

# Where From, Who For? Modern Korean Historical Studies

Forum >  
Korea

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 been a time of rapid and momentous advances in knowledge and technology, 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, the ideological antagonisms 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 wresting 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 Golden Age: seldom have their learning, opinions, and courses been the object of such widespread, popular demand.

## Constructing the nation

To produce a history of a nation, it is required that one postulates a heritage, a coherent line of continuity. This readiness 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 sovereignty, is a late and miniscule portion 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 political relations has occurred. Citizens of nation-states now play and dance to different tunes than did the subjects of former realms. But to give the score of contemporary times legitimacy 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 dynamic is particularly important for Korea. By the same token, the natural centre of historical research on modern Korea is the Korean peninsula, and the topics and foci selected by historians 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 recognition 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 story.

But in going beyond the nationalist paradigm of modern Korean history, if we may so characterize the historiographical task of the last decade and a half, those of us who work outside Korea in particular, have to confront our own starting points and to consider seriously whom we are writing for. These points arise in relation to external factors and the general context within which academics now work, and to internal debates among historians on how we propagate our viewpoints.

The general context of our work as academics outside Korea has changed over the last two decades. Although inter-

est in Korean history as such has not grown abroad as it has inside Korea, there has been a revitalization of interest in Korean Humanities disciplines. One reason for this was the realization among funding agencies such as the Korea Foundation and Korea Research Foundation that, in addition to language studies, it was important to ensure that knowledge of Korean history, culture, and society was provided to students in a systematic way. This has led to the appointment of Korean Humanities scholars in universities around the world, from Scandinavia to New Zealand.

## Beyond the US

External support for Korean Studies is not without its problems, insofar as it derives from agendas not necessarily in tune with why academics engage in the serious study of Korea. Though limited funding and paucity of other research support make historians of modern Korea vulnerable to the pressures of outside agendas, the record of scholarship in journals and monographs of the last decade and more indicates a consistent adherence to central academic motives and objectives. The success with which the distinction between external and academic logics has been observed is a very encouraging element in modern Korean Historical Studies.

When it comes to examining our starting points and the question of whom we are interpreting Korean history for, there is, as one would expect, less clarity and greater diversity. On one critical point consensus is gathering, namely the determination to 'thicken' accounts of Korean modern history to do justice to the multidimensional nature of the Korean people's experiences and the depth and breadth of the social and cultural changes that have occurred. A self-conscious move in this direction is reflected in the collection of chapters by scholars in different disciplines in the 1999 volume, *Colonial Modernity in Korea*, edited by Gi-Wook Shin and Michael Robinson.

In this and a number of other recent writings, a greater concern is expressed to write Korean history that is not so strongly focused on debates over the foreign and domestic policies of the writers' own countries as has been the case hitherto. The move towards writing histories that recognize Korea as an active participant in the making of the modern world, without denying the obvious, common-sense realities of its position in the world, is a welcome advance.

Yet this move remains entangled in superpower operations at the academic/cultural level. Until the mid-1990s and up to this day, many works on modern Korean history, especially those authored in the USA, but also those in the two Koreas, reflect preoccupations with the Cold War and the rights and wrongs of US foreign policy, and to non-US scholars, seem to be addressed primarily to a US domestic audience.<sup>1</sup> For scholars working outside North America and the Korean peninsula, however, there is something liberating about not having to approach Korean history under the shadow of a superpower, of not feeling obliged to relate modern Korea to one's domestic or foreign politics, of not having to choose sides or be tempted into a patronizing defence of the honour, integrity or cultural value of the Korean people. It is thus not surprising that many of the pioneering works over the last two decades in literary-history, microhistory, and non-American diasporas, together with reinterpretations of the mid-nineteenth- to late twentieth-century transformations in the historical agency of culture, thought and religion, have emerged in Germany, France, the Netherlands, the UK, Australia, and Scandinavia.<sup>2</sup>

## Beyond imperialism

Interest both in the turn away from monothematic, nationalist historical paradigms and in the benefits of considering Korean history within its own cultural spectrum appears to be gaining ground, and may contribute to better communication between scholars in different countries in the future. In his very recent book, *Korea Between Empires*, Andre

Schmid emphasises that the basic content of modern Korean nationalist discourse was formulated by intellectuals and others before the annexation by Japan in 1910, and that they were part of a world of ideas wider than narrowly defined indigenous Korean thought. He aims to correct an oversight of Benedict Anderson's by giving the content of their nationalist thought, alongside political developments, a historical agency, showing that there was not just one idea of the Korean but various views and visions of the nation. In her recent oral history, *Under the Black Umbrella: Voices from Colonial Korea*, Hildi Kang observes that recent scholarship has begun to move from an either/or approach, judging good and bad in relation to colonial rule, to a recognition of the complexity of the period.

In both cases we see earnest and successful attempts to reveal the many concurrent 'histories' running through the modern period. Schmid's book, a true achievement, warms the cockles of one's heart, and yet he might have engaged more with works outside North America, such as those by the contributors to the special issue of *Korean Studies* (2001: 2). In some of their earlier writings, his concerns, insights, and at times, even judgements had been given central importance.

Current developments in the world accentuate the importance of giving views from the 'periphery' more attention. While it is inconceivable to me that Korea not remain of supreme importance in the interpretation of its modern history, it is time to decentre historical investigation abroad. As it is, university departments are potent channels of cultural chauvinism however reluctant some may be to acknowledge the fact. Among the many benefits of studying modern Korea is its constant reminder of the historical consequences of imperialism in all its forms and the critical need to constantly re-examine our positions. ◀

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- Schmid, Andre, *Korea Between Empires, 1895-1919*, New York: Columbia University Press (2002), p. 3-7.
- Shin, Gi-Wook and Michael Robinson (eds), *Colonial Modernity in Korea*, Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Asia Center (2000).

## Notes >

- 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 journal, *Korean Studies*, vol. 2 (2001), in articles by Boudewijn Walraven, Kenneth Wells, Koen De Ceuster, Alain Delissen, and Kim Kichung. Space does not permit titles, but books, articles, and dissertations by the following authors, among others and in addition to those named above, reflect similar activity in modern historical studies outside the USA and Korea from the mid-1980s: Paik Sungjong, Carl Young, Janice Kim, Gregory Evon, Kim Hyunga, Pak Byung-kun, James Grayson, Keith Howard, Ruediger Frank, Geir Helgesen, John Jorgensen, Song Changzoo, Andrei Lankov, and Ruth Barraclough. Resistance to the nationalist paradigm had also emerged in the 1980s in works by modern historians in the USA, particularly those by Vipan Chandra, Michael Robinson, and Donald Clark.