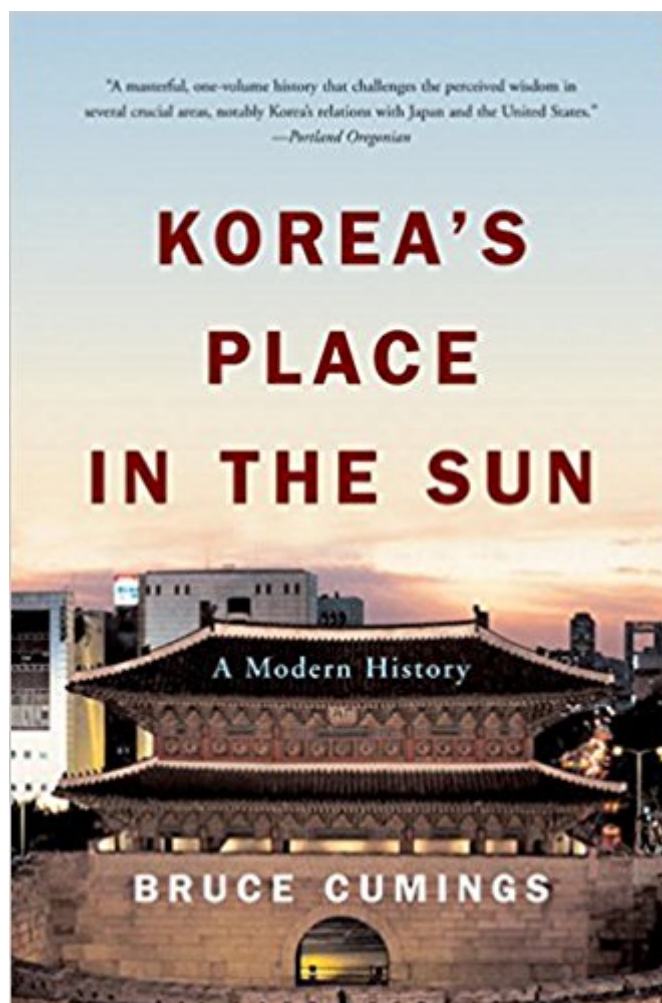


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# Korea's Place In The Sun: A Modern History (Updated)



## Synopsis

"Passionate, cantankerous, and fascinating. Rather like Korea itself."--Nicholas D. Kristof, New York Times Book Review Korea has endured a "fractured, shattered twentieth century," and this updated edition brings Bruce Cumings's leading history of the modern era into the present. The small country, overshadowed in the imperial era, crammed against great powers during the Cold War, and divided and decimated by the Korean War, has recently seen the first real hints of reunification. But positive movements forward are tempered by frustrating steps backward. In the late 1990s South Korea survived its most severe economic crisis since the Korean War, forcing a successful restructuring of its political economy. Suffering through floods, droughts, and a famine that cost the lives of millions of people, North Korea has been labeled part of an "axis of evil" by the George W. Bush administration and has renewed its nuclear threats. On both sides Korea seems poised to continue its fractured existence on into the new century, with potential ramifications for the rest of the world. 25 illustrations

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Bruce Cumings traces the growth of Korea from a string of competing walled city-states to its present dual nationhood. He examines the ways in which Korean culture has been influenced by Japan and China, and the ways in which it has subtly influenced its more powerful neighbors. Cumings also considers the recent changes in the South, where authoritarianism is giving way to democracy, and in the North, which Cumings depicts as a "socialist corporatist" state more like a neo-Confucian kingdom than a Stalinist regime. Korea's Place in the Sun does much to help

Western readers understand the complexities of Korea's past and present. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Cumings's riveting history of modern Korea challenges much received wisdom. Rejecting the verdict of Western historians who support Japan's "modernizing role" in Korea, he characterizes the Japanese occupation (1910-1945) as a callous colonization that fostered underdevelopment, crushed dissent and suppressed indigenous culture. Director of Northwestern University's Center for International and Comparative Studies, the author is highly critical of the U.S. military occupational government (1945-1948), which he blames for bolstering the status quo and laying the groundwork for one of Asia's worst police states. Popular resistance in South Korea, he emphasizes, ultimately transformed an authoritarian regime into a relatively democratic society, while the North, which he has visited extensively, remains a cloistered, family-run, xenophobic garrison state. Yet, drawing on recent scholarship, Cumings argues that North Korea was never a mere Soviet puppet but instead resembled more autonomous communist nations, such as Yugoslavia. His incisive concluding portrait of Korean Americans presents a hardworking, upwardly mobile yet insular, ambivalent group, "in the society but not of it." This spirited, vibrant chronicle is indispensable for understanding modern Korea and its dim prospects for reunification. Photos. Copyright 1996 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

too much talking jumping around past and present but it is worth reading and get some point of views. i just didnt like the fact that Cummings portrayed as just another state rather than a failing mobsters.

While I found Cumming's writing to be very biased, Korea's Place in the Sun is an interesting read. The author's use of emotive language and a mixture of personal experience and historical facts is also interesting.

Interesting book but rather out of date. Would prefer more current information since N. Korea is continually evolving.

Clearly and interestingly written; however too general overall. For those who have little knowledge on Korea, it may serve the purpose; however, not enough analytical approach.

A gift for my granddaughter who studies Korean culture

Good factual book

Professor Cumings has a talent for putting people in a rage. He is denounced by his critics almost as sharply as he denounces them. If the American Historical Association offers a course in anger management one day, they should invite him as guest speaker. Views about his books are heavily polarized. He is lionized by a generation of historians, many of them Koreans, who found in his work a source of emancipation and independence from received ideas and conventional views. Likewise, he comes under heavy criticism by an earlier generation of scholars and practitioners, Americans but not only, who accuse him of being too harsh on the US and too lenient towards the North Korean regime. Until recently, he was considered as the authoritative source on the origins of the Korean war, about which he wrote a massive, two-volume study. His *Modern History of Korea*, more than 500 pages long, has been characterized by a *New York Times* reviewer as "passionate, cantankerous and fascinating". Don't expect me to take sides in this debate, or to feel passionate about this book. For a start, Cumings introduces his book as written "by an American, for Americans, and for Koreans who are now of America." Well, America is not my country, and neither is Korea. Both are, to use the title of another book about North Korea by the same author, "another country" to me. I do take Korea seriously, but with the dispassionate gaze of a student of world history. If the Korean War was the defining moment of Korean-American relations, Europeans take a longer-term view, and tend to put events into context. To be sure, the French did participate in this war, as did other European nations. France sent a battalion who fought with honors as part of the UN coalition, and is still party to the UN Command that monitors the armistice in Korea. But one thing is for sure: we didn't start this war. I say this because Bruce Cumings distributes the blame very evenly for who is to be held responsible for the start of the Korean War. He reminds me of the game of Cluedo or of a whodunnit novel: everybody, at some point or other, is suspected of being the culprit. And, like in a good Agatha Christie novel, in the end all the suspects took part in the crime. Cumings ends his investigation with the conclusion that "civil wars do not start: they come. They originate in multiple causes, with blame enough to go around for everyone--and blame enough to include Americans." And Mr. Cumings being an American, and having accessed mostly American archives, it is not surprising that he concludes by assigning the blame disproportionately to his country: "it is Americans who bear the lion's share of the responsibility for the thirty-eight parallel." Zhou Enlai, when asked by Kissinger about the origins and consequences of the French

revolution, famously replied: "It's too early to tell." Similarly, Cumings states that "we still know too little to determine the respective North Korean, Soviet, and Chinese roles in initiating the June fighting." Part of this indetermination comes from limited access to the written archives. Despite his best efforts, Cumings was not able to get access to key US archives, even though the Freedom of Information Act provides easier access to classified documents. Archives from China and from the Soviet Union, not to mention North Korea, will have to wait for the investigation of future generations of historians. But the difficulty to answer the question: "Who started the Korean war?" also comes from the complexity of the issue at hand. It was, to use a psychoanalytic term, a case of overdetermination: everybody is to blame, and nobody bears full responsibility. So my advice to people debating with Professor Cumings is: don't start him on the Korean war. He just cannot be stopped. He reminds me of this end-term history class assignment, when the instructor gave the following subject: "Describe the origins of the First World War. Use the next page of the answer sheet if necessary." Bruce Cumings would certainly have used this second page, and many more. The reason was because the Korean War was, as he puts it, an American war. Americans still have to come to terms with their Korean past. When the author first travelled to North Korea in 1981, a stern custom officer asked him bluntly whether he had done penance for American crimes in Korea. Cumings' act of contrition is to play on America's guilt. His conclusion is that the United States should have stayed away from Koreans' internecine war, for their intervention solved nothing. He sees the alternative counterfactual as vastly preferable: "a civil conflict purely among Koreans might have resolved the extraordinary tensions generated by colonialism, national division and foreign intervention." In the absence of the Americans, "a leftist regime would have taken over quickly, and it would have been a revolutionary nationalist government that, over time, would have moderated and rejoined the world community--as did China, as Vietnam is doing today." It is, of course, difficult to remake history. But the opposite viewpoint can also be held: the Korean War was the first act of the Cold War, and a defeat by the allied forces would have been a terrible omen for the Western camp. If one looks at the grand scheme of things, the Korean War is the last war Americans can claim to have won. Only in Korea can they say: here we drew a line in the sand and we stood firm; here we didn't bulge. In comparison with more recent wars, Americans did not overstretch their goals in Korea. They stopped when war had to be stopped. Even more important than the doctrine of containment, they managed to contain their own demons, and exercised self-restraint when nearing the edge of the cliff. This lesson was certainly remembered when the US government was confronted with other fateful challenges in Cuba or in Western Europe. The only other clear American victory since WWII is provided by the First Gulf War, in which the US-led coalition rolled

back the Iraqi invaders from Kuwait. But then this victory planted the seeds of hubris and chaos that blossomed with the war for Iraq and its aftermath. With the experience of Japan's and Korea's battlegrounds, Americans still stand as victors in Asia, a fact that certainly hasn't been lost to its allies or to China. There is a second issue for which Cumings is bound to enrage some people: the way he deals with North Korea. Here I have to confess that I found his treatment of the Pyongyang regime more even-handed and balanced than his reputation for revisionism would have led me to expect. He provides a convincing explanation of the regime's ideology, which obeys its own rules and forms a coherent whole. He exposes North Korea for what it is: "a tightly held, total politics, with enormous repressive capacity and many political victims--although no one really knows how repressive it is." He prides himself of having made the right prognosis on the regime's duration, forecasting a smooth transition from father to son when other pundits were predicting immediate collapse following the death of Kim Il-sung. I was not convinced, however, with his treatment of the North Korean economy. Here again, I am not an expert, but as an economist I have learned to treat some facts and figures with caution. The author provides a vast array of data to demonstrate that, until the early 1980s, North Korea was at least as prosperous as the South, and outpaced its neighbors on some dimensions ranging from production of electricity and fertilizers to life expectancy and social welfare. There is no denying that North Korea is quite unlike third-world countries: it is modern, urbanized, and has the technological ability to build an atomic bomb. But is official data to be trusted, even when validated by CIA estimates? What is one to make of the statement that "the North's total production of electricity, coal, fertilizer, machine tools, and steel was comparable to or higher than South Korean totals in the early 1980s, even though its population was half that of the South"? Transition economics has taught us that command economies were based on false metrics, and produced a tremendous amount of waste. More than current production levels, one should also assess a country's growth potential and its resilience to external shocks. People who bet their dollars on the North Korean economy, as some foreign investors did in the 1980s, ultimately made the wrong bet and lost their capital, as Pyongyang fell heavily into debt and accumulated arrears. Bruce Cumings, or so the book cover tells us, claims for himself the role of a "leader in the fields of Korean history, East Asian political economy, and international history". I don't know where he got his economics credentials, but to me his economic analysis seems plain wrong. As for his talent as a historian, I will defer to the opinion of members of the profession. But there are things that can be tolerated from the part of a historian and other things that put him squarely outside the boundaries of the discipline. He laces his narrative with constant references to the present, mixing periods and genres to offer a very personal vision of history. He alludes to Jihad

in the context of resistance to imperialism, compares Korea under Japanese rule to Vichy France, and refers to the Shinkansen when discussing railroad building before 1939. His scholarly references include an uncanny roster of modern philosophers, from Deleuze to Foucault and to Wallerstein. The real subject of Korea's Place in the Sun is actually himself: how he encountered Korea, how he came to his conclusions on the Korean war, as well as his direct observations of street scenes and everyday life of ordinary Koreans. Other historians have put a lot of themselves in their books, offering essays in auto-analysis or personal history. But they were careful to separate the genres and to keep disciplinary boundaries. Not so with Cumings: he treats Korean history as a pretext for subjective digressions and personal aggrandizement. This, and not his controversial opinions on the Korean War and on North Korea, is what I found most irritating.

It's okay

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