

## Book Review

Kornel Chang. *A Fractured Liberation: Korea Under US Occupation*. Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2025. Pp 284. Photographs, footnotes, index. \$29.95 (cloth)

Bruce Cumings' two-volume *The Origins of the Korean War* (vol. 1, *Liberation and the Emergence of Separate Regimes, 1945-1947*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981; vol. 2, *The Roaring of the Cataract, 1947-1950*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), dramatically revised historians' understanding of the period between the liberation of Korea from Japan at the end of World War II and the invasion of the south by North Korea in June 1950. Cumings argued both that what became known as the Korean War was the culmination of civil wars which had already erupted during that earlier five-year period, and that United States Cold War policies were in large part responsible for setting the stage for the 1950-1953 war.

Kornel Chang, History Department Chair at Rutgers University-Newark, in *A Fractured Liberation* revisits the first two years of this period, 1945 to 1947, although with attention mainly on the south, under United States occupation. Chang's book title and chapter titles (e.g., "Pursuing Liberation," "False Starts and Missed Opportunities," "Rising Up," and "Searching for a Way Out") illustrate his thesis, which is also two-fold. First, Koreans in the south, along with the American occupiers, pursued national liberation characterized by strong, popular, social-democratic movements. Second, the sequence of events which made the 1950 war all but inevitable coalesced later than Cumings believed, and they were not preordained by any consistent US policy.

Chang's brisk narrative (217 pages of text) will make it more attractive to students than Cumings' massive work. In addition to his elucidation of varied perspectives in US military and diplomatic archives and in the papers of other American contemporary observers in Korea, Chang utilizes—especially in the early chapters—numerous works of fiction by Korean authors which illuminate the social upheaval of these first, post-colonial years, and these sections will likely engage student interest. Chang also

incorporates the insights of voluminous recent Korean-language memoirs, historical and sociological studies, and government investigations which were not available when Cumings wrote. There is a lot to commend here, although there may not be as many differences in perspective between *A Fractured Liberation* and *The Origins of the Korean War* as Chang claims.

Chang vividly portrays the wide range of actions by Koreans to reclaim their nation and their livelihoods after Japan's defeat: tenant farmers kicking out landlords; workers occupying factories and otherwise demanding a fairer share from their labor; women calling for more rights; exposure of Koreans who had collaborated with the Japanese; nationalists emerging from hiding or prison—or returning from abroad—to work for democracy. These movements and actions were often spontaneous, but, in one of the book's valuable attributes, Chang makes clear through capsule biographies and historical flashbacks the indispensable contributions of veteran nationalists who had suffered persecution under the Japanese and had then lived in China, the Soviet Union, or the United States, with a mix of socialist, communist, and Christian influences. (Without clear explanation, Chang labels Autumn 1945, the onset of this exciting period, the “Asian Spring.”)

The “fracturing” of South Korea's liberation came from four main sources, in Chang's telling. There were the inevitable problems of how to keep production going, on land and in factories, in the instability between old and new. There were bitter disputes among nationalists, or between popular movements and more ideologically-aligned nationalist leaders. There was the conservative anticommunism of some Koreans, especially the landlord class, the police (who were mainly colonial holdovers), and the nationalist faction led by Syngman Rhee (the person referenced in Chang's final chapter title, “Strongman Rising”). And there were the American occupiers, who, when pressed, almost always came down on the side of landlords, the police, and, eventually, Rhee.

But before Rhee established near-dictatorial control, there was the period, which Chang explores nicely, of the divergent views and actions among these Americans, as well as real conflicts between Rhee and the Occupation. Military commander John Hodge, a fervent anticommunist, nevertheless at one point considered arresting Rhee, and Rhee—maneuvering ruthlessly through Korean factional politics and sabotaging both US efforts to form a coalition government in the south and international agreements working toward reunification—called Hodge a “communist” (139). Rhee was not a puppet of the Americans, Chang insists, just as Kim Il Sung was not simply a puppet of the Soviets. Meanwhile, other American advisers, especially Methodist minister and New Deal veteran Stewart Meacham, the labor attaché, and agricultural expert Arthur Bunce, a socialist-leaning former missionary in Korea, enthusiastically supported the popular movements for workers' rights and land reform and vigorously protested their suppression by Korean police and US forces.

Key to Chang's thesis of the contingent—not inevitable—nature of the outbreak of open war in 1950 is the irony that Hodge's efforts to disentangle the US from military occupation, due in part to his exasperation with Rhee, allowed the emerging strongman to divide Korea and increased the likelihood of war with the north. But while the Hodge-Rhee antagonism was real, and Chang's attention to the dissenting views of Meacham, Bunce, and others is welcome, the author's efforts to distinguish his conclusions from Cumings' downplays the evidence presented here of the preponderance of US military and diplomatic support, from August 1945 on, for conservative forces in South Korea.

In addition to those attributes noted above, *A Fractured Liberation* should appeal to students with its wonderful period photographs enlivening the text, and with the author's apposite remarks about current-day globalized Korean cultural phenomena, such as *The Squid Game*. Chang, born to South Korean immigrants in Queens, New York, frames his narrative partly around divergent views among his older relatives about the events he describes, thus tying this "history" to identity formation of this immigrant and ethnic group.

Nevertheless, the book poses challenges to teachers contemplating classroom adoption. Students may need additional support tracking recurring surnames such as Kim and the dizzying procession of acronyms of often-short-lived organizations and political parties. Chang's engaging prose style becomes overly informal at times, at least for this reviewer, as when he labels one political alliance "team Kim-Yŏ" (147). There are quotations which do not appear to be footnoted (e.g., 59, 164), and passages which require stronger copy-editing (e.g., that General MacArthur's "reverse course" made Japan a "communist bulwark," rather than the opposite [240n.59]). More substantively, Chang's all-but-exclusive focus on the south—while undoubtedly a valid scholarly choice—will leave some students wondering about simultaneous developments in the north. The book is best suited to upper-level undergraduates or graduate students, although its accessible first chapter, "Pursuing Liberation," could be read on its own in advanced high school and introductory college courses.

Beyond its potential for course assignment, *A Fractured Liberation* develops important themes which world history teachers and researchers will find valuable. Chang's exposition of the transnational and ideologically diverse backgrounds of Korean rebels against Japanese rule reinforces our understanding of these facets of anti-colonialist movements globally. Similarly, his consistent highlighting of women's involvement and demands for gender equality in Korean reform efforts can widen discussions of women and nationalist movements in world history. The sympathy of some Christian missionaries for reform, and even for popular uprisings, bears directly on perennial debates over missions and cultural imperialism. Perhaps most importantly, this unusual post-colonial case study—independence was from a non-Western overlord, followed by overt military occupation by another global superpower—

can nevertheless be placed in the context of decolonization movements and social uprisings more broadly, as so many such instances exhibited a pattern of initial optimism and popular mobilization, only to be met by insurmountable obstacles, both internal and external, which prevented true liberation.

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**Robert Shaffer** is Professor of History Emeritus at Shippensburg University. He analyzed Japanese Christian pacifist Kagawa Toyohiko in the *Oxford Handbook of Peace History* (2023), and his essay “Pearl S. Buck on American Society: Towards a Multi-Racial (Post-Racial?) Future” appears in *Cowrie: Comparative and World Literature* (2025). He is book review editor of *Peace & Change*. He can be reached at [roshaf@retiree.ship.edu](mailto:roshaf@retiree.ship.edu).