The Environment in the Box of Cold-War Developmentalism: North Korea’s 1970s Discourse on Pollution (konghae)

Eunsung Cho*

Introduction

In North Korea, pollution, or konghae (公害), refers to “damage caused to people’s health and living environment by industrial construction, urban construction, and other social factors.”¹ The term konghae, which originated in Japan, came into popular use in North Korean society in the 1970s, coinciding with South Korea’s pollution industry imports from Japan. Severe pollution in Japan in the 1960s led to the explosive growth of the anti-pollution movement.² When polluting Japanese industries tried to find alternate sites in the early 1970s, the Park Chung Hee administration actively courted them in the interest of promoting South Korea’s heavy and chemical industries. In the 1970s, the discourse on konghae spread, and many people became

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* Assistant Professor, Department of History, Sogang University.


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In fact, in the 1970s, North Korea also began to experience environmental pollution problems caused by rapid industrialization. It received little attention from the state-run media until the mid-1980s when environmental problems in North Korea began to be discussed seriously and environmental legislation was created. Until then, discourse on the environment in North Korea revolved around *konghae*. Although the environment is a much larger concept than pollution, in both Koreas, environmental discourse developed from the perception of and discussion on *konghae*; it is therefore a fitting starting point for analysis of the formation of and change in the North Korean environmental perspectives.

This paper examines how North Korea’s discourse on *konghae* unfolded in relation to the Cold War and developmentalism during the 1970s. Analyzing the way in which the North Korean regime sought to vindicate its own management of environmental issues by criticizing the handling of the *konghae* issue in the capitalist states, particularly South Korea and Japan, this paper will also show that the interlocking politics of economic development and the environment were shaped by the Cold War outlook of North Korea as a developing state. To this end, I use the term “Cold War developmentalism” here to encapsulate the entangled influences of Cold War international relations and economic developmentalism, which form the context for a discussion of the Korean peninsula during this timeframe.

To date, there have been two main types of research on environmental issues in North Korea. The first type is studies analyzing the state of the North Korean environment and/or the environmental policy or law of North Korea. These studies deal with how North Korea has responded to changes in its domestic environment and the international community’s environmental discussions by making or amending environment-related policies and laws. Most of these studies focus on the

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3 Yun Hwang Chi Yŏnghwan, “Pukhan ŭi hwan’gyŏngbohobŏp(2002) e kwanhan
period after the 1980s because North Korea’s Environmental Protection Law was enacted in 1986, and awareness of the need to address environmental problems spread widely in North Korea around this time. The 1970s saw only limited North Korean recognition of environmental problems and tangential attempts to address them, including “five policies for nature-remaking” and the inclusion of environmental provisions in land law.

The second main type of research on North Korean environmental issues is analysis of environmental cooperation between North and South Korea, along with current status analysis on forests, soils, water quality, atmospheric environment, and so forth. These studies have

4 Several studies using satellite images to analyze North Korea’s atmospheric environment or land use have been published recently. For instance, Myǒng Sujǒng et al., Pukhanjiyǒk hwan’gyông oyǒmwǒn hyǒnhwang punsǒk mit nambukhwan’gyông hyǒmnyǒk pangan: taegi oyǒmǔl chungsimmǔro [Analysis of environmental pollution sources in North Korea and inter-Korean environmental cooperation measures: Focusing on air pollution] (Sejong: Han’gukhwan’gyôngjôngch’aktek ‘p’yǒngga yǒn’guwǒn, 2020); Yi Wǒnjin et al., “Chǒngjigwedo hwan’gyôngwisǒng (GEMS) hwaryǒng mit hwakchang kanǔngsǒng- piǒpǒkǔn chiyǒk ūi tae-gihwan’gyông mit paektusan monit’ǒring kanǔngsǒng ūl chungsimmǔro [Possibility
been produced mainly by national research institutes, such as the Korea Environment Institute (KEI), the National Institute of Forest Science, and the Korea Institute for National Unification. In particular, KEI publishes a periodical providing information on environmental trends in North Korea.

There has been little research regarding North Korea’s environ-

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5 O Kyŏnhŭi-Hong Sunjik, “Pukhanŭi hwan’gyŏng oyŏm silt’ae wa nambuk hyŏmnyŏk pangan [Environmental pollution status in North Korea and measures for inter-Korean cooperation],” Minjokpaljŏnyŏn’gu, no. 4 (2000); Son Kiung, *Namhul hwan’gyŏng enŏji hyŏmnyŏk hwal’sŏnghwâ chŏll’yyak yŏn’gu* [A study on strategies for revitalizing inter-Korean environment and energy cooperation] (Seoul: T’ong’il’yn’guwŏn, 2002); An Dŭkkı, “Pukhanjijŏk hwan’gyŏngmunje e taehan nambukhan hyŏmnyŏk e kwanhan yŏn’gu [A study of inter-Korean cooperation on environmental issues in North Korea],” Pyŏnghwahak yŏn’gu 12, no. 3 (2011); Yi Chaesŏng·Kim Sŏngjiŏn’Ch’ŏng Hayun, “Hwan’gyŏnghyŏmnyŏk ŭl t’onghan p’yŏnghwaguch’uk ŭi iron gwa sarye: hanbando eŭi chŏgyŏng e taehan koch’al [Theories and cases of peacebuilding through environmental cooperation: A study on application to the Korean Peninsula],” Han’gukch’ŏngch’i’yŏn’gu 23, no. 3 (2014); Ch’ŏn Chŏngyŏng·Yi Myŏngjae, “Pukhan ŭi chihasut’’oyang hwan’gyŏng hyŏnhwang mit hyŏmnyŏk pang’an chego [North Korea’s groundwater and soil conditions and cooperation plans],” Chijirhakhoeji 54, no. 4 (2018); Myŏng Sujŏng et al., *Chisokkanŭnghan hanbando chayŏn sallimch’op’ik* [Research on inter-Korean environmental cooperation for sustainable conservation of natural ecosystems on the Korean Peninsula] (Sejong: Han’gukhwan’gyŏngjŏnch’aek p’yŏnggag yŏn’guwŏn, 2020); Shin Kyŏnhŭi-Ch’u Changmin, “Pukhan t’oyang·chihasu oyŏm kwallir’il ŭi wihan nambuk hwan’gyŏnghyŏmnyŏk yŏn’gu [Research on inter-Korean environmental cooperation to manage soil and groundwater contamination in North Korea],” Hwan’gyŏngpo’orŏn 249 (2020); Na Yongu et al., *Namhul chaeahaejaenan kongdonggwalli sisŭ’em kuch’uk p’iryesŏnggwâ ch’ujinbanghyang* [Necessity and direction of establishing a joint disaster management system for inter-Korean disasters] (Seoul: T’ong’il’yn’guwŏn, 2021), Ch’oe Hyŏngsun et al., “Kihuwigi wa nambuk sallimch’op’ik hyŏmnyŏk – pukhan REDD+ saŏp ŭi hyogwa [The climate crisis and North-South forest cooperation],” Kukche sallimjŏnch’aekt’op’ik 111 (Seoul: Kungnip sallimgwahgŏn, 2022).
mental discourse or perspective, though two studies partially address this topic. The first is Kiung Son’s 2006 paper titled “Pukhan ŭi hwan’gyŏnggwan gwa hwangyŏngjongch’aek [North Korea’s environmental views and environmental policy],” in which Son explains how North Korea’s fundamental perspective on the environment is informed by the Juche idea. The bulk of his research, however, focuses more on North Korean environmental policy and participation in international environmental conferences and agreements; there is little discussion on the raising of awareness on environmental issues or the development of environmental discourse in North Korea. Sŭngju Ch’a’s 2015 paper titled “Pukhan ŭi hwan’gyŏngdamnon [North Korea’s environmental discourse]” also touches on the North Korean perspective, providing an overview of the above studies on North Korea’s environmental law, perception of the environment, and inter-Korean environmental cooperation.

This paper aims to address this gap in the literature, focusing on the North Korean perspective and discourse on the environment. This requires a historical analysis of the inception of North Korean environmental discourse in the 1970s, which set the stage for the heightened public environmental awareness and enactment of the comprehensive environmental protection law of the 1980s. Despite the fact that konghae was a major axis in spreading awareness of environmental issues in North Korean society, there has been little study of the discourse on konghae in North Korea in the context of the spread of awareness and discourse on environmental issues in Asia more broadly.

The most significant sources for this study are the Rodong Sinmun, North Korea’s daily newspaper and organ of the Central Committee of

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6 Son Kiung, “Pukhan ŭi hwan’gyŏnggwan gwa hwangyŏngjongch’aek [North Korea’s environmental views and environmental policy],” in Pukhan ŭi sahoe, ed. Pukhan yŏn’gu hakhoe (Seoul: Kyŏngin munhwasa, 2006).
7 Ch’a Sŭngju, “Pukhan ŭi hwan’gyŏngdamnon [North Korea’s environmental discourse],” Todŏk yulligwagyoyuk 49 (2015).
the Workers’ Party of Korea, along with a few other North Korean primary sources. These provide optimal material to probe North Korea’s official discourse on konghae as an early form of environmental discourse as well as the structure of discourse over time.

The first section of the paper explains the notion of Cold War developmentalism and the idea of the environment as a sociotechnical imaginary. Next, through an analysis of all Rodong Sinmun articles mentioning konghae published from 1970 to 1979, this paper will show the progression of environmental discourse in North Korea during this period. The last section concludes with a sketch of how developmentalism and the idea that technology can solve environmental problems are intertwined in North Korean society.

**Environment as a Sociotechnical Imaginary**

The term environment encompasses the concepts of the natural environment and the social environment. North Korea’s perspective on environmental issues is shaped by its political identity; modern state socialism promotes ideology as the font of social, and even human, transformation. Moreover, the dominant modern perspective of human-centered nature that extols technological progress and industrialization aligns easily with North Korea’s Juche ideology promoted as a “human-centered idea.” Through this lens, the natural environment has long been regarded in North Korea as an object to be transformed by humans and society.

A striking example is the nature-remaking work, or chayǒn gaejo saǒp (自然改造事業), implemented by North Korea to increase agricultural production. These efforts included irrigation, river improvement,

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8 In Korean, konghae is a homonym with two different meanings: pollution (公害) and international waters (公海). I analyzed only articles containing the word meaning pollution.
tideland reclamation, floodgate construction, and soil conservation and flood control work. Although grand national projects with the title of *chayŏn gaejo* began in the mid-1970s, North Korea now claims the 1946 Pot’ong River improvement work as the beginning of the nature-remaking projects.

North Korea has historically viewed environmental issues fundamentally as “socio-political problems that depend on the nature of social institutions.” This rhetoric describes the environment in socialist states as paradise on Earth and environmental problems as inevitable phenomena that occur only in capitalist states. In North Korean logic, true environmental protection and pollution prevention are impossible in capitalist societies because a small number of capitalists who own the means of production are only pursuing profits and are not willing to invest in environmental protection facilities such as pollution prevention. In contrast, North Korea believes that socialist societies can achieve proper environmental protection and pollution prevention because the working people are the masters of state sovereignty and the means of production. As such, for North Korea, the environment has

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9 As an example of the large-scale tideland reclamation in North Korea, a project to create islands for reed fiber cultivation began in the late 1950s. See Eunsung Cho, “The Field of Reeds on Silk Island: A Study on North Korea’s Reed Fiber Industry,” *Taegu sahak* 142 (2021): 6-7.

10 The Pot’ong River, running through the heart of Pyongyang and merging with the Taedong River, used to overflow even after a brief half-day of rain. This led to flooding of farmlands and houses along the river, resulting in casualties. In May 1946, the Provisional People’s Committee of North Korea, the highest national authority in the region after liberation, began work to improve the Pot’ong River, straightening the channel and building an earthen bank. On May 21, 1946, Kim Il Sung symbolically wielded the first shovel during the groundbreaking ceremony for the improvement project’s construction. Consistent with North Korea’s inclination to frame everything as a narrative centered around its supreme leader, the projects aimed at remaking nature also have a political dimension.

11 Son Kiung, “Pukhan ŭi hwan’gyŏnggwan gwa hwan’gyŏngjŏngch’ak,” 515.

12 Chŏn Taeyŏng, “Kyŏngaehanŭn suryŏng Kim Il Sung tongji ŭi saengsallyŏk
been framed in terms of the utopia-dystopia dichotomy.\textsuperscript{13}

Environmental issues are bound with North Korea’s general conception of science, which categorizes science as good or bad according to the social system from which it is generated. North Korea has taken this stance on its nuclear program as well; interestingly, North Korea has occasionally likened *konghae* to nuclear weapons, stating that “in capitalist countries, *konghae* has already emerged as an enemy of humanity comparable to nuclear weapons.”\textsuperscript{14} The socially constructed nature of the environment can also be seen in North Korea’s omitting nuclear-related content from the 1986 Environmental Protection Law.\textsuperscript{15}

As time went by, environmental problems caused by rapid industrialization in North Korea became serious enough that the official North Korean view of and discourse on the environment shifted. Although North Korea’s dominant discourse and ideology define what the environment is, the environment also can play a role in supporting or weakening the legitimacy of the social system. That is to say, the environment itself influences the construction of environmental discourse. In this sense, I consider the environment as a “sociotechnical imaginary” co-constituted by the environment, technology, and society, which is also “temporally situated and culturally particular.”\textsuperscript{16}

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\textsuperscript{13} In this respect, North Korea’s “pollution-free country” rhetoric should not be dismissed as mere propaganda, for it was also a social technology of North Korea with implications for constructing the environmental discourse in the binary Cold War framework.

\textsuperscript{14} Chŏn Taeyŏng, “Kyŏngaehanŭn,” 55; “Multo malko konggido makta [The water is clear, the air is clean],” *Rodong Sinmun*, August 27, 1978.

\textsuperscript{15} The Chernobyl nuclear power plant disaster occurred roughly 20 days after North Korea enacted its environmental protection law, which omitted nuclear-related content.

“sociotechnical imaginaries” is borrowed from Sheila Jasanoff and Sang Hyun Kim’s discussion on this term. In their words, sociotechnical imaginaries are “collectively held and performed visions of desirable futures (or of resistance against the undesirable),” and are “animated by shared understandings of forms of social life and social order attainable through, and supportive of, advances in science and technology.”

Although this paper does not address the environment’s role in the construction of the normative imagination, nonetheless, the concept of sociotechnical imaginaries is helpful here because the changes in the North Korean discourse on the environment show the ways in which the collectively imagined social forms of the environment were built on the realities of both discourse and nature. I intend to explore this idea in greater detail in future research. In this paper, I focus on examining the way in which konghae discourse was interwoven with North Korea’s 1970s environmental perspective.

The Cold War and developmentalism have been the core elements of the sociotechnical imaginary of the environment in North Korea. People’s perceptions of the environment were embedded in these frames. The phrase “Cold War developmentalism” that I employ here best encapsulates the context of North Korean environmental discourse. The konghae problem, which awakened awareness of environmental issues and fostered the spread of environmental discourse during the 1970s in the North, was also addressed within this framework. In the next section, I will analyze this in detail.

Pollution Discourse Trapped in a Cold War Frame

Throughout the 1970s, the discourse surrounding konghae in North Korea consisted solely of critical commentaries on serious pollution
problems in capitalist countries and propaganda denying the existence of *konghae* in the DPRK. Every *Rodong Sinmun* article on *konghae* in the 1970s can be categorized this way. The introduction of *konghae* discourse in the *Rodong Sinmun* in the 1970s was likely triggered by both Asian economic developments in the context of Cold War competition as well as the introduction of international discussion on the environment.

Articles mentioning *konghae* first appeared in the *Rodong Sinmun* in 1972. From this, we can see that as in the 1960s, North Korea’s awareness of environmental problems in the very early 1970s was still minimal. In 1972, a total of eight articles mentioning *konghae* were published in the *Rodong Sinmun*. The first among them was an editorial criticizing Japanese monopolistic capital for replacing outdated facilities in Japan by relocating polluting industries to South Korea.\(^{18}\) The report was based on fact; such agreements were taking shape in 1972 following the second meeting of the Korea-Japan Economic Cooperation Committee in 1970, where the relocation of Japanese polluting industries to Korea began to be considered.\(^{19}\) On the Japanese side, this push was due to the growth of the Japanese anti-pollution movement, which had been active in the 1960s but became even more intense with the start of the new decade — the year 1970 was called “the first year of pollution”\(^{20}\) in Japan.

The year 1972 also marked the beginning of international discussions on the environment and ecology. *The Limits to Growth* was published by the Club of Rome in March of 1972,\(^{21}\) and the United

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21 *The Limits to Growth* is a book published by an MIT research team sponsored
Nations Conference on the Human Environment, which raised awareness of the global environmental crisis and established June 5th as World Environment Day, was held in Stockholm in June of that year. Although the Rodong Sinmun did not report on these international events at the time, North Korea was likely aware of this international movement because the DPRK joined the World Health Organization (WHO) the following year.²²

Among the 1972 Rodong Sinmun articles dealing with konghae, there were a speech and a report by Koreans in Japan who visited the North and South and contrasted Japan and South Korea’s pollution with the clean environment of Pyongyang.²³ There was also an article

by the Club of Rome. It presents an analysis of the utilization and depletion of global resources, population growth, pollution, and food conditions from 1900 to 2100. Refer to the following webpage, https://www.clubofrome.org/publication/the-limits-to-growth/

²² The WHO is a specialized agency of the UN. In the 26th General Assembly of the WHO, which was held in Geneva on May 17, 1973, North Korea’s membership in the WHO was approved by a vote of 66 in favor, 41 against, and 22 abstentions. The Rodong Sinmun reported that this was another victory for North Korea’s foreign policy, despite heavy interference from the United States, Japan, and South Korea. “Konghwaguk ūi kongmyǒngjŏngdaehan taeoejŏngch’aek ū ttohana ūi pitnanŭn sŭngni,” Rodong Sinmun, May 18, 1973. North Korea’s accession to the WTO met other diplomatic goals; nonetheless, this demonstrates that North Korea was reacting to international trends at the time. Following its approval to join the WHO, North Korea established diplomatic relations with Iceland, Denmark, Sweden, and Finland in the same year, and with Austria and Switzerland in 1974. Chŏn Hyŏnjun, “Pukhan ūi taesŏbanggukka mit EU kwan’gye kaesŏn gwa nambukkwan’gye [North Korea’s improved relations with Western countries and the EU and inter-Korean relations],” T’ongil chŏngch’ae k’yŏng-u 10, no. 1 (2001), 104.

²³ “Suryŏngnimkkesŏ ch’angsihasin widaehan juch’esasang’i uriŭi apkirul tūngdaech’ŏrŏm hwanhi palkyŏjunŭn han uriegenŭn sŭngni wa yŏnggwang i issul ppunida [As long as the great Juche idea founded by the Supreme Leader illuminates our path like a lighthouse, there is only victory and glory for us],” Rodong Sinmun, July 26, 1972; “Summak’inŭn sŏul kŏri,” Rodong Sinmun, September 17, 1972.
explaining in great detail the serious pollution problems in capitalist states, in particular, the United States and Japan; this article described pollution problems in the city of Gary, which hosted the largest U.S. steel mill complex, and various *konghae* diseases such as the Minamata disease and Itai-itai disease in Japan.\textsuperscript{24}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure1}
\caption{This photo was published in an article titled “Suryŏngnim ŭi hyŏnmyŏnghan ryŏngdo are konghae hyŏnsang ŭl morŭgo sanŭn uri inmin ŭi haengbok” [The Happiness of Our People Living Without Pollution Under the Wise Leadership of the Supreme Leader] on June 12, 1973. The photo was captioned, “A beautiful socialist modern city surrounded by green forests under an ever-clear sky – Pyongyang.” Source: *Rodong Sinmun*, June 12, 1973.}
\end{figure}

When it comes to the propaganda of pollution-free Chosŏn, North Korea always cites Kim Il Sung’s speech at the first meeting of the 5\textsuperscript{th} Supreme People’s Assembly in December 1972, which was published in full on December 26, 1972, in the *Rodong Sinmun*. In this speech,

\textsuperscript{24} Ri Unse, “Tŏrŏpyŏjinŭn hanŭl, p’agoedoenŭn ttang – chabonjuŭi naradûresŏ [Defiled sky, destroyed land – In capitalist countries],” *Rodong Sinmun*, November 3, 1972. As for Minamata disease, North Korea explains that “Minamata disease, which originated in Japan, is caused by eating fish from Minamata Bay, which was contaminated by toxic waste from a chemical plant in Kumamoto Prefecture, Japan.” “Konghaebyŏng [Pollution disease],” *Rodong Sinmun*, February 18, 1979.
Kim Il Sung said: “The rational arrangement of industry prevented the excessive concentration of factories and population in a few cities and prevented the pollution phenomenon that has become a major social problem in capitalist countries today.”  

“No pollution thanks to the rational arrangement of industry” is the main logic of North Korean propaganda that extols the superiority of the socialist system and highlights the wise leadership of Kim Il Sung who cares for the people.

The *Kim Il Sung chŏjakhchip* (collected writings) records Kim Il Sung’s first mention of “*konghae*” in a 1970 speech. According to this source, he used this term for the first time in a meeting of officials from the Tŏkch’ŏn-county Party, government agencies, labor organizations, and administrative and economic organizations, saying that there is no *konghae* in Tŏkchŏn-county, a machine industrial zone with automobile factories, etc. Considering the fact that the volume which includes the above speech was published in 1983, it is very likely that North Korea later added the word *konghae* into this speech.

The fifth volume of the *Kim Il Sung chŏjaksŏnjhip*, published in 1972 and containing Kim Il Sung’s major speeches from February 1968 to November 1970, does not include this piece. The speech is also not found in the 1971 edition of *Chosŏnjung’angnyŏngam* or the Yearbook of the DPRK, which contains reports and speeches by Kim Il Sung in 1970. This could be because *chŏjaksŏnjip* is selected works and the yearbook is primarily a collection of speeches given at national-level events. However, it is highly unlikely that Kim Il Sung would have used the word *konghae* in 1970, given that the word did

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The number of articles mentioning *konghae* in the *Rodong Sinmun* exploded from eight to eighty-six in 1973 when the Park Chung Hee regime took measures to court Japan’s polluting industries. In January 1973, Park Chung Hee announced a policy to promote the heavy chemical industry and encouraged the “export” of Japanese polluting companies and declining industries to Korea. North Korea strongly condemned this policy, calling it an “act of selling out the country.”

South Korean authorities have been importing foreign monopoly capital and equipment regardless of whether it is harmful to South Korea or not, new or old. They are even bringing in equipment that has already been criticized and ostracized in other countries for polluting the environment.

In the name of building heavy industry, they are attempting to introduce polluting industries that are being rejected in all areas of Japan by providing all favorable conditions, and they are trying to turn South Korea into a neo-colony completely subject to the Japanese economic sphere.

In addition, the *Rodong Sinmun* poured out very detailed reports on already serious pollution problems in capitalist countries, particularly

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29 “(Kim Chongp’il ŭi taeil yesok oegyo rŭl kyut’anhanda) – (Mindan) sanha 6 kae tanch’e taep’yodŭri namjosŏn dangukchadŭru maegukpaejok haengwirŭl kyut’anhanŭn sŏngmyŏngŭl palp’yo [Condemning Kim Chongp’il’s subservient diplomacy toward Japan],” *Rodong Sinmun*, June 20, 1973.
Japan, South Korea, the United States, and West Germany. To give an example:

Even according to the very minimal announcement by the Japanese authorities, over the past year and a half, the number of patients with Konghae diseases such as Minamata disease, Itai-itai disease, and Yokkaichi asthma disease has increased by two and a half times and the number of deaths by more than six times. In particular, it is said that in Minamata City of Kumamoto Prefecture, Kyushu, the origin of Minamata disease, one out of every two residents has this disease.\(^{30}\)

Konghae-related articles consistently appeared in the mid-to-late 1970s Rodong Sinmun, peaking at 117 in 1978. The number of articles on Konghae in Japan and South Korea was roughly equal until 1973, but after 1974, more articles covered South Korea. This can be attributed to the increasing number of Japanese polluting companies entering South Korea in the form of so-called joint ventures (e.g. Toyama Chemical, Nippon Chemical Industries, Showa Electric Industries, etc.),\(^{31}\) as well as the severe environmental pollution in Ulsan and Masan, where large-scale heavy chemical industrial complexes had been built.

For instance, the Rodong Sinmun reported that in August 1975 malformed fish contaminated with light metals appeared off the coast of Ulsan, and malformed fish contaminated with heavy metals appeared off the coast of Inch’ŏn.\(^{32}\) There were also reports of egrets and her-

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30 “Ilbonesō tǒuk tǒ usimhaejinŭn konghae [Pollution is getting worse in Japan],” Rodong Sinmun, July 4, 1973.
32 “Padaŭi mulgogiegekkaji mich’in hoksimhan konghae [Severe pollution is even
ons dying in large numbers after eating these contaminated fish in South Kyŏngsang Province. Moreover, there were many reports of farmers who had their crops ruined by pollutant emissions and of fishermen with severely damaged fish farms. In one article titled “South Korea is turning into a sewage dump for Japan” on March 14, 1978, the Rodong Sinmun reported, “It has been revealed that South Korea has been massively ‘importing’ waste oil, a polluting industrial waste, and dumping it on the land and sea.” Japanese polluting companies entered Southeast Asia just as they had entered Korea; in 1979, North Korea reported revelations from an international conference that Japanese companies dumped toxic wastewater into rivers and seas in Thailand, Malaysia, and the Philippines.

There were also numerous reports of damage caused by polluting facilities near schools and residential areas in the South. Articles described more than 700 students from schools in Ulsan as suffering from lung and skin diseases due to toxic gases emitted by Yongnam Chemical and petrochemical manufacturing plant, and more than 50% of workers in Ulsan as suffering from skin diseases, respiratory diseases, vision disorders, and occupational diseases caused by heavy metal poisoning, among others. In the late 1970s, articles reporting

reaching the fish in the sea],” Rodong Sinmun, August 26, 1975; “Namjosŏnesŏ pijojinŭn hoksimhan konghae hyŏnsang [Severe pollution in South Korea],” Rodong Sinmun, August 31, 1975. In South Korea, deformed fish have been observed in significant numbers since 1975. Ko T’aeu, “1970nyŏndaehan’guk,” 22.

33 “Kyŏngsangnamdoesŏ paengno, waegaridŭri oyǫmdoen mulgogirul mŏkko tte-jugŭm [Egrets and herons died en masse in Gyeongsangnam-do after eating contaminated fish],” Rodong Sinmun, August 1, 1977.

34 “Ilbonũ omulch’ŏrijangûro chŏnbyŏndoeo innŭn namjosŏn [South Korea is turning into a sewage dump for Japan],” Rodong Sinmun, August 10, 1978.


36 “Konghae mulchillo chilbyŏnge kŏljŏ o innŭn haksaengdŭl [Students suffering from diseases caused by pollutants],” Rodong Sinmun, March 14, 1977.
on konghae in South Korea focused on Ulsan and Masan, and a steady stream of articles covered rallies demanding measures to prevent konghae in cities across the South, including Inch’ŏn, Seoul, Sŏngnam, P’aju, Suwŏn, Anyang, Mokp’o, Sinan, Chŏngsŏn, and Poryŏng.

Along with the depiction of capitalist countries as inextricably linked to pollution, as noted above, North Korea was described as “pollution-free” throughout the 1970s, and there was no mention of pollution problems in the Soviet Union, East Germany, or other socialist countries.

Ours is a country of factories. ... forests of factories ... yet people living in this country have only heard of konghae in newspapers and magazines, in the news columns of some distant country, but they have no concept of it in their daily lives. What a contrast to the reality of capitalist countries, which are screaming that konghae has emerged as an enemy of humankind comparable to nuclear weapons!

The graph above shows the number of articles mentioning konghae in Rodong Sinmun in the 1970s by year. Based on this analysis, the export of Japanese polluting companies to South Korea with the active support of the Park Chung Hee regime was a direct factor in the introduction of the term “konghae” and the formation and spread of

37 “(Ppyŏwa sarŭl kkangnŭn chungnodong) – namjosŏn rodongjadûrŭi pich’aml han ch’ŏji [Hard labor in great pain – the miserable situation of South Korean workers],” Rodong Sinmun, December 5, 1979.

38 As one article described it, “Serious konghae phenomena will remain ‘incurable cancer’ as long as the capitalist world exists.” “Onûrŭi segye – chayŏnŭl p’agoehago in’gansaengmyŏngûl ppaennŭn chabonjuŭi naradûresŏŭi konghae [Today’s World – Pollution in capitalist countries destroying nature and taking human lives],” Rodong Sinmun, August 27, 1978.

39 Yun Wuch’ŏl, “Multo malko konggido makta [The water is clear, the air is clean],” Rodong Sinmun, August 27, 1978.
konghae discourse in North Korea. This is evidenced by the fact that prior to this, there was no mention of konghae in the North. The 1970 Korea-English Dictionary does not contain the words “konghae” or “oyŏm” (pollution). It was not until Chosŏn munhwadǒ sajŏn or the Korean Culture Language Dictionary, published in 1973, that the term was introduced as follows: “The social harm caused by anti-people capitalist industrial construction, city building, and urban management.”

Figure 2. The number of Rodong Sinmun articles mentioning “konghae” in the 1970s. ©Eunsung Cho

The 1970 dictionary gives only the following explanations for the word “environment”: “Home (living) environment, new (difficult) environment, and international environment of our revolution.” It shows


41 Miyamoto notes that since the 1970s, there has been a tendency in Japan to refer to all social disasters as konghae. North Korea has also used this term in this manner since the mid-1970s to criticize the penetration of Japanese culture in South Korea, referring to the excessive use of foreign words as language pollution. I have included these cases in the overall number of articles by year as follows: one in 1974, one in 1977, and three in 1978.

42 Pyongyang oegugŏdaehak ch’ŏllima yŏngŏgangjiwa ed., Choyŏng sajŏn [Korea-
that the meaning of nature was not attached to the word environment. At this time, nature was used only by itself, and “natural environment” was not used as a set phrase. In the Rodong Sinmun, a meaningful article including the word natural environment first appeared in an editorial entitled “Sahoejuŭi haesŏ ŭi saengsannyŏk paech’i e kwanhan t’agwŏlhan kwahakchŏk riron” [Outstanding scientific theory on the arrangement of productivity under socialism] published on April 29, 1973. This editorial was written by the Research Laboratory of Industrial Economy under the Institute of Social Science; it articulated the view that industrial construction should be accomplished while protecting the natural environment and natural resources. The article criticized capitalism’s tendency to concentrate various industrial sectors that are harmful to people’s health and the natural environment in cities, noting the serious social, cultural, and health consequences of this practice.

In addition, it wasn’t until the 1973 dictionary that environment was defined in the same way as it is today, as “surrounding natural and social conditions or circumstances that directly or indirectly affect people or animals.” This demonstrates that the introduction of the concept of konghae, the spread of related discourse, and the expanded definition of the environment occurred around the same time.

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43 Sahoejwaehagwŏn kyŏngjeyŏn’guso kong’erpkyŏngjeyŏng’yusil, “Sahoejuŭihaesŏûi saengsallyŏk paech’ie kwanhan t’akwŏrhan kwahakchŏk riron [An excellent scientific theory of the deployment of productive forces under socialism],” Rodong Sinmun, April 29, 1973. From 1970 until this article was published, there were three articles mentioning the term “natural environment.” It was mentioned once in a 1971 article criticizing Nixon and once in a 1972 article criticizing capitalism. In 1973, prior to this editorial, it was mentioned in an article on opera stage art.

44 Sahoejwaehagwŏnŏnôhak yŏn’guso, Chosŏn munhwaŏ sajŏn, 859.
While North Korea’s official discourse maintained a narrative that North Korea was a “pollution-free country” within the framework of the Cold War, it seems that internally, both the regime and the people were already aware of the problem of pollution in North Korean society. Although the word konghae was not directly used, it is highly probable that there were internal guidelines calling attention to the problem of pollution and implementing measures to prevent it. For instance, Kim Il Sung said that the air in Ch’ŏngjin was bad in his speech at the enlarged meeting of the joint plenum of the Ch’ŏngjin City Committee and the North Hamgyŏng Province Committee of the Workers’ Party of Korea on June 20, 1979.\textsuperscript{45} Ch’ŏngjin is a North

Korean city where iron and steel mills and chemical fiber factories are concentrated.

The air in the city of Ch’ǒngjin is as bad as the air in the city of Hamhŭng. Smoke from factories and enterprises in the city of Ch’ǒngjin is currently polluting the air, causing considerable inconvenience to the lives of citizens. [...] In the future, it is recommended that the houses in Ch’ǒngjin be moved to South Ch’ǒngjin. When we originally built houses in Ch’ǒngjin, we should have taken into account the harmful gases from factories and enterprises, but we failed to do so. Therefore, a few years ago, I tasked the relevant departments to redraw the city’s urban construction plan.46

In this speech, Kim Il Sung urged party cadres to thoroughly identify places where harmful gases and dust were emitted and to take measures to prevent air pollution and relocate people’s homes in Ch’ǒngjin.47 Although this 1979 speech was published in 1987, it may be one clue to show that North Korea was experiencing pollution problems at the time and was aware of them. The adoption of the Environmental Protection Law in April 1986 was also a reflection of the fact that North Korea could no longer put off taking practical measures to address environmental problems. North Korea tends to admit problems only after a long time has passed. In 1990, a Rodong Sinmun article was published that acknowledged that North Korea had pollution problems in the mid-1960s, though the article did not use the word konghae.48

46 Kim Il Sung, “Ch’ǒngjinsi,” 278.
47 Kim Il Sung, “Ch’ǒngjinsi,” 278.
48 The Rodong Sinmun article titled “Tangŭn inminŭl wihae pongmuhaeya handago hasimyŏ [He said that the Party should serve the people],” on November 17, 1990, mentioned that in the mid-1960s, there were phenomena in North Korea
Developmentalism Unproblemazied

The previous section examined how the konghae problem was described within the Cold War framework in 1970s North Korea. A discussion of the social and political context of the time is incomplete without addressing developmentalism, which was then and largely remains an unchallenged doctrine. Regardless of their social system, modern states pursue science and technology-based industrialization, taking a firm developmentalist or productivist perspective. An honest evaluation of development, however, should consider its effects on the environment.

Although environmental problems such as konghae are intertwined with industrialization, there are not many attempts to contemplate developmentalism itself from this point of view. It was the same in 1970s North Korea. Developmentalism was not problematized. Even in the 1990s, when a deeper social awareness of environmental problems beyond pollution problems emerged, North Korea maintained the view that technological development would solve these environmental problems. This is in fact very similar to the technocratic perspective of the mainstream capitalist enterprises. In this gaze, nature is objectified and environmental problems are described in narrow terms as if they were a matter of technology, not a matter of system or structure.

It is well-known that North Korea, following the Marxist view, has followed the principle of productivity first. Marx, who critically dissected the dynamics of capitalism in his foundational treatise Capital, held that building a social system without exploitation of labor eventually boils down to technological advancement and productivity. Most socialist countries have based their ideology on Marxism-Leninism; the Juche ideology, despite North Korea claims that it is an original idea, that could damage the natural environment and make people’s lives uncomfortable; for instance, not paying attention to the smoke billowing from the chimney.
also originated from a “creative application of Marxism-Leninism” and maintained the position of technological development and productivism. In this respect, some scholars have argued that anti-ecological productivism is the essential factor generating environmental problems.\footnote{For instance, see Andrew McLaughlin, \textit{Regarding Nature: Industrialism and Deep Ecology} (New York: SUNY Press, 1993). For papers dealing with North Korean ideology along with theoretical discussions on socialism and ecology, refer to Min Kich’ae, “Pukhan ŭi saengt’ae ideollogi mit silch’ôn e kwanhan koch’al [A study of ideology and the practice of ecology in North Korea],” \textit{T’ongil munje yǒn’gu} 26, no. 2 (2014): 259-291.} Regardless of the social system, framing the environment in ways that transcend the legacy of modern industrialism remains a challenge.

\section*{Conclusion}

North Korea’s environmental discourse around \textit{konghae} in the 1970s was rooted in Cold War ideology, focusing on criticizing capitalist societies while extolling itself as a pollution-free country. In particular, South Korea’s import of Japanese polluting industries was the direct cause of the introduction of the term \textit{konghae} into North Korea and the spread of related discourse. The growing international awareness of environmental issues and discussions on how to address them may also have played an indirect role in this process.

The discourse criticizing pollution expanded, however, as it became harder to ignore the growing phenomenon of pollution within the country and awareness of pollution became more common throughout North Korean society. This led to institutional efforts in the 1980s and 1990s to actually respond to environmental concerns in North Korea, such as the enactment of the Environmental Protection Law in 1986 and the inclusion of environmental rights into the Constitution in 1992. It was through this process in the 1970s that North Korea’s environmental discourse shifted from a narrow focus on \textit{konghae} to a broader,
more comprehensive understanding of the environment.\textsuperscript{50} Despite this shift, the developmentalist view that technological progress can solve environmental problems persists in the DPRK. Within North Korea’s Cold War developmentalism paradigm, the concept of the environment continues to be (re)constructed as a sociotechnical imaginary.

Cold War developmentalist framing of environmental issues is not a phenomenon unique to North Korea. South Korea is by no means free from the influence of this perspective.\textsuperscript{51} Given that environmental problems transcend national boundaries, considering the environment more holistically—consciously removing the frame of Cold War developmentalism—might be one way to introduce a crack into the old Cold War relational structure between the two Koreas.

As McNeill and Unger have noted, there are considerable connections between the Cold War and the concerns of environmental history.\textsuperscript{52} The rapid development of science and technology-based industries was a critical indicator in Cold War competition, and such significant economic growth necessarily brings environmental problems such as pollution. For example, in order to achieve high growth, governments and companies cooperate to lower production costs by allowing pollution such as wastewater discharge. In addition, environmental/natural modification through large-scale infrastructure construction, such as dams, highways, and railroads, was just as important a Cold War battleground as economic development, for both were based on advances in

\textsuperscript{50} Another important question for future research would be: When did North Koreans begin to feel \textit{konghae} in their bodies? How did the human-nonhuman network act on that perception?


\textsuperscript{52} As for the study on the linkage between the Cold War and the environment, refer to J. R. McNeill and Corinna R. Unger eds., \textit{Environmental Histories of the Cold War} (Washington, D.C.: Cambridge University Press. 2010).
science and technology. This paper has only scratched the surface of the Cold War’s impact on the environment through North Korea’s konghae discourse in the 1970s, and further research is needed on various aspects of this issue. For one thing, although this article has described developmentalism as a general characteristic of modern industrialized countries, future studies on the Cold War and environmental issues should include an analysis of the similarities and differences between developmentalism in capitalist and socialist countries. This would allow us to delve into the specific sociotechnical context of environments in various societal systems. Furthermore, an examination of the emergence of environmental discourse in other socialist countries from a comparative perspective would be an important follow-up study.

While this paper was being written, the South Korean government allowed the discharge of contaminated water from Japan’s Fukushima nuclear power plant, sparking strong civil society criticism. North Korea also released a series of reports criticizing the current South Korean government’s handling of environmental issues, highlighting negative public opinion and media reports from South Korea and the international community. This echo of the 1970s import of Japanese polluting companies is a bitter reprise.

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The Environment in the Box of Cold-War Developmentalism: North Korea’s 1970s Discourse on Pollution (konghae)

Eunsung Cho

This paper examines the unfolding of North Korean discourse on “konghae (pollution)” in the context of the Cold War and developmentalism during the 1970s. Scrutinizing how the North Korean regime justified its own environmental management approach by critiquing the handling of the konghae issue in capitalist states, this study elucidates the impact of North Korea’s Cold War framing on the intertwined dynamics of development and the environment. In particular, the import of Japanese polluting industries into South Korea triggered the introduction of the term konghae into the North Korean vernacular and the subsequent proliferation of related discourse, which may have also been influenced by the growing global consciousness of environmental matters and the corresponding dialogue on potential solutions.

While Cold War framing impeded North Korean acknowledgment of its own developing pollution problem, discourse on pollution expanded as it became harder to ignore the growing phenomenon of pollution within the country and awareness of pollution became more common. This led to efforts in the 1980s and 1990s to respond to environmental concerns in North Korea, such as the enactment of the Environmental Protection Law in 1986 and the incorporation of environmental rights into the Constitution in 1992. This paper highlights the significance of the 1970s as a pivotal pre-transition phase during which North Korea’s
environmental discourse evolved from a confined focus on *konghae* to a broader, more comprehensive conception of the environment. Despite this progression, the developmentalist idea that technological advancement can resolve environmental challenges persists in the DPRK.

**Keywords:** North Korea, *konghae* (pollution), environmental discourse, Cold War, developmentalism
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조은성 (서강대 사학과)


주제어: 북한, 공해, 환경 담론, 냉전, 발전주의