

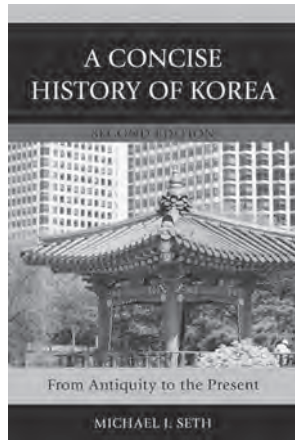
## A Concise History of Korea *From Antiquity to the Present, Second Edition*

By MICHAEL J. SETH

LANHAM, MARYLAND: ROWMAN AND LITTLEFIELD, 2016

626 PAGES, ISBN: 978-1442235175, PAPERBACK

Reviewed by Mary Connor



Michael Seth's *A Concise History of Korea: From Antiquity to the Present* provides readers with a clear, comprehensive, objective, and illuminating survey of Korean history from ancient times to the present. Readers will be inspired by Seth's extensive knowledge of Korean history combined with his understanding of East Asian and world history. Throughout, comparisons are drawn between developments on the Korean peninsula and those in neighboring regions, especially China and Japan. Seth discusses how the Koreas became so radically different

from one another after centuries of being unified. One of the great merits of the text is the presentation of each stage of Korean history within a global context; subsequently, readers will have a deeper understanding of social, cultural, and political history not only in East Asia, but also with other parts of the world. Responding to differing historiographical issues, the author provides objective responses to what he thinks may be plausible answers. Another important dimension is his inclusion of information based on new research and events as recent as 2015. Additional features of the book include historical maps, primary source entries within each chapter, and a very useful annotated bibliography in English.

Educators of Asian and world history on the high school and college levels will benefit from reading this well-written and balanced text on Korean history and culture that offers both regional and global perspectives. Teachers of United States history will profit from reading about the role the United States has played in Korea prior to the division of the peninsula, the Korean War, and postwar policies in Korea compared to those in Japan. All readers will be interested in how South Korea made unprecedented achievements in both democratic and economic development while North Korea became one of the world's most totalitarian and impoverished countries in the world.

*A Concise History of Korea* is timely for its coverage of Korea combined with regional and global perspectives. In July 2016, the California Department of Education approved an updated and revised history-social science framework that includes more than twenty references to Korean history and culture. The previous framework only mentioned Korea four times. Since the leading textbook publishers will incorporate these additions in their secondary textbooks, educators will be bringing Korean history and culture into their classrooms to a greater extent.

In the first chapter, readers become immediately aware of Seth's knowledge of Korean, regional, and world history. He writes that

*It was the weakening and collapse of the Chinese Empire in the third and fourth centuries that gave the indigenous people free rein to*

*develop autonomous states that were culturally distinct from China. The process was analogous to contemporary developments at the other end of Eurasia when the declining Roman Empire disintegrated in Western Europe, allowing tribal people to develop their own heavily Roman-influenced states. (49)*

When Seth writes about Silla's "cultural brilliance" in the eighth century, he notes that at the same time there were flourishing cultural developments in China with the Tang Dynasty, the Nara period in Japan, the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad, and the Carolingian Empire in Western Europe. He concludes this discussion by writing that

*Historians do not understand all the links among the societies of the Old World, but they are increasingly appreciating just how interconnected they were. Korea geographically on the periphery of Eurasia was not only embedded in the larger historical developments of East Asia, but a part of the larger Afro-Eurasian world. (78)*

When Seth writes about the Koryŏ Dynasty, he comments on how the introduction of the civil examination system helped "transform the aristocracy into highly educated service nobility" that contributed to the institutional stability and continuity of the Korean state and ruling elite for centuries (105). He compares the stability of Korea with the hereditary class in Indian states and the inherited aristocracies of Europe and Japan. When leaders of the hereditary class failed, power struggles and uncertainty would occur. Seth also compares the examination system in Korea with that of China. The Chinese examination system was open to commoners; consequently,

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*Most European colonies were administered by a relatively small number of officials, but in Korea, the Japanese dominated all aspects of life, from its huge top-down bureaucracy to the local neighborhood policeman.*

there was greater social mobility in China. In Korea, examinations remained limited to members of the aristocracy and maintained hereditary status and privilege. In subsequent chapters, the author discusses Korea's universally held zeal for education as a means of advancing social status, and connects South Korea's stress on education to South Korea's economic miracle, one of the most dramatic economic developments in modern history.

The Chosŏn state in the late nineteenth century is inevitably described as the "hermit kingdom" with few comparisons with its neighbors; however, Seth provides greater perspective by explaining that the policies of the late Chosŏn government did not really differ completely from the policies of China and Japan. The Ming and Qing dynasties placed restrictions on Chinese travel abroad, and trade with neighbors and Europe was restricted. Tokugawa Japan from the early seventeenth century adopted policies that kept most Japanese from traveling abroad and restricted trade. He also comments that other countries after 1600, such as Việt Nam and Siam, expelled Westerners or implemented restrictions on their activities.

Another example of Seth's enhanced perspective is his comparison of Japanese colonization of Korea and the French's colonization of Việt Nam. He offers a powerful example of why the Koreans were so bitter about Japanese rule. In the late 1930s, nearly a quarter of a million Japanese served in Korea, when the colony's population was approximately twenty million. Việt Nam had a population of seventeen million, but only about 51,000 French and indigenous personnel served in Việt Nam. The Japanese personnel in Korea were equal to that of the British in India, who had twenty times the population. Most European colonies were administered by a relatively small number of officials, but in Korea, the Japanese dominated all aspects of life, from its huge top-down bureaucracy to the local neighborhood policeman.

Throughout the text, Seth offers interesting observations about similarities between East Asia and the West. It is commonly known that elements of feudalism as the term is understood were utilized in parts of medieval Western Europe and Japan, but many of the developments in twelfth-century Japan occurred at the same time in Korea. In Japan, a strong military leader emerged who took the title of shogun in 1192; and in Korea, Chŏe Ch'ung-hŏn became the military leader in 1196. Both adopted a system where the members of the military pledged loyalty to their leaders and derived wealth from their large landed estates. Buddhism became the religion of the warriors in both Japan (Zen) and Korea (Sŏn).

One of the author's most interesting comparisons relates to Neo-Confucianism in China, Japan, and Korea during the Chosŏn Dynasty. Seth states that "the zeal with which many Koreans adhered to Neo-Confucianism does not have a parallel elsewhere in East Asia." Seth explains that neither China nor Japan ever enforced Neo-Confucianism as rigidly as Korea. He expresses the similarity between Korean Neo-Confucianism to orthodox Islam in that "it encompassed a code of behavior governing nearly every aspect of life." He observes that the "Neo-Confucian revolution" might be similar to the Islamic revivals in Persia in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and the "Wahhabi movement of eighteenth-century Arabia" (163–164).

Seth does not neglect modern Korean history. The last five chapters are devoted to the Koreans during the last six decades following the Korean War. Seth writes:

*North and South Korea continued on the divergent paths that they had embarked upon in the immediate postwar years. History has no*

*parallel to this development. What had been one of the world's most homogenous cultures, with a long historical tradition, became two radically different societies. (361)*

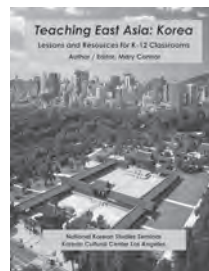
In his examination of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, he asks, "How can we characterize North Korea?" He responds by discussing how the Democratic People's Republic of Korea has elements of Stalinism and Maoism, but essentially evolved along its own path "with its elaborate hierarchical structure based on family background, its Kim family cult, its extreme ultranationalism, and its *juche* ideology that eventually ceased to be Marxist in any meaningful way." (392)

The chapters on South Korea's economic and political development are fascinating. Seth writes that "South Korea's economic takeoff was one of the most dramatic in modern history." (428) He compares the economic development of South Korea with Hong Kong, Japan, Singapore, and Taiwan, and explains how South Korea's success was unique in many ways, especially because of the devastation from the Korean War and the fact that it was one of the few postcolonial states to become a fully developed country. In discussing democratization, he writes that South Korea had a democratic transformation as unpredictable as its economic achievement. Recognizing how political instability, authoritarian tradition, and military coups are characteristic of developing nations, Seth explains how South Korea was nevertheless determined and able to achieve an open and stable democratic political system.

Most Americans know too little about Korean history and culture. Seth has published an engaging and worthwhile narrative that provides us with an understanding of Korean history, and how it is as fascinating and unique as its neighbors. ■

MARY CONNOR taught United States History and Asian Studies for thirty-five years. She is the author of *The Koreas (Asia in Focus)* (2009) and the recipient of the Organization of American Historians Tachau Award, the Prime Minister's Award from the Republic of Korea, and the Daekyo Enopi Award. She is the co-founder of the Korea Academy for Educators and the National Korean Studies Seminar. Both organizations are dedicated to informing educators about Korean history and culture.

## Teaching East Asia: Korea



In the fall 2016 issue of *EAA* (vol. 21, no. 2), we reviewed Mary Connor's *Common Core: Korea Lessons and Resources for K-12 Classrooms*. An updated second edition of this resources and lesson book titled *Teaching East Asia: Korea* by Mary Connor will be available this June. The new book includes 137 additional pages of content including new lessons in history and art as well as chapters on music, science and technology, and Korean American history. Please visit <http://www.nationalkoreanstudies.com> for more information and to order a copy of the book once it is available.

You may read the review of the first edition, *Common Core: Korea*, from the fall 2016 issue at <https://tinyurl.com/l67o63s>.