

Editor's note: Authors of the two most recent *Key Issues in Asian Studies* have each contributed an essay about their volume. For more information about this pedagogical resource, visit www.asian-studies.org/publications/KIAS.htm

EAST ASIAN SOCIETIES

By W. Lawrence Neuman

Few students approach their study of Asia with a blank slate; rather, most start with a mixture of stereotypes, misconceptions, and fragments of accurate information. *East Asian Societies* attempts to convey the excitement and significance of East Asia to American teens and young adults at the same time that it introduces them to the complex factors that influence people's lives in contemporary East Asian societies. The booklet tries to strike a balance between acquainting American students with the "big picture" of East Asian regional forces and broad East-West differences, showing them each society's specific traditions and distinct trajectories.

After opening with a brief overview of the region's history, the booklet introduces students to the cultural themes and beliefs that shape people's everyday understandings and daily lives. A short discussion on the meaning of culture provides analytical tools to assist students who know nothing or very little of Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, and non-Western value systems. The booklet uses comparison and contextualization to counter a tendency among many students to treat Asian beliefs and practices as alien and exotic upon their first encounter with them. Without exaggerating or distorting any differences from an American cultural experience, the booklet guides students to see how East Asian cultural practices originated and are applied by people in practice.

Once students have gained a basic familiarity with the region's history and culture, the remaining chapters follow a life course sequence. This should help students connect their personal experiences with life in a contemporary East Asian society—growing up in a family (i.e., child raising practices, marriage and mate selection, and family structures), going to school and getting a job in a workplace, encountering systematic inequalities and diversity (by gender, region, income, and ethnicity) in adulthood, and acquiring an awareness of national political debates. The goal is to spark student interest in East Asia and reinforce its relevance to them without skirting the sociological complications that emerged from social, economic and political changes in the past twenty to thirty years. Students are encouraged to see how an individual's understandings and daily existence are embedded in a larger framework of cultural beliefs and societal institutions, and once they learn to recognize the influence of these beliefs and institutions, it helps explain why individuals, or even entire nations, act as they do.

The book ends on a theme that is woven throughout prior chapters. On one level, the daily life experiences of an East Asian teen or young adult has much in common with his/her American counterpart. On another level, the history, institutions, and cultural traditions of each Asian society continue to shape many aspects of that person's daily life in subtle, yet profound ways. In closing, I wish to thank Lucien Ellington, *KIAS* Editor, and Jon Wilson, AAS Publication Coordinator, for their tireless support and encouragement throughout the creation of the booklet.

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