

A Brief History of Korea

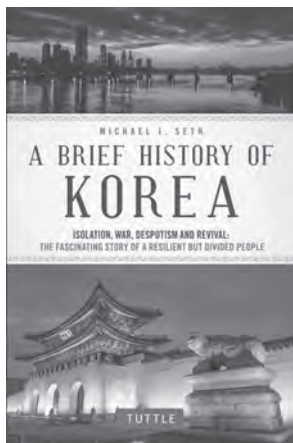
Isolation, War, Despotism, and Revival: The Fascinating Story of a Resilient but Divided People

BY MICHAEL J. SETH

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Reviewed by Franklin D. Rausch



Michael Seth of James Madison University has a great deal of experience writing textbooks. His *A Concise History of Korea: From the Neolithic to the Nineteenth Century* was first published in 2006. It was revised and broken into two volumes: *A Concise History of Modern Korea: From the Late Nineteenth Century to the Present* (2009) and *A History of Korea: From Antiquity to the Present* (2010). Those volumes, published by Rowman & Littlefield, are still in print. In addition, Seth recently published his *North Korea: A History* with Redfield Press in 2018. Despite having studied Ko-

rea for more than two decades, I have always found reading Seth's work to be rewarding, as I'm sure to learn something new and gain fresh perspectives. His most recent original work, *A Brief History of Korea: Isolation, War, Despotism, and Revival: The Fascinating Story of a Resilient but Divided People*, the subject of this review, continues this excellent tradition. This text is especially welcome for its approachable style, making it ideal for classroom use or for instructors who want to learn a lot about Korea in a short amount of time that they can integrate easily into their classes.

Seth's text is broken up into an introduction, ten chapters, and a section for further reading. Seth's introduction describes how little was known about Korea in the West at first and that even after it was "opened" for decades, this continued. And, while Seth points out that now many people certainly know about its existence, "Korea still is not well understood by most outsiders" (7), especially considering how the two societies of this divided nation have gone in very different directions: a modern, liberal, wealthy, and democratic South, and the authoritarian, poor, and isolated North. In addition to accounting for this differentiation, Seth proposes to explain how Koreans are different from Chinese and Japanese, and how "their story fits into the larger narrative of the history of humanity" (8). Seth then provides a summary of Korean geography, which ends with another theme that he will explore throughout the text: "Modest in size [Korea] has at all times been under the threat of conquest and absorption by its powerful neighbors. Yet Korea has somehow managed to maintain its political autonomy most of the time, and its distinctive culture and identity always" (10–11). The introduction ends with an explanatory note that neatly describes the complexities of Korean Romanization (the author opts for the Revised Romanization system, which will likely be easier for an audience unfamiliar with Korean to understand).

Chapter 1, "Origins," begins with the famous story of Dangun, the son of the son of a god and a bear, transformed into a woman, who is the

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putative ancestor of the Korean people, followed by an examination of the movement of ancient peoples who are the ancestors of contemporary Koreans. Seth continues to examine the rise of the states of Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla, particularly how they creatively borrowed from China. Showing the relevancy of ancient history can be a challenge for historians, especially when teaching students taking a course to fulfill a general education requirement. Seth pays particular attention to this issue and to illustrating the contested nature of history. For instance, in this chapter, Seth describes how Jumong, the founder of Goguryeo, was presented as a hero and as a tyrant in two separate historical dramas produced in South Korea. Similarly, Seth provides an excellent summary of Chinese attempts to claim Goguryeo as Chinese and how that is a cause of conflict today among China and the two Korean states. Seth also points out how aspects of contemporary culture, such as an emphasis on heredity, can be seen particularly in Silla. He then ends the chapter by raising the question of when Korea began.

This excellent mix of history, historiography, and relevance, as well as the raising of thought-provoking questions that can serve as seeds for classroom discussion, can be found all throughout this work. In chapter 2, Seth provides an overview of the Unified Silla and Goryeo kingdoms. This chapter provides two illustrative examples of Seth's knack for humor and storytelling, which liven up the writing and make facts more memorable. Seth begins this chapter by noting that the Unified Silla Kingdom, established in 676, lasted until 1910, and "thus, the unified Korean kingdom spent seven centuries in a Buddhist temple and five centuries before a Confucian shrine" (33), which could not help but remind this reviewer of the saying that the Philippines had spent 333 years in a Spanish convent and fifty years in Hollywood. Likewise, while discussing how Mongol culture threatened Korea's autonomy, Seth points out that the experience of being under the empire's sway led to exposure to new ideas, including "distilled liquor," particularly *soju* (53).

Chapter 3 takes as its subject the Joseon dynasty (1392–1910), focusing particularly on the life of kings, the shift away from Buddhism toward Confucianism, the lives of Korean people ranging from the poor to *yangban* (hereditary aristocracy), and a foreign policy emphasizing isolation and a desire to remain pure. Chapter 4 has some overlap with chapter 3, as it begins in the year 1876 with Korea's opening by Japan. The focus, though, is on how despite Korean attempts to modernize and maintain the country's independence, it would eventually be absorbed by the Japanese empire. Thus, while Korea would develop, much of that development was based on the needs of Japan rather than the Korean people themselves. Chapter 5 traces the division of Korea and the outbreak of the Korean War, noting how many people suffered from that conflict with little positive to show for it. National division marks an important shift in the book, as the next four chapters treat North and South Korea separately.

Chapters 6 and 7 are dedicated to North Korea. While an excellent text, the reviewer believes this section to be particularly strong for several reasons. First, Seth shows how, until the late 1970s/early 1980s, North Korea could make a strong case that it, not the South, was doing a better job of building an independent and prosperous state. Second, Seth explains the reasoning behind North Korea's behavior in a rational way, helping readers better understand both the past and the present. This is often done in succinct and memorable ways. For example, Seth, explaining North Korea's policy for reunification following the Korean War, writes that North

Korea dictator Kim Il-sung's "strategy for reunification was to strengthen the North, weaken the South, and get the Americans out" (138). At the same time, this work is definitely not an apology for the northern regime. For instance, Seth writes in his discussion of Kim Il-sung's vision for a rebuilt Pyongyang following the destruction of the Korean War that "few cities in modern history were built to reflect the vision of a single person so comprehensively. Unfortunately, it was the vision of an aesthetically challenged, egocentric tyrant with a middle-school education" (134).

Chapters 8 and 9 focus on South Korea and its development from an incredibly poor country to a wealthy one, how that economic development would spur Korean hopes for democracy, and how that desire was achieved. That story is incredibly complex, but, through the adroit use of statistics, anecdotes, and illustrative examples, Seth is able to weave together a story of *chaeböl* (family-run business conglomerates), Christians, dissidents, the United States, and many other actors that helps explain these extraordinary changes. Moreover, Seth does this in a balanced way, for instance, showing how while the *chaeböl* helped drive economic development, they also have led to structural problems in the economy. Chapter 10 brings North and South Korea together. It begins with the former, noting the rise to power of Kim Jong-un, who, despite having received some education in the West, has not proven to be a liberalizer, instead ordering the assassination of his half-brother and pushing forward work on nuclear weapons and delivery systems for them. Seth shows how part of this is a reaction to the existential threat posed by the prosperity and freedom of South Korea and the power of China. Likewise, Seth points to contemporary issues South Korea faces, such as pollution, the high cost of raising and educating children, continued patriarchy, and demographic decline. Not all is bad news; for instance, there is an excellent overview of the rise of Korean popular culture. The section ends with a review of obstacles toward national unification, and while noting that they are massive, no one could have predicted the twists and turns in Korea's history (which Seth has so skillfully navigated), so therefore "the only safe prediction is that whatever Korea's future course may be, it will certainly be shaped by its long historical tradition, and most likely won't be boring" (243). The following further reading and bibliography sections will be useful to those who want to expand on what they have gained from reading this work.

Every text is always in need of improvement, and, with Seth's proven track record, this reviewer is confident that future editions will be published and that some suggestions might be of help. Chapters 3 and 4 are somewhat anomalous, as they cover a united Korea but overlap. Because of that, it seems that important information and detail have been lost. For instance, internal problems, such as the Hong Kyeongnae Rebellion of 1812, receive little attention, as do Korean attempts to deal with those issues. Thus, something of the dynamism of pre-1876 Joseon Korea is lost. Similarly, in chapter 4, Min Yeong-hwan's suicide is mentioned. His suicide note, which makes it clear that he had hoped to move foreign nations to help Korea through his sincerity in offering up his life, is not mentioned, making it seem like it was simple despondency that drove him (90). Similarly, when An Jung-geun and his killing of Itō Hirobumi, the primary architect of Korea's colonization, are mentioned, he is labeled simply as a "nationalist." However, An's thinking was actually quite complex, as he was also a Pan-Asianist and Catholic. This might have provided a suitable entry point to examine the influence of global ideas on Korea. Likewise, it seems somewhat curious in chapter 10 that PC room culture is treated rather negatively, focusing on addiction rather than noting the respect Korean players have won on the global e-sports scene playing such games as *League of Legends*. Of course, the problem with any such critique is that if something is to be added, something else must be taken away, and if too much is added, this history of Korea will no longer be "brief."

Minor criticism aside, Seth's *A Brief History of Korea* provides an excellent introduction to that nation's history that is readable, succinct, thought-provoking, and informative. It is, therefore, suitable and highly recommended both for instructors to use to prepare for class and as a textbook for students. ■

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