

Korea: Need for Revival, a New Direction Home

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International Media Association for Peace (IMAP)

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I've been working in this country almost forty years as a journalist and later as a business consultant, so let me say a few things about Korea. I would like to ask the interpreter to bear with me. I'm going to jump around a little bit. As I'm sure you all know, the transformation of this country from the bottom of the world rankings to an advanced democratic state is quite a phenomenon. Korea and Taiwan... Let's say Taiwan is a country. These two countries are the only two in recorded history to have managed five percent annual growth for five decades. It is quite phenomenal.

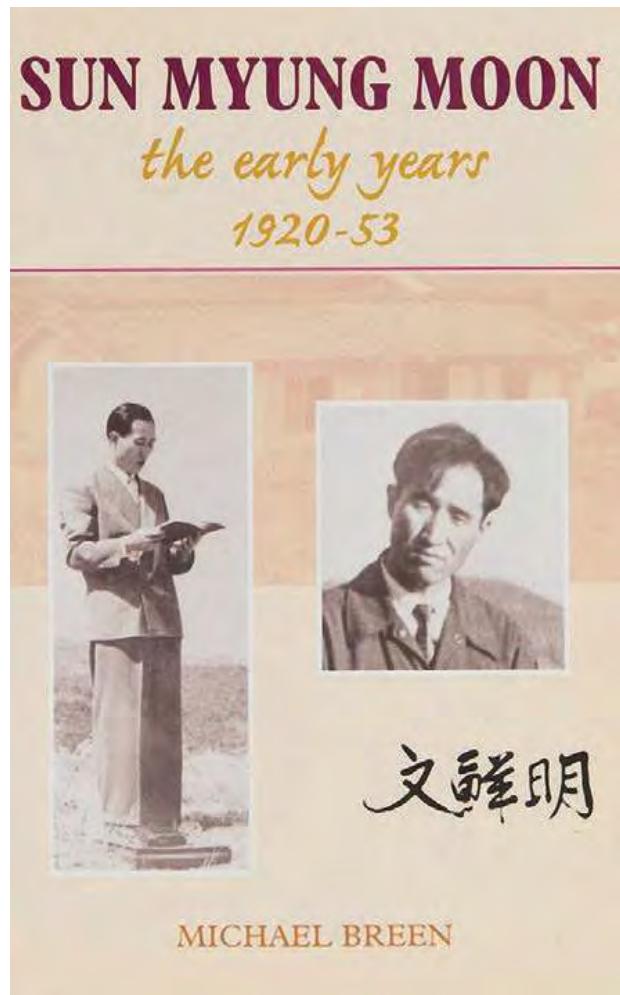
The economic growth here began in 1964 -- ten years after the end of the Korean War, when the government decided on a national strategy of export-oriented industrialization in response to a financial crisis, and they pursued it by five-year plans. If you consider that growth like an assault up a mountain, the decision to do that was the establishment of base camp. Camps one, two, three and four were all marked by annual export targets. There was no overall plan. It was just that as they went along they reached some point and put up a new target.

By 1990 they reached the goal of \$10 billion annual exports, and the foundation for the country's future growth was set. This country went into the OECD [Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development] in 1996, which is quite remarkable. As I say, it all happened according to no predetermined plan. There was no textbook. There were no American advisers. There were no British advisors; this is proof of a God who loves Koreans.

Because they were afraid of him, the bureaucrats fixated on the president's target. He just set numerical targets -- per capita income, annual exports, etcetera. Give me a plan to get there. So they did that through a process of trial and error. I'm not an expert on this, and we've had some previous experts talking about this in a broader context, so I won't repeat what they said. What I am curious about is where the energy comes from. What's behind this? Because I don't think policy explains everything. Here is where I think it comes from: The Koreans in the 1950s were an angry, dislocated and very desperate people. So many of them were hungry. Now the traditional greeting is An-nyeong-ha-sim-niga? which literally means, Are you at peace? It used to be, Meog-eoss-oe-yo Have you eaten? That was how they said hello to one another.

The threat of renewed war hung over their heads and they were all desperate to change the horrendous present for a better future. I think that desperation was the first condition for Korean development. But how do you direct that desire? [North Korea and South Korea] had been unified roughly along its current borders for one thousand three hundred years. Forty years before the period I am talking about, the Japanese came in and ruled the country, so it was then a colonial state. They were liberated, divided in

two, and then the two sides had a war with each other.



Some foreign influence

So where do you direct that desperation? They were liberated from Japanese colonialism. The Koreans then became familiar with a new kind of foreigner, the American soldier. So these black and white foreigners were youngsters who in the Korean culture should have been bowing to them, showing deference to them. In fact, the Koreans found themselves looking up to these people, not just because they were physically taller but because they had things. So these desperate people, looking for a better life, now saw what they wanted. Around that time, this encounter with the American soldiers led to a shift away from the Confucian view of life (which explains why Korea had been, economically speaking, useless for centuries) toward a new materialism.

But then, there was a final ingredient that they were missing, and that was leadership. In 1961, the Koreans got the leader that they needed. This is a tough point to argue because modern Koreans see that leader, Army General Park Chung-hee, as an illiberal dictator, which he was. But it was he above all others who set the vision and inspired, bullied, beat and enticed the Koreans out of rice paddies and into "Silicon Valley." Some have described him as an economic warrior.

Park had been an officer in the Japanese military and as the commander-in-chief now of the economy, he employed the same management style, which the Japanese learned from the Prussians, which involved setting objectives, giving his lieutenants very broad scope to take the initiative to meet those objectives, promoting those who succeeded and firing those who didn't. The lieutenants followed the same process with the Korean conglomerates. The hero of all this is Hyundai. I am sure you've all heard of it. They were the nation builder.

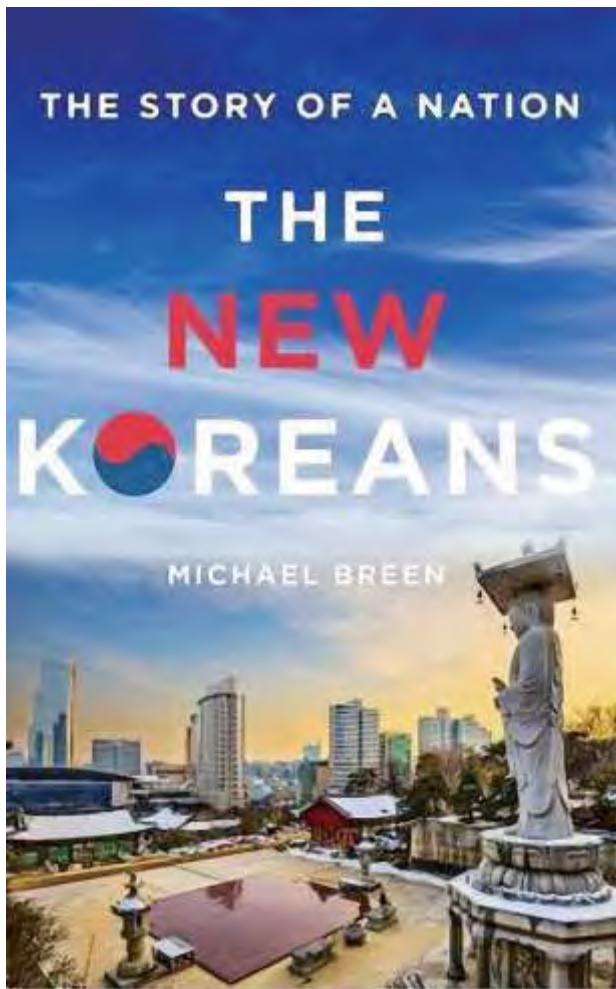
Often not calculated -- happiness

That was then. What about now? Now I would say that modern developed Korea needs you, the organization that you are proposing [The International Association for Peace and Economic Development (IAED)]. I won't talk about the economic need so much because it's not my area, but it does need help with values.

Here is my argument: Korea has almost the lowest birth rate in the world, if you don't count countries like Monaco, where they are all retirees anyway, not people having babies. It has one of the highest suicide rates in the world. These two statistics send a very loud message. The people of this country have a huge problem with unhappiness.

The turning point of this misery index was in the 1997–1998 Korean financial crisis. Before that, the Koreans felt they had purpose. They all worked hard together for a common purpose. After that, they learned what we and other countries already knew -- that you are competing with each other. You are not cooperating; you are competing with each other. Something went out of the air; some kind of magic went out of the air for Koreans.

The issue is of course more complex than that. The Koreans are very group-oriented, and they are acutely sensitive to what they think other people think of them. Combine that with the fact that their parents interfere in big decisions in their children's lives -- like who to marry and what job to get, what university to go to and what to study there. Then you get a lot of very unhappy, unfulfilled people who are not doing what they want to do. And because of the competitive environment they feel like losers.



Finding the right formula

Where does IAED come in? I am simplifying this picture, and I apologize to the Koreans here if any of you feel insulted by this. I think this country needs a new ethic. It needs a vision to live by. I will give you a quick example. The United States of America, one reason -- its problems aside -- and I think some Americans have forgotten this -- but one reason you are so inspiring for the rest of the world is that you articulate in your Constitution an objective in life for government and people that speaks to the human heart, which is the pursuit of happiness.

A good economy -- somebody getting a good job and making a lot of money -- is part of that. It contributes to that goal. The Koreans were raised to believe that the ultimate goal is the economic development of the nation. Their purpose in life was to serve that end. But the thing is, the result you see is a fantastically developed country that doesn't make for happy individual people. It's not the right formula. There's something missing in the formula. So the Koreans need something else and they need something new, and I think that's where you [International Media Association for Peace] can come in.