

Cumings, Bruce. *Korea's Place in the Sun, A Modern History*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1997.

There are many East Asian programs on university campuses all over the United States, Canada and Western Europe; only a handful of them, however, include Korea studies. Korea is also conspicuously missing in many textbooks on East Asian history or civilizations, as if the region includes only China and Japan. In the vast corpus of literature on the Korean War, the emphases are likely on the geo-political games, the strategic interests and the military operations of the major powers, namely the United States, the Soviet Union and China; Korea hardly mattered.

If most East Asian specialists continue to be, somehow contentedly, outsiders of Korean studies, Bruce Cumings, one of the foremost students of Korea in the Western world, now offers us an "inside-out" perspective on the modern historical experience of Korea as a nation and a people in their own right. With his superb knowledge and notable passion, Cumings explores the deep historical and unique cultural roots of modern Korean society and politics. It was this deep-rooted heritage that shaped the Koreans' actions vis-[^]-vis Japanese colonists in the first half of the twentieth century, the American and Russian occupation authorities in the postwar era and the Chinese influences from ancient times to present day. In the Japanese colonial "pressure cooker," Korean society polarized; under the occupation authorities of the US and the Soviet Union, Korea was divided. And yet, at no time did Koreans cease to assert their willpower to claim their rightful place in the modern world. Kim Il Sung was no Soviet puppet; he was like a Korean Tito. Nor was Syngman Rhee the American "running dog." They both opted to manipulate the powers to serve what they saw as Korea's destiny, the author argues.

Along this line of thinking, Cumings emphasizes the civil origins of the Korean War, asserting that the conflict was a result of the socio-economic-political polarization created during the Japanese colonial period; the left and the right pitched against each other. The civil war, moreover, became inevitable once Washington decided to divide the peninsula along the 38th parallel. Given the civil war's origins, it is almost impossible to determine when and who started the Korean War; it simply "came" fatefully, the author asserts.

Cumings goes far beyond America's "forgotten war;" two-fifths of the book is about the postwar Koreas. In explaining the economic "miracle" in the South, Cumings takes us to the dusty alleys in Seoul, where the gigantic urban market in the 50s became "an incubator of capitalism every bit as good as the Harvard Business School." It was in this marketplace "animated by the human propensity to truck and barter," that Chong Chu-yong, a small auto repairman, emerged to be the billionaire chairman of the Hyundai Corporation. However, only a very few people and their families were as lucky as Chong. The success of the *charbol* groups (family-owned monopolistic companies) was normally dependent upon opportunities of "sucking the American teat for all it was worth," of necessary family ties to the governing elite in order to obtain the "policy loan" and "slush fund." When the monopolistic family firms became quasi-state organizations, "in which relatives in the government lent money to relatives in business," efficacious corruption became the rule, not the exception. The so-called "miracle" was only the result of the

endeavor of the vast, talented population, who "worked their fingers to the bone." The author's populist sentiment becomes more energized when he reviews the heroic journey of the democratic movement in South Korea from the 60s to the 90s.

As for North Korea, Cumings describes the nature of the regime as being "neo-Confucianism in a communist bottle, or Chu Hsi in a Mao jacket." Pyongyang's "left-wing version of corporatism," of which the personality cult of Kim was at the center, made the North more of a Neo-Confucian kingdom than a Stalinist socialist country. And yet, the economic development in the North, Cumings adequately demonstrates, kept its pace neck to neck with the South until the 1990s. Though a "Hermit Kingdom," the Pyongyang regime draws from the well of Korean tradition and anticolonial nationalism; therefore, it will have staying power in the post-Cold War world, the author predicts.

If one is not particularly enthusiastic about the author's revisionist perspective with a populist bent, it is still undoubtedly an informative and stimulating read, essential to all students of East Asian studies.

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