

## BOOK REVIEWS

# The Koreas

## *A Global Studies Handbook*

BY MARY E. CONNOR

SANTA BARBARA: ABC-CLIO, 2002

286 PAGES. HARDCOVER

ISBN: 1-57607-277-0

“You know, Korea’s the most interesting of the Asian cultures.” The author’s preface invites the reader to explore one of the richest, and most often ignored, cultures in East Asia. Many educators have left Korea out of their curricula mainly due to the lack of available material. This ambitious book seeks to remedy this problem by providing a general introduction to Korea through history, contemporary culture, and its economic and political development since 1945. Mary Connor has succeeded in providing a succinct, well written, and surprisingly easy to use reference book. The book is mainly appropriate for secondary and post-secondary schools and would be a valuable addition to any library collection. However, *The Koreas* is not just for teachers and students; it’s for businesspeople, travelers, and those curious about the relationship between the United States and South Korea.

Within the postwar period, Korea has often been overshadowed by the political and economic power of both China and Japan. For most westerners, Korea has conjured up images of a far-away place besieged by Cold War politics and tensions best forgotten. Indeed, even the Korean War (1950–53) has been labeled the “Forgotten War.” It’s no wonder that when one looks through world history textbooks, Korea is often treated as nothing more than a tributary state of China or as a region where the United States sought to contain the spread of communism. *The Koreas* challenges this perception and pushes us to examine Korea as a distinct culture that was not absorbed by China and one that fought to maintain its identity through history. The author also challenges us to view South Korea as a nation not under the predominant influence of the United States.

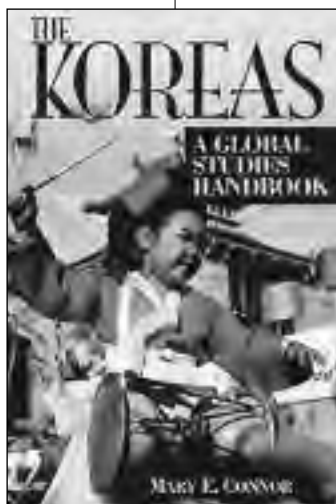
This book has come at a time when North and South Korea have been in the news to such a high degree that many people are wondering not only “Where is Korea?” but also “Who are the Koreans?” The Seoul Olympics of 1988 showed the world that the Republic of South Korea was a strong, industrialized, prosperous nation. Seoul has become the Paris or Milan of East Asia due to its innovative fashions and is seen as the rising star of Asian pop culture. South Korea has emerged as a world economic power. North Korea remains a fixture in the media due to its nuclear arms program and human rights abuses. However, the image of Korea that

most recently touched the hearts of many people came into focus at the opening ceremony of the Sydney Olympics (2000) when athletes from North and South Korea marched together holding the flag of unification. It is difficult to ignore Korea, and educators are now obliged to open their students’ minds to understanding more about a region long neglected in education.

The first chapter, Geography and History, offers a brief introduction to the physical and cultural geography of the Koreas. The author sets the stage by placing the physical geography in context with political and economic concerns: “Korea sits at the vital center of Northeast Asia, one of the world’s most strategically important and dynamic regions” (p. 8). The history set forth from early Korea to the present day revolves around this assumption. Many of her neighbors have fought to take control of the peninsula. The Chinese, Mongols, Manchurians, Japanese, and later the Europeans all sought to control Korea. However, the history section demonstrates that Korea has a culture distinct from her neighbors. Although China had a tremendous influence on the cultural development of Korea, mainly through Confucianism and Buddhism, the Koreans assimilated these beliefs into an already distinct and developed culture. The sections on the Japanese Colonial Rule (1910–1945) and the Korean War are concise and informative. Each of these periods is difficult to summarize

without making value judgments based on historical evidence. Although the author gives many examples of the severe policies of Japanese rule and to the ideological struggles between the United States and the Soviet Union, she allows the readers to draw their own conclusions.

When President Bush labeled North Korea one of the nations in his “Axis of Evil,” the public was once again awakened to the lingering memory of the Cold War. However, the North Korea we have in our memories, whether from the Korean War, speculative journalism, or from the television series *M\*A\*S\*H\**, is a different nation with different concerns. *The Koreas* makes an earnest attempt to include as much information about the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (North Korea) as possible, considering the country remains shrouded in mystery. The author ties North Korea’s concern with economic and political development into the international arena and its desire to strengthen relations with South Korea, which in turn means contact (or possibly conflict) with the United States. The sections devoted to “The North Korean Experience” open the reader to seeing North Korea in a new light and not just as a xenophobic, isolated, and aggressive nation. The author remains objective in describing North Korea’s view of the United States, socialist ideology, and the history of the two Koreas. The North Korean section in the chapter “Contemporary Culture and Social Problems” is a must-read and would provide fascinating classroom discussions.



The only shortcoming with *The Koreas* is that the sections on North Korea are short and the reader will want more. Considering that academic scholarship on North Korea is scant and public information is open to conjecture, the author made an earnest attempt to include pertinent and reliable information. She states “. . . North Korea remains the most mysterious nation in the world. Many basic facts remain unknown” (p. 100).

The bulk and strength of *The Koreas* are in its focus on South Korea. Over thirty pages are devoted to South Korea in “Economic Development since 1945”; eight pages are devoted to North Korea. This section does not overwhelm the reader with analysis and theory of how South Korea ascended to economic power nor of North Korea’s economic stagnation. Instead, it is readily understandable due to extensive examples interconnecting economic development with history and politics. For example, the United States occupied South Korea from 1945–48 to consolidate power, stabilize the economy, and to shift the economic structure away from Japan’s occupation policies to self-reliance on capital, managerial skills, and technology. The economic goals of the United States were similar to its occupational policies in Japan (1945–52). The United States’ great emphasis on countering communist influences in South Korea has influenced the nation to the present day. Perhaps the most extensive chapter is “Political Development since 1945.” The author gives extensive details on the eight republics from Syngman Rhee to Kim Dae-jung. It’s enlightening to read this chapter and realize the turmoil that South Korea has endured from the Korean War, from military rule, and later from student democracy movements. The author made this chapter interesting to read by showing Korea’s involvement in the international arena and providing interesting sideline stories of spy games, assassinations, and political intrigue. This chapter alone gives the reader insight into the challenges that lie ahead for the Koreas in the twenty-first century.

*The Koreas* is a valuable reference book that can inspire educators to devote curriculum units to Korean history and culture. The annotated bibliography provides reliable sites for internet search activities and a broad list of organizations that can provide information and classroom materials. For students, the book can assist in projects, classroom presentations, and research papers. Part Two is devoted to reference materials and is exhaustive in what it provides the reader: a chronological table; significant people, places and events; Korean language, food and etiquette; organizations; annotated bibliography on recommended works on Korea (books, periodicals, literature and the Internet). Indeed, it is difficult to find anything that *The Koreas* leaves out. ■

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**Q:**

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