

Book Reviews

Korean History in Maps: From Prehistory to the Twenty-First Century

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Compared to the English-language fields of Chinese or Japanese history, Korean history started late, and the relatively fewer English-language textbooks and resources clearly reflect this. But recently the situation has changed, and there are far more resources available now than even a decade ago. Yet these works usually treat maps as an afterthought. Michael Shin and his colleagues, however, have addressed this problem with this edited volume. They have clearly put considerable thought into this project, and it shows. There is nothing quite like this highly visual narrative of Korean history, and it is a delight to read.

The book, after giving the standard maps of Korea today, quickly begins with prehistoric Korea defined as 200,000 BP – the seventh century BCE. Unfortunately, it adheres to the narrative favored by South Korean nationalist historians and could be considered out-of-date, especially in regards to the early premodern periods. There are no notes to point out many of the

controversial dates or events nor is there any real mention that a problem exists. For example, there is no textual or archaeological evidence to indicate that Baekje had expanded into the southwestern part of the Korean peninsula in the fourth century. Also the use of the traditional foundation dates for Silla, Baekje conflict with contemporary Chinese dynastic sources, such as the *Sanguozhi*. Therefore, its use beyond a university survey course or a high school classroom would need to be accompanied by a serious discussion on its problems and supplemented with recent scholarship and archaeological findings. A good starting point in English is the Early Korea series published by the Early Korea Project at Harvard University and edited by Mark Byington, who has also published insightful work on these problems. Each historical state is nicely organized into sections, such as culture, politics, economy, and relations with neighboring states. Each chapter ends with a very well-organized chronology of important events, which newcomers to Korean history will find especially useful. In addition, the ending sections of premodern periods contain a list of monarchs with reign dates and names rendered in English, hangul and Chinese characters.

Once the book moves past the highly problematic periods prior to Goryeo, it clearly benefits from the strengths of its contributors in dealing with Joseon and modern Korea. One striking example is the graphical breakdown of the political factions in the Joseon period (p. 94), with its clean, elegant, and easy-to-understand design. The end of the book includes appendices on the chronology of the “Comfort Women” issue as well as the “Dok Island” issue. In regards to the Dokdo/Takeshima controversy, the book does not delve deeply into the issue but includes several maps all supporting Korea’s claim to the island. This is not particularly surprising, but it is puzzling that more attention was not directed at the East Sea/Sea of Japan controversy, considering the geographic nature of this text. The final appendix explains the sexagenary cycle and includes a *yeonpyo* or Korean history in Western calendar years, the sexagenary cycle, and reign years. This is the first time the reviewer has seen one in English, so it will be helpful for those who cannot read hangul or Chinese characters.

Since the maps are the centerpiece of this book, the reviewer would be amiss not to discuss them. The maps are well-drawn with an eye-pleasing color palette, making it easy to locate important information. The editors did an excellent job ensuring that the maps contained just the right amount of detail to illustrate the historical key points.. One point of concern is the lack of discussion regarding the false certainty and subjectivity of maps, particularly for the premodern period. One example is the map of the Korean peninsula in the late fourth to early fifth centuries (p. 33), which shows clearly defined borders and a rather large Baekje extending its control all the way into the southwest, which is supported neither textually nor archaeologically. Maps for this period and prior are based on conjecture from problematic textual sources, but readers not familiar with these issues may falsely believe that these maps are accurate depictions. A discussion on the problematic nature of these maps may be necessary. In addition to the maps, however, there is much more to please the eye. Striking color photographs of material culture, locations, and people frame the maps and explanatory text but not in an overwhelming way. Credit goes to the team that collected and selected these high-resolution images. The images do an excellent job providing realism to the narrative that the text and the maps by themselves cannot.

The book uses the Revised Romanization system, which will quickly displease users of the McCune-Reischauer system, still widely used in English-language academia and classrooms outside of South Korea. The lack of citations prior to the Joseon period, the absence of a list of sources, or no inclusion of a “suggestions for further reading” indicate that this book seems intended for popular consumption and not to be used as a serious academic reference. Even with these problems, this book does make a considerable contribution to the field by making Korean history more accessible to a larger audience by making it more visually appealing, fun, and easy-to-understand.