

## 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:

he states that “in traditional Southeast Asia power was concentrated in the hands of the elite few” (45). But then, as if to rectify his biases, the author takes pains to speak of peasants, minorities, and slaves, and shows how they avoided elite impositions. Other than that, I might add that recent scholarship suggests that he overemphasizes the power of Confucianism in precolonial Vietnam.

The book then takes up a series of topics linked to the coming of colonialism: the European advance, the arrival of other Asian immigrants, and the economic transformation of Southeast Asia. Some important topics are excluded. For example, in focusing on economic transformations, Osborne gives short shrift to the great majority of Southeast Asians who continue to make their living through fishing and wet-rice agriculture. Given the short length of the book, such choices are regrettable but perfectly defensible.

At times a peculiar statist bias does, however, show through. For the colonial period, this comes across as Eurocentric; I was perplexed, for example, to see that he has titled his chapter on the period between the two World Wars “The Years of Illusion.” It becomes clear that Osborne means that these were years of illusion to the ruling colonizers. One could just as easily call this period “The Years of Experimentation,” for it was in these years that a wide variety of Southeast Asians experimented with new ideologies, new practices, and new conceptual languages, as well as returned, in dialectical fashion, to older traditions; witness, for example, the centrality of Muslim participation to the 1926 Indonesian communist revolts. (A different example of a focus on the European perspectives: at the end of the book, Osborne adds a chapter on literature that emphasizes European and American, not Southeast Asian, writings on Southeast Asia. Why?)

For the postcolonial period, Osborne maintains a critical distance from the self-representations of the new ruling elites. But despite this distance, he falls into a statist bias—he clearly perceives

challenges to central authority from separatist movements as “problems.” In this age, when the nation-state is ubiquitous but also, at times, so weak, we need to be reminded that there is nothing “natural” or necessarily enduring about current state boundaries.

Reflecting on the book as a whole, one could say that its occasional statist and European focus can be a strength but is usually a weakness. At the beginning of the book, for example, Osborne explains his use of the term “classical period,” admitting that some might inevitably be led to compare his use of the term to the way it is used in Greek and Roman history. Indeed, occasional comparisons with European history can be pedagogically useful. In this case, however, it is not. Osborne seems to use the term “classical” because Coedès and others have; but in and of itself, that is a poor reason to perpetuate the use of a problematic term with unclear temporal boundaries, borrowed from European history, that poorly fits the Southeast Asian experience.

I have lingered over some mild criticisms of Osborne’s book. These criticisms must be placed in context. Overall, the book is excellent. It is a short, selective, and well presented introduction to the modern history of Southeast Asia based on solid scholarship. Osborne manages to present a lively picture of the region’s past. I have used an earlier version of this book in my introductory course on Southeast Asian history and can testify that, unlike many textbooks, this one can actually generate lively discussions. ■

Shawn McHale

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