Editor’s introduction: What follows are three short essays by the authors of the latest Key Issues in Asian Studies (KIAS) booklets. Readers who aren’t familiar with KIAS, an AAS series intended for beginning university survey and honors high school students, as well as general readers, should visit http://www.asian-studies.org/publications/KIAS.htm.

Modern Chinese History
By David Kenley

In addition to being the most populous country, China is projected to surpass the United States in gross domestic product within a few years. It has a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council and wields tremendous “soft power” throughout the world. For these and other reasons, Americans are fascinated with China. Yet this fascination remains tempered by fear and ignorance. Modern Chinese History is not designed specifically to alter American attitudes toward China, but it does provide English-reading students with the background information necessary for them to approach China from a position of greater understanding. Though many notable historians have added to our general knowledge of Chinese history, their texts are often too weighty for nonspecialists. Modern Chinese History provides a concise, accessible introduction to the topic designed specifically for high school and lower-division college students, as well as for general readers.

Two main themes run throughout Modern Chinese History. First, it emphasizes the role of foreign actors in China’s past. Cross-cultural contacts have deeply influenced the shape and trajectory of modern China. However, this text moves beyond the “impact-response” narrative, which outlines repeated conflicts with the superior West followed by China’s belated, inadequate responses. Not only is this narrative inaccurate and Eurocentric, it is also incomplete. Modern Chinese History emphasizes the importance of cross-cultural contacts but provides a more balanced approach to the topic. It includes encounters with the West, as well as interactions with China’s Asian neighbors. Second, this volume highlights the roles of domestic actors in China’s history, recognizing that these include far more than simply political and military elites. Modern Chinese History provides room for both men and women peasants, soldiers, and intellectuals to enter the stage of history.

Whereas many scholars suggest modern China began during the mid-Qing period in 1840—the date of the Opium War and the beginning of the impact-response cycle—this work begins with the Qing dynasty (1644) and continues to the present day. Furthermore, rather than focusing primarily on twentieth-century events at the expense of earlier eras, roughly half the text covers the Qing period with the other half covering the Republican and Communist eras.

Several individuals will benefit from Modern Chinese History. Teachers of history, international studies, cultural studies, and Asian studies will find this text useful. Most notably, it will supplement the world history survey, which is becoming increasingly common on high school and college campuses. Even those colleges that have maintained the Western civilization survey will find this an appealing option, as instructors are emphasizing the West’s interaction with the larger world. Naturally, all types of Asian history classes will profit from this volume.

Modern Chinese History offers a succinct introduction to the political, economic, cultural, and social heritage of this powerful and influential nation. Because our students will increasingly interact with this region of the world, it is imperative they have a basic understanding of China.

Confucius in East Asia
By Jeffrey L. Richey

Confucius in East Asia introduces fundamental patterns of East Asian history, spirituality, society, and politics through the lens of Confucianism’s development and impact in the region. For millennia, no East Asian regime has governed independently of Confucian influence; and even when Confucius and his tradition have been criticized or condemned, as has often been the case during the past century or so, they have been conspicuously present in East Asian affairs. It is impossible to understand the East Asian region, its peoples, or its role in global history without knowing something about Confucius, Confucians, and Confucianism. This short book aims to provide such basic knowledge in the contexts of Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and Vietnamese history.

Each of the book’s four main chapters is devoted to a single country within East Asia as viewed through the lens of Confucianism’s historical development, spiritual significance, social impact, and political role there. Every chapter is divided into four sections. First, the origins of Confucianism in the particular country are discussed. Next, for each country, there is an explanation of how self-cultivation—the pursuit of intellectual, moral, and spiritual excellence as defined by the Confucian tradition—has
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River, where they grew enough rice to survive from harvest to harvest. The economic freedom that rice gave the Vietnamese easily fit into the political autonomy that has been so valued in Viêt Nam. The Story of Viêt Nam demonstrates that though China and France temporarily ruled this part of the world, the Vietnamese never lost their innate desire for liberty and ousted every colonial power that occupied or dominated all or part of Viêt Nam. Because of Viêt Nam’s long history of both East and West colonial domination, this volume is an important study in tracing the evolution of nationalism in an imagined state.

The foreign intrusions into Viêt Nam included the transmission of external ideas about spiritual, social, and political matters. The Story of Viêt Nam carefully outlines the role that Confucianism, Buddhism, and Marxism played in shaping ancient and modern Viêt Nam. In each case, these foreign ideas were accepted in Viêt Nam but then shaped to fit indigenous values. The Vietnamese accepted Confucian dictates on the importance of rites and relationships but opposed its subordination of women. Viêt Nam’s long coast invited foreign traders and missionaries. My narrative traces the steps of Buddhist monks who brought the belief system to Viêt Nam and depicts how the Vietnamese integrated elements of Buddhism into their existing animistic spirituality. After 1986, the story of Vietnamese transformation of Marxism from largely a command economy to one with a substantial private sector constitutes yet another example of how the culture has modified foreign ideas to meet important needs.

A key to understanding Viêt Nam is to see how it was been affected by world events, such as China’s expanding empire during the Han and Ming dynasties; the Catholic missionary enterprise during the West’s Age of Discovery; Western colonialism during the Industrial Revolution; the two World Wars; the Cold War; and the rivalry between the two Communist behemoths—the People’s Republic of China and the Soviet Union. The Story of Viêt Nam includes a rather poignant example of how Viêt Nam’s invasion and occupation of Cambodia between 1978 and 1989 was also due, in part, to much larger global considerations.

Four of the ten chapters of this KIAS volume are about the Socialist Republic of Viêt Nam (SRV) or the post-1975 united Viêt Nam. Despite the difficult and often tragic first decade of the SRV’s existence, the book’s thesis is that Viêt Nam’s best days are ahead. With a thriving economy and its geographical proximity to East and Southeast Asia, it appears that economic stability, if not prosperity, awaits a population that is disproportionately young compared to many other nations. For the United States, the importance of Viêt Nam is not in its past interactions but as a future ally, as both nations seek a Pacific not dominated by China.