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On This Topic

Korean Science since the Colonial Period:

Environment, Medicine, and Technology in Transwar Korea

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Accommodating the Korean History of Science

This special issue, titled "Korean Science since the Colonial Period: Environment, Medicine, and Technology in Transwar Korea," is intended to spark an academic conversation between Korean history of science and Korean studies. Despite the recent surge of interest in the subjects of science, technology, and public health in the field of Korean studies, little interaction has been made between the two fields. Aiming to promote the history of science as a form of intervention, this introductory essay charts the institutional history of this field and the possible benefits that it can provide to Korean studies in terms of generating new insights.

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As an academic discipline within Korea, the history of science field has a very brief history, with the first department dating to the early 1980s, and with STS (science, technology, and society) programs following shortly thereafter, with these latter associated with the growth of technical specialties (Sang-yong Song 2017). In the first case, the Interdisciplinary Program in History and Philosophy of Science (PHPS) at Seoul National University (SNU) began under military dictatorship (in 1984) and developed as the nation underwent dramatic social change during the 1980s. The first generation of historians mainly focused on the Western history of science but soon expanded their interests to embrace premodern Korean history, and ultimately, modern and contemporary Korean history. Starting from Kim Geun Bae's pioneering research on the role of US aid in the establishment of the Korean Institute of Science and Technology (KIST) under the Park Chung-hee regime (G. Kim 1989), SNU grads have charted the understudied history of Korean science. Their work spans from Japanese colonial science and medicine to the science and technology of the two Koreas, while also recognizing the contributing role of superpowers in the making of postwar science and technology regimes.[1] After Jeonbuk National University (JBNU) established its graduate course in the Department of Science Studies (DSS) in 2000 and the Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology (KAIST) established the Graduate Program of Science and Technology Policy (STP) in 2008, the field has expanded, for instance, by embracing environmental history and public health as its new research avenues.[2] In particular, the Korean Research Institute of Science, Technology and Civilization (under Director Dongwon Shin), established in 2015 at JBNU, will publish 14 modern and contemporary history of Korean science and technology monographs, as part of its *Science and Civilization in Korea*

1. It is worth noting the many thesis projects in that program that are committed to the modern and contemporary history of science in Korea. For the modern and contemporary history of Korean science, 27 master's theses and 18 dissertations have been written from 1989 to 2021.
2. For the recent increase in interest in environmental history among Korean historians of science, see Lee (2020) and Y. Kang (2021).

Series.[3] Other scholars, such as Hyungsub Choi and John DiMoia, who were trained in the history of science and technology in the United States, have also offered fresh perspectives in this field (Choi 2017; DiMoia 2013).

In the second case, STS, engineers and related specialists have taken an avid interest in science policy, seeking not only to pursue technology, but also to direct its use for social betterment. Korean STS has a lengthy tradition of participating in civic activism going back to the mid-1980s.[4] Meanwhile, science policy research groups, which were also loosely connected with graduate students at SNU-PHPS and interested in technological innovations at the Science and Technology Policy Institute (STEPI) in the early 1990s, also played a crucial role in introducing American STS literature to South Korea (Sung-Soo Song 2021). Although JBNU partially offered an undergraduate STS course from 1994 on, the first graduate program was established at Korea University in 2002. SNU-PHPS also began to offer STS graduate courses in 2007, and the newly established KAIST-STP also focused on STS training around the same time. Pusan National University began to promote a similar STS program in 2006 (Sung-Soo Song 2021).

However, less attention is devoted to the history of science within the Korean studies field, at least in its North American iteration.[5] Why is there a gap, or certainly a qualitative difference in the level of attention, given a shared investment in Korean history and culture? The premodern and early modern fields for Korean studies certainly include subjects such as traditional instruments, forms of medical practice, and measuring devices

3. The Science and Civilization in Korea project is loosely modeled on the famous Science and Civilization in China project at Cambridge University.
4. See also Quet and Noel (2014). In North America, History of science programs tend to be associated with the traditional liberal arts, while STS programs are often affiliated with public policy and situated especially at engineering or technical schools.
5. A rare exception is the recent research project of Todd A. Henry on queer subjects in Cold War South Korea (Henry 2017). David Fedman has also become more intersected with the history of science in general (Fedman and Hood 2019). It is interesting that both scholars have experience with transdisciplinary scholarship, between Japanese studies and Korean studies and between area studies and queer studies (Henry) or environmental history (Fedman).

for time and weather (S. Kim and J. Kim 2014). More recently, there has been a growing interest in environmental history, broadly for East Asia, and more specifically, for the two Koreas, as illustrated by activity on the US west coast, with David Fedman, Albert Park, and Eleana Kim hosting a conference in 2019, with a forthcoming edited volume (Fedman et al. 2023).[6] This event, along with a number of recent articles connected to the COVID-19 crisis, have spurred interest in Korean landscapes (agricultural reform and afforestation), medical and public health history (mental health, female medical practitioners, disability, and COVID-19), and towards regional positioning in approaching these comparative issues (Fedman 2020; T. Yoo 2016; S. Kim 2019; E. Kim 2017; DiMoia 2020; J. Kang 2020).

One evident fact is that if Albert Park and colleagues' edited volume shares STS concerns, the turn towards environmentalism generally remains much closer to the style of practice recommended by the American Society for Environmental History than it does to Korean history of science, and many of the scholars owe their training to social science disciplines, rather than history. Another recent example, Sonja Kim and Robert Ji-song Ku's edited volume, *Future Yet to Come* (2021), handles these issues by providing several thematic sections, allowing STS, history of science, Korean studies, and literary studies to intermingle (Kim and Ku 2021). Even though one of the guest editors (DiMoia) has contributed to this volume, and despite the striking overlap of research avenues, Korean history of science literature remains more or less remote from other essays written by Korean studies scholars. The current situation, in which both fields have begun to focus on similar research avenues while not yet interacting proactively, allows us to urge the need to accommodate the Korean history of science.

6. Cornell University Press also maintains an East Asian environment series, with Albert Park as one of the editors. See, https://www.cornellpress.cornell.edu/series/the-environments-of-east-asia/.

The Nation as a Category: Challenging Area Studies

For historians of East Asia, there are numerous ways in which the history of science can be brought to bear upon emerging questions, especially when it involves a subject inviting criticism. The modern Japan field, for example, has started to acknowledge that an exceptionalist narrative for empire, one restricted primarily to the war years (1931–1945), rather than a longer Shōwa story (1926–1989), proves too simple. Janice Mimura has made this case with her careful study of wartime bureaucrats in Manchuria (Mimura 2011). Even more explicitly, Aaron S. Moore tracks Japanese engineers, showing that their postwar activities in Southeast Asia (Burma and Vietnam) closely resemble their previous colonial projects in northern Korea and Manchuria (Moore 2013). With these insights, the Japanese Empire becomes more nuanced, linking wartime ambitions to postwar developmentalism and the related pursuit of resource extraction (Mizuno et al. 2018).[7] Indeed, using a focus on science and technology, Japanese studies has successfully questioned the categorical demarcation between the prewar and the postwar and between the Japanese empire and democratic Japan, and now urges for a transwar history approach (Nakamura 2005; Gordon 2011; Kadia 2019).

What can we learn from the Japanese studies experience in engaging with history of science? First, it offers a way of rethinking the nature of modern science and technology and by doing so provides a way of questioning the stability of the nation as an analytic category. If one assumes science and technology aim to establish a form of transnational, transhistorical knowledge-making, there are obvious problems with this assumption. Still, some version of this narrative reflects the idealized vision of knowledge that sought to transform Europe and its colonies from about the mid-17th century (Raj 2006).[8] In bringing this category to bear upon

7. Similar questions might be asked about China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and indeed, many are skeptical of the project's motives.
8. Historian of science Kapil Raj responds here not only to the European story but also specifically to the famous "circulation" narrative made by George Basalla's diffusionist model of Western science (Basalla 1967).

other contexts, the history of science raises questions that disrupt the tensions embedded within an area studies field such as Korean studies.[9] If we can ask these questions of (the Japanese) Empire, we can also turn them on fields closer to home, often with surprising results. Depending upon how we define *science*, the Korean studies narrative for the mid- to late Joseon era needs to acknowledge considerable borrowing from Ming and Qing practices (Jeon 2017). To make a point more relevant here, the papers of this special issue cluster around the colonial period and the transition to post-*haebang* (liberation). The American intervention thus becomes a critical part of our focus, especially the intersection of late colonial empire with the arrival of American development aid.[10] If Koreans made their own scientific and technical institutions, they did so in specific cultural and social contexts, and much of this supplementary detail is missing from an older Korean studies literature, one invoking a *miracle* narrative of post-Korean War transformation (Y. Hong 2015).

Second, in challenging the idea of the nation's stability, the history of science questions its periodization as well, and there are many examples of controversies where the Korean history of science can intervene. Korean studies prefers to date the origins and import of new technologies (electricity, streetcars, and telephone) to the late Joseon, especially the Taehan period, when the court introduced numerous reforms (D. Kim et al. 2006). Although the period remains fascinating, and indeed, an area of growth, such claims about priority do not always stand up to scrutiny. The introduction of electricity in Seoul, calling for the illumination of palaces, does not necessarily equate with the notion of electrification as measured on the scale of a technical system or an electrical grid (Hughes 1993).[11] As with many developments from the colonial period, by the 1930s, Japanese authorities dramatically expanded the small-scale system of generators with

9. Perhaps Korean studies has been more oriented to placing the critique upon an external object (Japanese Empire, American militarism) than upon an internal one (Korean environment, developmental ambitions), at least until recently.

10. This intersection has recently become the focal point among historians of South Korean science. See Hyun (2017), Ro (2018), Won (2019), Y. Kang (2021), and Park (2021).

11. For its case study carried out by Korean historians of science, see Y. Kim (2018).

thermal (coal-based) plants and with hydro-electric facilities, the latter densely concentrated in the North, particularly along the line of the empire's expansion toward Manchuria (Moore 2013; Seow 2022). This colonial legacy became the backdrop of the post-liberation competition of power between the North and the South and the latter's pursuit of nuclear power via US aid (DiMoia 2010). Any account of the history of electricity in Korea has to account for these competing stories, and indeed, the official volumes published by KEPCO (Korea Electric Power Corporation) may evade such questions (Oh 2017).

A National Story, with Transnational Actors

The challenge undertaken here lies with telling a postcolonial story of Korean initiative, giving sufficient voice to domestic actors while acknowledging the presence and impact of multiple international parties, whether they be Japanese, American, or international organizations.[12] Much of Korean industrialization and public health holds a longer trajectory, arguably spanning late Joseon, the colonial period, and the post-1945 era. The choices made about which actors to follow and which objects to prioritize shape a set of distinct narratives, not all of them complementary. The aim here is not to resolve or to provide *final* or definitive answers, but rather to use the history of science as a tool to offer insights into a set of technical subfields as they took shape under Korean direction. A Koreanist might easily tell these stories in a different fashion, and that is to be expected. The goal here is to raise questions, generate discussion, and bring together these two fields—history of science and Korean studies—to track the growth of a postcolonial Korean science and technology, one acknowledging and negotiating the placement of its Japanese, American, and international constituent parts.

12. This dilemma was evidently demonstrated in writing the Korean side's role in the USAID establishment of the first nuclear reactor in South Korea during the late 1950s and early 1960s. See Koh (1992), DiMoia (2010), and Seong Jun Kim (2009).

In the papers offered here, the historical periods covered concentrate primarily on *haebang* and following, that is, on the postcolonial transition after 1945. Subsistence concerns took immediate precedence, placing additional emphasis on the necessity of public health and other basic forms of social welfare. These themes continued through the Korean War, which increased the perception of need, and brought international actors. The following period, a period of reconstruction, followed by the Park Chung-hee presidency, also draws a great deal of attention, here in conjunction with themes of nation-building, the need for technical expertise, and the surrounding context of the Cold War. Here, again, we see Korean stories set amidst a rich transnational background context.

The contemporary history of Korean science was transnational from the beginning, as it was in the first Korean history of science paper in which Geun Bae Kim studied the American role in establishing KIST during the 1960s (G. Kim 1989). Overcoming the US-centered narrative and expanding its focus to South Korean interactions with Japan and Southeast Asia (Homei and DiMoia 2021; Hyun 2017), the field has paid attention to the circulation of knowledge, goods, and people beyond national boundaries and its role in the making of Korean science and technology. With this transnational potential, the Korean history of science's policy-oriented nature—which has been driven by its civic activism and science policy-origin, as stated above—represents a crucial asset as a form of intervention in Korean studies (G. Kim 2016; Moon 2010; 2017). Even today, a number of graduates from SNU-PHPS, KAIST-STP, and JBNU-DSS move on to government and NGO-style work, and due to the job market situation, their historical research tackles the past and current South Korean science policy (S. Hong and Song 2017; S. Yoo 2020). In other words, the scholarship brings its findings to bear not only upon historical issues but also on questions of contemporary significance. This stands with the best history of science and STS work internationally, especially for Korea, where the fields have often been linked with informing social policy.

Major Themes and Connections

The papers gathered for this special issue address subjects related to the history of science in Korea, clustered around themes of public health, population, environment, and engineering. While each essay tackles its own historiographical matters with a focus on either public health or the environment, the papers collectively engage with the above themes through a focus on domestic scientific and medical practitioners and their knowledge production. Locating South Korean science, technology, medicine, and their relationship with the environment within the transwar contexts spanning from the Manchurian Invasion (1931–1932) and the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945) to the Korean War (1950–1953), the papers decentralize the nation-centered narrative as well as the standard periodization.

The first two articles focus on public health challenges in the US-centered historiography. Ji-young Park's paper interrogates the question of Americanization in postwar South Korean medicine, focusing on the initiation of public health studies (*bogeonhak*) by Korean physicians who studied abroad in the United States during the US Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK) period. Park problematizes the periodization of Americanization by illustrating that the US-trained public-health specialists, or at least Korean clinician groups oriented toward American medicine, had already existed throughout the colonial period and gained power in public health administration and policy-making during and after the USAMGIK period. She also shows that the wording *bogeonhak* meant a new American import, but the seemingly new discipline's contents were in fact filled with principles of colonial hygiene (*wisaenghak*) by Korean medical practitioners, who had trained in *wisaenghak* during the colonial period.

John DiMoia's paper also blurs the old distinction between the colonial and the postwar (or Cold War) but further develops this theme by questioning the disciplinary distinction between biomedicine and social science. He revisits the historiography for South Korean family planning, arguing that its perceived *success* ultimately reflects a construction embedded within American social science. South Korean family planning

advocates and practitioners had mostly been trained in colonial medical institutions during the late colonial period. When they were invited to be involved with the family planning program initiated in the international development context, they found their intellectual place to justify and rationalize their family planning work within American social science, as their Japanese teachers and colleagues had done for the Japanese Empire.

The other two papers focus on the postwar construction of the environment carried out in tandem with the formation of related social movements, knowledge regimes, and technical infrastructure. With this theme, two historiographical issues are at stake. First, environmental ideas, policies, and institutions only appeared from the early 1960s and began to work in part in the 1970s, specifically due to international pressure, sometimes in the form of US aid or international cooperation (Ro 2018). Second, scientists and engineers made an unholy alliance with the authoritarian government and served as a source of state power, damaging nature and humiliating people (Byeon and Lim 2012).

Jaehwan Hyun's paper revisits the first historiography. Focusing on mountaineering expeditions carried out by Korean alpinists and scientists from the late colonial period to the early 1960s, Hyun illuminates how South Korean biologists could develop forest and natural monument conservation practices and incorporate them into the governmental conservation activities while taking part in the national alpine club's academic alpinism throughout the early postwar period. Hyun claims that the postwar conservation activities, specifically with respect to its military involvement, were a transwar product—in the sense that the academic mountaineering practice accompanied with the military had been formed and continued during the Pacific War and Korean War periods.

Seohyun Park's paper argues for a more nuanced, practice-focused approach related to the second issue. Park gives attention to hydrological engineers, who played a significant role in rationalizing large multi-purpose dam construction during the Park Chung-hee era. Tracing this engineering community's professional identity-making process and concomitant envisioning of the *Korean* nature for postcolonial development, Park reveals two points: first, their activities went back and forth between colonial legacy

and the Cold War influx of knowledge from the West, rhetorically and intellectually. Second, Park also illuminates tensions and negotiations between technocrats and engineers while promoting large dam construction plans and envisioning the nature-society relationship. We hope that this special issue will open a more active and more extended dialogue between Korean history of science and Korean studies.

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