Editor’s introduction: What follows are three short essays by the authors of the latest Key Issues in Asian Studies (KIAS) booklets. Readers who aren’t familiar with KIAS, an AAS series intended for beginning university survey and honors high school students, as well as general readers, should visit http://www.asian-studies.org/publications/KIAS.htm.

Modern Chinese History

By David Kenley

In addition to being the most populous country, China is projected to surpass the United States in gross domestic product within a few years. It has a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council and wields tremendous “soft power” throughout the world. For these and other reasons, Americans are fascinated with China. Yet this fascination remains tempered by fear and ignorance. Modern Chinese History is not designed specifically to alter American attitudes toward China, but it does provide English-reading students with the background information necessary for them to approach China from a position of greater understanding. Though many notable historians have added to our general knowledge of Chinese history, their texts are often too weighty for nonspecialists. Modern Chinese History provides a concise, accessible introduction to the topic designed specifically for high school and lower-division college students, as well as for general readers.

Two main themes run throughout Modern Chinese History. First, it emphasizes the role of foreign actors in China’s past. Cross-cultural contacts have deeply influenced the shape and trajectory of modern China. However, this text moves beyond the “impact-response” narrative, which outlines repeated conflicts with the superior West followed by China’s belated, inadequate responses. Not only is this narrative inaccurate and Eurocentric, it is also incomplete. Modern Chinese History emphasizes the importance of cross-cultural contacts but provides a more balanced approach to the topic. It includes encounters with the West, as well as interactions with China’s Asian neighbors. Second, this volume highlights the roles of domestic actors in China’s history, recognizing that these include far more than simply political and military elites. Modern Chinese History provides room for both men and women peasants, soldiers, and intellectuals to enter the stage of history.

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Confucius in East Asia

By Jeffrey L. Richey

Confucius in East Asia introduces fundamental patterns of East Asian history, spirituality, society, and politics through the lens of Confucianism’s development and impact in the region. For millennia, no East Asian regime has governed independently of Confucian influence; and even when Confucius and his tradition have been criticized or condemned, as has often been the case during the past century or so, they have been conspicuously present in East Asian affairs. It is impossible to understand the East Asian region, its peoples, or its role in global history without knowing something about Confucius, Confucians, and Confucianism.

This short book aims to provide such basic knowledge in the contexts of Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and Vietnamese history. Each of the book’s four main chapters is devoted to a single country within East Asia as viewed through the lens of Confucianism’s historical development, spiritual significance, social impact, and political role there. Every chapter is divided into four sections. First, the origins of Confucianism in the particular country are discussed. Next, for each country, there is an explanation of how self-cultivation—the pursuit of intellectual, moral, and spiritual excellence as defined by the Confucian tradition—has
The many different strands of this multifaceted modern Confucianism do not necessarily all tend in the same direction; but they do constitute a web of identity, meaning, and practice that still lies at the foundation of East Asian life. Learning to see the unity and diversity of Confucian traditions across East Asian history, spirituality, society, and politics can help students understand what makes this region so distinctive, dynamic, and important today.

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River, where they grew enough rice to survive from harvest to harvest. The economic freedom that rice gave the Vietnamese easily fit into the political autonomy that has been so valued in Việt Nam. The Story of Việt Nam demonstrates that though China and France temporarily ruled this part of the world, the Vietnamese never lost their innate desire for liberty and ousted every colonial power that occupied or dominated all or part of Việt Nam. Because of Việt Nam's long history of both East and West colonial domination, this volume is an important study in tracing the evolution of nationalism in an imagined state.

The foreign intrusions into Việt Nam included the transmission of external ideas about spiritual, social, and political matters. The Story of Việt Nam carefully outlines the role that Confucianism, Buddhism, and Marxism played in shaping ancient and modern Việt Nam. In each case, these foreign ideas were accepted in Việt Nam but then shaped to fit indigenous values. The Vietnamese accepted Confucian dictates on the importance of rites and relationships but opposed its subordination of women. Việt Nam's long coast invited foreign traders and missionaries. My narrative traces the steps of Buddhist monks who brought the belief system to Việt Nam and depicts how the Vietnamese integrated elements of Buddhism into their existing animistic spirituality. After 1986, the story of Vietnamese transformation of Marxism from largely a command economy to one with a substantial private sector constitutes yet another example of how the culture has modified foreign ideas to meet important needs.

A key to understanding Việt Nam is to see how it was been affected by world events, such as China's expanding empire during the Han and Ming dynasties; the Catholic missionary enterprise during the West's Age of Discovery; Western colonialism during the Industrial Revolution; the two World Wars; the Cold War; and the rivalry between the two Communist behemoths—the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union. The Story of Việt Nam includes a rather poignant example of how Việt Nam's invasion and occupation of Cambodia between 1978 and 1989 was also due, in part, to much larger global considerations.

Four of the ten chapters of this KIAS volume are about the Socialist Republic of Việt Nam (SRV) or the post-1975 united Việt Nam. Despite the difficult and often tragic first decade of the SRV's existence, the book's thesis is that Việt Nam's best days are ahead. With a thriving economy and its geographic proximity to East and Southeast Asia, it appears that economic stability, if not prosperity, awaits a population that is disproportionately young compared to many other nations. For the United States, the importance of Việt Nam is not in its past interactions but as a future ally, as both nations seek a Pacific not dominated by China.

The Story of Việt Nam
From Prehistory to the Present

By Shelton Woods

The Story of Việt Nam is an overview of Việt Nam's history from the first days of village life along the Red River in the north to the rise of the modern mega metropolis of the south's Hồ Chí Minh City. As the title suggests, the book is a tale—a narrative that is built around four themes: land and freedom, persistence of cultural values, shifting tides of global interests in Việt Nam, and the vital role Việt Nam will play in shaping the twenty-first century.

Việt Nam's rise and fall have always been tied to the land. The earliest Vietnamese communities lived along the Red
Modern China: The Fall and Rise of a Great Power, 1850 to the Present. HarperCollins, 2008. Meisner, Maurice. Mao’s China and After: A History of the People’s Republic. The Free Press, 1986. Asia for Educators. “Introduction to China’s Modern History.” Asia for Educators. “Timeline: Chronology of Key Events.” This section focuses on four key topics in China’s modern history. Chinese denials for trade on England’s terms eventually led to several wars which concluded by imposing “unequal” treaties that by the end of the century threatened to carve up China “like a melon.” A second key topic is that of the internal crises that were occurring in China at this time: the rebellions, famines, and explosive population growth of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This is a timeline of Chinese history, comprising important legal and territorial changes and political events in China and its predecessor states. To read about the background to these events, see History of China. See also the list of Chinese monarchs, Chinese emperors family tree, dynasties in Chinese history and years in China. Dates prior to 841 BC, the beginning of the Gonghe Regency, are provisional and subject to dispute. Timeline of Chinese History. Pre-1600 BC, China is charted mainly by legends and prehistoric evidence. The ancient China era was c. 1600-221 BC. The modern-day northern Hebei Province was occupied by the Khitan and was under the control of the Liao Dynasty (907-1125). In the northwest, the Western Xia Dynasty (1038-1227) ruled by the Tanguts controlled the modern-day Gansu and northwestern Shaanxi.