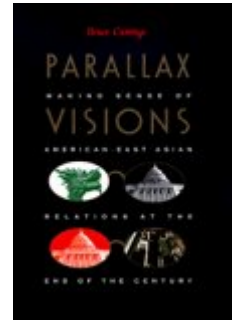


Bruce Cumings. *Parallax Visions: Making Sense of American-East Asian Relations at the End of the Century.* Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999. 304 pp. \$27.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8223-2276-4.



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Making Sense

There is no doubt that Bruce Cumings is a pre-eminent scholar of modern East Asia and U.S. diplomatic history. His contribution to the scholarship in both fields has been well-demonstrated with previous books such as *The Origins of the Korean War* (Princeton; Princeton University Press, 1981), which should be mandatory reading for any student of that conflict, and *Korea's Place in the Sun* (New York; Norton, 1997). There is also no doubt that with *Parallax Visions: Making Sense of American-East Asia Relations at the End of the Century*, Cumings has embarked on an ambitious project. "Making sense" of Asia, and U.S. foreign policy with respect to any part of it, has always perplexed historians, and often continues to confound observers.

Rather than being a conventional book, *Parallax Visions* is mostly a collection of previously published articles and chapters, here expanded or revised, on topics ranging from "American Mythology and East Asian Reality", to the war between the United States and Japan, and the state of academe during and after the Cold War. The

"feel" of the book is decisively different than those with a more standard narrative, and Cumings frequently discusses and applies theoretical frameworks to his analysis. Given the enormity of the topics Cumings wishes to address, the reader is initially struck by the surprising brevity of the book. However, *Parallax Visions* is seldom in want of detail or original, and critical, analysis. It is clear from the outset that what fascinates Cumings is the curious blend of U.S. hegemony, the realities of global conflict during the Cold War, and American liberalism. In fact much of the book pivots around his attempt to understand the United States, more than it does Asia. In the introduction Cumings laments that "so much about the American side is assumed, unspoken, implicit, taken for granted... transparent, known, a thing understood." In reality, he points out, American observers of the world often suffer from a "deep, abiding, and often unexamined 'consensus'... so rooted in the United States that it is not a matter of conscious reflection" (p. 4). Hence, Americans believe that they are a people without ideology, which ultimately leaves them with "a built-in ahistoricity." With this in mind, Cumings exam-

ines East Asia in the wake of U.S. hegemony during the 20th century, never forgetting to apply the "particularity" of an American world-view.

Cumings argues convincingly that Japan has occupied a special place in American minds. From an enemy to an ally, Japan is still now a "mysterious entity, to be loved or reviled" by Americans (p. 23). In addition to discussing the war between the United States and Japan in general terms, Cumings tackles more contentious issues, such as Japan's wartime atrocities, and the American decision to drop the atomic bomb. He concludes that throughout the 20th century Japan was subordinate in alliances, first with Britain and then with the U.S., except for World War II. Cumings also argues that as a result of this "Western hegemonic regime", Japan has never developed a true autonomy. Although Japanese nationalists would no doubt take offence, they can take heart from Cumings' contention that Japan may ultimately move beyond this subordinate position vis-a-vis the West once the United States "truly enters its period of hegemonic decline" (p. 225).

In a chapter entitled "Colonial Formations and Deformations", Cumings examines Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam within the context of foreign, and particularly American, influence. He sees Japanese rule in Korea during the first half of the twentieth century as the key to its post-World War II strife, but in an earlier chapter (Ch. 2) also discusses the "sorry American record" there. He argues that Koreans were "de-humanized" by both. In fact, again welcoming contention, Cumings lists "war crimes" that Americans committed in Korea (p. 64). Despite this, and the long-standing presence of U.S. soldiers in the Korea, he contends that few Americans know or care about Korea at all, again illustrating their ahistoricity. With respect to all three "colonies" he chooses, Cumings concludes that a Western "hegemonic web", albeit with different spiders, has again dominated Asia.

Cumings' discussion of China is one of the great strengths of *Parallax Visions*. He begins by

outlining the numerous myths and metaphors that have pervaded American thought on China; pointing out that such views continue to influence opinion on "where" China is going, and what the U.S. must do to prepare. Contrary to the myths, Cumings argues that China since 1949 has been remarkably restrained in exercising its power within its own historic sphere of influence, and that despite prevailing American opinion (which is frequently want to liken it to Japan in the late 1930s), China is not a rogue state. Convincingly, Cumings contends that China is really a fragmented nation, too divided between intellectuals, bureaucrats, and party leaders to be a single-minded nation capable of truly "shaking the world" as many Westerners fear. Instead, it is likely -- as we have already begun to see -- that capitalism and the new global order will shake China.

Noting that "China still has no principle for interacting with that world while retaining its dignity", Cumings suggests that U.S. policy should avoid confrontation with, and the humiliation of China. Rather, the West should focus on fostering what he terms "economism" in China, and seeking an accommodation. However, Cumings is well-aware that such a generous view of China is difficult to sell. That, he believes, is because China has become a metaphor for "something else"; namely a huge American military establishment without a clear protagonist, neo-conservatives without fear of a credible "Left", and American idealists in search of themselves (p. 169-171).

Parallax Visions offers some other interesting kernels throughout. Discussing the struggle for democratic change in Korea, Cumings points out that the process has been more profound than the 1960s were in the United States, and that pluralism in America is, in fact, by comparison quite limited. Dealing with North Korea's nuclear gambit, he notes that much of the problem between Washington and Pyongyang stems from the "cunning of history", which has left the U.S. bereft of worthy adversaries and preoccupied with smaller

pariahs (p. 138-139). Bringing full circle his attempt to understand America, Cumings argues in the concluding chapter that the Cold War was not just a "containment project" against the Soviet Union, but also a "hegemonic project" designed to contain capitalistic allies and further U.S. influence.

Parallax Visions does have its weaknesses. Primarily, they come from the sheer scope of the work. In places, the book deals perhaps too much with questions of methodology and theoretical paradigms, detracting from Cumings' excellent prose. Some of Cumings' arguments are left dangling, without a full explanation or defence. For example, his comparisons between China and South Korea or Taiwan in terms of political and economic developments are somewhat tenuous. The potential for violent change in China (given the inherent political divisions he details) is not fully discussed, especially in relation to pressures from the global order dominated by the United States. While Vietnam is mentioned at various junctures in the book, an expanded, more comprehensive examination of that country and its special place in American history is needed; especially considering how readily the American experience in Vietnam would fit Cumings' analytical framework. And, paradoxically, while throughout the book Cumings discusses the dangers of U.S. hegemony, he frequently points to the stability and success of an international order based on American liberalism. Still, such criticisms do not detract from the power of Cumings' arguments. *Parallax Visions* offers the critical analysis of good scholarship at its best, and is provocative, engaging reading that is essential for any student of Asia or the United States.

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