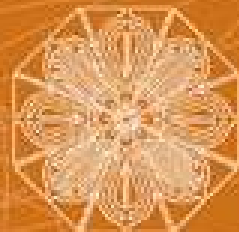


VOLUME 32 | 2008

Korean Studies

Center for Korean Studies
University of Hawai'i



Korean Studies

Korean Studies

Volume 32, 2008

University of Hawai'i Press

Review



Viewed



Downloaded

Save

View Citation

Additional Information

Reviewed by:

Jong Chol An — (bio)

***Korea's Twentieth-Century Odyssey: A Short History*, by Michael E. Robinson. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007. 232 pp., illus., notes, bibliography, index. \$19.00 paper.**

Reliable yet readable introductory books on modern Korean history are not all that numerous. For nearly two decades, *Korea Old and New: A History* (Ilchogak, 1990) by Carter J. Eckert and others has been a popular survey covering both the premodern and modern eras. Its balanced narrative on the modern period offers just the right amount of factual details and analyses, but readers wishing to know about new scholarship on modern Korean history and the events of the last twenty years need to look elsewhere. Bruce Cumings's *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History* (Norton, 1997) has been another authoritative survey of the modern Korean experience, while Cumings's perspective on the Korean War and its colonial origins was still arguable.

Michael E. Robinson's *Korea's Twentieth-Century Odyssey: A Short History* is a welcome addition to the growing yet still short list of good Korea surveys. As a leading Korea historian in North America and an authority on colonial Korea (1910–1945), Robinson seems like a logical choice to author a modern Korea survey. Robinson's research expertise and insights are evident in this book, which comprises eight chapters. The first five cover in chronological order

the major historical events from the "opening" of Korea (1876) up to the Korean War (1950–1953). **[End Page 177]** Devoted to postwar history, the remaining three chapters trace economic development, North Korea's "autarky" system, and the democratization of South Korea. Compared to other English-language books on modern Korean history, this book well reflects the latest scholarship on the country, as is noticeable in the citations. Indeed, the bibliography offers a highly useful listing of works for further reading.

The first chapter prepares the reader by offering a critical discussion of Chosŏn-dynasty (1392–1910) history relevant for understanding modern Korea. While providing a good analysis of a wide range of Korean responses and reform movements, Robinson understands the demise of the dynasty in the larger context of a "global phenomenon" that embraced "capitalism and imperialism" (p. 32). On this, Robinson's account is balanced: though not resorting to a victim-versus-victimizer tone, it is a critical analysis of the forces that led to the Japanese takeover of Korea.

Together covering the colonial period, chapters two, three, and four are even stronger. Regardless of whether one accepts the notion of colonial modernity, the period of Japanese colonial rule in Korea provides a strategic window through which Korea observers can better understand the story of modern Korea. They explain the colonial government policies toward Korean intellectuals and masses, as well as the developing rift among Korean intellectuals, that is, between cultural nationalism and communism. A new mass culture in the colonial era is a phenomenon "shaped by the transnational forces of global capitalism, technology transfer, and blended forms of cultural expressions" (p. 88). This area remains an important contribution by the author to Korean studies for understanding "the antecedents of contemporary Korean modernity" (p. 87).

Finding the origins of the Korean War therein, Robinson stresses the colonial legacy, particularly the last ten years, and sees the conflict as something that was imminent from the fall of 1948. He accepts Bruce Cumings's famous pronouncement: ". . . civil wars do not start: they come. They originate in multiple causes, with blame enough to go around for everyone" (*Korea's Place in the Sun*, p. 238). In the field's ensuing debate on who was responsible for the war, however, the relationship between human agency and social structure is not clear in his book. Rather than furthering this debate, he utilizes recent scholarship to describe the consequences and the aftermath of the war in terms of South Korean economic development, the North Korean system, and the democratization of South Korea. For example, although many scholars have painted a bleak picture of the South Korean economy in the 1950s, he accepts Jung-en Woo's view in her *Race to the Swift: State and Finance in Korean* **[End Page 178]** *Industrialization* (Columbia Univ. Press, 1991), which delineates meaningful economic developments in the 1950s through the government's finance and education policies (pp. 123–25).

One meaningful aspect of reading this book is to appreciate so many interesting photographs and statistical tables. They give readers a better sense of various historical events, sites, and trends. Of course, obtaining copyright holders' permission to reproduce photographs can often be a daunting task for an author, but Robinson apparently chose to serve his readers well. Especially compelling are pictures such as those of students in the streets during the 1960 April Revolution (p. 126) and a grieving woman in front of a draped coffin after the Kwangju massacre (p. 142). The tables serve the same purpose; one example is Table 6.2 (pp. 130–1) relevant to macroeconomic trends between 1965 and 2000.

As is true perhaps with any good history book, this one too offers interpretations with which not every reader will agree. In the caption below a photo (p. 42), the "Capitol Building" may be a misleading description, since many, if not most, scholars would object to the notion that colonial Korea had a meaningful representative assembly. And regarding the Yalta Conference, Robinson states: "To that end the United States had invited the Russians into the postwar trusteeship by conceding their occupation of Manchuria and Korea at the Yalta Conference" (p. 104). This is the same statement that Syngman Rhee made at the San Francisco Conference in April 1945 to criticize the United States for what he deemed selling Korea to the Soviet Union, and Rhee was exaggerating. The United States was willing to acknowledge Soviet influence in Manchuria in terms of ports and railroads but not their occupation of all Manchuria.

In some places in the book, Robinson offers an inaccurate description of an event. For example in explaining King Kojong's flight to the Russian legation in 1896, he writes: "The murder of prominent officials Kim Hongjip and ŏ Yunjung had caused Kojong to seek foreign protection out of fear for his life" (p. 23). Actually, since Kim and ŏ were the highest officials of the cabinet installed by the Japanese, the two were killed by angry Korean mobs *after* Kojong had taken refuge at the legation. Regarding the day of the Japanese surrender on August 15, 1945, Robinson writes that "by noon the streets were full of celebrating Koreans" (p. 100). According to many personal testimonies, however, Koreans came outside only on the day *after* due to the fact that not many had even gotten to hear Emperor Hirohito's radio message; also, a formidable Japanese police presence prevented an immediate outpouring of joy on the streets (KBS, *The Memories of the August 15th*, Changjakgwa Pipyŏngsa, 2005).

And the book certainly has its share of simple factual errors, as do **[End Page 179]** many survey histories. Examples include: Chōsen Jinko (p. 42) instead of Chōsen Jinku; September rather than December 1919 as the month when Saitō Makoto's would-be assassin threw a bomb (p. 49); 1926 for 1924 as the year when the imperial university opened (p. 63); 1939 instead of 1940 as the year when the colonial government eliminated private vernacular publications (p. 67); and the fall of 1947 rather than the spring of 1948 as the time when the Second Joint Commission came to an end (p. 109).

Overall, though, these shortcomings do not decrease the value of this book. With a concise yet insightful account of twentieth-century Korea, Robinson indeed achieves his self-stated objective to write "a simple and reader-friendly narrative" that is important for a book used "in collegelevel courses as well as by the general reader"(p. ix). Anyone studying modern Korean history will find this book a wonderful starting point. Furthermore, although this is a Korean history book, readers will learn about the direct and indirect roles played by the United States in many events and developments. As the author acknowledges in the epilogue, to understand Korean history is "especially important for Americans because we bear some responsibility for the genesis of the problem" (p. 189). Upholding the ageless wisdom in studying history, Robinson also offers some suggestions on the future U.S. role in East Asia—indeed not a small factor to consider in any discussion of the two Koreas.

Jong Chol An
Seoul National University

Jong Chol An

Jong Chol An (jongchol@yahoo.com), 106-1506 Yichon Apt., Yichon Dong, Yongsan Gu, Seoul, Korea 740-040.

Copyright © 2009 University of Hawai'i Press

Additional Information

ISSN	1529-1529
Print ISSN	0145-840X
Pages	177-180
Launched on MUSE	2009-02-13
Open Access	No