

# **INTERVIEW**

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## **WRITING ABOUT THE TWO KOREAS**

*Interview with Daniel Tudor*

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## *Interview with Daniel Tudor*

*Daniel Tudor is Foreign Policy Press Advisor to the Blue House in Seoul, South Korea, and the author of Korea: The Impossible Country (2012) and North Korea Confidential (2015). He holds degrees from the University of Oxford and is a former Korea Correspondent for the Economist. He is also the co-founder of The Booth, a craft beer company.*

*The Journal's junior staff editor Kendra Hodapp sat down with Daniel Tudor to discuss the Two Koreas.*

### **Y: Could you please briefly elaborate on your background, interest in Korea, and your current position in the Blue House?**

DT: I came to Korea in 2002 for the World Cup at the invitation of my best friend in university, a Korean. It was the best time in my whole life. It was like going from black and white TV to color TV. It brought this new dimension to my life. After I graduated, I decided I would spend a year here and taught English, as many people do. Over time I got a few different jobs, but it was always this love for Korea that keeps me here, or when I've left [I think] "Ah! I miss it, I want to go back!". Korean society emphasizes "jǒng," helping each other, being like a brother and sister. Of course, not everyone lives up to that. I am not saying I do either, but the fact that a country, or a culture, emphasizes that means something. Say, in a place like England, we're very ironic. We cover everything in layers of irony. There is sincerity, warmth, and love, but it is hidden and it feels like there is less of it. Whereas in Korea it is very direct, and you can be direct with your emotions. I appreciate that.

### **Y: What is your current position in the Blue House?**

DT: I advise the foreign press team about the international press.

### **Y: What to and to not write, essentially?**

DT: Well, *they* are not doing the writing: journalists do the writing. For example, we've got a press conference coming. What kind of situations might come up? If you were a journalist, what would you want to ask? And sometimes it is

just ordinary things like making press releases. Sometimes very simple boring things, sometimes very interesting things.

**Y: You've written several books on the topic of Korea, both North and South, and in ways that explored aspects of both not typically explored. What got you interested in these topics and what was your process in transferring these ideas to text?**

DT: First of all, I was always interested in politics, since I was ten or eleven. Second, being a journalist, inevitably I have to write about those topics. I have to be interested in those topics. Over time, you come to know a lot. And I've always wanted to write a book about South Korea. There was no "big book" in English on South Korea, except maybe Michael Breen's book [The Koreans]. And then there was nothing else for 15 years or maybe more, though Mike has recently released an update named The New Koreans. Korea has changed. 15 years of change in Korea is like 100 years of change in my country. There is a whole lot of new material to write about. So it was necessary that someone did it. If you think something is necessary and you have the ability to do it, then it becomes your duty to do it.

As for the North Korea book, I was never really that interested in North Korea as a journalist. The only kind of story that people seemed to want was 'fat dictator' Kim Jong Un and his big rockets, or Kim Jong Il getting holes in one playing golf, and so on. There is also so much groundless speculation about North Korea, with no criteria for making even the boldest assertions. There are plenty of journalists who just make things up. It's not usually the journalists' fault – it's the editor in London or New York, who wants something 'sexy' to generate clicks.

**Y: Additionally, there is the assumption that all published work is factual and a large bulk of this published text depicts Kim Jong-un as crazy.**

DT: That's really dangerous as well. He's not irrational. He's bad, and his system is bad, but he's not a crazy person. The belief that he's crazy is greatly reinforcing the idea that the US should preemptively strike North Korea. Conventional deterrents don't work if someone is crazy, right? But he's not crazy, he's not going to attack first. He wants to live, and he wants to stay in power. That family has been in charge for seven decades, in spite of the fall of the Soviet Union, famine, the rise of South Korea and China, and two hereditary successions. You don't achieve that by being crazy. Kim Jong Un,

like his father and grandfather, is crazy like a fox. But the Americans seem to be convincing themselves that he is crazy. This is extremely dangerous.

[About my book] I didn't really want to write about North Korea. Then my publisher contacted me and said: "Can you do a book on NK?" I drafted a reply basically saying, "No." I almost hit send and then, I thought, maybe my friend James [Pearson], a journalist who specializes in North Korea, might like to do one together? But it was never going to be a book about defectors and it was never going to be a book about "evil Kim Jong-un's big rockets," because there is a lot of [publications about] that and it's boring. But if you focus on the marketization [of the North Korean economy, which shows] how ordinary people in North Korea are living, then we'll do it. So we did.

**Y: These days, North Korea has been an especially hot topic. In your most recent book *North Korea Confidential* you mention briefly that there is a lack of literature on the "real" North Korea. Why do you think there is this absence, both among scholars and the public?**

DT: It's extremely hard to get information about North Korea. Can you survey 1,000 people and estimate Kim Jong Un's approval rating? No, because you can't go there and just wander around talking to people. Can you know where inflation is, or unemployment? No, because they probably can't (or don't) even measure these things themselves. Can you know how many people are in their prison camps, to any real degree of accuracy? No, because they don't want you to know.

At the same time, North Korea looks very "exotic", as well as provocative and fascinating. There's naturally huge demand for knowledge about North Korea, and yet as I said, there's a huge lack of proper information. So bullshit fills the gap. More bullshit is written about North Korea than anywhere else in the world.

**Y: So you did talk more about the public in that book, and how the public is responding to this in the market, and things that people don't talk about. Do you think the current political situation will affect the "new capitalism" of the North Korean black markets, as you mentioned in your book?**

DT: I suppose sanctions could hurt the 'new capitalism'. But I also think North Korea is very heavily sanctioned already. The big one is oil. I think that oil sanctions would make life harder not just for the newly emerging business people, but for the population in general. But really I don't think an oil embargo is genuinely possible because Russia, regardless of what's happened in a legal

sense, will give them oil. As I said, North Korea is heavily sanctioned already and people have become very resourceful in part because of that. They are operating as entrepreneurs under a really tough, idiosyncratic environment, and there are sanctions imposed from the outside as well. So, North Korean entrepreneurs are highly resourceful. If I could have a chance to do business with a former North Korean entrepreneur-defector, I wouldn't say no.

**Y: at do you think a North Korean social revolution will look like? Especially with those markets.**

DT: It's kind of starting already. People are more cynical about authority. People are taking matters into their own hands in terms of making a living, and are more interested in foreign culture. It's well documented now. They like watching South Korean TV, foreign films, makeup, cosmetics, clothing. The way young North Korean couples act, the *aegyo* kind of stuff. That's more of an emerging thing in North Korea because of the influence of South Korean TV. And guys are expected to be more romantic. North Korea has changed the way that married couples and families work, the old dynamic of the man of the house and the woman indoors. Now, it is more likely that she is making more money than him, and he is somewhat useless, because he's still working at a state-owned organization that pays him very little. (Though nowadays he can bribe his way out of the SOE and join his wife in profitable work).

Returning to the South Korean case before I end my interview, as someone working in the Blue House (although in a new position) and a long-term resident of South Korea, do you think South Korea has fostered a uniquely political environment, particularly in light of the recent candlelight vigils for the impeachment of Park Geun Hye? What would you identify as the major contributing factor towards this phenomenon?

I think Korea is different in a good way. Up until last year I was worried about Korean democracy. I thought that there was this slow drift towards what could end up being a kind of South Korean Putinism, where you still get to vote, but subtle semi-authoritarian controls make it very unlikely that there'd ever be a change in the government.

**Y: I think it even could be simply complacency.**

Yeah. The average person didn't seem to show much interest in politics. At the same time, press freedom was declining. You had quite an authoritarian minded government. Lots of things controlled by tight personal networks without the proper process being followed. And then suddenly out of nowhere, this scandal comes up. To have a million or however many people there in

the streets was really extraordinary. It was quite beautiful. Now, there are some negative aspects to this as well. The big one being, at what point does it become mob rule? I don't think for a minute that Park Geun-hye is innocent, but even if she had been, would she have survived? I don't know. So, this idea that the will of the people is above everything, is a bit scary sometimes. But protest is the safety net of Korean democracy, as there is a huge amount of authoritarian-mindedness among the traditional leadership class, and they sometimes need reining in.

And what would you identify as major contributing factor to this phenomenon?

Surprisingly, considering the existence of North Korea, throughout the history of Korea there have been impressive examples of the expression of people power. There have been revolutions and big protests historically. There is a long-standing culture of it. I don't know much about China—but in China there appears to be more of an acceptance of injustice. Again, this is an outsider view: I don't know much about China. But when I talk to Chinese friends and there is something that's been going on, whether some protest, or civil servant who has been expropriated, or related to someone's business, there seems to be this attitude of "well that's just what happens." In Korea, people will get mad. I don't know why that is, but people will get mad and they will protest. They will give it everything. I interviewed Park Won-soon, the mayor of Seoul, about democratization. Perhaps if you're Chinese, you would vehemently oppose this statement, but anyway here's what he said: at Tiananmen Square, when the government cracked down upon protesters, they gave up. Whereas in Korea, protesting just continues.