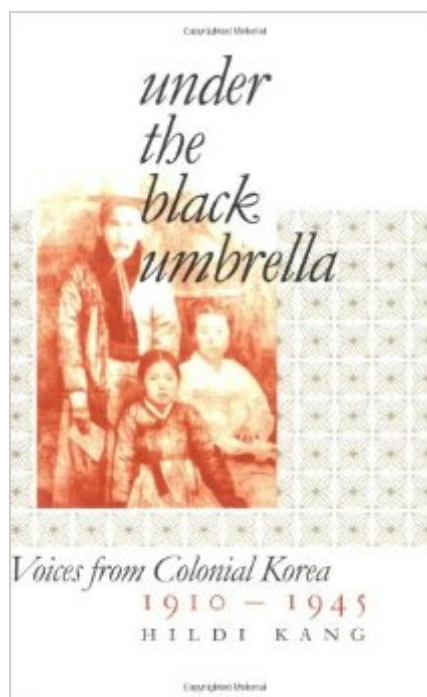


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Under The Black Umbrella: Voices From Colonial Korea, 1910-1945



Synopsis

In the rich and varied life stories in *Under the Black Umbrella*, elderly Koreans recall incidents that illustrate the complexities of Korea during the colonial period. Hildi Kang here reinvigorates a period of Korean history long shrouded in the silence of those who endured under the "black umbrella" of Japanese colonial rule. Existing descriptions of the colonial period tend to focus on extremes: imperial repression and national resistance, Japanese subjugation and Korean suffering, Korean backwardness and Japanese progress. "Most people," Kang says, "have read or heard only the horror stories which, although true, tell only a small segment of colonial life." The varied accounts in *Under the Black Umbrella* reveal a truth that is both more ambiguous and more human—the small-scale, mundane realities of life in colonial Korea. Accessible and attractive narratives, linked by brief historical overviews, provide a large and fully textured view of Korea under Japanese rule. Looking past racial hatred and repression, Kang reveals small acts of resistance carried out by Koreans, as well as gestures of fairness by Japanese colonizers. Impressive for the history it recovers and preserves, *Under the Black Umbrella* is a candid, human account of a complicated time in a contested place.

Book Information

Paperback: 192 pages

Publisher: Cornell University Press (October 20, 2005)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0801472709

ISBN-13: 978-0801472701

Product Dimensions: 6 x 0.2 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 12.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 stars — See all reviews (15 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #411,476 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #135 in Books > History > Asia > Korea #137 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Ethnic & National > Japanese #497 in Books > Textbooks > Humanities > History > Asia

Customer Reviews

I think a lot of Western youth are by and large unfamiliar with Modern East Asian history. Many might be surprised to learn about Imperial Japan's colonial ambitions. For instance, Japan ruled the Korean peninsula for four decades: de facto as a protectorate from 1905-1910, and de jure as a colony from 1910-1945. Even today, many Koreans, both young and old, continue to bear a grudge

towards Japan for its subjugation of their ancestral land. Rightly or wrongly, they continue to vilify Japan for the crimes and cruelty perpetrated in the name of Emperor Hirohito and the Land of the Rising Sun. Other nations which fell victim to Japanese imperialism--China, Guam, the Philippines, Vietnam, Taiwan, to name only some--arguably suffered less than Korea, but the people and governments of these lands are generally much less antagonistic towards Japan today. We can see this dichotomy clearly in Koreans' nationalistic, vituperative demonstrations against Japan that continue into the third millenium--demonstrations that are toned down or absent in other former victim nations. It is in this context in which Hildi Kang's "Under the Black Umbrella" makes for a much-needed book. Kang's series of interviews with survivors of the colonial period, who come from all walks of life, casts a refreshing light on the topic of life under the Japanese. Her interviewees do not all espouse the hardline, nationalistic anti-Japanese view--far from it. Of course some interviewees still seethe with bad memories of Japanese cruelties. But many of the now aged or deceased men and women speak of the mundane routines of daily life under the Japanese: growing up, going to school, getting married and raising a family, finding employment.

Hildi Kang's book is highly recommended to anyone who wants to understand Korean people more fully. To understand the present dynamic Korean society, and to understand Korean character, one should understand the scars of the past. According to the Cambridge professor and leading economist Chang Ha Joon, fifty years ago, Korea was poorer than Ghana. Now, it is one of the most powerful countries in the world, with a healthy and thriving economy. However, to understand how Korea got there, one needs to know the past, and Kang's beautiful book achieves its aims admirably, collecting interviews with Koreans who went through those painful years from the late 1800s to the mid 1950s, offering the reader a rare prism through which to view such periods of massive change -- changes that brought Korean people from a feudal existence to a modern industrial one within a startlingly short period of time. Kang's book compiles interviews with a diverse array of subjects : we meet those who found themselves at the bottom of society, compelled to conspire, or resist, on the run, hiding out in forest and mountains, or in jail, and we are also introduced to the higher echelons of society, meeting bank managers, academics, business men, and holy men. The text also introduces the reader to Koreans from all corners of the diaspora -- we meet Koreans who were forced to the far flung corners of Russia, Manchuria and Japan, and we meet those from North and South Korea, and those who chose to, or were forced to flee to America. It is a very broad sample of interview subjects, and from a very broad social background, giving the reader valuable insight into a diverse array of characters and life experiences.

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