

Editor's Introduction: Entangled Histories of the Environment and Development in Korea*

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The historical examination of the relationships between human societies and the natural environment can be traced back even long before the early 20th century. However, it was not until the late 1970s that 'environmental history' began to be recognized as an important sub-field within the discipline of history. Over the past half-century, environmental historians have sought to position the environment as a central category of historical analysis, while distancing themselves from the pitfalls of environmental determinism that once heavily influenced the humanities and social sciences.¹ Donald Worster, one of the pio-

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1 Andrew C. Isenberg, "Introduction: A New Environmental History," *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014): 1-20. Some of the examples include: Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979); *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas* (2nd edition) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1983); Richard White, *The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River* (New York: Hill

neers of modern environmental history, famously argued that the field should incorporate three levels of analysis: first, understanding the historical implications of the structures and changes of natural ecosystems; second, examining the political-economic modes of production that (re)organize socio-environmental interactions and relationships; and third, exploring the ideas, perceptions, ideologies, and cultural values about the natural environment.² Yet other environmental historians with a more contextualist approach have critiqued his framework in that it still maintains and reinforces the traditional historiography presupposing a clear demarcation between ahistorical, non-social natural environment and human societies. They advocated that the environment and its materiality could not be understood in isolation from the historical, social, and cultural contexts, emphasizing the mutual and relational constructedness of the social and the material (the environmental).³

While such historiographical debates carry profound implications for how environmental history research should be envisioned and conducted, it is unfortunate that most Korean historians have overlooked and failed to engage with these crucial issues. To them, even those who are familiar with the subject, the scope of environmental history has been largely confined to the first layer of analysis outlined by Worster.⁴

& Wang, 1995); David Arnold and Ramachandra Guha, eds., *Nature, Culture, Imperialism: Essays on the Environmental History of South Asia* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1995); David Arnold, *The Problem of Nature: Environment, Culture and European Expansion* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1996).

- 2 Donald Worster, "Transformations of the Earth: Toward an Agroecological Perspective in History," *Journal of American History* 76(4) (1990): 1087-1106.
- 3 See, e.g., Richard White, "Environmental History, Ecology, and Meaning," *Journal of American History* 76(4) (1990): 1111-1116; William Cronon, "Modes of Prophecy and Production: Placing Nature in History," *Journal of American History* 76(4) (1990): 1122-1131. For more recent historiographical discussions in the field of environmental history, see Paul S. Sutter et al., "The State of the Field: American Environmental History," *Journal of American History* 100(1) (2013): 94-148; Dolly Jørgensen et al., eds., *New Natures: Joining Environmental History with Science and Technology Studies* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013).

With the rise of the Anthropocene discourse, more Korean historians seem to have come to recognize the significance of human impacts on the natural environment, extending beyond the traditional focus on environmental influences on human societies. But this renewed attention to the reciprocal relationships between human societies and the natural environment has not led to the long-awaited reflections on the ways in which those relationships are conceptualized, analyzed, and described in history.⁵ Discussions about the limitations of the traditional historiography of the environment—particularly its essentialist and positivistic approaches to the natural environment—as well as the risk of reintroducing environmental determinism, reductionism, or scientism in historical analysis are notably absent. On a positive note, though, there is a growing body of more sophisticated and nuanced work on Korean environmental history. Examples include a special issue titled “New Perspectives from Korean Environmental History” from this journal in 2020, and the recently released edited volume, *Forces of Nature: New Perspectives on Korean Environments*.⁶

The current special issue seeks to contribute to and bolster this emerging trend, but by highlighting the following two aspects. First, despite the growing body of research on Korean environmental history, studies focusing on the modern period—especially the era after the liberation and the Korean War—remain conspicuously limited. Given that the multilayered and multifaceted nature of socio-environmental inter-

4 See, e.g., Kim Dong Jin, *Chosŏnŭi saengt'aehwan'gyŏngsa* [An Ecological-Environmental History of Chosŏn] (Seoul: P'urŭnyŏksa, 2017).

5 For a review of research in Korean environmental history, see Ko Tae-woo, “Han'guk kŭndae saengt'aehwan'gyŏngsa yŏn'guŭi tonghyanggwwa kwaje [The Research Trends and Challenges of Korean Modern Ecological and Environmental History],” *Saengt'aehwan'gyŏnggwwa yŏksa* 2 (2016): 31-70.

6 John S. Lee et al., “New Perspectives from Korean Environmental History,” *International Journal of Korean History* 25(1) (2020): 1-121; David Fedman, Eleana J. Kim, and Albert L. Park, eds., *Forces of Nature: New Perspectives on Korean Environments* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2023).

actions and relationships became more salient during the period of post-war industrialization, the lack of interest in these pivotal phases is somewhat perplexing.⁷ The papers featured in the special issue aim to fill that gap. Secondly, previous studies addressing the environmental history of modern Korea have often portrayed 'development' as a fixed, monolithic trajectory, whether they present techno-economic development as the main culprit of environmental degradation or maintain the possible harmony between the environment and development. However, critical historical analyses of development have aptly demonstrated that development should not be assumed as a given entity, but should be approached as an assemblage of discourses, knowledge, and practices constructed within specific historical, social, and political contexts.⁸

7 There are, of course, some exceptions. See, e.g., Ko Taewoo, "1970nyōndae han'gugūi konghae(公書) sanghwanggwa chaenan inshik [Pollution Problems and Disaster Awareness in 1970s South Korea]," *Kaenyōmgwa sot'ong* 28 (2021): 7-52; Shin Jae Joon, "1970nyōn chōnhu konghae(公書)ūi ilsanghwawa hwan'gyōnggwōn inshigūi ssiat [Routinization of Pollution(公書) and emergence of Environmental rights awareness around 1970]," *Yōksamunjeoyōn'gu* 25(1) (2021): 523-55; Lee Seulgi, "Nongyakūl chungshimūro pon noksaek'yōngmyōngr 1970nyōndae chūngsan'gwa konghae karyōjin nongyang chungdok [Pesticide Problems in the Korean Green Revolution: Inequal Knowledge Production, Ignorance, and Invisible Pesticide Poisoning in the 1970s]," *Han'gukkwahaksahak'oeji* 43(1) (2021): 215-235; Kang Hye-kyung, "1970nyōndae taehanjōkshipchasaūi hwan'gyōngbohōundong [Environmental Protection Movement of Korean Red Cross in the 1970s]," *Han'gungminjogundongsayōn'gu* 113 (2022): 411-459; Won Chuyoung, "Tijel chadongch'a shidaeūi taegioyōm kwalli: 1960-70nyōndae han'gung chōngbuūi konghaech'aryang tansokkwa ch'aegimūi kaeinhwa [Regulating Air Pollution in the Diesel Car Era: The Automobile Pollution Control and Individualized Responsibility in South Korea during the 1960s and 1970s]," *ECO* 24(1) (2020): 303-331.

8 See, e.g., Nick Cullather, "Development? It's History," *Diplomatic History* 22(4) (2000): 641-53; David C. Engerman and Corinna R. Unger, eds., "Special Issue: Towards a Global History of Modernization," *Diplomatic History* 33(3) (2009): 375-512; Stephen J. Macekura and Erez Manela, eds., *The Development Century: A Global History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Corinna R. Unger et al., eds., *The Routledge Handbook on the History of Development*

The environmental history of modern Korea therefore requires not only the interrogation of socio-environmental relationships, but also the problematization of development discourses, knowledge, and practices that constitute, transform, and fracture those relationships.

The articles by Sang-Hyun Kim, Jihye Yang, Eunsung Cho, and Sangrok Lee in this special issue all delve into the environmental history of modern Korea and its entanglement with the history and politics of development. Kim and Yang, in their respective articles, examine how concerns and debates about environmental pollution, or *konghae* (公害), and economic growth-centered development were closely interwoven with each other in South Korea. Kim probes into these connections through an analysis of the emergence of radical political-economic approaches to the environment in the early 1970s. Concurrently, Yang sheds light on their manifestations by investigating the importation of polluting industries in the context of heavy chemical industrialization since the mid-1970s. Cho traces the unfolding of the *konghae* discourse in North Korea, highlighting its origins as a critique against capitalist industrialization in South Korea during the 1970s and its eventual application within North Korean society itself. Lee moves to a more recent period, revisiting the emergence and activities of the anti-nuclear movement in South Korea from the 1980s to the early 1990s, along with its limitations and internal conflicts. Though these articles vary in focus and perspectives, they collectively underscore that the importance of environmental history does not simply lie in adding a new theme to research in Korean history; a critical examination of environmental history is inseparably intertwined with that of the history of development.

This intricate link is tackled most directly by Kim's article, "Questioning

(London: Routledge, 2022); Kim Sang-Hyun, "Palchŏn'ŭl munje samgi: 'palchŏnsa (History of Development)' yŏn'guŭi chŏn'gaewa tonghyang [Problematizing 'Development': The Evolution and Trends of Research in the 'History of Development']," *Yöksabip'yŏng* 134 (2021): 120-45.

Growth, Interrogating Pollution: South Korea's Political Economic Approaches to the Environment in the Early 1970s." Contrary to conventional wisdom that environmental problems in South Korea only gained serious attention in the 1990s, pollution had already surfaced as a pressing public issue during the late 1960 and early 1970s. Kim contends that societal responses to pollution at the time were not merely immediate and isolated reactions to individual instances of environmental degradation. Rather, they were deeply shaped by the prevailing imaginaries of development—primarily defined in terms of GNP-based growth—and how these imaginaries performed or were contested, along with their underlying political, economic, and social orders. Such inextricable interplay was particularly evident in the radical critiques of growth and pollution that began to emerge in the early 1970s. For instance, Yu In-Ho (俞仁浩), a progressive economist, developed a leftist political-economic approach to the environment as an extension of his critical reflection on 'high growth' in South Korea from the late 1960s. But Kim posits that seemingly apolitical, mainstream approaches to pollution were no less entangled, although they were rooted in different conceptions of socio-environmental relationships. He also illuminates the transnational nature of these processes, as they were informed by contemporary debates in Japan and elsewhere regarding the growth-pollution nexus.

In her article, "Rewriting the Economic Growth History of Korea in the 1970s: Focusing on the Pollution Imports and the Shadow People of Economic Growth", Yang similarly delves into the intertwining politics of the environment and development in South Korea. In the mid-to-late 1970s, the Park Chung-Hee military regime justified the importation of pollution-intensive industries and industrial wastes from Japan as a strategy to bolster the heavy-chemical industrialization drive launched in 1973. Yang closely tracks the disputes stemming from these policies, highlighting varied responses from the government, the media, opposition parties, and expert groups. Building on her analysis, she criticizes that many historical accounts of South Korea's supposedly

successful economic growth often overlook its environmental consequences, even though these considerations cannot be separated from how the nation's development itself is understood and evaluated. It is noteworthy that, while Yang addresses the compliant attitudes of scientific experts in approaching pollution issues, she nevertheless attends to their multiple and ultimately positive roles in raising environmental awareness in South Korea. This is in contrast with Kim's paper, which asserts that the technical framing of pollution adopted by these experts was inherently limited, erasing the social and political-economic nature of pollution and thereby obstructing a more systematic understanding of environmental issues. Such difference in perspective calls for further research and discussions.

Cho's article shifts our focus to perhaps the most neglected facet of the environmental history of modern Korea: North Korea. In "The Environment in the Box of Cold-War Developmentalism: North Korea's 1970s Discourse on Pollution (*konghae*)", Cho examines the formation of environmental awareness in North Korea during the 1970s, focusing on the evolution of the discourse of *konghae*. The rise of this discourse in the North coincided with the Park Chung-Hee regime's efforts at importing polluting industries from Japan, serving as a critique of the ills of South Korea's capitalist industrialization. It resembled the political-economic approaches to the environment in the South that Kim discussed in his paper, though couched in more orthodox Marxist-Leninist ideology. But unlike South Korea's radical critiques of growth and pollution, the North Korean discourse of *konghae* remained technocratic and did not prompt a serious contemplation of the limitations of developmentalism. Instead, it reinforced the dichotomy of socialist utopia and capitalist dystopia within the framework of Cold War developmentalism. As Cho highlights, however, the accumulation of pollution problems within North Korean society became undeniable over time. Despite its constraints, the discourse of *konghae* played a role in heightening awareness of these environmental challenges. Cho's analysis compellingly illustrates the necessity for the environmental

history of modern Korea to be viewed through a holistic lens, one that fully encompasses both parts of the peninsula.

Finally, we have Lee's article, "Breaking the Myth of Nuclear Power Omnipotence in the Cold War Era: Discourse on Nuclear Power and the Movement Against the Construction of Nuclear Power Plants in South Korea in the 1980s and early 1990s". Lee provides an in-depth exploration of the early phase of the South Korean anti-nuclear movement. At a time when nuclear power and weapons were closely entwined with the Cold War rhetoric of national security, mounting opposition was a daunting task in anti-communist South Korea. The movement initially found strength in leftist anti-foreign nationalism, ingeniously tying life, safety, and health rights to national survival. However, this nationalist inclination often overshadowed ecological concerns, merely leveraging them as tools for national liberation struggles and curtailing deeper critiques of capitalist developmentalism. With the devastating Chernobyl disaster, the movement shifted away from nationalist motivations. But as Lee showcases through his analysis of campaigns against the Yeonggwang Nuclear Power Plant and the nuclear waste disposal facility in Anmyeon-island, the journey of anti-nuclear activists was fraught with challenges. They constantly grappled with the state's strategies to entice local residents into its nuclear developmentalist project through substantial economic incentives. Despite such challenges, Lee argues, the anti-nuclear movement was crucial in bringing the ecological agenda to the fore, laying the groundwork to challenge South Korea's firmly entrenched developmentalist mindset.

Taken together, the contributions to this special issue underscore that the three levels of environmental historical analysis proposed by Worster cannot be neatly parallel. While varying in emphasis, each article demonstrates that the task of environmental history goes beyond solely accentuating the significance of material constraints, whether human-induced or naturally occurring. Instead, it must probe the complex ways in which socio-environmental relationships are envisioned, constructed, enacted, and reconfigured in specific historical, social, and po-

litical contexts. Within the scope of the present special issue, it becomes evident that a deeper understanding of the environmental history of modern Korea necessitates a more nuanced, contextualist approach to the history of development. We hope that our articles in the special issue will help foster further research in this direction within the field of Korean history.

