

Understand Korea

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South Korea has its first female president, Park Geun-hye, but the *Sewol* ferry disaster, corruption charges and a see-saw relationship with North Korea have left her administration looking shaky.

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The tale of 5000 years of war, peace, colonisation and modernisation on the Korean peninsula is an action-packed one.

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The Confucian mindset still holds a tight grip on the people of this monocultural country, but Christianity and Buddhism also have large roles to play.

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Ever-present kimchi, the delicacies of a royal banquet or chicken and beer on the street: the diversity of Korea's cuisine is well worth discovering.

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The *hallyu* (Korean pop culture wave) shows no signs of abating, and also notable are Korea's traditional buildings and dramatic contemporary structures.

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The mountains and islands remain havens of natural wonder, but industrialised South Korea also struggles with environmental challenges.

Korea Today

With consumer spending and industrial output both down, the *Sewol* ferry tragedy and the deadly outbreak of the MERS (Middle East Respiratory Syndrome) in 2015, it's been rocky times of late for South Korea. The popularity ratings of the country's first female president, Park Geun-hye, have plummeted to 30%. Her saving grace is a fractured opposition, though it could be in a winning position should popular Seoul mayor Park Won-soon throw his hat into the ring for the 2018 presidential election.

Best on Film

The Host (2006) Seoul-based classic monster movie that juggles humour, poignancy and heart-stopping action.

Poetry (2010) Lee Chang-dong directs this drama about a woman in her 60s struggling with Alzheimer's disease who enrolls in a poetry-writing course.

In Another Country (2012) Hong Sang-soo, director of award-winning *Hahaha*, casts Isabelle Huppert as three different women whose stories intersect in the seaside resort of Mohang.

Best in Print

I'll Be Right There (Shin Kyung-sook; 2014) A city wracked by pro-democracy protests in the 1980s is elegantly evoked by this award-winning Korean author.

Three Generations (Yom Sang-seop; 2005) Originally published in newspaper serialisations in the 1930s, this epic novel focuses on the travails of a family under colonisation.

A Geek in Korea (Daniel Tudor; 2014) Fully illustrated and covering topics from religion and traditional martial arts to K-Pop, Samsung and the *hallyu* (pop-culture wave).

Sinking of the Sewol

On 16 April 2014, while sailing from Incheon to Jeju-do, the ferry MV *Sewol* capsized while attempting to make a sharp turn in a channel with strong underwater currents. Of the 476 passengers and crew aboard, 304 people drowned, most of them teenagers from a high school in Ansan, Gyeonggi-do. Many of the survivors were rescued by fishing boats and other commercial vessels that arrived at the scene well before either the coast guard or the Korean navy.

Grief over the tragedy was swiftly followed by national outrage when it was discovered that not only was the ferry carrying more than twice the legal limit of cargo (which was also improperly secured), but that Captain Lee Jun-seok – who had not been on the bridge at the time disaster struck – had abandoned ship, along with many of the crew, while passengers had been instructed to stay in their cabins. The captain was later found guilty of negligence and sentenced to 36 years' imprisonment.

Fighting for Justice

The owner of the shipping line that operated the *Sewol* was found dead under suspicious circumstances a few months after the sinking. The government was also in the figurative dock for its botched role in the rescue operation and poor regulation of the shipping industry in general. Approval ratings for President Park Geun-hye sank amid rumours that she was out of reach on the day of the disaster. The president's office strongly denied this and charged a Japanese reporter with defamation when those rumours were printed in Japan's *Sankei Shimbun*.

The shadow of the *Sewol* continued to loom large in 2015. Tensions ran particularly high in central Seoul around the first anniversary of the tragic sinking. Thousands of police and national-service conscripts blocked streets around Gwanghwamun Sq, where a