

Michael J. Seth, *A Concise History of Korea: From the Neolithic Period Through the Nineteenth Century*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006. vii + 257 pages.

Recently I received an assignment to write a series of encyclopedia articles on early Korean history. Lacking any recent books on the subject, I Googled the topic and found reference to this very new book by Michael Seth, a colleague who teaches Asian history at nearby James Madison University. I hastily ordered a copy. When it arrived a few days later, I used it as one of my key references for the encyclopedia work.

As one would expect of such a work, Seth's "concise" history—though 257 pages is not exactly "concise"—is packed with information. He begins with a short description of prehistoric Korea and essentially ends his work in the 1870s, just before Japanese and Russian intervention destroyed the unity and calm of the late Chosŏn period (1392–1910). Nine chapters give equal and ample coverage to the major periods of Korean history, including a superb twenty-six-page analysis of "United Silla." What is somewhat surprising, though, is that Seth chooses to end his work in the 1870s, giving little attention to the coming of the West and the collapse of the last dynasty. Of course, the collapse of Korea is tied much more to the modern period, but a few concluding pages (or perhaps an epilogue) on Korea up through 1910 or 1945 would give students some sense of the conditions of the Korean peninsula as it is brought into the twentieth century—historical territory with which students should already be somewhat familiar.

Seth's work is intended to be a text for undergraduate or graduate students. I teach introductory history courses on Chinese, Japanese, Indian, and Korean history to undergraduates, and what I find lacking in each instance is a basic, solid text specifically written for the nineteen- or twenty-year-old student. Such a text would contain not only an intelligent yet basic introduction to a territory's history but also in-depth sections on philosophical theories (e.g., Confucianism), politics, society, and the nation's interactions with its neighbors and other foreign states.

I am happy that Seth's *Concise History* meets all of my criteria beautifully. It is written in a crisp, lively manner that is both highly professional and scholarly yet clear and interesting. He handles critical historiographi-

cal issues in a clear, understandable manner and skillfully discusses the structure of Korean society. Especially effective is his discussion of the role of the *yangban* 兩班 (literary and martial classes of Confucian scholars who were part of the ruling elite prior to 1910). Seth's discussion of the Japanese invasions of Korea under Toyotomi Hideyoshi 豊臣秀吉 (1536/37–98) between 1592 and 1598 clarified many misconceptions I held concerning those tragic events. Finally, Seth includes a superb annotated bibliography. I plan to give copies, as a model of the form, to my senior seminar students so they can grasp the concept of annotated bibliographies.

Indeed, many other histories of Korea cover the early period, and I have tried to read many of them—but most are poorly written and just plain boring. Seth has organized a coherent, highly analytical work that is a perfect tool for both the student and intelligent reader. In short, this book belongs in every academic library. What Bruce Cumings has done for modern Korean history, Michael Seth has done for traditional Korea. We should be thankful for this book and the contributions it makes to the field.

DANIEL A. MÉTRAUX
Mary Baldwin College