudor's journalistic writing style combined with eye-catching titles and leading sentences. To illustrate, he used the rhetoric to portray dynamics and nuances, such as *In the hours not spent working (Part IV)*, instead of leisure time, and *More of "us," less of "them" (Part V)*, rather than collectivistic culture. In addition, inclusion of many interviews provides a palpable sense of reality, and the short length of chapters is effective in capturing and holding the reader's attention.

The single-level analysis rooted in modernization theory, however, does not capture the complex picture of Korean market development and globalization. For example, The Silk Road was a historically important international trade route based on geographic connections. The Jewish diaspora across the world has been operating in a globalized capitalist economy early on before establishing their nation state. In the postmodern era, storytelling about market development and globalization should be multifaceted. The power of narrative shapes not only who you are but also where you are heading. A young British man's book on a country of "the other" is questioning market narratives, and future scholars could address how to weave multifarious strands of market development and globalization in the new era, an era that might be a closing chapter of

modernity and the start of new chapters – not just about Korea but about the world at large – that are just beginning to be written.

References

- Firat, A. Fuat and Nikhilesh Dholakia (2006), "Theoretical and philosophical implications of postmodern debates: some challenges to modern marketing", *Marketing theory*, 6 (2), 123-62.
- Gallup International (2012), "Global Index of Religiosity and Atheism", (accessed September 7, 2016), [Available at: <http://www.wingia.com/web/files/news/14/file/14.pdf>].
- Hong, Soonkwan and Chang-Ho Kim (2013), "Surfing the Korean wave: a postcolonial critique of the mythologized middlebrow consumer culture in Asia", *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, 16 (1), 53-75.
- Hunt, Lynn (2014), *Writing History in the Global Era*. New York, NY: WW Norton & Company Ltd.
- Morrison, Ken (2006), *Marx, Durkheim, Weber: Formations of modern social thought*. London: Sage.
- OECD (2014), "Hours worked," (accessed September 7, 2016), [Available at: <https://data.oecd.org/emp/hours-worked.htm>].
- Tudor, Daniel, (2014), *A Geek in Korea: Discovering Asia's New Kingdom of Cool*. North Clarendon, VT: Tuttle Publishing.