

Sourcebook of Korean Civilization

Volume 2: From the Seventeenth Century to the Modern Period

Edited by Peter H. Lee, with Donald Baker, Yongho Ch'oe, Hugh H. W. Kang, and Han-Kyo Kim

NEW YORK: COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1996
500 PAGES

This volume completes the two-volume *Sourcebook of Korean Civilization*, the first volume of which appeared in 1993. The books complement the *Sources* series on Japanese, Chinese, and Indian traditions from the same publisher. The latter books have been in wide use by scholars and students for four decades; it is remarkable that it has taken so long for a similar work on Korea to be published. Its appearance, however, is an indication of the steady growth of interest in Korea that is reflected in the larger number of course offerings at an ever-growing number of colleges and universities in the English-speaking world. Another impetus for the production of the Korean *Sourcebook* was the appearance in the 1980s in Korea of a five-volume collection of Korean historical documents (in Korean, which in many cases meant in translation from classical Chinese). The Columbia volumes on Korea are not simply a duplication or condensation of the Korean series, but as the editor points out in the first volume, they do owe a debt to that earlier compilation of source readings.

The volume under review here is divided into two sections (Part IV and Part V, continuing from the earlier volume). The first is on "Late Chosŏn" (spanning the seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth century), while the second is on the "Modern Period" (1860–1945). The reason for the absence of any documents beyond 1945 (the year of both the peninsula's liberation from Japanese rule and its division by the United States and the Soviet Union) is not explained. Teachers who wish to have their students read primary sources from this later period will have to look elsewhere.

Nevertheless, this is without question a most welcome addition to the Korean Studies field. Nowhere can one find a more comprehensive and varied collection of primary historical materials in English. Primary sources are the stuff of historical understanding. This book is full of them, and while there are a few errors and imprecise translations, I will not dwell on them, as doing so would be out of proportion to the book's contribution. Perfection is not to be expected from a 500-page volume containing over 150 separate documents translated by 18 contributors. At least one of the editors has already indicated that such mistakes as are known will be corrected for the future paperback abridgement.

Topics covered by these documents range from the political to the philosophical, from the dirt-under-the-nails practical to the

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BOOK REVIEWS

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seemingly head-in-the-clouds metaphysical. There are discussions of land reform, agricultural technology, calendars, Christianity (both pro and con), Confucianism, inheritance practices, music, early encounters with Western countries, rebel movements, independence activities (educational as well as confrontational), and various facets of nationalist movements under Japanese rule, including the first years of the Korean Communist movement. I was pleased to see the very useful glossary and bibliography of sources (in Asian languages as well as English), in addition to a comprehensive index. Two famous examples of Korean poetry from the colonial period can be found in the last chapter, but teachers wanting to include a substantial section of poetry and fiction in their courses will need to look at the growing number of anthologies and novels now available in English translation.

The range of coverage in this book makes it very useful as a supplement to textbooks or to more focused studies of particular

topics or periods. Some of the material, such as the technical debates over aspects of Confucian cosmology, are rather complicated and may be beyond the interest or even the intelligibility of many students who will be approaching the topic for the first time. They are nevertheless important parts of the Korean tradition, and their inclusion is fully justified in a book that aims to be comprehensive. Teachers who use this book, however, will probably want to pick and choose, selecting those passages that are most relevant to the way in which they are teaching about Korea.

While scholars and teachers of Korea enthusiastically welcome this book, there are two factors which will probably limit its use in the classroom. One—its scope—has already been mentioned. Even in a one-semester course devoted only to Korea since roughly 1800, I found that there was more material here than I could possibly use. I tried to find a balance between not overloading my students on the one hand, and using enough of the book's material to justify its purchase on the other. In the end, many students still commented that they felt the source readings were too numerous and sometimes too technical. The second factor is the book's price. The book is big; it is also expensive—perhaps not by the standards of, say, chemistry textbooks, but more expensive than the average supplementary book in a history or culture class.

My view is that a healthy dose of primary documents is vital to an understanding of any culture or period. Teachers of Korea (either by itself or as part of a course with broader coverage) who wish to use this excellent collection of documents, however, may want to put a copy on limited reserve in the library, assigning students only certain sections and hoping they do not all go after it at the same time. Alternatively, they may choose to wait until the abridged paperback edition has been published. A belated inclusion in the "Introduction to Asian Civilizations" series that includes the Japan, China, and India volumes mentioned above, the first paperback volume has already appeared (under the title *Sources of Korean Tradition*, matching the others in the series). It shortens the original Volume 1 by about 300 pages while still maintaining a legitimate claim to being comprehensive. But its smaller heft and price make it much more classroom-friendly. The same will undoubtedly be true for Volume 2.

In sum, *Sourcebook of Korean Civilization* is an important collection of documents on Korean history and culture. It is an impressive achievement that fills a gap in English-language material on Korea. Though teachers may want to wait for the paperback edition before requiring students to purchase the book, for both scholars and students its value can hardly be overestimated. ■

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