

Modern East Asia

BY JONATHAN LIPMAN, BARBARA MOLONY, AND MICHAEL ROBINSON
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Reviewed by Anne Prescott

Modern East Asia is an engaging East Asia history textbook that offers a new approach to the topic and is suitable for both high school and postsecondary classes. It focuses on the history of China, Japan, and Korea (including North Korea and Taiwan) from 1600 to the present, with roughly two-thirds of the book devoted to the past 150 years. Readers, particularly those with less experience with East Asia, will appreciate the clear introduction to the geography and languages of the region. Each of the following chapters begins by placing the cultures and the times in world context, followed by separate sections for China, Japan, and Korea. Within each chapter, the authors take care to give each culture equal weight, and for balance, the order of presentation varies. “Diasporas and Connections,” which highlights the movement of peoples between and from East Asia and the interactions between the three cultures, concludes each chapter.

This book stands out from the crowd in four ways. Portraits of thirty-six individuals, twelve from each culture, constitute the most visible innovation, and their stories serve to personalize the historical narratives. Included are well-known figures such as Fukuzawa Yukichi, Kim Dae Jung, and Lu Xun, as well as those which challenge stereotypes such as Catholic saint Hosokawa Gracia Tama, and Lady Hyegyong—the author of an important book on the dark side of eighteenth-century court life in Korea—and contemporary figures such as film director Im Kwon-Taek and entrepreneur Zhang Ruimin. With such variety, readers should find at least one person whose story has meaning for them.

Second, connections to other countries—both within and outside of Asia—are clearly laid out and integrated into the text at appropriate points. So often in history textbooks—of any kind—one gets the feeling that all history centers on the US and its relations to other countries, but this book is careful to point out, where it makes sense to do so, that the world doesn’t always revolve around the US. For example, the authors note that

Demonstrating the transcultural nature of scientific work, engineers from Russia, Croatia, Italy, England, Germany, India, New Zealand, Spain, and the US (working separately) put together electricity, magnetism, and new technology to make possible the wireless transmission of electrical signals and eventually sound—the basic science of radio. (210)

Another illustration is the unique way that Chinese, Japanese, and Korean terms are presented in the text. When the term *hanzi* (the reading for “Chinese characters” in Mandarin) appears, the equivalent Korean (*hanja*) and Japanese (*kanji*) readings are given in parentheses. When Chinese words are given in a dialect, the Mandarin equivalent is noted in parentheses. All of these terms are also listed in the glossary.

Third, the authors consulted with master secondary teachers to create a text that is appropriate for and accessible to both high school and postsecondary teachers and students, who should find the text less dry and more engaging than many history texts. The thematic approach of each chapter allows for integration into historical world issues—an important consideration for instructors who are using this text to teach classes with a focus that is broader than just East Asia. Finally, *Modern East Asia* is an excellent refer-

ence book for educators who will appreciate the wealth of photos, maps, and other illustrations. The bibliography offers additional resources—more specialized textbooks, collections of primary sources, and first-person historical accounts.

Finally, *Modern East Asia* ends with a “stay-tuned” list of lingering questions about the effects of growing regional connectivity that will stimulate thought and encourage readers to continue their study of East Asia into the future.


East Asians have connected with one another since the 1990s through cell phone technology, the Internet, greater media openness (underground in the DPRK), and expanding travel for business, family, tourism, and nostalgia. Their interactions, not mediated by influences from elsewhere in the world (but connected to them), will be crucial in the region’s futures. Will traveling to one another’s countries lessen or enhance the sense of ethnic difference and cultural barriers strengthened by twentieth-century conflicts? Will anti-Japanese sentiment in China and Korea gradually dissolve in a generation that loves anime? Will Japanese condescension toward Koreans disappear in national affection for Yon-sama and Korean soap operas? Will Mandopop, Cantopop, J-pop, and K-pop mediate a new mutuality among East Asians? (465)

May the authors of the continuation of the East Asia story 100 years from now write an equally compelling, clear, concise, and useful textbook. ■

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