A Concise History of Korea: From the Neolithic Period through the Nineteenth Century

by Michael J. Seth

Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006

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Michael Seth's book on premodern Korean history through the nineteenth century has been called "engaging," "knowledgeable and historiographies."[1] It also sets Korean political, social, and cultural nuanced," and "focused on the needs of the American undergraduate student." One previous reviewer pointed out how Seth's book is also valuable for its attention to "crucial larger themes—such as the status of women, the Confucianization of society and culture, and the institution of slavery—as well as to issues regarding the interpretations of colonial and nationalist developments within the larger context of East Asia, looking at connections across time and place. Throughout the book, Seth poses critical questions to provide fuel for classroom dialogue, and discusses some of the controversies in historiography within East Asia today. Seth's book is a useful text for undergraduate courses on Korea, although in-depth upper division courses may benefit from a more

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[1] Reviewers' comments, back cover.

detailed textbook.

Structure of the Book

The 256-page book has nine chapters: 1) The Origins; 2) The Fourth Century and the Emergence of the Three Kingdoms; 3) United Silla; 4) Koryŏ; 5) Military Rulers and Mongol Invaders; 6) The Neo-Confucian Revolution and the Chosŏn State; 7) Chosŏn Society; 8) Late Chosŏn; and 9) Korea in the Nineteenth Century. Additionally he has an appendix on Romanization, a Glossary of Korean Words, and Selected Bibliography. The appendix on Romanization, however, may be baffling to readers without previous exposure to the Korean language, especially if they are not sure familiar with terms like "aspirated" or "unaspirated." There are six basic maps at the beginning of the book, but they are quite simplistic. I found myself wishing there were more illustrations in the book, but that would have undoubtedly raised the cost of the book. The book's affordable price is one of the ways in which this book is accessible.

Seth begins his story with the origins of Korean civilization, giving the geographical background and tracing the theories on the origins of the people who inhabited the Korean peninsula. The discussion on the development of agriculture, growth of communities, rise of pro-states and early states are all handled skillfully, providing the reader with a firm foundation to understand the origins of Korean culture and society. Overall, this is a very informative book and is better written than many other textbooks published in English.

Seth shows East Asian relations in a balanced way with specific adaptation, and not just blind adoption, of Chinese customs. At the same time, Seth could have done more to show that Chinese culture was not just selectively adopted but that there was a two-way transmission of culture, with Koreans making significant contributions in developing Neo-Confucianism, Buddhism, and the arts in East Asia. For example, Seth talks about Confucianization as "a creative process of adapting the ideals

that originated in China to indigenous practices"[2] and shows that Confucianism was not static, but changed across time and place. However, a discussion of Korean contributions to the Confucian intellectual tradition would have given readers a richer sense of the role of Korean thinkers, especially of Neo-Confucianism.

Seth has read and incorporated much English-language scholarship on Korea, with footnotes and an annotated bibliography that is very helpful for further research. For example, Seth refers to Cameron Hurst's analogy of the "good," "bad," and "ugly" to describe Wang Geon, Gyeonhwon, and Gungye, the respective founders of Goryeo, Baekje, and Later Koguryo.[3] Cited references such as these are helpful in guiding the reader to more scholarship on Korean history. The annotated, selected bibliography is also useful in pointing readers toward more research. The bibliography, however, has several typographical errors that maybe hinder some readers from finding the source. There are also some sources that have been omitted from the selected bibliography and hopefully will be included in the second edition.

At the end of chapters one through eight, Seth includes excerpts of primary source materials culled from Peter H. Lee and Wm. Theodore de Bary's *Sources of Korean Tradition*. These include Dangun myth, descriptions of *hwarang*, royal edicts, Wang Geon's Ten Injunctions, descriptions of Manjeok's rebellion, and the preface to the *Hunmin jeongeum*. While Seth discusses them in some context within each chapter, it would be beneficial to the reader if he had included a brief introduction immediately preceding the excerpts. While he has selected excerpts originally from *Samguk sagi* (三國史記, *History of the Three Kingdoms*), *Goryeo sa* (高麗史, *History of Goryeo*), and various sections of *Joseon wangjo sillok* (朝鮮王朝實錄, *Veritable Records of the Joseon*

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[2] See p. 151.

[3] See pp. 69-70

Dynasty), the reader would better be able to appreciate the excerpts with explanations about the significance of each excerpt.

Substance of the Book

This book deserves much praise for packing so much substance into 256 pages. Although the book is concise in its treatment of history, Seth has not cut corners in explaining key issues concerning our understanding of premodern Korean history. His treatment of competing interpretations and controversies as well as his contextualization and situating of Korea relative to its neighbors helps the reader gain a much richer and more nuanced understanding of Korean history.

Much to his credit, Seth discusses many of the lingering historical controversies within East Asia about history and historiography. For example, he explains how Japanese imperialists used historical claims of Mimana as a fourth-century conquest of Korea by Japan to legitimate their twentieth-century colonization. Seth questions the reliability of such claims, and introduces the "horse rider theory" and alternate explanations. Most importantly, he explains how contemporary nationalism has tended "to project modern notions of national and ethnic identity anachronistically onto these early times."[4] He thereby helps his readers understand that varying interpretations of these ancient events are still controversial today.

Seth's treatment of Korean history within a larger context is very illuminating. When he talks about the Goryeo period of Choe House rule (1196-1258), he compares the situation with Japanese and European feudalism. He shows how the Korean situation differed because the military under the Choe House rule was still closely connected to the king, civil officialdom, and the Chinese-style legal system, and thus lacked the

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[4] See p. 32.

autonomy seen with the Japanese shogunate system.[5] This type of comparison makes the book more interesting but also makes it more relevant to readers of varied familiarity with East Asian and world history.

Seth is especially skillful at describing key historical figures, adding a richer texture to his narrative. Whether he is describing King Gwanggaeto (of Koguryo), Jang Bo-go (of Silla), King Gongmin (of Goryeo), or the Dutch who became stranded in Joseon, Seth weaves together a narrative on each figure (major or minor) in such an adept way as to breathe life into their descriptions. He does this all the while he stays within general knowledge, without romanticizing or embellishing facts. Seth's descriptions of people make his book much more dynamic and deep.

Seth also widens his scope beyond the elite males. He has sections devoted to women's roles, as well as commoners and secondary-status groups such as secondary (or illegitimate) sons, *jungin*, *hyangni*, and lowborns. This approach enables the reader to gain a fuller understanding of Korean society beyond that of the elite stratum. The only point of contention is his inclusion of secondary status groups under the heading of "Slaves and Outcastes." While slaves and *baekjeong* rightfully belong in that section, secondary sons and their descendants (*seoja* or *seoeol*), *jungin* ("middle people" who were technical specialists), and *hyangni* (local clerks) should not be classified as such. They did not have the privileges of being *yangban*, but as secondary status groups, still belonged to what Seth calls "subelite" stratum just beneath the *yangban*.

Shortcomings of the Book

Perhaps because Seth satisfactorily explains many of the controversies, I could not help but wish he had included more of them. For example, he

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[5] See pp. 105-6.

talks about Wiman Joseon as a lieutenant of the Yan king,[6] but does not explain the Korean-Japanese debate about whether Wiman was "Korean" or "Chinese." It would have also been helpful if Seth had explained the debate on the transition of the Samhan (Three Han, referring to Mahan, Jinhan, and Byeonhan) into the Three Kingdoms. Whereas they had been correlated with Baekje, Gaya, and Silla, recent scholarship has shown linkages between Koguryo and Mahan as well. In another instance, Seth says there is "an inherent pro-Silla bias in most Korean history,"[7] but I wish he had clarified that this applies mostly to South Korean historiography, as North Korea has a very different take on the events.

In his discussion of Balhae, Seth explains why some historians argue that the unified Silla period should be called the "two Kingdoms period." He also raises further questions, asking if Balhae was a Korean state and what role it has in Korean history.[8] But instead of fully developing the issues, Seth tackles only some of the debate, and summarizes that Balhae "was first of all a Manchurian state with a southern foothold in northern Korea and some ethnic and cultural affiliations with the peoples of the peninsula."[9] He seems to disregard the latest South Korean scholarship on Balhae, which has been previously published in Korean and is now available in English.[10] Recent scholarship points to considerable linkages between Balhae and Koguryo (before Balhae's formation) and Goryeo (after Balhae's demise), so it is simplistic to just dismiss Balhae as a Manchurian state and to situate it within contemporary historical disputes.

While Seth points out that Joseon enjoyed exceptional longevity, at

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[6] See p. 17.

[7] See p. 37.

[8] See p. 68.

[9] See p. 68.

[10] See John B. Duncan. (Trans.). *A New History of Parhae*. The Northeast Asian History Foundation (Ed.). Leiden: Brill, 2012.

times he is prone to sweeping generalizations. A statement about Joseon may be apt to describe one period, but not another, as mid-Joseon saw major social changes due to Confucianization. And later Joseon also saw major transformations due to encounters with the West.

Stylistically, the book contains some errors in Romanization. While most of it has been accurately Romanized in the McCune-Reischauer system, some of the mistakes have made it into the first edition. For example, misspellings and incorrect Romanizations include: two of the Korean names of the Four Han Chinese commanderies;[11] South Pyeongan province;[12] Hwabaek Council;[13] the concept of *dono jeomsu* (sudden enlightenment and gradual cultivation);[14] the name of the monk Hyegong;[15] and Hwang Jin-i's surname.[16] Such errors are nearly inevitable and do not detract from the quality of the book, but may obstruct the reader from effectively conducting further research.

At times, Seth strays from commonly used translations of terms. For example, *samgang oryun* is commonly translated as the three bonds and five relationships but Seth uses "three cardinal principles" and "five ethnical norms." Seth says that the corresponding virtue of men and women is *yŏl* (distinction), but it is *pyŏl* (separation, as in separate spheres of influence).

In a few instances, Seth does not give or use the Korean version of names, opting for Chinese or Japanese usages instead. For example, he uses the terms Yalu River and Tumen River instead of the Korean Amnok and Duman. Elsewhere, Seth uses the Japanese term *koan* without giving the Korean term *gongan* in discussing the Seon (J. Zen) term. And Seth

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[11] See p. 18.

[12] See p. 35.

[13] See p. 39.

[14] See p. 104.

[15] See p. 115.

[16] See p. 158.

alternatively refers to the Joseon period or dynasty as the Yi period or dynasty. While the Yi house ruled the Joseon dynasty, using the term Yi dynasty was a denigrated term used by Japan in its imperialist expansion. Given that the book focuses specifically on Korea, rather than East Asia, a more concerted effort to use Korean usages of these names and terms would have been preferential.

There are also some factual errors that will hopefully be addressed in a revision. Seth's description of Buddhism in Baekje and Koguryo as "a state protective cult patronized by the court"[17] is problematic, to say the least. Given the longevity of Buddhism and its role as one of the world's major religions, his characterization of it as a "cult" is unfortunate. Although Seth correctly gives the reigns of queens Seondeok (632-47) and Jindeok (647-54) in the first mention,[18] he mixes up their names in another mention.[19] And finally, while Seth talks in detail about the status of secondary (illegitimate) sons of *yangban*, he does not explain early on that while men took secondary wives in order to insure male offspring, the secondary sons were barred from taking the civil service examinations, and were considered second-class sons even in their homes.

These shortcomings do not mean that the book should not be adopted as a textbook. The writing of history inevitably engenders disagreements, and controversies, omissions, and errors can all become topics of discussion and teaching moments. Overall, Seth has written a very textured and rich history on premodern Korea, tailored for the undergraduate classroom or a motivated reader who wants to learn more about Korea. Just as Seth has written a second text on Korean history through the present, I hope he will write a second edition to this book, incorporat-

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[17] See p. 36.

[18] See p. 39.

[19] See p. 55.

ing some more of the latest English-language research and scholarship on Korea.