The twentieth century has been a time of massive, far-reaching change on a global scale: a century of transitions from dynastic realms to nation-states, from agricultural to secondary industries, from elite to mass education, media, and politics. It has also been a time of rapid technological and economic development, but also a century of crises and extremes, of the disruption of traditions, of widespread social dislocation and increasingly large gaps of understanding between generations. Around the globe, whole populations have been cut off from their pasts by seismic shifts in the crusts of their civilizations. At such critical times, people, and in particular the educated among them, reflect on history in order to gain self-understanding and retrieve some sense of stability and confidence in the present.

By Ken Wells

Korea is certainly no exception. The past one hundred and fifty years is a story of crisis after crisis, from internal rebellions to foreign domination, to the division into two states, North and South, and their present economic woes. The small Korean peninsula has experienced in concentrated form almost every feature of this century of change: colonialism and post-colonial dilemmas, the force of nationalism and the ideological antagonists of the Cold War, rapid urbanization and the probing impact of global economics and culture. In terms of the speed and depth of transformation, and in the density of its recent history, few countries rival Korea. Not surprisingly, the Korean people have become masters at handling crises and wrestling from them achievements that surprise the world. They have risen high above numerous challenges to produce a fascinating and vibrant culture, from which there is much to learn and still more to expect.

Nevertheless, by force of the sheer number, depth, and rapidity of the changes, Koreans today are more cut off from their country’s pre-twentieth-century past than from the values, mindsets, and material cultures of their contemporaries, even those whose histories followed quite different paths at least up until the mid-twentieth century. Naturally they have developed a keen interest in history. For Korean historians inside Korea, this interest has produced something of a Gold-en Age: seldom have their learning, opinions, and courses been the object of such widespread, popular demand.

Conducting the nation

To produce a history of a nation, it is required that one pos-tulates a heritage, a coherent line of continuity. This readi-ness to find an unbroken historical dynamic for the nation is something of a paradox, for the present system of nation-states, and of international relations based on state sover-eignty is a late understanding of human history. But because people take the order of nation-states for granted, they seldom recognize that a profound name-change entailing a wholesale re-ordering of social, economic, and politi-cal relations has occurred. Citizens of nation-states now play and are different roles from those of the subjects of former realms. But to give the score of contemporary times legiti-macy and security amidst rapid change, there is a need to trace it backwards, to find a lineage in which the present is foreshadowed.

This discovery, or invention, of a national historical dynam-ic is particularly important for Korea. By the same token, the natural center of historical research on modern Korea is the Korean peninsula, and the topics and foci selected by histo-rians of modern Korea abroad have largely reflected those pursued inside Korea, where the dominant themes have been the rise of nationalism during the Japanese colonial period from 1905 to 1945 and the ideologically charged conflict over national legitimacy resulting from the national division of 1948. Over the past fifteen years, however, a growing recog-nition has emerged among historians in Korea, but perhaps more so outside Korea, that a preoccupation with these themes has kept attention away from precisely those momentous changes in so many realms of life that are the substance of Korea’s modern history.

But in going beyond the nationalist paradigm of modern Korean history, if we may so characterize the historiograph-ical task of the last decade and a half, those of us who work outside Korea in particular have to confront our own start-ing points and to consider seriously when we are writing for. These points arise in relation to external factors and the gen-eral context within which academics now work, and to inter-nal debates among historians on how we propagate our view-points. The general context of our work as academics outside Korea has changed over the last two decades. Although inter-

1. I restrict myself in all cases to historical studies (including literary, religious, and political history) and regret that space does not permit consideration of historical studies on North Korea. An example of self-conscious writing for a US readership with frequent allusion to US domestic and foreign policies, is Cumings, Bruce, Korea’s place in the sun: A modern history. New York: W.W. Norton (1997).

2. A convenient collection of works in this vein can be found in the Hawai‘i Pacific University Press’s Critical Asia series, edited by Ken Wells, Koen De Ceuster, Alain Delissen, and Kim Kichung. Space does not permit titles, but books, articles, and dissertations by the fol-lowing authors, among others and in addition to those named above, reflect in modern historical studies outside the USA the new perspective from the mid-1980s: Paik Sung Jong, Carl Young, Janice Kim, Gregory Evon, Kim Kichung, Paik Byong-ku, James Grayson, Keith Howard, Ruediger Frank, Geir Helgesen, John Jorgensen, Song Changsoo, Andre Larkush, and Ruth Barraclough. Resistance and the national flag had also emerged in the 1980s in works by modern historians in the USA, particularly those by Vipan Chadha, Michael Robinson, and Donald Clark.

References