



Korea Unmasked

Won-bok Rhie , Jung Un (Translator) , Louis Choi (Translator)

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ABOUT THIS BOOK: Korea Unmasked is an illustrated book that presents a hilarious and often unflattering look at Korean society and its people. It brings the reader a fascinating exploration of the Korean mindset and weaves together history, sociology and cultural anthropology. The book introduces an insight in subjects like; Korean history, traditions, culture, food, life, economy, tension between South and N. Korea and more. The book will introduce the reader to Korea and their people and discuss many subjects and attitudes that are sometimes unknown or misunderstood by westerners. The insightful discussions about Korea and differences/similarities with other countries emphasized on the neighbors China, Japan, will help to clear the picture who the Korean people really are. The author, Won-bok Rhie provides a delightful and humorous portrait of the Korean people. It's comical yet serious well-written and informative pictured by the author. If you only have time for one book about Korea, this is the book! ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Won-bok Rhie is one of Korea's most famous cartoonists. After achieved a bachelor's degree in architecture at Seoul National University, he studied graphic design in Germany and obtained a degree of Dipl. Designer. He is the author of numerous comic books introducing historical, cultural and economic subjects. He have also written many comic series in Korea newspapers and magazines. Korea Unmasked is part of a 9-volume series of comic books about several European countries, Korea and Japan, which all became bestsellers in Korea. Rhie is also a professor of graphic design in University in Seoul, Korea. In 1993, he achieved a prestigious Award in recognition of his development and contributions to the Korean cartoon industry. From 1998 to 2000, he also served as the president of the Korean Society of Cartoon and Animation Studies.

Korea Unmasked Details

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From Reader Review Korea Unmasked for online ebook

Ashley Jackson says

I really enjoyed this book! I noticed that it was published in 2002. I would be interested into how technology that has developed in the years since have affected Korea as well. An updated version would be wonderful but I love the info presented in this book!

Jakub says

This is the best account I've read of what South Korea is really about. This is largely because it is the first account that I've read that avoids the tired clichés and stock phrases that are inculcated into most Koreans from birth. Even famous Korean professors who have taught at Harvard (Song, Byung Nak) still repeat tired tropes like "Korean is special because it has four distinct seasons, and this has forced its people to be more adaptable than other nations," but this book manages to avoid all that.

Because the author has travelled and written extensively about other nations, he is able to provide something approximating the perspective of an outsider looking in, even though he is a born-and-bred Korean. He does an excellent job of illustrating and explaining thousands of years of Korean history and tying them together with accounts of the Korean mindset and attitude.

I read this book before coming to Korea, and the knowledge I gained from it has served me well. I read it again a few months ago, and found it even more insightful after 2 years spent living in Korea. I doubt there is any better introduction to South Korea and its people.

Jorge Matheos says

Rhi Won Bok's philosophy: If the facts don't add up to support your hypothesis, simply make them up or lie. His Mainland-Peninsula-Island hypothesis is unique, but he goes at great lengths to find other peninsular cultures that are as insular as Korea has historically been. He even goes so far as to compare the Korean "pure-blood" myth that has predominated only since the late 19th and early 20th Century to 20th Century Balkan nationalism.

There is of course little basis for blood-nationalism hypothesis in the Balkans (nation has been historically defined by religion and to a lesser extent by language into the 20th Century). Turkish speaking Christians became Greeks, Serb-Croat speaking Muslims became Turks and later "Bosniaks" and only in the Post-War period did Slavic-speaking Bulgarians in Macedonia become "Macedonians" in a multi-ethnic state made up of Macedonians, Albanians, Serbs, and Vlachs.

With this fundamental centerpiece of Rhi's theory shown to be largely without strong historical support for valid comparison, his work remains a fun but amateur collection of generalizations that serves as a basic introduction to Modern Korea. His commentary on the industrialization of Korea, politics, and economics is useful for its simplification for new-comers to Korean history. It is a comic-book, after all.

Luiz Gustavo Givisiez says

A little bit out-of-date, but still a fun way of learning about the Korean mindset, culture and history.

Meri says

This is a fantastic, easily readable digest of Korean culture and mindset. Unlike other books I've read about understanding Korea, this one puts Koreans in context, giving a short overview of the historical and geographical roots of the Korean mindset. A few of the statements it makes are a bit sweeping--I don't think that all peninsular people are stubborn--but it's pretty spot on about a lot of Korean traits that I have noticed. A great overview for anyone trying to understand Korea a little better.

Vivienne says

It's a great book if you're interested in more, than K-pop.

Shayna Ross says

This presents a pretty hard look at Korea (both North and South) in regards to the country, politics, history, and social climate. It can come off as dry if you were looking for fun topics (along the lines of entertainment), but understanding how Korean people is essential to understanding how the country. If you intend to move or visit Korea, but are baffled by their temperament and way of life, this may be a good resource to gain an understanding of how the Koreans identify themselves.

Maria says

This graphic novel attempts to explain the Korean mindset, it's history and culture in simple clear terms. No big deal, you can easily cover than in 200+ pages...

Why I started it: Graphic novel, looked easy to read and I'm always interested in learning more about Korea and how Koreans see themselves..

Why I finished it: Written by a Korean, this book not only explains how they see themselves but it opens up and reveals some standard Korean prejudices and cultural historical interpretations. We all have them, and it's not until you see another's that you can more clearly see your. After finishing Rhie's book I really want to read his explanation of American history and culture to Koreans.

John says

KOREA UNMASKED is a 200+ page comic book that provides a fun, non-academic look at Korean culture and society. The illustrations are admittedly pretty childish and goofy, but they force readers to slow down and absorb the material at a more effective pace, resulting in an increased retention of the information being conveyed.

The quality of the information itself varies from topic to topic. Some sections of the book are extremely helpful, whereas other parts might be seen as controversial. For example, in explaining the evolution of any given culture, the author places great importance on the type of land mass its people inhabit. In other words, the Japanese developed a certain way because they live on an island (like the British), the Chinese developed a certain way because they live upon the mainland (like the French), and the Koreans developed a certain way because they live on a peninsula (like the Italians). These are problematic comparisons to say the least. Unfortunately, the author is guilty of frequent generalizations and over-simplifications of complicated issues. For example, he claims that the reason Koreans have such a hard time eating foreign food is because of their addiction to hot spices. That might be true to a small extent; but the bigger reality is that many Koreans have a very narrow definition as to what constitutes a proper meal (same as most people), and they are generally very sensitive to foods that are high in salt, sugar, or grease.

As I mentioned, the author of this book primarily deals in stereotypes, but I'm not sure how else you go about presenting an entire country's heritage and culture as a 200-page comic book. Still, this book is sure to send members of the uptight PC-crowd into a tizzy.

More than ten years have passed since KOREA UNMASKED was written, and some parts are a little out-of-date. Furthermore, this book was only ever meant to explain the mindset of the older Korean generation, whose outlook on life was fashioned from the ashes of the Korean War. So, much of what the book talks about is only immediately apparent in Koreans who are middle-aged or older. Still, the book provides a good many valuable insights, and it's a great place to start if you want to learn about Korea and its people.

Johnny says

Calling *Korea Unmasked* a graphic novel may be something of a misnomer. It is presented in a graphic format resembling a lengthy comic strip, but it is not (as most graphic novels would be) fiction. Rather, it is more like a graphic essay about culture. I learned a lot from this book (recommended by a Korean friend) and I spend a lot of time with Koreans.

The first major point that stood out to me was the author's comparison of three Asian cultures around one word respectively. He presents the Chinese culture as unified and builds his presentation around the character for "yi" or "ei" (p. 21). He demonstrates the unified nature, but also the idea of "only" as in "me only" and the selfish desire for survival in Chinese culture. He contrasts that with the Japanese character for "wa" (peace or harmony, p. 40), demonstrating that honoring personal space and refusing to shame others is part of this unifying cultural truth. Then, he comes to the Korean idea of "choong" and shows how loyalty and faithfulness (much like the biblical idea of righteousness--p. 45).

He demonstrates how the peninsular nature of Korea's geography led to a distinctive survivalist form where orthodoxy, legitimacy, form, and stubbornness marked what was necessary for Korea to survive as a people. He demonstrated how the emphasis on the original form made family lineage and racial purity so important to Koreans (and even answered my questions about why "original" and "authentic" were such important code words in Korean culture--p.68).

In terms of religion, it was very interesting to consider how Confucianism had helped the people cope with justice and moral order, but left them hungering for some sense of a reward or afterlife. So, it is no wonder that Christianity's assurances about life after death, heavenly reward, and even a sprinkling of prosperity gospel fit into their culture so successfully (p. 90).

I also learned about how, prior to the Japanese occupation, the class-based society had used a state examination (for the upper class) similar to the Manchu test in China that would determine whether a young man entered the gateway of the country's elite (pp. 111-112). He didn't compare it to the Manchu examination, but it seems a clear parallel to me.

I was ignorant about the royal family's exile to Ganghwa Island during the Mongolian occupation and hadn't seen this in the context of the imperial dynasty surrendering the people and territory to the Mongolians in order to preserve their own necks (p. 120). That was eye-opening. Surrendering to China as a tributary during the Joseon Period wasn't a surprise, but it was cleverly presented in the book (p. 121). Of course, I hadn't thought about the removal of the ROK government to Busan (sometimes Pusan) during the 1950s as being the same kind of retreat to protect the ruling class as the cowardly exile in Ganghwa centuries before (p. 122).

The book also expressed in a comical way the Korean fear of being left behind or letting someone get ahead of another. In one sense it is an extreme form of egalitarianism but it is not a central government leveling out the masses; it is all the masses trying to catch up (p. 126). This probably explains some of the excesses in drinking, gambling, studying, and working that typifies the Korean culture (p. 146).

Another surprise to me was the even-handed way in which the author gave credit to the military regime of Park Chung-Hee as laying the foundation for Korea's incredible economic growth since the '80s but pays extensive attention to the assassination after 18 years of military rule (p. 138). Rather, the author seems to reserve his harshest words for the Chun administration which followed (p. 140).

I feel like I learned quite a bit from this book (especially the latter chapter on education--pp. 162-172) and expect to read it on many occasions over the next few years.

Mag says

This graphic, non-fiction comic book with dynamic and funny illustrations is a fascinating look at different aspects of Korean culture and lifestyle. The author clarifies Korean history and shows how the country's peninsular shape and mighty neighbours helped to shape its national identity. He tackles Korean language and customs and points out how they are different from those of the neighbouring countries of China and Japan. Politics and the nation's struggle to become a democracy are also discussed as well as Koreans' high regard for education and the country's amazing economic development. All this in a highly entertaining form.

Written by a Korean who spent a lot of time outside the country, this book was supposedly a bestseller in Korea, which is probably the best recommendation in itself. I really enjoyed it.

Jules says

This is a very easy read. The book is written in a comic style form and is so entertaining. As a second generation immigrant, it really sheds light on why our parents behave they do. I have a much better understanding of my native country.

The author is really clever in addressing the religious, cultural, social, and political aspects of Korea as a country and the its people in a very non-boring, entertaining style. There were many "ah-ha!" and "that's so true!" moments.

This is a must read if you're a 2nd generation Korean, or if you have friends, girlfriend, boyfriend, or spouses from Korea, and want to better understand them.

Emily says

This book would give you sufficient knowledge about Korea, its society and its culture. It comes with funny comics for easy and better understanding why the people behave like that.

For people who have visited Korea before, they would find themselves agreeing to this book a couple of times. And for those who yet to visit the country, this would give them insight about it (plus it would come in handy in case you need more knowledge about North-South stuff! ;D).

Barry says

Mr. Rhie does an excellent job of explaining the why behind aspects of Korean culture that stand out to a foreigner. Using history and culture as guides, he lays out the basics of Korean culture and how those aspects came to be formed. One remarkable feature of this book is how he compares Korea with other nations and cultures around the world, and this gives the book both depth and validity as well as helping his explanations make more sense. Originally written in Korean, the translators have done an excellent job of bringing life into the English version giving this book even more appeal. Despite being Korean himself, Mr. Rhie is willing to peel back the veneer off his mother culture and give an honest assessment of the pros and cons of life in Korea.

This is an excellent book and is definitely worth reading.

Matthew says

For what it is, it's wonderful. One must take into consideration that this is a non-fiction comic book and as such, it takes some liberties for the sake of brevity. We are talking about summing up a whole culture into less than 250 pages. Comments such as "this book is too general" or "it takes too many liberties" failed to see what this book is intended to be - a general overall for people with virtually no background knowledge of Korea. To that end, this book excels.

I also commend this book in its comparison with Japan, China, and America. The author has taken a vast amount of information and condensed it into very approachable subjects such as cultural identity, leadership and economic growth.

Let's not forget that this book is driven by it's artistic style which is quite pleasant and not distracting the least. For an animator, the script is well written and translated which includes very native-English references and subtle jokes that demonstrate his dedication to the project.

All in all, it's a great non-academic read that is recommended to anyone looking to take an introduction to Korea without having to dig through countless volumes of ancient history and poorly translated, nationalistic rhetoric.
