

BOOK REVIEWS

Korea's Place in the Sun

A Modern History

by Bruce Cumings

NEW YORK: W. W. NORTON, 1997

495 PAGES + BIBLIOGRAPHY + INDEX

Here's a big book that could be as important for understanding Korea as Reischauer's was for revealing Japan. *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History* will become an essential resource for high school and college libraries and a requisite for those who teach Asian Studies. This valuable text was authored by Bruce Cumings, a Northwestern University professor and one of America's leading Korea scholars. After guiding us quickly through the country's early history, Cumings documents the arrival of the big powers in Korea, the Japanese occupation, World War II, the division of Korea, subsequent war, and the economic "miracle" on the Han River. Those who interact with Korean students and their families will find the chapter on Korean Americans very helpful.

Little has been written about modern Korean history because South Korea and Japan have sealed the records of much of the shame and psychological scars endured by the Korean people. To counter the ignorance about Korea that Cumings says beclouds Americans today as much as it did their leaders in 1945, the author provides a vivid, engrossing, and often disturbing account of the direct role the U.S. has played in Korean history in this century and how the U.S. bears the greatest responsibility for failing to resolve the Korean conflict. Although the Cold War has ended, the Korean DMZ remains the most heavily fortified and potentially explosive area in the world. As recently as the mid-1990s, we came much closer than most people realize to war over North Korea's nuclear program.

The first and probably the gravest collision between communism and capitalism erupted in Korea in 1950. Thousands of North Koreans who had been fighting for Mao Zedong invaded the South, whose military leaders had served under Japan. Mao had determined that if North Korea faltered, he would enter the war. The United Nations commander, Douglas MacArthur, ordered that a wasteland be created in North Korea. Before Truman fired him, the general had demanded thirty-two atomic bombs.

With great specificity, Cumings reveals how the U.S. supported brutal anticommunist dictatorships during the Cold War. While South Korea had been the agricultural region of the country, the government fostered the growth of the *chaebol*, and the Korean people "worked their fingers to the bone to create the industrial country we now see."

The author is skeptical that reunification will happen soon. Both sides may expect that giving up power will mean trials and executions for political crimes and "a thorough rewriting of history to blot out the other side's achievements and to highlight its transgressions." Rival Japan might also take a dim view of Korean reunification.

It is abundantly clear that Bruce Cumings admires the spirited Koreans: their work ethic, devotion to family, and respect for education. Some readers might be satisfied with less detail; however, most will find this to be the most engrossing and complete history of Korea available today. ■

Mary Connor

MARY CONNOR, a high school teacher of Asian Studies and Advanced Placement United States history, has been published in *Social Education* and *Social Studies Review* and has spoken at NCSS Conferences for the past four years. During the Summer of 1997 she participated in the Keizai Koho Center Fellowship to Japan.

Southeast Asia

An Introductory History

Seventh edition
by Milton Osborne

ST. LEONARDS, AUSTRALIA: ALLEN AND UNWIN, 1997

How does one teach the history of Southeast Asia? In a survey course, it is extremely easy to show the region's diversity. Yet emphasizing diversity without mentioning commonalities leaves beginning students floundering. Milton Osborne's *Southeast Asia: An Introductory History* strikes an excellent balance between particular histories and overarching themes. Indeed, it is easier to grasp Southeast Asian history as a whole with Osborne's book than with the other introductory texts on Southeast Asian history. Furthermore, at 263 pages, his book is long enough to provide a substantive narrative to frame the course, but short enough to allow the instructor to supplement it with numerous other readings.

This book is aimed at beginning students who are mostly studying modern Southeast Asian history. In his introduction, Osborne notes that he has been "concerned to preserve the book's *introductory* character" (viii). In keeping with this approach, he does not advance controversial new interpretations or complex theories.

The book has roughly three sections: the "classical" and precolonial period; the period from the beginning of the European advance to the end of colonialism; and the independence period. A chapter on art and literature is added, as is a 1997 postscript. From chapter lengths alone, it is clear that historians of premodern Southeast Asia will be unhappy with this book, while those who focus on modern history to the 1950s will find it more than adequate.

Osborne's section on the premodern period (what he calls the "classical period") strikes this reviewer as judicious, if short. Reflecting the evidence available, much of his text focuses on kings, courts, and empires. At times, ignoring what Michael Adas has called "avoidance protest" (flight, foot dragging, not paying taxes, etc.), he overemphasizes the power of kings and their retinues over peasants: