



Han Unbound: The Political Economy of South Korea

John Lie

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This book reveals how South Korea was transformed from one of the poorest and most agrarian countries in the world in the 1950's to one of the richest and most industrialized states by the late 1980's. The author argues that South Korea's economic, cultural, and political development was the product of a unique set of historical circumstances that cannot be replicated elsewhere, and that only by ignoring the costs and negative consequences of development can South Korea's transformation be described as an unqualified success.

The historical circumstances include a thoroughgoing land reform that forced children of former landlords to move to the cities to make their fortunes, a very low-paid labor force, and the threat from North Korea and the consequent American presence. The costs of development included the exploitation of labor (as late as 1986, South Korean factory workers had the longest hours in the world and earned less than their counterparts in Mexico and Brazil), undemocratic politics, and despoliation of the environment. The title of the book suggests the ambivalence of South Korean development: "Han" refers both to South Korea (*Han'guk*) and to the cultural expression of resentment or dissatisfaction (*han*).

Because the author sees South Korean development as contingent on a variety of particular circumstances, he ranges widely to include not only the information typically gathered by sociologists and political economists, but also insights gained from examining popular tastes and values, poetry, fiction, and ethnography, showing how all of these aspects of South Korean life help elucidate his main themes. The result is the most comprehensive and informative account available of the extraordinary changes that brought South Korea to the forefront among major industrialized nations at the end of the twentieth century.

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