

A Concise History of Korea *From the Neolithic Period through the Nineteenth Century*

BY MICHAEL J. SETH

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REVIEWED BY MARY CONNOR

Michael J. Seth's *A Concise History of Korea: From the Neolithic Period through the Nineteenth Century* (2006) is exceptional and in many ways tops nearly every chronological narrative I have read on Korean history and culture. His book provides an appreciation of the remarkable durability and stability of pre-modern Korea, a foundation for understanding modern Korea, and, more than any other source, an understanding of Korea's distinctive culture. Five historical maps, primary documents, a glossary of Korean words, and an annotated bibliography add to the text's considerable value.

Seth's knowledge of and passion for Korea, broader perspectives acquired from being a scholar of East Asian history, and a considerable gift for writing make the book a great read. The author is able to draw comparisons between developments in Korea and those in neighboring regions, especially China and Japan.

Remarkable in his ability to clearly explain details of Korean history without overburdening the reader, Seth also elucidates the

web that connects those facts with the present. For example, following a discussion of Neo-Confucianism and its emphasis on class and rank, he notes how this philosophy still influences "elaborate speech styles and formality" in the language.

What will also appeal to students and teachers alike is the fact that the book incorporates social, cultural, and political history. Sections on everyday life, education, the family, women, philosophy, and religion during various historical periods are clear, engaging, and memorable. Students will be quite fascinated by the examination system. During the Chōson Dynasty (1392–1910), their counterparts tried to beat the system and raise their scores. Also, family background influenced future employment. In spite of sharp class division in Chōson, people were bound together by the Confucian values that permeated all levels of society.

A Concise History of Korea is a timely response to the demand for a pre-modern Korean history for teachers, undergraduate students, and upper level high school students.

Of particular interest is the inclusion of recent scholarship. Seth underscores the challenges faced by historians of East Asia due to the incalculable loss of primary documents and conflicting interpretations based on nationalist sentiments as a result of war. This concise history is particularly suitable for college level survey courses, teacher institutes on East Asia, and high school students in a year-long upper level Asian Studies class. Earlier grades may use some of the material for cultural studies and world history. ■

MARY CONNOR is the Founder of the Korea Academy for Educators and the Co-Director of summer seminars and one-day workshops on Korean history and culture, and the Korean American experience at the Korean Cultural Center, Los Angeles (www.KoreaAcademy.org).

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