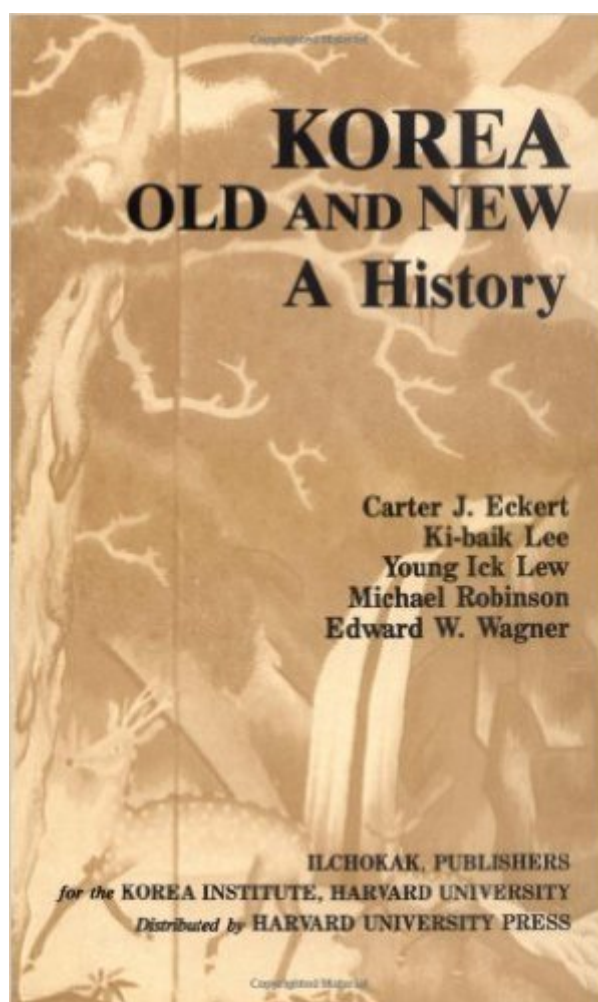


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Korea Old And New: A History



Synopsis

This is the most reliable and popular history of Korea available in English. The tumultuous developments of the modern era receive the greatest coverage, but the book's balanced treatment of traditional Korea emphasizes cultural events as integrally related to the political, social, and economic evolution of this ancient nation. Five outstanding scholars give a wide-angle view of each distinct period, elucidating the past while providing new understanding of the vast changes that have taken place in Korea.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I should start by saying that it's not easy to find a Korean history book in English that was actually written by Korean historians and scholars. You can find many authored by US and British authors, and having browsed through some of them, I strongly recommend AVOIDING them - I'll explain at the end of my review. On to the book: This is a fascinating account of Korean history from ancient times up to the 1980's, a span of over 2000 years. Each chapter covers a different period, and the chapters share the same organization, describing the social, cultural, political, philosophical/religious, scholarly, and military aspects of the period in respective subsections. This makes it easy to later refer to previous chapters and compare different periods. Understandably, the level of detail provided increases along with the stability of the country. The style and content changes noticeably though after the pre-Industrial Age chapters. The history up to this point is analogous to European medieval history with kings, queens, heroic warriors and devious power struggles to control the throne. However, as the 20th century dawned, Korea was overrun by Japan

and roughly half a century of occupation ensued. From this point on, the book's strength is its account of modern Korea and the motivations of the Korean government. This is where accounts by foreign authors invariably fail and take on obvious biases based on the "official" information the Korean government and their own governments have dispensed. Having several Korean relatives both in the US and Korea, I should emphasize that this book's account of modern history is definitely politically liberal and populist.

KOREA OLD AND NEW: A HISTORY is the beginning student's text Korean history has sorely needed. The result of a fruitful partnership between Korean and Western scholars, it is both well-written and researched. This book is pieced together from two earlier efforts (hence the old and new of the title). Although the second part, containing the latter history of Korea from the mid-19th century to 1990, is more detailed and analytical, the entire book is the best text around. This text has spawned new specialist histories of Choson, Buddhism, and Confucian studies. It is also better edited for typographical and linguistic errors than previous histories. However, some questions remain, mostly related to the question of Korean nationalism. The authors address the peculiar problem Korea faces: cultural chauvinism combined with dependence on foreign markets, notably Japan and the United States. The authors admirably and courageously document the role of the Japanese and American policies in Korean development, the nature of Pak Chung Hee's regime, and the fortuitous nature of Korean economic recovery, but still cling to cultural nationalist baggage about the cultural, linguistic, and racial unity of the Korean nation, downplaying the numerous historical political entities on the Korean peninsula and significant regional differences. As Korea becomes more pluralistic and its economy more open, information about the last 5 decades will continue to filter through, but, increasingly this liberalness is purchased with a racial and linguistic chauvinism that threatens to keep studies of Joseon and Koryo wrapped in inviolate sacralty. Although the authors final note of a turn to more participatory evolution of Korean politics, the bigotry and exclusivity of the Korean market is left intact.

The complicated history of Korea is a rich field of study for the professional historian. It has been ruled by Buddhist- and Confucian-based governments, and also been the victim of countless foreign invasions. Understanding the factors which have led to the modern day division of North and South Korea is no easy matter. Most works dealing with the history of that land are bogged down with the tedious analysis of obscure, period texts. These approaches use the works to explain - or attempt to explain - the underlying forces behind those changes in political structure. The problem with this

approach is that many of those texts were merely rhetorical exercises written by career(-minded) politicians seeking to better their personal station by justifying the policies of the victors of this or that time and place. This approach does little to address the effects of those changes on Korea's populace, economy, and diplomatic standing in the Asian community. Happily, this book is an exception. "Old and New" does a good job of synthesizing Buddhist and Confucian polities in relation to the major periods of Korean history (Three Kingdoms period, Koryo Dynasty, Chosun Dynasty). This discussion clearly defines the major issues of each period, and segues easily into a discussion of the fall of the Chosun Dynasty in the early 1900s, when Japan occupied the "Hermit Kingdom." Much attention is rightfully devoted to the post-WWII machinations between Russia, America, and the various political factions inside Korea which led to the Korean War. The authors note that the Koreans did not stand helplessly by while Russia and the USA arbitrarily drew a dividing line between North and South.

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