1880s, weakening the otherwise solid sections on rising Japanese involvement in Korean affairs. Perhaps the most disturbing omission from the book is the degree to which Japan’s 1930s militarism is portrayed as a unique, isolated, domestic phenomenon without the context of territorially aggressive totalitarianism rising in Russia, Italy and Germany. Given the overarching theme of Japan responding to external pressures and ideas, this is odd.

The endnotes and bibliography are substantial, but the sense of scholarship as an ongoing debate is lacking. Rather than call the narrative into question, Huffman directs attention outward: the issues described as open questions at the end are not, by and large, active historical debates, but rather focus on ethical responsibility and post-colonial diplomatic legacies. Topics like post-war return migration, the debate about the actual value of Japanese colonial development, or the instability of the Meiji constitutional system have no place here, though there is a great deal of recent and ongoing work in these areas.

The rich range of visual materials, most of which are not commonly used images, and the short but well-done biographical sketches make this a lively read. The writing is straightforward and clear, free of jargon but not of complex situations. The historiographical simplicity of the presentation may be a strength or a weakness depending on your purposes. It should work well as a supplement in a world history course or as background reading in conjunction with primary sources or additional scholarship. But it must be used critically, as a starting point rather than as a final statement on either theoretical or historical issues.

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Though somewhat misnamed as A Concise History of Modern Korea, this nearly 300-page book by Michael Seth offers an appealing option for scholars seeking a general history of modern Korea for either reference or teaching. It is divided into eight chapters, in addition to an introduction and conclusion: the first three chapters cover the 1876-1910 period, the colonial period of 1910 to 1945 and the period of “Division and War, 1945-1953,” respectively, while the remainder of the book contains two chapters on North Korea and three on South Korea.

The book’s primary themes appear to be Korea’s survival as a nation amidst the turbulence of the modern era, Korea as a crucible for modernity, and perhaps most pronounced of all, the process by which the remarkable divergence between North and South (“the most fundamental question,”
Book Reviews

7) took place. There is likewise an unmistakably developmentalist arc in the narrative, as well as a strong tug toward “modernization.” The South Korea chapters, for example, are concerned almost wholly with how the country turned into an economic power and a political democracy.

These thematic priorities, though, do not overwhelm the book. Indeed the content in the chapters are more or less standard chronological descriptions of what happened, book-ended by analysis on the relative significance of certain trends. One wishes that the author could have made it easier for students and the lay reader to grasp a central argument in the chapters, and in turn, of how each chapter fits into a larger message in the book, all of which is somewhat obscured by the extensive detail of the information. But the book is also notable for what it leaves out. Only half a paragraph, for example, is devoted to the “The Kwangju Incident” of 1980, in a 30-page chapter on the South Korean political road to democratization. The strengths in the coverage include education, understandable given that the author has written a book on this topic; situating Korea’s historical experience in a global context, with each chapter concluding with a section on “Korea in World History”; and ample explanations for South Korea’s economic development, which gets an entire chapter. Furthermore, the chapters are divided into many sections of varying length, each with its own helpful heading.

This book also could have provided a greater sense of historical debates and controversies, or at least an indication of what new perspectives the author forwards. There is very little new here for the Korea specialist, and in some areas the book is clearly behind the historiography. Despite the frequent allusions to how “historians” have tended to view certain moments and trends, there remains only a sketchy sense of recent American historiography, much less Korean historiography. The pronouncement of “very few reform efforts” (21) during the period of Chinese domination (1885-94), for example, is outdated and is even contradicted by the author’s own accounting of many important developments. More glaring is the coverage of the Taehan Cheguk period (1897-1910), which is reduced to a few sentences despite gaining tremendous attention in Korea over the past two decades and increasingly even in the US. In this book, the focus rather conventionally is on the American-influenced Independence Club of 1896-99. Indeed, some readers, though likely not American students, will find the narrative’s strong consciousness of foreign and especially Western impact—even as a major force in South Korean democratization—excessive. Most noteworthy in this regard is chapter 3, which attributes predominant influence to the superpowers in the nation’s division following liberation from Japanese rule in 1945, despite the book’s emphasis on ideological divisions in the colonial period (1910-45) laying the groundwork for subsequent history. The book’s heavy attention to nationalism, in general, and especially in the colonial period (almost 10 pages of coverage in chapter 2), also comes across as
somewhat old-fashioned. Even Korean scholarship has moved beyond this preoccupation, which in the past stood for a historiographical valuation of the independence movement over the actual conditions in the colony.

Finally, this chapter’s section on “Wartime Colonialism: 1931-1945” conflates political and military changes in Japan to what occurred in Korea. The book’s labeling of the last 15 years of colonial rule as “wartime” amounts to viewing the colonial period as having had only about a dozen years of “peace” or semblance of normalcy, given the “harsh political repression” (45) that characterized the first decade of colonial rule from 1910 to 1919.

Even with such grounds for criticism, the book is lucid and accessible, and often quite appealingly presented. There are of course some typos, writing errors, and minor factual errors, with the only major problem coming in the quirkily chronic mistakes in the usage (and lack thereof) of commas. But mostly this represents a polished work that can be recommended.

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KYUNG MOON HWANG


This work by Chang provides a fascinating approach to contemporary economic, political and social life of South Korean society in transition. By utilizing a family-centred conceptual tool, Chang offers an insightful analysis of how ongoing structural and institutional transitions in the society are attached to family interests and family relations. Although there have been ample studies dealing with gender discrimination in industrialization, family overburdening welfare policy, excessive educational fever, familial governance of chaebol (conglomerates) and the role of the state in South Korea, the analysis in the book with an integrative conceptualization of compressed modernity is quite innovative.

Accidental pluralism in chapter 2 is a key viewpoint for the analysis of the entire volume. As four different and even contradictory family ideologies (e.g., Confucian familism, instrumental familism, affectionate familism and individualistic familism) co-exist, South Koreans experience diverse macro social trends of traditional, modern, postmodern and global. The first two family ideologies are emphasized by older generations, while the latter two are favoured by females and generations of the middle-aged and young, the educated and the urban-residing. Chang points out, however, that official policy has always stressed ‘private families’ to feed, protect, support and educate themselves without governmental supports.

In chapter three, the question of why South Korean families have