

## Asia in Focus *The Koreas*

MARY CONNOR, EDITOR

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Reviewed by Todd Golding

A nation torn asunder by Cold War animosity and ideologies is again united, at least in book form, by chief author and editor, Mary Connor. The latest release in a series on East Asia by publisher ABC-CLIO draws on the editor/author's vast experience with Korea and taps into the expertise of five other Korea specialist co-authors. While these East Asian nations may unfortunately receive short shrift in our K-12 social sciences classrooms, Connor presents an airtight case that the peninsula has attained a primary importance we cannot ignore. *The Koreas* was written with teachers in mind (the editor is herself a veteran educator), but its in-depth and timely material offers business people, non-governmental organization (NGO) workers, military personnel, and anybody who intends to travel here an informative handbook for survival and success. The comprehensive, authoritative survey of Korean history will attract post-secondary Asian history scholars to consider this publication as a course textbook. Its scope, however, extends well beyond the peninsula's past. From the first pages, we are immersed in everything Korean: politics, geography, food, music, language, art, and belief systems. Additionally, we take in a timely briefing on what could soon be one of the world's ten leading economies.

Connor launches her ambitious volume with a detailed, yet engaging and accessible, description of Korean geography and its several thousand years' traditions. Though later chapters progress to more current issues, each contributor continues to braid topics of East Asian history with vibrant descriptions of contemporary culture. Educators wishing to enrich their knowledge of this world region will appreciate the way authors guide the reader through several millennia of East Asian civilization. The accounts are enlightening and relevant to Korea's role in the twenty-first century. This country's unique heritage and deep-seated Confucian ethic are not mere curiosities of a bygone era, rather, the co-contributors demonstrate how these elements exert a fundamental influence on the lives of today's Korean population and, in turn, the people who interact with Koreans.

The twentieth century saw the peninsula transformed into a paradox among the world's countries—it is one nation but two states; it is perhaps the world's most linguistically, ethnically, and culturally homogeneous population, yet it is of late the most physically and tragically divided. The North Korean conundrum is addressed in the history and politics chapters where readers are afforded a wide-ranging account of life in the world's last Orwellian communist regime. Although the North receives the brunt of today's negative press, we observe how the South, with its once byzantine political system, suffered its share of human rights woes for decades following the 1950–53 Korean War.

Extensive data tables, a glossary, an index of curricular resources, and a vast annotated bibliography make this collaborative effort the lat-

est, most relevant, and timely in-print resource on both the ROK and the DPRK. Anyone who has traveled to either or both of these states knows that both are rich in color. Though photos and illustrations are printed in black and white, the contributors' captivating descriptions of the Korean people's rich art, culinary, and other customs will no doubt move readers to take every opportunity to experience this colorful culture firsthand.

Short of a college "Korea 101" course or substantial study tour in country, this resource may be our best hope for comprehending a region that is increasingly catching world attention. Academics, Koreaphiles, travelers, and anybody with a stake in this part of Asia will greatly appreciate Mary Connor's contribution. Her book offers a sound and thoroughly researched survey of Korea's fascinating history and vividly shares with us its enduring magnificence. That this one country has, over the past sixty years, essentially become two radically different states adds another dimension to this remarkable project. *The Koreas* assesses both North and South in a balanced fashion yet affords each the individual attention it deserves. Crafting a great book about a great people must entail discipline, a sense of adventure, and something of the spirit of that nation. Exceptionally well researched, thoughtful, and highly practical, this work has to be a landmark accomplishment that showcases Connor's passion for educating Westerners about the beauty and intrigue of the Korean phenomenon. Most importantly, *The Koreas* will help educators better understand this great culture, and give it the attention it merits. ■

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### ON THE MARGINS OF ASIA: DIVERSITY IN ASIAN STATES

Edited by Charles Keyes



This collection of ten articles from the *Journal of Asian Studies* focuses upon ethnic diversity in Asia. The articles are grouped under five main headings: Premodern Roots of Modern Ethnicity, On Understanding Human Diversity in Asia, Migrant Minorities and Ethnic Pluralism,

States and the Politics of Ethnic Minorities, and Ethnic Conflict and Ethnonationalism. The editor's introduction, "The 'Other' Asian Peoples of Asia," sets the stage for the articles to follow.

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