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Review by Ji-Young Lee, American University

Sheila Miyoshi Jager’s *The Other Great Game* offers masterful storytelling about East Asia’s tempestuous history of transformation, one that led the region to become part of modernity and of a larger, single international system in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. From a bird’s eye view, the book captures a rare historical moment in Asian international relations of what political scientist Robert Gilpin called *systems transition,* in which the character of the international system itself has undergone a major change.\(^1\) The story follows the rough journey of Korea, a site of contentious coexistence and the eventual transition from a set of earlier Chinese-centered diplomatic practices known as the tribute system to those that rested on international law, industrialization, imperialism, and nation-building.\(^2\) The book does so by unfolding the drama of how Korea opened itself to the world and ended up losing sovereignty through Japan’s annexation of Korea in 1910. This is simultaneously a book about what happened to East Asia along the way: the Imo Uprising of 1882, the Kapsin Coup of 1884, the Tonghak Rebellion of 1894, the First Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895, the China Relief expedition of 1900, the Boxer Uprising of 1900, the Russo-Chinese War of 1900, and the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905 among other incidents that constituted this tempestuous transformation.

The idea that links Korea’s geostrategic location with great power rivalries underlies much of the popular dialogue on the international relations of the Korean Peninsula. Jager’s *The Other Great Game* is incomparable in terms of providing a panoramic, comprehensive, in-depth understanding of what this idea really means historically. In her historical narrative, the lead actors are Russia, Korea, China, and Japan, who were engaged in fierce power struggles, with the United States, Britain, France, and Germany playing supporting roles in this drama. An unparalleled feat of this book is that it not only brings these multiple actors into one picture but examines all three levels of analysis—the traits of key individuals, the respective domestic politics of the countries involved, and their inter-state relations dimensions—using extensive primary as well as secondary sources. Importantly, the gaze of Jager’s storytelling stays focused on the human condition, which provides a sense of what it would have been like to be there in the scene, while at the same time offering the vigorous big-picture of the region’s shifting power configurations and turbulent inter-state relations.

There are three major arguments of the book. First, what distinguishes this book’s narrative history from other works on Korea’s opening and related developments is the weight Jager gives to the role of Russian

\(^1\) Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 41. According to Gilpin, systems change “involves a major change in the character of the international system itself.”

ambitions and actions. The prologue’s ending, which describes Russia’s establishment a new post, Vladivostok, that allowed it to extend its territory to the border of Korea, is the beginning of the vortex that Korea would soon find itself in, “making the Korean Peninsula the center of major convulsions in East Asia as regional powers embarked on their own Great Game” (9). Jager shows how Chinese, Japanese, and British fears about Russia’s expansion eastward and its perceived ambitions toward the Korean Peninsula were important considerations that triggered their own Great Game. For China, diplomat Li Hongzhang’s strategy for deterring Russian and Japanese threats using Western countries led Beijing to encourage Korea to establish relations with the United States and others. Many pages of the book are dedicated to the underappreciated geopolitical significance of Russia’s Trans-Siberian Railway, a meeting space where Russian, Chinese, and Japanese strategic calculations and interests collided with implications for the fate of Korea. For Japan, its war with Russia in 1904–1905 “was to neutralize Manchuria so that it could serve as a buffer against Russian threat to Korea” (312).

A second important argument of the book is Korea’s agency in great power politics. This is an important departure from and a challenge to the popular notion that typically portrays Korea as a “shrimp among whales.” The mainstream geopolitical narrative on Korea has tended to repeat “the curse of geography,” and of Korea being “a country of the wrong size at the wrong place,” to borrow the words of Don Oberdorfer. Arguably, the period that this book covers—one of the most turbulent times in the history of Korea—should speak directly to this dominant narrative with conflicts and wars in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Yet the book’s narrative suggests that we should not view Korea as a mere victim of great power politics. Jager does this in multiple ways. She offers detailed research on Korean policymakers’ thinking and their engagement with foreign powers instead of assuming them as unimportant. For example, in this account Korean king and emperor Kojong comes alive as a powerless yet industrious leader trying hard to navigate the massive forces of the balance of power politics that his country was strapped in. In the shaping of this complex era of East Asia’s transformation, the author examines Korean actions and decisions with equal significance, especially in the context of its relations with other countries and their leaders. More broadly, by shedding light on the relational context and social networks that Korean players sought to utilize in determining their courses of action, the book shows how contingencies might lead to different outcomes in one’s history.

A third important argument is the recognition that regional geopolitics in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries “will make clear just how much this history illuminates the present, especially in light of the fact that the Korean Peninsula continues to remain the locus of conflict in the Asia-Pacific region” (xv). As Jager notes, the relevance of this past for the present is undeniably clear when looking at the origins of some of the most intractable territorial and historical disputes in the region today. The lead actors of the drama in this book put forward the competing claims, which are complicated by the systems transition and the birth of nation-states in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Taking one step further, even while keeping in mind John Lewis Gaddis’s exhortation that history “is not like mathematics and chemistry,” I think that this past can illuminate the future when we pay careful attention to these lead actors’ big-picture strategic calculations at times of major shifts in the power balances surrounding the Korean Peninsula. The book offers important insights into likely enduring structural forces that might arise from the geography of the Korean peninsula, at times of a possible future event of the unification of the two Koreas, for example.

Jager uses narrative history to effectively convey the importance of her research. I think this was a brilliant decision. What stands out in this ambitious work is her endeavor and success in consulting primary sources.

See, for example, Michael Robinson, Korea’s Twentieth-Century Odyssey: A Short History (Honolulu, University of Hawai’i Press, 2007); Key-Hui Kim, The Last Phase of the East Asian World Order: Korea, Japan, and the Chinese Empire, 1860–1882 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).


that were originally produced in Russia, Korea, Japan, China, the United Kingdom, and the United States. With the help of her friends, former students, and colleagues (575), she was able to translate the texts that were most germane to her stories, along with her research trips to Seoul, London, Washington, DC, and Boston. The result is a panoramic drama of the big picture called “the birth of modern East Asia,” with its impressive comprehensiveness and rigor. This political scientist wondered what earlier works have to say about the topic of the book and would have appreciated more discussion of how the author sees her own work in the larger literature. But I think this book fulfills something perhaps only a narrative history can do: that is to embrace contingencies of the many historical moments in the shaping of East Asian modernity and transformation, in ways that give voice to all the actors that need to be in, while examining individuals, societies, politics, and international life in a panoramic way and going deeper into human emotions and sufferings.

Ji-Young Lee is an Associate Professor of International Relations at American University’s School of International Service, where she is the C.W. Lim and Korea Foundation Professor of Korean Studies. Trained as a political scientist, she has written on historical international relations, regional security order and the US alliance network in Asia, Korea-China relations, and Korea-Japan relations. She is the author of *China’s Hegemony: Four Hundred Years of East Asian Domination* (Columbia University Press, 2016).