Michael Seth’s A Concise History of Korea: From Antiquity to the Present provides readers with a clear, comprehensive, objective, and illuminating survey of Korean history from ancient times to the present. Readers will be inspired by Seth’s extensive knowledge of Korean history combined with his understanding of East Asian and world history. Throughout, comparisons are drawn between developments on the Korean peninsula and those in neighboring regions, especially China and Japan. Seth discusses how the Koreas became so radically different from one another after centuries of being unified. One of the great merits of the text is the presentation of each stage of Korean history within a global context; subsequently, readers will have a deeper understanding of social, cultural, and political history not only in East Asia, but also with other parts of the world. Responding to differing historiographical issues, the author provides objective responses to what he thinks may be plausible answers. Another important dimension is his inclusion of information based on new research and events as recent as 2015. Additional features of the book include historical maps, primary source entries within each chapter, and a very useful annotated bibliography in English.

Educators of Asian and world history on the high school and college levels will benefit from reading this well-written and balanced text on Korean history and culture that offers both regional and global perspectives. Teachers of United States history will profit from reading about the role the United States has played in Korea prior to the division of the peninsula, the Korean War, and postwar policies in Korea compared to those in Japan. All readers will be interested in how South Korea made unprecedented achievements in both democratic and economic development while North Korea became one of the world’s most totalitarian and impoverished countries in the world.

A Concise History of Korea is timely for its coverage of Korea combined with regional and global perspectives. In July 2016, the California Department of Education approved an updated and revised history–social science framework that includes more than twenty references to Korean history and culture. The previous framework only mentioned Korea four times. Since the leading textbook publishers will incorporate these additions in their secondary textbooks, educators will be bringing Korean history and culture into their classrooms to a greater extent.

In the first chapter, readers become immediately aware of Seth’s knowledge of Korean, regional, and world history. He writes that

*It was the weakening and collapse of the Chinese Empire in the third and fourth centuries that gave the indigenous people free rein to develop autonomous states that were culturally distinct from China. The process was analogous to contemporary developments at the other end of Eurasia when the declining Roman Empire disintegrated in Western Europe, allowing tribal people to develop their own heavily Roman-influenced states.* (49)

When Seth writes about Silla’s “cultural brilliance” in the eighth century, he notes that at the same time there were flourishing cultural developments in China with the Tang Dynasty, the Nara period in Japan, the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad, and the Carolingian Empire in Western Europe. He concludes this discussion by writing that

*Historians do not understand all the links among the societies of the Old World, but they are increasingly appreciating just how interconnected they were. Korea geographically on the periphery of Eurasia was not only embedded in the larger historical developments of East Asia, but a part of the larger Afro-Eurasian world.* (78)

When Seth writes about the Koryŏ Dynasty, he comments on how the introduction of the civil examination system helped “transform the aristocracy into highly educated service nobility” that contributed to the institutional stability and continuity of the Korean state and ruling elite for centuries (105). He compares the stability of Korea with the hereditary class in Indian states and the inherited aristocracies of Europe and Japan. When leaders of the hereditary class failed, power struggles and uncertainty would occur. Seth also compares the examination system in Korea with that of China. The Chinese examination system was open to commoners; consequently,
Most European colonies were administered by a relatively small number of officials, but in Korea, the Japanese dominated all aspects of life, from its huge top-down bureaucracy to the local neighborhood policeman.

...
A Concise History of Korea is timely for its coverage of Korea combined with regional and global perspectives. Most Americans know too little about Korean history and culture. Seth has published an engaging and worthwhile narrative that provides us with an understanding of Korean history, and how it is as fascinating and unique as its neighbors. * Education About Asia * The first edition of Michael Seth's book became a benchmark for an overview of Korean history in English. Now bigger and better, it promises to become a standard for Korean history in any language. - - John Lie, Univers A Concise History of Korea emphasizes how Korean history can be understood as part of an interactive sphere that includes three basic areas: China, Japan, and the Manchurian/Central Asian region. Throughout the book, comparisons are drawn between developments in Korea and those in neighboring regions, especially China and Japan.Â A Concise History of Korea proves to be entertaining, detailed, informative, and, in adherence to the suggestion of its title, characterized by concision. Dr. Seth does well to present a plethora of material swiftly, and in a manner that paints a broad image of Korea stretching two millennia. When North Korean forces invaded South Korea on June 25, 1950, in a surprise attack, they awakened the United States to the dangers of brushfire war in the nuclear age. The earlier crisis of 1948 in Berlin, Communist successes in Czechoslovakia in 1948 and China in 1949, and news of the Soviet explosion of an atomic device in 1949, had prompted the National Security Council (NSC) to issue a secret directive, NSC-68, in April 1950. It judged the Soviet Union to be bent on world domination. NSC-68