

# Book Review

- Theodore Jun Yoo. *The Koreas: The Birth of Two Nations Divided*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2020. Pp 328. Photographs, bibliography, index. \$29.95 (cloth).

In 2020, the Oscar for Best Picture went to South Korea's *Parasite* and *Time* magazine named as Entertainer of the Year the K-pop boy band BTS. The nation's global cultural impact extended into 2021, with Best Supporting Actress awards to Youn Yuh-jung from both the British and American motion picture academies, and *The Squid Game* became a smash hit on Netflix. So Theodore Jun Yoo's *The Koreas: The Birth of Two Nations Divided* appears at a propitious moment, when the "Hallyu" ("Korean Wave") has reached across the Pacific and beyond. Yoo's readable survey of political, economic, and especially, cultural developments in North and South Korea after the 1953 armistice on the peninsula demonstrates the importance of and influence upon the world over the past six decades of what is now the world's eleventh largest economy, in the South, and a nuclear-armed power, in the North.

Yoo, the author of two cultural histories of colonial Korea, one on gender and the other on mental health, is a former editor of the *Journal of World History* and University of Hawai'i professor who now teaches at Seoul's Yonsei University. His years in the United States gave Yoo strong familiarity with Anglo-American politics and culture, and he often compares Korean developments with analogous ones familiar to English-speaking readers. Thus, politicized folk music in South Korea in the early 1970s was "in the tradition of Bob Dylan," and the hair and clothing style of singer Yun Bokhui had an impact similar to that of British model, Twiggy. The preponderance of individuals with the surname Kim make any book about Korea difficult for those being introduced to the subject. Nevertheless, Yoo does his best to overcome that inherent obstacle, especially with engaging chapter introductions focused variously on an artist, singer, actor, or other cultural figure.

*The Koreas* has several overarching themes. First, and perhaps most important, is that there have been many similarities in the separate development of North and South. As the two polities took shape after Japanese colonialism ended in 1945, and for decades afterwards, both were dictatorships. Dissenters from both Kim Il-sung's government in the North and Syngman Rhee's and Park Chung-hee's serial autocracies in the South met with censorship, prison, torture, and even assassination. (Having judged far too many National History Day projects that mischaracterized the Korean War as between "communism" and

“democracy,” I appreciated Yoo’s insistence that South Korea could not begin to be considered a democracy until the late 1980s.)

Economic policies, too, demonstrated similarities, with state-led industrialization in both North and South, and aid from the outside—the Soviet Union and China for the North, and the United States and, to a lesser extent, Japan for the South—key to recovery from the ravages of colonialism and war. Yoo critiques both paths to economic growth. In the South, powerful conglomerates amassed huge political as well as economic power, while farmers and industrial workers suffered poverty and exploitation, and even much of the educated middle class endured a precarious economic status. Kim Il-sung’s vaunted “Juche” (self-reliance) in the North—adopted in part to navigate the growing split between his two large Communist neighbors—did not avert the horrific famine of the 1990s, in which perhaps three million died. The famine occurred, moreover, not only because of flooding across North Korea but from disruption of trade with post-Soviet Russia. Despite the seeming success in recent years of South Korea’s economy and the out-sized world role afforded by the North’s status as a nuclear power, both face significant contemporary challenges, including demographic decline and corruption in the South, and continued economic stagnation in the North. Several sets of photographs—of monuments, subway trains, and apartment blocks—effectively reinforce Yoo’s theme that North and South have many commonalities, despite their antagonism.

The second major theme is the importance of population migration and the Korean diaspora, again for both South and North. While Yoo covers the varied roots and contemporary ramifications of emigration from the South to the United States, as well as defections from North to South, he pursues a much broader approach to this issue. He discusses, among other things, South Korean miners and nurses in West Germany in the 1960s; the use of South Korean soldiers in the Vietnam War as, in essence, state-sponsored mercenaries; the surprisingly fraught relations of ethnic Koreans in China and the Soviet Union with North Korea’s government; repatriation of ethnic Koreans from Japan to the North; the (mis)treatment of Filipino immigrants in South Korea, along with a vignette of the first Filipino-Korean elected to its National Assembly; and a growing recognition in South Korea that its self-conception as ethnically homogeneous must give way to a multiculturalism of sorts. Thus, the Koreas’ engagement with contemporary world history is in large part because of increasingly global migration flows.

Third, both Koreas have employed soft power to enhance their standing in the world, with the North welcoming Black Panther expatriates and cheering African liberation movements, and the South providing medical and other aid to many nations. Indeed, Yoo is a kind of poster child for such interconnections: he grew up mainly in Ethiopia, where his father served as a physician under South Korean auspices, even as the leader of that nation’s new Marxist government, Mengistu Haile Mariam, admired Kim Il-sung.

A fourth major theme is that popular culture—encompassing cinema, cosmetic surgery, coffee shops, and much more—exemplifies important aspects of modern Korea. The popularity of Korean television and food in Japan does not erase the history of colonialism, but it shows that relations between the two are no longer based solely on that history. “Symphonic diplomacy” not only enabled the New York Philharmonic Orchestra to play in Pyongyang in 2008, but allowed American reporters to write first-hand about the normally closed-off North. The popularity of double-eyelid surgery reflects South Korea’s “lookism” and consumerism, one of many trends that Yoo critiques. The extended discussions of individual artists and their works, almost all from South Korea, also allows Yoo to investigate the extent and limits of that nation’s freedom, about hair styles, gender roles, sexual orientation, historical memory, and other concerns.

*The Koreas* provides a fluid narrative that updates, within a more limited time-frame, Bruce Cumings’ impressive but dense *Korea’s Place in the Sun: A Modern History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997) and Michael Robinson’s brief *Korea’s Twentieth-Century Odyssey: A Short History* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007). Yoo adds the important and engaging cultural dimension largely missing from Don Oberdorfer and Robert Carlin’s geopolitically-focused *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History* (New York: Basic Books, 2013).

Despite its strengths, *The Koreas* falls short at points. There are too many small but irritating errors. Franklin Roosevelt died in April 1945, not May (17), and the People’s Republic of China detonated its first atomic bomb in 1964, four years before the signing of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (156–157). Han Kang (rendered in the index as “Han Gang”) is a writer of fiction, not a “fictional writer” (121), and the veteran American reporter on Korea is Oberdorfer, not Orbendorfer (300). The decision to publish the book without footnotes limits its usefulness for scholars; it may also have abetted the inclusion of some questionable claims, such as the assertion that there were more deaths in South Korea’s 1980 Gwangju massacre than in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square nine years later.

Despite Yoo’s efforts to cover both Koreas, he devotes far more attention in the book’s second half to the South than the North, in part, as Yoo explains, because of the paucity of sources about the latter. But this imbalance also demonstrates the vibrancy of civil society and cultural expression in the South, especially since the 1980s. Thus, Yoo’s efforts to maintain the evenhanded focus on parallel government authoritarianism in both North and South—a reasonable proposition from the 1940s into the 1980s—no longer corresponds to reality after the downfall of Chun Doo-hwan in 1993, even if much of the South’s civic and cultural life was in opposition to its government’s political leaders and economic policies.

Yoo’s critical approach to South Korea, convincing as it is, may also lead him to overlook some disturbing aspects of North Korean society. For example, he restricts his discussion of “cyber warfare” to misogynistic online bullying among South Korean gamers,

ignoring the well-documented role of North Korean hackers in siphoning money from foreign banks to help finance their country's nuclear weapons program. Moreover, there are many aspects of South Korean life that receive inadequate attention, including the role of Christianity (despite making up one-third of the population, as Yoo tells us), the scrappy and often powerful labor movement, the redress efforts for World War II's "comfort women," and the social impact in the most recent decades of continued stationing of American military forces in the country.

Yoo's engaging prose and his organization of material into many brief vignettes make it easy for teachers in secondary and university World History or World Cultures classes to assign selected pages to students, and sections on culture and "daily life" should prove popular. Yoo's economic and political discussions, especially, will be helpful for teachers and professors preparing lectures. *The Koreas* may be appropriate as assigned reading in its entirety for university courses on modern Asia and, of course, on Korea, but professors choosing that route will need to be alert to its inaccuracies.

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