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.*

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.*

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.

There was greater social mobility in China. In Korea, examinations remained limited to members of the aristocracy and maintained hereditary status and privilege. In subsequent chapters, the author discusses Korea’s universally held zeal for education as a means of advancing social status, and connects South Korea’s stress on education to South Korea’s economic miracle, one of the most dramatic economic developments in modern history.

The Chosŏn state in the late nineteenth century is inevitably described as the “hermit kingdom” with few comparisons with its neighbors; however, Seth provides greater perspective by explaining that the policies of the late Chosŏn government did not really differ completely from the policies of China and Japan. The Ming and Qing dynasties placed restrictions on Chinese travel abroad, and trade with neighbors and Europe was restricted. Tokugawa Japan from the early seventeenth century adopted policies that kept most Japanese from traveling abroad and restricted trade. He also comments that other countries after 1600, such as Việt Nam and Siam, expelled Westerners or implemented restrictions on their activities.

Another example of Seth’s enhanced perspective is his comparison of Japanese colonization of Korea and the French colonization of Viêt Nam. He offers a powerful example of why the Koreans were so bitter about Japanese colonization of Korea and the French colonization of Việt Nam. Seth does not neglect modern Korean history. The last five chapters cover United States history and Asian Studies for thirty-five years. She is the author of The Koreas (Asia in Focus) (2009) and the recipient of the Organization of American Historians Tachau Award, the Prime Minister’s Award from the Republic of Korea, and the Daekyo Enopi Award. She is the co-founder of the Korea Academy for Educators and the National Korean Studies Seminar. Both organizations are dedicated to informing educators about Korean history and culture.

MARY CONNOR taught United States History and Asian Studies for thirty-five years. She is the author of The Koreas (Asia in Focus) (2009) and the recipient of the Organization of American Historians Tachau Award, the Prime Minister’s Award from the Republic of Korea, and the Daekyo Enopi Award. She is the co-founder of the Korea Academy for Educators and the National Korean Studies Seminar. Both organizations are dedicated to informing educators about Korean history and culture.

Teaching East Asia: Korea

In the fall 2016 issue of EAA (vol. 21, no. 2), we reviewed Mary Connor’s Common Core: Korea Lessons and Resources for K-12 Classrooms. An updated second edition of this resource and lesson book titled Teaching East Asia: Korea by Mary Connor will be available this June. The new book includes 137 additional pages of content including new lessons in history and art as well as chapters on music, science and technology, and Korean American history. Please visit http://www.nationalkoreanstudies.com for more information and to order a copy of the book once it is available.

You may read the review of the first edition, Common Core: Korea, from the fall 2016 issue at https://tinyurl.com/j67o63s.
The Lower Paleolithic era in the Korean Peninsula and Manchuria began roughly half a million years ago. The earliest known Korean pottery dates to around 8000 BC, and the Neolithic period began after 6000 BC, followed by the Bronze Age by 2000 BC, and the Iron Age around 700 BC. According to the mythic account recounted in the Samguk yusa, the Gojoseon (Old Joseon) kingdom was founded in northern Korea and southern Manchuria in 2333 BC.