

# **SENSE OF A PLACE: TOURIST'S ACCOUNT OF THE POLITICAL HISTORY AND SOCIETY OF SOUTH KOREA**

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## **Abstract**

South Korea occupies a unique position in the strategic map of Asia. The breath-taking natural beauty of the peninsula, the Confucian heritage of its society and the indomitable spirit of the Korean people reflected in the great pace of industrialization that took place from the rubble of the Korean War – all make the country an intriguing place in the mind of an international traveller. This is a qualitative paper based on social narrative where the authors have offered an account of South Korea's political history and society from a tourist's point of view. The authors opine that an appreciation of the political, historical and societal background and insights make tourism a very pleasurable experience.

**Key Words:** South Korea, Tourism and Nation Branding, Socio-Political History.

## **Introduction**

Nation branding is a significant topic of interest to practitioners and academics. Countries tend to apply branding as a tool for improving their image in a globally competitive marketplace. The practice of branding cannot be regarded as an individual act, but it is rather a holistic set of strategies that makes it work as intended. However, the process and framework of nation branding has an automatic and obvious relationship with the historical background of a nation. In other words, socio-political history shapes up the development of nation branding. This study has taken South Korea as an example of a country for discussion in this historical context.

## Methodology

This is a qualitative study written from the tourist's point of view and based on the social narrative. Social narrative as a method is well accepted to outline the historical make-up of a country (Cruikshank, 2000). Rather than using the conventional methodologies used in business research, this study has employed techniques used in ethnographic research such as personal observation and informal interviews. Conducted in South Korea, the informal interviews were unstructured; they were undertaken with the help of open ended questions with respondents based on randomized selection. The research is based on secondary sources and primary observation of situations with a clear focus on country branding and tourism. Rationale for choosing informal interviews was its flexibility and free flow of conversation that usually lead to the understanding of in-depth human thoughts (Bernard, 2011; Haviland et al., 2010). Although rooted in sociological traditions, personal observation as a method has now gone beyond studying the behaviour of a specific community to study interactions in marketing situations (Neelankavil, 2007).

Following randomized selection, unstructured interviews were conducted with twenty tourists in South Korea to understand their perceptions of the country in the context of its socio-political background. More importantly, due to the importance of historical issues in this study, extended review of existing literature including newspaper articles or editorials, journal articles, online information, published official reports as secondary source of data and information have been used. This was intentionally done keeping in mind that secondary sources for data collection sometimes offer more validity than the primary sources in the context of marketing research (McDonald and Wilson, 2011; Wilson et al., 2009).

## Literature Review

Historically, Korea embraced a culture different from that of China and Japan, though for a long period of its history the Koreans had to put up with Chinese and Japanese domination. During the Ming dynasty period, Korea was ruled by the Goryeo and then the Joseon dynasty. Both paid tribute to Ming China. The Japanese invasion of Korea in the 1590s was the first attempt to alter this strategic power balance. Perplexed by the rapid capitulation of Korea, Ming China intervened in the war and drove the Japanese out. The financial burden of the campaign was a huge drain on the Ming dynasty, and favoured the Manchu Qing dynasty, which took control of the middle kingdom (Peterson and Margulies, 2010). In the intervening years the Korean potentates tried to assert their independence, only to be undone by two successive invasions of the Manchus, who again brought Korea back under the Chinese sphere of influence by the early seventeenth century. Korea continued to be ruled by the Joseon dynasty, but the decline of China brought the European powers – especially Russia – into the fray. Korea had to fight back against French and US military intervention in the late nineteenth century (Choi, 2008). In the late nineteenth century the Qing dynasty in China had to give up on its relationship with Korea and ceded effective control of the peninsula to the Japanese, who drove out the encroaching Russians in the Russo-Japanese war. There followed a period of Japanese domination, which only ended after the Second World War (Holcombe, 2010). In the post-war chess game for control of the peninsulas, the Soviet Union and the US set up their client states in the North and South respectively. The North's attempt to invade South Korea was repulsed by the US troops, who invaded and almost reached the Chinese border (Hart-Landsberg, 1998). But they were driven back as the Chinese intervened

in an almost identical re-enactment of the Imjin wars in the 1590s, only this time the capitalist state held on south of the armistice line. Since then South Korea has developed first under US-protected military dictatorships and then under a democratic system of government. Seoul (Hanseong in ancient Korean folklore), its capital, has developed into a bustling metropolis (Cumings, 1997).

Korean culture and politics is very interesting because of the fact that the survival of the country has very much depended on the balance of ambitions of the Chinese and Japanese on both sides of the country. The US military presence in South Korea is a balancing factor in the Sino-Japanese struggle for supremacy in the region, while the regime in North Korea has held on by a calculated show of defiance and by playing off the Chinese against the US (Seth, 2011).

On a separate note, in the seminal paper 'A Theory of Tourism' of 1958, German publicist and author Hans Magnus Enzensberger opined that tourism is nothing but an attempt to realize the dream effected by romanticism projected on to the distant and far away. He believed that tourism is an important fascination of the modern culture. This theory was historically motivated by the then West Germany, so the concept of tourism has associations with the mood of nostalgia and escapism (Gemunden and Johnson, 2001).

Moreover, separately, the term "brand" itself originated from the Germanic or Old Norse root meaning "burn" with the theme of lasting impression in mind (Healey, 2008). This can be a named product or service, a trademark referring to the abstract sense or a customer's belief about a product or service. A brand is an intellectual possession expressed as a word, name, figure, design or any attribute that spots the distinctiveness between sellers of similar products or services. The word "branding" denotes a positive feature of distinguishable promises which ties a product to its customer (Aaker, 1996).

The notion of branding has been applied broadly to products and services, though destination branding is a comparatively new topic in the branding related discussions (Blain et al., 2005). Theoretically, product branding and nation branding represent clear contrast. Simon Anholt was the person who popularized the term "Nation Branding", which referred to the use of the strategies of corporate marketing for individual countries. The notion of nation brand and nation branding represents dissimilarity. A nation characteristically has brand image, even without nation branding (Fan, 2006). Branding provides a corporate or commercial platform on which a specific nation or country can perform. This implies that the reputation of a country as well as aggregate citizenship behaviour is critical to a nation's strategic development. Nation or country branding is the positive and mindful set-up of the nation's identity for ensuring the enhancement of nationhood and nationality manners internally and preparing for competition on a common global marketplace.

Branding of a country is significant for both developed and developing countries. Countries with booming economies prioritize suitable policies to develop hospitality business and tourism infrastructure such as a well-situated airport. The conceptual framework of branding and strategic application follow a similar pattern in all countries. However, the allocation and use of resources can have influence on the nature of country branding. Advanced economies in the world use their country brand to get competitive advantages for encouraging the growth of tourist numbers, business and investment. Countries that have developed their economy and resources attempt to nurture the brand image with strong governance, security and tourism-friendly tax patterns and infrastructure. On the other hand, developing countries with weaker economic structures employ rebranding, struggling to establish or maintain a visible brand identity. With the help of appropriate branding, countries like Australia, for

example, have turned themselves into highly attractive tourist destinations simply from a penal colony (Papadopoulos and Heslop, 2002).

South Korea, which was until the Second World War an underdeveloped expanse of countryside, rapidly emerged as a prosperous economy in which tourism flourished. Interesting socio-political history coupled with supportive legislative policies and government initiatives accelerated the journey of South Korea toward a major tourist destination in Asia. The realization of increased risks due to the fierce export competition and complexities in marketing amidst global economic turmoil have led countries like South Korea to concentrate on country branding for a rapidly flourishing and expanding tourism sector (Anholt, 2008). In Asia, other developing countries like Maldives or Thailand are working on developing their tourism sector as well.

### **Discussions on the South Korean Experience**

During the stay in South Korea, there were opportunities to talk to tourists and get their views. From what the researcher observed, the South Korean people showed some kind of a victim complex. This is logical when people were dominated for centuries by powerful neighbours like China and Japan and now having to live with the presence of foreign (US) troops in the country for more than half a century.

Korea occupies a unique position in the strategic map of North Asia. Surrounded by three great world powers, the peninsula has been a battlefield that has decided the power balance in north-east Asia. The original religion of the Korean people was shamanism. Buddhism gained a foothold in Korea through China. During the period of Goryeo dynasty, Buddhism became the official religion in Korea. The Joseon dynasty, which ruled Korea for 500 years from the late fourteenth century onwards, suppressed Buddhism and promoted a strict version of Confucian ideology.

The societal fabric seemed regimented from the study. Until recently, the country was not heavily industrialized. Even in the well developed economy of today, South Korean society has strict hierarchy and retains its past traditions. It is during one of the much maligned military dictatorships of the recent past that South Korea started to be rapidly industrialized.

The presence of favourable factors of socio-political history as well as the fact that South Korea seems forever to be at the crossroads makes the peninsula a very attractive tourist destination. The culture and the cuisine are distinct and contagious; it is obvious in the way the South Korean media (known as Korean wave) and cultural influence are perceptible in many other countries. The threat of nuclear Armageddon from North Korea adds to the charm of the trip, but one has to be politically aware of media statements in different parts of the world to appreciate that. Irrespective of politics and associated uncertainties, all the while the economy in the south tries to assert itself as one of the East Asian tigers.

For the branding of Korea as a tourist destination, its socio-political history is very important. The charm of the place is magnified by the role the national question of the Korean people played during the cold war, the geographic position of Korea as a nation at the crossroads of three major world powers, namely China, Japan and Russia and the central role a South Korean democracy can play in the revitalization of democratic institutions in the region. The breathtaking natural beauty of the peninsula, the Confucian heritage of its society and the indomitable spirit of the Korean people reflected in the breathtaking pace of industrialization arising from the rubble of the Korean War – all make the country an intriguing place in the mind of the international traveller. There is a significant Korean diaspora in the Philippines and Japan, where the Korean minority have carved out a distinct existence and perception of

what it means to be a Korean. Research showed that a globally noteworthy event like the FIFA World Cup Football 2002 brought a successful move for nation branding of South Korea as a tourist destination (Kim and Morrision, 2005). The national soccer team has achieved international renown in tournaments held across the globe and reinforced the image of South Korea as a serious country with achievements in sports as well.

North and South Korea have been separated for around six decades now. The armistice that was signed in 1953 is still being observed from both sides of the barbed wire fences and military checkpoints that both sides have maintained for all these 58 years. After the demilitarized zone was established the communist North built some tunnels underneath it through which 30,000 troops could pass at a time and come out right outside the South's capital of Seoul: an ingenious invasion plan. Touring the third tunnel of aggression/infiltration on 13 July can be one of the greatest experiences of a tourist as s/he ponders in the darkness, reflecting on people's yearning to reunite their motherland. It matters little that they built such a tunnel under the now discredited ideology of communism, but behind it lay a more nationalistic motive. The infiltration tunnel is a monumental engineering feat. In 20 years, the family connection between the two Koreas will be felt more weakly; all that will remain is a shared past.

Interestingly, on a separate note, a previous research survey found that the first-time tourists to South Korea expressed an affirmative attitudinal change in aspects like scenery and safety derived from their tourism experience (Chon, 1991). Some tourists gave a similar opinion during this study in 2011 as well. One observation was that, whatever qualities the Korean people are famous for, patience is not one of them. The focus everywhere is on speed and efficiency, as the researchers learned while dining out with friends. If anyone spends too much time pondering what to order from the menu, the customer gets impatient looks from the waitress, as would also be the case if you take too long to finish your food. The researcher asked a professor of communications in Ewha women's university; he confirmed that he had similar experience. Saying that, Korean cuisine and the much celebrated Kimchi have won international renown in far flung US and Australia. In any decent suburb in Melbourne, the chances of finding a decent Korean restaurant are pretty good.

Outside the hotel the researcher stayed in Yoido Lexington, where there is a full gospel church. Christianity has spread rapidly in South Korea since the Korean War, and today more people adhere to the Christian faith than the Buddhist. Some 45% of the Korean population profess to have no religion. South Korea has been largely influenced by the Confucianism that denotes humanity as the inner strength of any human being (Diamond and Kim, 2000). Seoul has a vibrant night life and clubbing scene but for the foreigners the circuit is mostly located around the area of Itaewon, which is virtually a no-go area for locals. Itaewon is also known as a red light district; funnily enough the only mosque in Seoul is situated in Itaewon. Apparently before the Korean War, Pyongyang used to be the major Christian centre in the Korean peninsula, but times have changed. Today's South Korea is a vibrant, confident society that has recovered from the dark days of the Asian financial crisis, which may seem to have taken place remotely in the past but was actually quite a recent phenomenon.

Interacting with the locals in Seoul, tourists get the feel of a distinct culture. The Koreans do not seem to have the polite formal air of the Japanese, nor do they have the quiet but reclusive air of the Chinese. It seems that men have to act in a brash and cocky fashion. Such is the societal custom. However, they certainly come across as direct, open and confident people. As a previous study revealed, the Korean people have an easy charm about them and certainly they are more humorous than either the Chinese or Japanese (Uzama, 2009). The

standard of English is quite high, as the researcher found out while talking to Korean students during a debating tournament. Apparently, the Korean student community has increased its commitment to extracurricular activity significantly over the last few years.

Seoul, the capital of South Korea, changed hands four times during the Korean War. There is still an air of uncertainty about the place as the border is less than 100 kilometres away. The sunshine policy of the recent past ended in 2008 and with it the old tensions with its Northern brethren have come to the fore again. The North Korean government tries to assert its nationalist credentials by openly proclaiming its goal of reuniting the country. However ludicrous such pronouncements seem, the peninsula may still be one of the few places on earth where the vestiges of the cold war are still visible. From coin operated telescopes on the southern side of the DMZ, one can see the villages of the north, some buildings that purportedly house a Juche ideology research centre (a pet project of Kim Il Sung) and ponder how differently things might have turned out for this magical mystical country, which reminded visitors of a sea in storm because of its numerous mountain ranges.

South Korea has attempted to bring the national culture closer to the international population through the Korean Hangeul script, the national item of clothing or 'Hanbok', and the Korean traditional Hansik cuisine. The entertainment industry and night life are nowadays comparable to and competing with the Western world. In 2009, with a vision of promoting the country branding of South Korea and improving perception of the global tourists, the Presidential council on Nation Branding was formed. The country branding approach included the illustration of each of the South Koreans as a national ambassador to the rest of the world. In a wider context, South Koreans were encouraged to be a model of cultural excellence and civilized etiquette. Simultaneously, South Korea's role in poverty alleviation and the climate change issue appeared to be a vital step in its progressive journey toward country branding. Hosting the G-20 summit in 2010 successfully drew the spotlight of media coverage on South Korea. Separately, the country has been blessed by nature with fortresses, museums, holy sites, etc., giving it an immense opportunity for tourism promotion (Korea Tourism Organisation, 2011).

An old Korean proverb says "Even if you have to crawl, get to Seoul". Indeed the city of Seoul is very much the economic and cultural centre of the nation. Pusan may enjoy the better weather and the Jeju Islands in the south may hold a special place in the tourists' imagination, but to understand the spirit of the Korean people one must visit Seoul. Here is a nation that suffered great calamities across the century, suffered foreign domination, a nation whose fate was decided by the whims of great powers, be it in the context of the treaty of Shimonoseki or in the arbitrary decision of the US and the USSR to carve up the remains of post-colonial Korea into two separate spheres of influence. But Seoul has risen phoenix-like from the ashes of the Korean War to reclaim and symbolize the fight of a brave people to achieve their rightful place in the community of nations, the engine room of a miracle economy that might one day be able to prop up the bankrupt regime in the North, as and when the day comes when reunification can become a realistic dream again.

## **Conclusion**

Some of nation branding could be evolutionary and natural, e.g. the role that socio-cultural history plays in developing perceptions; and some are intentional because of the efforts of the people, the tourism board (Korea Tourism Organisation in the case of South Korea), and the government. This paper focuses more on the unintended and it is a tourist's account of a

place where the authors have taken the liberty to take a social narrative approach to share the insights and experience of a people. The authors are aware that individual tourists' perception of a place hinges on prior knowledge and own background, and the meanings are co-created. But irrespective of level of co-creation of meaning of a place while touring, socio-political history can have a great romanticizing effect. Tourism is indeed an important fascination of the modern culture, creating immense sense of nostalgia and escapism (Gemunden and Johnson, 2001). The sense of a place can be enriched by the sense of its past. When the useful knowledge we tend to get from the media around the world about the recent demise (on 17 December 2011) of North Korean ruler Kim Jong-Il and its implications for South Korea, the apparently "useless" knowledge of the historical past also helps shape and enjoy the impressions of a country and its neighbours. As the prominent British philosopher Bertrand Russell puts it:

Curious learning not only makes unpleasant things less unpleasant, but also makes pleasant things more pleasant. I have enjoyed peaches and apricots more since I have known that they were first cultivated in China in the early days of the Han dynasty; that Chinese hostages held by the great King Kaniska introduced them into India, whence they spread to Persia, reaching the Roman Empire in the first century of our era; that the word "apricot" is derived from the same Latin source as the word "precocious", because the apricot ripens early; and that the A at the beginning was added by mistake, owing to a false etymology. All this makes the fruit taste much sweeter. (Russell and Gottlieb, 2004, p. 25)

Can't we say the same about the experience of a tourist? Experiencing a place with political, historical and societal awareness gives a tourist immense pleasure indeed!

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