

Ecological-Environmental History of Joseon
[Joseon ui saengtae hwangyeong sa]

By KIM Dong Jin

Seoul: Pureunyeoksa: 2017

Chong Min KIM

Graduate School of International Studies, Seoul National University

A greater part of historical tradition shared by Koreans today is based on memories newly invented in the fifteen to nineteenth centuries. Such memories are closely related to changes in ...the ecological/environmental conditions of the Korean Peninsula, which changed drastically in the fifteen to nineteenth centuries...However, there is little research on the overall characteristics of such changes, which regulated the everyday lives of Koreans. This is why we need to pay attention to the ecological and environmental history of Korea. (7)

This book is written with a unique historical perspective focusing on the interplay between humans and nature. Divided into four parts, it seeks to weave an ecological-environmental dimension into the understanding of premodern Korean thought and practices.

Part one, “Macroecology: Wildlife and Domestic Animals,” examines the fauna of the Goryeo and Joseon periods, paying special attention to animals that had significant meanings for people, either as wild animals or livestock—such as tigers, leopards, deer, buffalos and cows. It analyzes their geographical distribution, trends in population

variation, and interactions with people. Part two, “Farmland Reclamation: River banks (川防) and Slash-and-burn Fields (火田),” examines the two major ways of acquiring agricultural land that were widely practiced during the Joseon period. Part three, “Mountains, Forests and Streams (山林川澤): Zone Protection (封禁) and Public-private Collaborative Governance (與民共之),” provides an overview of the status and use of Joseon’s forests and streams that functioned as the center of community lives. Part four, “Microecology: Biological Transaction and Infectious Diseases,” describes the positive, as well as negative, interactions between humans and microorganisms. Overall, the book analyzes long-standing traditions and practices from a twenty-first century perspective, as the author mentions in the prologue: “By looking into past human activities and ecological-environmental changes, I sought to find a historical answer to a popular question about the future, believing that the answers to future problems lie in the past.”

For instance, in describing Joseon’s use of lumber, not only does the author look at kinds of trees and how they were used, but he also identifies demographic and social factors that affected the use of lumber and their impact on forest ecosystems:

The proportion of coniferous tree used as building materials saw a dramatic increase during the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries, a period of much development in Joseon. During this period, population increases led to more clearing of farmlands and the formation of new communities around them. These communities, in turn, allowed easier access to, and accelerated damage of, the surrounding forests. As people used the forest to raise domesticated animals and gather food, firewood, and fertilizers, various organic matters were lost, lowering the fertility of the forest soil.

(150)

While such insights are surely facilitated by the author’s ability to access and understand materials written in classical Chinese, his will and

capacity to bridge historical and environmental studies and the sheer time he likely spent in this intellectual pursuit are also evident. The book's rich characterization of the ecological status of Joseon is assembled from 116 different primary materials written in classical Chinese, including *Nongsajikseol* (Explanation of Farming 農事直設) and *Sejong Sillok Jiriji* (Cultural Geography Recorded in the Annals of King Sejong 世宗實錄地理志). Primary sources also encompass various documents ranging from policy recommendations by Joseon bureaucrats to a book of poetry written by Joseon literati. Believing that Joseon historical records were produced according to the principle of “*Suribujak* (Describing without fabricating 述而不作),” the author successfully encapsulates the essence of such technical descriptions and delicate emotions.

As a result, the reader can understand, for example, how wetlands, flood plains and forests, long the domain of wildlife, transformed into spaces where human communities might obtain the necessities of everyday life during the Joseon period. One of the founding principles of Joseon, namely, “Sharing the benefits of nature through public-private collaborative governance (山林川澤與民共之),” resulted in the dramatic expansion of human living spaces where “the barking of the dog resonates with the crow of the cock (鷄狗之聲相應)” and “the smokes of neighborhood cooking fires mingle (人煙相望).”

This was a process of technological innovation characterized by explosive increases in the use of animal labor in agriculture—increasing 150 times from the early to late Joseon period, right before annexation by Japan. Meanwhile, the competition over living space became intense. In early Joseon, for instance, there were frequent clashes between humans and tigers on the flood plains, a traditional wildlife habitat gradually turning into rich agricultural ground (97-98). But the reclamation of flood plains, hitherto forbidden zones for humans, also allowed for such bucolic moments as “looking over the spring streams from the locust tree just outside the East gate” (167; an excerpt from Yi Mungeon, *Mukje Ilgi*

(Mukje Diary, 默齋日記), March 27, 1561).

Perhaps most indicative of the book's significance, it reminds one of *Green History of the World* (1991) by Clive Ponting, a pioneering book in the field of global environmental history. In particular, the two works each present a narrative of humans dominating the natural ecosystem as they make progress in agricultural technologies, using tools and domesticated animals, and the backlash resulting from destroyed wildlife in the form of micro-bacterial diseases.

In sum, the book presents an extensive analysis of Korean environmental history focusing on ecological changes during the Joseon period that incorporates both quantitative and qualitative data framed by an interdisciplinary and consilient perspective. However, readers may find the work ends rather abruptly, without presenting a conclusive analysis of human-nature interaction. More recent works on environmental history, such as Brian Fagan's *The Little Ice Age: How Climate Made History 1300-1850* (2001), suggest that the relationship between humans and the environment is not linear-causal but interactive. Although *Ecological-Environmental History of Joseon* does not explicitly claim that human impacts are the sole factor affecting the environment, it pays little attention to other long-term variables, such as periodic climate change.

Perhaps if the book incorporated a concluding chapter suggesting the diversity of environmental factors shaping human-nature interaction, a more comprehensive analysis may have been possible, neatly tying together the descriptions and analyses of each chapter presented in this otherwise seminal book on Korean environmental history.