

Five Questions for Mike Breen

April 11, 2011

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Born in Buckinghamshire, UK, Mike Breen first came to Korea in 1982. He made headlines last year for being on the wrong side of a libel suit from Samsung that stirred world netizens to a furor until the tech giant eventually backed down. Along with writing boat-rocking commentary in the Guardian, the Washington Times or the Korea Times, Breen has authored books on the Reverend Moon, Kim Jong-il and on Korea itself. He also heads up a public relations firm in Seoul. It's a lot to cover in five questions, but we tried.

You're known for writing satirical commentary on Korean culture and society. Knowing that Korea is not particularly fond of outside criticism, do you think this a wise career choice? Or should people just learn to lighten up?

I discovered a secret: Koreans like to be criticized. (Memo to the world: Americans don't). The idea that a foreigner has to show respect for kimchi to operate smoothly here is a myth. That said, no one likes rudeness. I think readers sense that I don't take things too seriously. I'm not a scholar or a policy person. I write social commentary to entertain. If I had my time over again, I would have been a guitarist. I want to flip my column up and play with my teeth like Hendrix. That's why I go for satire from time to time. It's different. As a form of humor, it doesn't exist in

print in Korea. I have some wicked fun with it. Last year, after the president had approved a plan to turn the DMZ into an eco peace park, I wrote a column saying he'd issued instructions that it be turned into a canal. MB Lee, Cheonggyecheon, Grand Canal, four rivers restoration. Get it? I got an email from the head of a DMZ-related NGO saying, like, "omg, this is terrible," and I was, like, "like don't shave your head yet, it's a joke" and he goes, like, "yeeow, you had me."



In 2009, Samsung went after you for a column you wrote satirizing political "gifts." What was it like to wake up that first morning and realize one of the largest companies in the world was suing you for \$1 million?

It came in stages. It began Christmas Day. We'd had lunch en famille with Andy Salmon, the author, and were on our way in two cars to a noraebang. It had just started snowing. The editor called to say Samsung had freaked. Its bosses had taken the satire for a real news story. The Blue House had called too, to say it was inappropriate for the president to be an object of satire. Gotcha! I wasn't too bothered. A few days later, Samsung filed criminal and civil defamation suits. How did I feel then? It is a very strange experience being under attack in public. It's as if there is this great dark engulfing pressure, full of people's angry thoughts – about little you. I'd got used to it as a foreign correspondent in the 80s and 90s. It's not easy, though. One correspondent here cracked up after writing a story alleging election fraud and claimed spooks had put a bomb on her plane. The key to handling such matters is to feel, without deluding yourself, that you are innocent and right. I didn't see it as Samsung, but rather as a curious cumbersome beast prompted into action by a certain tosspot in the control tower. I knew he was in the wrong. I had a five-hour interrogation by prosecutors and Samsung dropped the charges against the paper

and went after me. Then I got angry. I thought, you want a fight, I'll give you one. Whatever happens, I will win and you will lose. I had to think clearly and avoid posturing like a hero of press freedom because I did not want to damage the newspaper or my business – which, ironically, is public relations, not column-writing. Some very well meaning people suggested strategies for solving it quickly. But I wanted to do it with my head held high.

Having been a columnist here for so long, have you seen a change in how receptive your Korean audience is to your sometimes pointed commentary? Do you get much hate mail? And how about the Korea Times? Have they been supportive?

My intended audience in the Korea Times is expatriate. The paper is supportive. In fact, too much so. They run my columns intact, typos an' all. Korean readers seem OK. They are after all more critical of Korea than we foreigners. Where we part ways is over issues like Dokdo. That's because I loathe nationalism. Let me make a distinction. I love countries. In my life I've lived in Yemen, Germany, England, Scotland, America and Korea. I've applied for Korean citizenship. Since the earthquake, I've become a Japanese patriot. I can't talk about Winston Churchill without choking up. I also get choked up over the Marseillaise. I am a proud American, and Canadian, which is a different thing. Two of my brothers are Australian. I think it's cool to be a European. Recently I got emotional reading about Egyptians love of their country. But, nationalism sucks. Speed the day when nations are no more important than provinces and counties are now. I grew up overseas with a Scottish father who couldn't seem to convince foreigners that he wasn't English. I guess that's where it comes from. So, on nationalism stuff, I'll rip into it. I get hateful comments posted on the paper's site for that, but don't pay much attention. Why? Because my position is superior. A nationalist has lower quality values than an internationalist. Once this is pointed out, people know in their heart this is true.

As the head of the Seoul-based PR firm, Insight Communications Consultants, how would you contrast marketing to Korean consumers compared to consumers in the west?

Not too sure about the fabled west. My work experience there was three years on a North Sea oil rig, two years on a farm, in factories, and in a bar in Britain, and a year as a reporter in New York. One peculiar distinction of the Korean market is the role of "public sentiment." I believe this notion has filled the vacuum created by the rapid departure of authoritarian leadership. The current idea of democracy among leaders and decision-makers is not that they are elected to represent their constituents. Rather, they believe they must follow the dictates of "public sentiment," as expressed by the press, NGOs, enough netizens, and mobs on the street. The odd part is there is no such thing as public sentiment. Of my clients, the foreign companies in particular must pay close attention to this invisible beast. I represented Lone Star Funds for two years. Their business got slaughtered by it.

Back in 2004 you wrote the book *The Koreans: Who They Are, What They Want, Where Their Future Lies*. As to the last part of the title, "Where Their Future Lies," how did you do on your soothsaying, looking back seven years later? And are there any new predictions for the future of South Korea?

My track record on predicting specifics in Korea has been worse than the proverbial monkey picking stocks. But I feel I have a nose for the deep trend. In 1986, at a lunch with the US ambassador I said I thought democracy was around the corner. That was because the way I noticed the people around me changing, the people in and out of power. The lunch guests and diplomats looked at me as if I was nuts. In the book, I stuck to two forecasts – the Koreans will keep growing. They've left poverty behind and will never go back there. Second, they will be unified. Even if everyone is against it now, they'll still unify when the moment comes. My prediction now? Something is coming down on the North Korea front in the next 100 years. Remember these words. North Korea will be a democracy one day and its people will be free.



