

A History of Korea

by Kyung Moon Hwang
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Kyung Moon Hwang, a historian of modern Korea, has written a general history of Korea from the earliest times to 2009. A little less than one-half is devoted to covering the period up to the late nineteenth century and the rest deals with the country's modern transformation. It is divided into twenty-seven short chapters each beginning with a particular event that illustrates the main point of the chapter. What distinguishes this book from others is that rather than present a detailed compendium of facts or a comprehensive survey the author highlights key aspects of the country's historical development. As a result, a great deal of Korean history is left out or given only the briefest mention. For example, less than two pages are devoted to the entire early period before the emergence of the Three Kingdoms. There is nothing about the introduction of agriculture, the Bronze Age, or the controversies over the ethnic or linguistic origins of Korean people. Just one paragraph is devoted to Balhae. And yet, this approach introduces Korean history to those possessing little prior knowledge without overwhelming them with a flood of unfamiliar names and terms. Instead, Hwang attempts to provide an overarching narrative and a number of interesting observations and comments that might encourage the reader to pursue the topic further. The result is effective,

made more so by his lucid writing style. In short, this is a highly readable book, suitable for those with no background in Korean history.

A History of Korea is organized chronologically, but focuses on some basic themes. Hwang lists a number of these in his introduction: the formation of a distinctive Korean identity, the evolution of political authority, religion, economy and daily life, gender and family, social hierarchy, and Korea's relations with the outside world, especially with China and Japan. The main focus of this book, however, appears to be the interconnected themes of the emergence of Korean national identity and the appropriation of the past by modern Korean nationalists. This is exemplified in the first chapters that deal with the Three Kingdoms period. The author explains the significance of two major interpretations of this period: one that sees Silla as the founder of the united Korean state and the progenitor of later Korean society, and the counterview held by many contemporary historians and non-academics that looks to Koguryo as the truest embodiment of a distinctive Korean tradition. Hwang explains how today in North Korea Koguryo is admired for its fierce independence and its resistance to Chinese encroachment into the region. This is contrasted with Silla which sought the intervention of Tang and modeled its institutions after its giant neighbor, thus beginning a pattern of subservience to an outside power, the so-called *sadaejui* policy that has been excoriated by modern Korean nationalists. Furthermore, he explains the implication for Koreans today of the argument that Silla never united the homeland but instead conceded the greater part of the area of the former Koguryo to China leading to a truncated Korean state. The author thus makes the ancient history relevant to understanding Korean identity and nationalist rhetoric today while being careful to point out the limitations of both viewpoints.

Hwang touches on other historiographical issues, usually with admirable clarity and brevity in explaining their implications for understanding history. These include how the Japanese and Manchurian invasions helped to foster a sense of national consciousness among the non-

elite population, the impact of the Japanese takeover of Korea after 1905 in robbing the country of its autonomous modernization, and the importance of nationalism in understanding the histories of North and South Korea. His focus on Jang Bo-go in the chapter on Silla after unification centers on the maritime adventurer as a symbol of a Korea that used its geographical location amidst great powers to become a center of trade and trans-regional exchange rather than as a source of victimization. The Myocheong Rebellion in 1135 is placed in the larger perspective of Pyeongyang and the Daedong valley as a rival political and cultural center drawing parallels with the later Hong Gyeongnae Rebellion and the regime of Kim Il Sung. He introduces the “sprouts of modernity” argument over whether there was an internal evolution toward modernity in late Joseon. All these relate back to his central theme of national identity. In most cases historical issues are introduced without the author stating his own views on the topic. Mostly this is admirable, but at times one wishes the author presented his own interpretation.

Another distinguishing feature of this book is the prominence it gives to women in Korean history. This is done by giving more attention to gender issues than in most other English language histories, and by focusing on individual women in Korean history including: Queen Seondeok, Lady Gi, Lady Sin Saimdang and Na Hye-seok. Sometimes this leads to an exaggeration of their roles, such as seeing Queen Seondeok as a pivotal figure in Korean history. However, it does provide a useful corrective to the standard male-dominated narrative, and the discussions often raise important points for understanding Korean history. Again, he relates these to contemporary issues of identity and culture. There is a particularly interesting discussion of the controversy over the choice of Sin Saimdang as the first woman to appear on South Korean currency.

In general, the author offers a balanced, intelligent presentation, a product of clear, fair, and objective thinking about his subject. Of course, there are points where his judgments can be challenged. He, for example,

begins his history with the battle of Salsu River of 612, in which he uncritically accepts the traditional figures of all but 3,000 of 1,133,000 Sui forces perishing (p. 7). He makes broad statements that many in the field would contest. Was the General Sherman incident the “opening shot of imperialism” (p. 123)? In the last chapter he argues that “without Gwangju, the breakthrough to formal democracy would probably have taken much longer, if at all” (p. 262). Would South Korea today still not be democratic if Gwangju had not taken place? Again in the last chapter when discussing the two Koreas he states that the “radical departures in the two states’ development resulted from their strenuous effort to contrast themselves from each other” (p. 251). More likely the different trajectories of North and South Korea were the result of adopting different socio-economic systems and having two different geo-political orientations. While many would question some of the author’s statements, in general, he is a reliable guide to Korean history.

There are of course many limitations in this approach to writing a history of Korea. So much of this slim narrative is devoted to a few selected issues that much that is important is excluded. For example, the chapters on colonial history provide relatively little on the problems of tenant farmers or the demographic changes in Korea, and very little on the ideological divisions in the nationalist movement. Economic history tends to be given the briefest of treatments. His style of introducing vignettes to make points can sometimes be a bit confusing without a little more background. An interesting account of the Roundtable Discussion in Tokyo in November 1943 with Choe Namseon and Yi Gwangsu (p. 191), for example, needs more context to make it more fully understandable. As a result, anyone using this as a text will need some supplementary materials to fill out the sketchy treatment of many topics. The author helps with this by providing a useful selection of further readings in English on Korean history as well as a few sources. The book ends rather abruptly with the suicide of Roh Moo-hyun and the passing of Kim Dae-jung, without any conclusion that might draw some of the themes in the

book together. It would also have been useful to have had some maps. A more serious limitation of the book is that it does not place most events in their wider regional and global context. So important is the relationship of Korea with its neighbors that we need to understand the broader changes in China, Japan, and Inner Asia to appreciate how they impacted Korea and the country's role in shaping events in the region. Developments from the early state formation to the rise of Neo-Confucianism to the collapse of the tribute system only make sense if situated into the larger story of East Asian and world history. This lack of context becomes an even greater problem in the later chapters where imperialism, nationalism, the rise of communism, and the Cold War are central to understanding Korea, not only as a victim or passive recipient of global forces but also as an active participant in world history.

Yet, for all its limitations this remains a useful introduction to Korean history. Not only does Hwang's clear prose make this book accessible to the beginner, it is also a good read for those with a background in Korean history who can appreciate some of the author's insights.