

## Book Review: The Koreas: The Birth of Two Nations Divided by Theodore Jun Yoo

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**Yoo, Theodore Jun. *The Koreas: The Birth of Two Nations Divided*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2020. ix + 328 pages, Hardcover, \$35.64.**

*The Koreas: The Birth of Two Nations Divided* is an engaging survey of the political, social and cultural history of North and South Korea following the Second World War. Theodore Jun Yoo explores the effects the Korean War has had on North and South Korea, and the divergent trajectories and identities both countries adopted due to internal policies, Cold War politics and international relations. The book is divided into seven chapters, with each one loosely structured around a decade beginning with the 1950s, while the Epilogue explores the film *Burning*, recent developments in the Koreas and issues that still confront the two countries. Yoo uses the Introduction to discuss his family's history, which helps set the stage for a broader discussion later in the book on government policies, diasporic Korean communities and movements across national borders that have occurred within the last seventy years. Such a discussion highlights Yoo's contention that these movements have "challenged the master narratives of national culture, homogeneity, belongingness, and identity" (p. 10). But aside from the movement of bodies, Yoo also explores the effects foreign culture and goods have had on Korean culture and society (including sections on diet and tastes as cornmeal and instant coffee entered South Korea from American sources). However, Yoo is quick to show that the flow of culture has been multidirectional, as the Koreas, particularly the South, have exported their culture to an interested global community.

*The Koreas* is designed to introduce a general audience to a variety of pertinent issues in the two countries, including, but not limited to, mental health, globalization, marginalization, gender, homosexuality, *juche* ideology, democratization, and human rights. To familiarize those who lack a background on Korean history, Yoo presents a timeline of some key events. Yoo weaves together a tapestry of the different lives affected by colonialism, religion, war, Cold War politics,

globalization, and domestic policies. This focus on individuals helps Yoo achieve one of his goals: to “humanize” Korean history. For example, Yoo outlines the life of Korean artist Yi Jungseop to demonstrate the effects war, colonialism and the Cold War have had on “the individual and the collective scale” (p. 29). Yoo utilized an assortment of scholarly sources, memoirs, fictional literature, news articles and films to elucidate his points, and hoped his use of short stories, novels and films would further humanize Korean history for the reader. In his Epilogue, Yoo discusses the 2018 award-winning film *Burning*, a film that has already received some scholarly attention. This was a good selection to close the book with since *Burning* is an engaging film that encapsulates some of the concerning issues Yoo discusses that have taken place “beneath a façade of prosperity” (p. 286).

*The Koreas* covers a wide range of issues in the last seven decades of Korean history; however, there are some topics that could have been further explored. The fourth chapter, entitled “The Long 1980s,” is one of the shorter ones of the book and contains a very brief discussion of North Korea. Since the book is a survey of Korean history in the post-WWII period, it is expected and understandable that there are many topics that could have been further elaborated on, such as *kurimchaek* in North Korea and its popularity among that country’s youth. The decision to analyze issues through popular culture is a valid and engaging approach, particularly since novels and films have been utilized to open discussion on taboo subjects in Korean society and can be used to assess how these issues have been framed and articulated through the lens of the writer or director. That said, a fuller analysis of some films, such as *The Yellow Sea*, could have been conducted and greater use of film reviews and published interviews with directors and casts would allow one to see how these films have been further discussed in public discourses. For example, Yoo concludes *Burning* “has ignited debates about the very soul of the young generation in crisis,” but a specific

discussion of critical responses would demonstrate how some have used the film to frame these debates (p. 295).

*The Koreas* presents an interesting and engaging introduction of Korean history that covers a wide range of topics for a popular audience. Yoo's focus on diasporic Korean communities, the presence of non-Koreans in the Koreas and the challenges mixed-race families have encountered connects to his larger point that these movements have "challenged the identity of the once monoethnic nation" and created more "racial and class hierarchies in Korean society" (p. 259). This focus on diasporic Korean communities and transnationalism offers greater complexity to the retelling of Korean history; however, some of these issues have been explored in more focused studies on immigration and migration. Yoo acknowledges small sections of the book contain material from previously published works: his chapter in *Encounters Old and New in World History* was used for a small section on Park Chung-hee and food policies in the second chapter and for his discussion on *makgeolli* in the sixth chapter. Moreover, the fifth chapter uses material from a 2019 publication in *Korean Studies* by Yoo about Muhammad Kkansu.

Overall, Yoo presents an engaging account of Korean history, which delves into a variety of pertinent topics and unravels the Koreas in ways the general reader may be unfamiliar with. The short bibliography is only five pages in length, but it offers a limited list of valuable sources on North and South Korea readers can consult to further explore issues touched on in the book. Yoo's discussion of individuals who normally would not be found in general histories of Korea was an engaging way to further elucidate some issues, including diasporic communities and movements across national borders. *The Koreas* is a well-rounded text that offers the average reader valuable insight into key issues and debates that have occurred within the two countries.

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