

Eugene Y. Park, *Korea. A History*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2022, pp. XIV, 414

There is no ambiguity that after Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the citizens of Poland have become more educated about international affairs than ever before in the 21st century. What is truly puzzling, however, is the fact that these days Polish politicians and journalists have been frequently bringing up the subject of South Korea, as this distant Asian country is about to turn into a crucial supplier of military equipment and nuclear technology for Warsaw, which seems to be a bolt from the blue for global opinion.

Meanwhile, the expansion of Hallyu products such as TV dramas, movies or pop music has continued across Europe, thanks to which Poles can be already called quite familiar with some basic information on Korean society and culture. Moreover, they have the opportunity to deepen their knowledge in this area through the increasing number of commercially available books translated from English¹ or written by domestic authors². Unfortunately, the history of the Korean Peninsula has not yet grown into an authentic object of interest in Poland.

Suffice it to say that so far only one decent Polish-language work discussing Korea's entire past has been published³. I do not deny that *Historia Korei* by Joanna P. Rurarz was indeed a groundbreaking monograph back in the day, but nearly twenty years have passed since its first release. And worse still, its author made a lot of blunders that still exert a disastrous influence on Polish

¹ E. Hong, *Cool po koreańsku. Narodziny fenomenu. Jak jeden naród podbił świat za pomocą popkultury*, transl. J. Maksymowicz-Hamann, M. Suwińska, Warszawa 2020.

² R. HusarSKI, *Kraj niespokojnego poranka. Pamięć i bunt w Korei Południowej*, Wołowiec 2021.

³ Korea was not even incorporated into the Ossolineum publishing series, despite it having included such states like Vietnam; W. Olszewski, *Historia Wietnamu*, Wrocław 1991.

humanities⁴. Comparable publications, in turn, do not meet the criteria for historical research⁵, while others prefer to concentrate on different issues in the field of Korean studies⁶. In addition, peculiarly, to this day, no single book on the subject (e.g. Ki-baik Lee's *A New History of Korea*⁷) has been translated into Polish.

For this reason, I deem it beneficial to analyse the newest work synthesising the current state of knowledge about the centuries-old Korean history written by Eugen Y. Park, an American historian, alumnus of UCLA, Harvard, and Yale, former lecturer at Seoul National and Yonsei, who is now a staff member of the University of Nevada in Reno.

As soon as one starts reading *Korea. A History*, what attracts one's attention is the table of contents, unusual due to the author's periodisation that distinguishes four main historical epochs (classical, post-classical, early modern, late modern) that are interchangeable with four parts of the monograph. This distinction is indisputably reasonable and advantageous to readers, yet remains excessively American/West-centric (in Poland, for instance, there is a tendency to avoid terms such as "modern history"). The problem is more pronounced, as the book in question is told to *seek a balanced overview, [...] rather than highlighting East Asia's relevance to America* (p. XI). We will see later that this intention has partially failed.

The table of contents is followed by a list consisting of figures, table, and maps. The only table's message is comparatively understandable, but it is based on some dubious sources⁸. On the other hand, all the selected figures are generally adequate (except maybe the last two), the most valuable elements though, are the very detailed maps that show administrative and border changes on the Korean Peninsula and its vicinity throughout the ages. As far as I am concerned,

⁴ One example is a sentence stating that Jurchens failed to conquer Kaifeng in 1126. This sentence is, of course, true, albeit Rurarz forgets to mention that they did it the following year, which completely changes the picture of these events; J.P. Rurarz, *Historia Korei*, Warszawa 2009, p. 167.

⁵ T. Goban-Klas, *Historia i współczesność Korei. Od pustelniczego królestwa do azjatyckiego tygrysa*, Toruń 2006.

⁶ O. Pietrewicz, *Krewetka między wielorybami. Półwysep Koreański w polityce mocarstw*, Warszawa 2020.

⁷ K.B. Lee, *A New History of Korea*, transl. E.J. Shultz, E.W. Wagner, Seoul 1984.

⁸ Particularly controversial is the reference to the *Global Firepower* ranking, which experts often criticise.

there could be even more of them, chiefly to illustrate the excerpts about Late Goryeo, Japanese Occupation and recent times.

Subsequently, after the short preface, Park explains which convention of romanising he chose for the needs of his work. Regrettably, he does not explain why, like countless Anglocentric scholars, he prefers to use the American McCune-Reischauer Romanisation, seeing that almost a quarter of a century ago the South Korean government authorised the native Revised Romanisation of Korean⁹. Under these circumstances, this type of attitude may be seen as a manifestation of colonialism, officially condemned in the US and by Park himself.

The narrative segment of the monograph begins with the introduction, in which one learns a little about selected topics connected with Korean historiography, archaeology, genetics, and linguistics. The author seems to know them back to front, thus he can discuss even complex problems with zest in a fairly accessible way. Concurrently, a brief presentation of them allows us to focus on further aspects, more significant from a historian's perspective, to which the next four parts of the book are dedicated.

Each of these parts is divided into several chapters ranging from two to six. Then, every chapter is preceded by a concise prologue of a kind, but in fact it is composed like an abstract of a scientific paper, thereby disrupting Park's narrative, which is usually considerably smooth and engaging. Nevertheless, I have to admit that the chapters are built in a logical manner, deliberating sequential developments in political, economic, social, and cultural history, consequently combining synchronic and diachronic descriptions.

Inevitably, the way of presenting policy-related information is rather foreseeable. Even so, the author effectively puts the emphasis differently from other writers. For this purpose, for example, he minimises the number of biographical plots of far-famed people like Admiral Yi Sunsin, instead highlighting the importance of state offices and their role in the functioning of the country. The most paramount drawback in this case is that without any list of Korean kings and their years of reign, a less experienced reader may struggle with comprehending the timeline of various situations.

⁹ Thanks to Ruraz in Polish historiography in use are almost only the recommendations from 2000, therefore I also obey them. However, the system developed in Warsaw by Halina Ogarek-Czój was prominent at one time. Some traditional names (Seul/Seoul, Phenian/Pyongyang) are a separate issue; H. Ogarek-Czój, *Klasyczna literatura koreańska. Zarys*, Warszawa 2003, p. 10.

Economics is not exactly a many historians' cup of tea, so it should be appreciated that Park tries to trace the sundry transformations of local agriculture and craftsmanship in order to coherently prove their importance in shaping history. The only areas where some adjustments would have been beneficial are limiting unnecessary generalisations (e.g. the depiction of the Three Kingdoms period) and overreliance on statistics, most notably when it comes to North Korea.

According to the logic of said book, all these economic changes have had a clear impact on the shape of society. Although I have nothing against this sort of assumption, I am afraid it allows for an exaggerated Marxist-like opposition of the elite to the commoners that such cliché sentences like *aristocrats [...] enjoyed a luxurious life* (p. 52) strengthen. On the other hand, this picture is not so one-sided, as it includes some manifestations of social mobility, et cetera.

Finally, cultural history is not equated exclusively with art history. Alternatively, one gets acquainted with the advancements of philosophy and science¹⁰. Other topics are not so apparent because one finds relatively many facts in the fields of diet, housing, and clothing, but Park is not always consistent in exploring these issues. His approach to religion (whether it be Buddhism or Christianity), however, is absolutely astonishing. Not only does he look upon it merely as a source of consolation for people, but also seems to disregard the persecutions of Christians in the 18th–20th centuries. That is astounding because as he claims he *attempts to give more attention to Korea's less-known historical groups* (p. XII). The palpable bias can be noticed in this line of reasoning, since he mentions LGBT groups whenever possible and people of faith barely when it is unavoidable. It is debatable whether this historical licence does not distort the image of the past.

Given these points, let us have a look at some specific cases from the book. The part devoted to antiquity is quite comprehensive. The author almost effortlessly analyses the formation of the oldest Korean states as well as Buyeo, Gaya, Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla. Subsequently, he spends a lot of time presenting still unsatisfactorily known Balhae with its southern neighbour that, for reasons not entirely recognised by me, is not named “Unified Silla” (p. 312) but just “Silla” (p. 62)¹¹.

¹⁰ Koreans are extremely proud of developing their own alphabet or constructing the rain gauge; Y.D. Kim, *Korea w polskich podręcznikach uniwersyteckich do historii*, [in:] *Korea w oczach Polaków. Państwo, społeczeństwo, kultura*, ed. M. Burdelski, J. Włodarski, K. Zeidler, Gdańsk 2013, p. 542.

¹¹ In Poland, the term “Zjednoczone Silla” is commonly used as a practical differentiator;

By contrast, the description of Goryeo is rather laconic, as evidenced by decades of Mongol invasions summarised on one page (p. 115), and predictable because the shown views cannot be deemed original (e.g. the clearly negative attitude towards the Yuan dynasty). It is undeniable that Park specialises in modern history, therefore his book centres around the Korean Peninsula after the 14th century.

In terms of Joseon, I have doubts about the adopted time frames. The years 1567 and 1724 do not give the impression of being momentous, at the same time making the Late Joseon period seem simply uneventful. Nonetheless, I think highly of the author's ability to talk succinctly about the occasionally tedious feuds between various court factions and not ignore the significance of the 18th century¹².

Looking at the next period, it would be an understatement to say that Park is overly optimistic about Daewongun and Gojong's reforms after 1864. Since at every opportunity he blames the so-called imperialists (for him, everyone seems to have been an imperialist at that point), among whom he dislikes the Japanese the most, the Koreans' faults for the decline of their state are being diminished. In Poland, even the Warsaw School of History did not absolve Poles to such an extent.

Dealing with the subject of colonialism, it is worth pointing out the author's discrepancy when he depicts Korea in 1910-1945. Sometimes he claims it was under Tokyo occupation (p. 242) and other times he suggests it was a Japanese colony (p. 226). From my perspective, these are two conflicting interpretations. To illustrate, Polish lands were somewhat partially colonised by Germans and Russians before 1918, but during World War II (according to Park, there was no such thing in Asia, as he calls it only "the Pacific War") Berlin with Moscow occupied Poland. The author's strong attachment to the concept of colonialism is evidenced by, for example, the following phrase: *decentering the West in the South Korean weltanschauung* (p. 310). However, to do him justice, he simultaneously recognises the painful problem of collaboration.

In turn, he has absolutely no interest in the Korean War. He does not even mention where the armistice was signed and what its terms were¹³, despite it

M. Kula, *Funkcjonowanie Silla w okresie Trzech Królestw. Wybrane aspekty zainspirowane serialem „Hwarang”* (2016), "Studia Antiquitatis et Medii Aevi Incohantis" 2023, no. 8, p. 126.

¹² Rurarz encloses this period in one paragraph; J.P. Rurarz, *Historia Korei*, p. 272.

¹³ It is especially important for Poles because then they became members of the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission; M. Hańderek, *PRL na straży pokoju w Korei*, "Biuletyn IPN" 2018, no. 10, pp. 136-137.

being formally valid to this day. Furthermore, he neglects the case of the Second Korean War yet finds it appropriate to describe in detail the Gwangju Massacre along with the story of the first Korean transgender person.

The major flaw of the last few chapters is the lack of a deeper exploration of North Korea's past. As a result, the history of the South is coherent and convincing for us, while the developments in Pyongyang are reduced to some statistics and platitudes. Perhaps this is the reason why Park Chung-hee's regime is judged harsher than Kim Il Sung's. Even more unexpected is the blind faith in the Sunshine Policy that was allegedly undermined by the Japanese and evidently almighty Americans that purportedly forced Seoul to intervene in Afghanistan (the long-winded passage on the September 11 attacks indicates the narrator's citizenship). The possible malice of Kim Jong Il, whom President Kim Dae-jung tried to bribe with Hyundai money, is not considered at all.

The monograph ends with a selective listing of books in English that can be certainly helpful, but as some of them were published decades ago, they can be difficult to obtain by non-scholars from outside America. The consecutive index, in turn, is largely pointless because it contains arbitrary keywords such as "Chinggis Khan", "Buddhism", "Silla", "baseball", "butchers", "prostitutes" or "Gangnam Style".

Obvious errors are rare for Park, but a few of his wordings may raise doubts. In one place, he suggests that boys attended the girls' school (pp. 232-233), and in another, that since the time of the Tangs *no China proper-based state would ever attempt to invade Korea* (p. 65), which is a bit of a simplification. Finally, his spelling of Korean names is not homogeneous, as he writes, for instance, about *island Chejudo* (p. 29) as well as *Ch'öin fortress* (p. 115). In my opinion, it should be "island Cheju" and "Ch'öin fortress" or "Chejudo" and "Ch'öinsöng".

To conclude, *Korea. A History* is not a flawless book, and I cannot say that I fully agree with its author. Howbeit, Eugene Y. Park definitely did a tremendous job trying to retell the history of this inconspicuous far-eastern country, its people, culture, and economy, due to which maybe more English-speaking readers will become fascinated by Korea. I wish that Poles also had a chance to see a similar monograph.

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