



**Michael E. Robinson, *Korea's Twentieth-Century Odyssey: A Short History*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007. x + 220 pages.**

Michael E. Robinson's latest work, *Korea's Twentieth-Century Odyssey: A Short History*, stands out among a number of recently published "contemporary" works on Korea. Robinson's effort overshadows other publications in Korean studies because of its clear, concise, succinct, and easily accessible writing style. In the preface, Robinson clearly states both his intentions behind writing this new history and the audience he is targeting: "my desire [is] to shape a simple and reader-friendly narrative, one that can be used in college-level courses as well as by the general reader" (p. ix).

Robinson, a Fulbright Scholar in the Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures at Indiana University, draws upon a broad reservoir of his own personal experience and research—as well as upon the works of colleagues—to provide the reader with a modern history of a frequently overlooked country. Robinson follows Korea's troubled past from its isolated stance toward the middle and end of the Chosŏn dynasty (1392–1910) to its divided twenty-first-century present. Emphasized in Robinson's history are foreign intervention, war, economic crisis, internal rebellion, and a revolutionary cultural change. Robinson differentiates autonomous Korea from a negative image of the peninsula as an "appendage" of others in his preface, eight chapters, and epilogue.

Robinson's title is certainly felicitous, because Korea's history has unquestionably been an odyssey. Robinson strongly defends his position that the roots of Korean modernity date not from 1945 but from well into the nineteenth century during the Chosŏn dynasty. In the nineteenth century, Korea's history was one of subjugation. Japan was opened to the United States in 1854, after which Western "modernity" flooded in. Japan, learning from the colonial methods of the West, applied similar tactics to the Koreans in 1876. The Kanhwah Treaty of that year essentially ended the autonomy of the Chosŏn dynasty with respect to Japan, opening the floodgates to a Japanese-flavored modernization.

By 1910, Japan officially annexed Korea as a colony, ending the Chosŏn dynasty and beginning a "colonial period" that Robinson claims to have lasted until at least 1945. In his interpretive narrative, Robinson successfully foreshadows a much later continental/cultural Korean split through the revolutionary resistance movements of this time by examining the different liberal-to-conservative factions of opposition to Japanese rule. He provides evidence of these early schisms in the clear development of numerous socialist and conservative factions developing outside the peninsula. He looks at the tug-of-war interference of the United States, China, and the U.S.S.R. as evidence of the amount of "factionalization" that would lead to the dividing of Korea.

Robinson follows the cultural problems that Korea faced during these times as well. He discusses the pros and cons of Japanese rule, such as the forced assimilation of Korean citizens and the modernization of the country. After the Demilitarized Zone was drawn in 1948, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK: socialist) and the Republic of Korea (ROK: democratic) were established as a result of Cold War role-playing by the Americans and Soviets, combined with the sociopolitical factions of Korean nationalists. Both sides continued to have difficulties in developing their governmental systems. Due in part to its dictatorial government, North Korea (DPRK) had a much more successful start than South Korea (ROK) in terms of economic and political development. In its early decades, North Korea was able to obtain a "head start" and implement its command economy, which prided itself on the philosophy of *chuch'e* 주체, or self-reliance. Comparatively, South Korea's beginnings were much more tumultuous, but the South would prove to be much more successful over time. South Korea, in the aftermath of the schism of the nation, suffered many years from violent struggles for a stable constitutional republic, going through several republics until its eventual success and economic growth. Thus, the roles of North Korea and South Korea are now reversed. North Korea, once the leader of the two, now suffers from extreme poverty at the hands of an oppressive government. South Korea's growing pains proved to be beneficial because it is now one of the fastest-growing economies in the world, in stark contrast to its northern brother.

In his book, Robinson states that many Korean problems were a result of outside interference and internal struggle; he supports this thesis by analyzing social currents of Korean identity dating from the nineteenth century in reaction to outside interference. Although one might be reticent to recommend a historian who has cited so few primary sources, Robinson transcends this potential weakness by drawing on information from his own knowledge as well as on his excellent scrutiny of secondary literature. Robinson's work successfully achieves what it set out to do: it provides the lay reader and scholar alike with a concise history of modern Korea.

DURHAM JOEL IZLAR  
*Georgia Southern University*