Introduction to a Forum on War and Environment on the Korean Peninsula, 1598–1965

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From the premodern to the modern period, the Korean peninsula has featured a process of alteration in which people have fundamentally changed ecosystems and landscapes to satisfy the needs and desires of individuals and communities. Agricultural cultivation in early Korea reshaped the composition of soil and reconfigured and accelerated biological processes for the production of food and commodities while infrastructure initiatives ripped up natural landscapes for farming, such as the Chosôn state working with local communities on irrigation projects. Capitalism and industrialization in colonial Korea and afterwards only sped up the alteration of the environment. The 1920 Program to Increase Rice Production and agricultural programs designed by the Japanese colonial state introduced chemical fertilizers to increase agricultural production, which subsequently advanced the commercialization of the agricultural system. Industrialization programs in North and South Korea after the Korean War reclaimed farmlands to build factories for industrial production, which led to the rise of pollution from heavy and chemical industries. The Saemaul Undong in 1970s South Korea intensified the widespread use of chemical fertilizers as the government produced fertilizer in mass quantities and pressured farmers to use it. At the same time, in North Korea, the government was fundamentally altering the rural landscape through its scientific programs to industrialize the agricultural base and its massive infrastructure projects (Kim1990). After protests against the Grand Canal Project in 2008 in South Korea, the government carried out the Four Major Rivers Restoration Project, which dramatically remade local ecologies around the areas of four rivers—Han, Geum, Yeongsan, and Nakdong—through infrastructural initiatives that caused a process of “reverse erosion,” algal blooms, and the death of hundreds of thousands of fish (Lah, Park, and Cho 2015, 385).

This process of alternation on the peninsula has produced a rich and complex history of environmental issues in Korea. Its impact not only on nature, but also on people’s everyday lives, lived experiences, social relationships, culture, and institutions is undeniable. Yet, the study of the Korean environment, or more specifically the intersection between people and nature, is a severely underdeveloped field. Compared to other fields in Asian studies, especially Japanese studies, Korean studies has largely ignored the study of environmental issues—both historical and contemporary. The few studies

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that have tackled these issues have not quite captured and traced the nuances and diversity of the interface between people, built environments, and nature. Temporally, these studies have solely focused on environmental issues and developments since the start of industrialization in North and South Korea. In particular, they have attributed the origins of environmentalism and environmental movements in South Korea to the outbreak of pollution caused by industrialization and the rise of democratic activism to combat the degradation of the environment. These studies have set the boundaries for studying environmental issues between the 1960s and the present. Spatially, because industrialization, pollution, and the democracy movement were mostly located in cities, these studies have also focused on the urban encounter and experience of environmental issues. This spatial point of view has put a primacy on the city as the main space for researching and writing on environmental topics.

This standard approach to examining environmental issues in Korea has prevented a more comprehensive analysis and picture of the relationship between humans and nature. It leaves out the history of the premodern period and of areas outside of cities and, at the very least, it ignores environmental issues in North Korea. This approach reinforces a strict temporal division between the premodern and modern and a spatial division between the city and everything else, especially the rural—a division hardened through larger trends in modern Korean studies that privilege industry and the urban over the rural and agriculture as subjects of inquiry. From this approach, there is an uneven picture of what has happened to the environment in relation to human action and how systems in society and lived experiences have changed because of transformations in the environment.

Delinking the modern from the premodern and ignoring the rural puts a stop to connecting wars on the Korean peninsula and comparing the environmental changes these wars have caused from the city to the countryside. Humans and other organisms have always altered their environment, but the speed and depth of change of an environment has varied depending on certain social, political, cultural, and economic conditions. Studies have documented that, compared to other historical conditions, wars and the violence produced from them intensified the transformation of ecosystems and built landscapes (Muscolino 2015; Tucker and Russell 2004). Energy transfers in war through processes such as the movement of people and the extraction of resources produced different types of contexts through which people and nature have mutually shaped each other. Within these contexts, there have been forms of knowledge, practices, institutions, and systems that have conditioned and mediated the relationship between individuals and elements of nature. These studies have shown how such areas as state governance and power, expert knowledge, infrastructure, industrialization, and capitalism have altered environments and, in so doing, these areas have undergone their own mutations as they engineered nature for war. Studies on war and the environment have been prisms through which to examine the relationship between people and nature in fierce and severe milieus.

The essays in this forum feature stories about war and the environment that contest the standard approaches to the study of the environment in Korea and expand the literature on war and the environment. John Lee’s article, “Postwar Pines: The Military and the Expansion of State Forests in Post-Imjin Korea, 1598–1684,” situates war, landscapes, and slow violence in the Chosŏn period during a time of devastation and
reconstruction due to Hideyoshi’s invasion of the peninsula. The war put people and the environment into direct contact. Forests, in particular, were ravaged by fire and cleared for the manufacturing of weapons. Timber took on new value as resources for building ships that would be commanded by Yi Sunsin. Keeping the value forests and timber, especially pine, as essential components for warships and constructing buildings, the Chosŏn government led a campaign of state forestry in which forests would be routinely assessed and protected from excessive logging. Alongside assigning forest wardens and inspectors to secure forests, the government created protected zones for the growth of forests, including a number of horse ranches. The military, Lee argues, was at the center of state forestry as it gained the responsibility to manage wood resources, especially near naval garrisons. Plans for state forestry upset ecological conditions in ways that had long-term effects on the people and the environment, especially with the loss of certain types of trees and plants and the rise of administrative controls on people, which limited traditional land practices in order to protect forests.

Covering the wartime period under Japanese colonialism through the concept of slow violence, David Fedman’s article, “Wartime Forestry and the ‘Low Temperature Lifestyle’ in Late Colonial Korea, 1937–1945,” looks at the “command economy for forestry products” and how plans for it fundamentally transformed forestry and forced new ways of organizing everyday life for Koreans. Fedman points out that the Japanese colonial state, at the beginning of its rule, started afforestation and conservation campaigns in response to deforestation caused by the decline of intensive state forestry and other factors in the late Chosŏn period. Yet, by the beginning of the war with China in 1937, afforestation campaigns came to an end as timber served as a vital resource for the production of materials for the war and the manufacturing of goods. As a new landscape was formed to extract timber from forests, the colonial state implemented plans to reorganize everyday life in ways that would ensure the availability of timber. The reshaped landscape featured the bodies of Koreans being disciplined through home “improvement” projects, such as reforming ondols, and a “low temperature lifestyle”; meanwhile their minds were being conditioned by public relations campaigns to promote conservation of natural resources. More than just passive figures, a certain number of Koreans resisted the biopolitics of the state and the “imperialization of Korean subjects” through natural resource conservation. Fedman’s article sheds light on the clash of different landscapes and the extent and pace of violence against people and the environment.

Covering the period after the liberation of Korea from colonial rule, Lisa Brady’s article, “Sowing War, Reaping Peace: United Nations Resource Development Programs in the Republic of Korea, 1950–1953,” looks at the attempts to modernize Korea through reforms intended to fundamentally reshape forests and agriculture. In line with Lee’s and Fedman’s articles, Brady’s piece reveals how authorities tried to create new landscapes through top-down processes that would overlap and collide with existing landscapes. The UN Korean Reconstruction Agency (UNKRA) took the lead shortly before and during the Korean War in introducing new plans for protecting forests and introducing new forms of agriculture and livestock. In order to create a nation-state with a strong economic and political base that would overcome agricultural deficiencies, UNKRA officials arranged for the transfer of eggs and animals—such as chickens, goats, hogs, and cows—from the United States to South Korea. Modernizing Korea through these efforts was anchored by a rationality that emphasized science and technology. The top-down
introduction of reforms, which Brady views as a form of high modernism, started a process of altering local ecologies in South Korea through the rationalizing of environments.

As a way to link Lee’s, Fedman’s, and Brady’s articles, my commentary introduces a thematic discussion on mediation and slow violence and the creation and transformation of landscapes over a longue durée on the Korean peninsula. Finally, Micah Muscolino’s commentary highlights the contributions each of the articles makes to the global environmental historiography of war and the environment. From his position as historian of China and of war and the environment, Muscolino raises questions and issues that seek to expand future research on the environment in Korean history and global environmental history.

These essays collectively broaden the temporal and spatial dimensions of the literature on environmental studies of Korea. They supply a long and diverse view of the interaction between the environment and human actors, or the biological and social, and the changes resulting from that relationship from the premodern to modern times. Lee’s, Fedman’s, and Brady’s analyses and comments demand the rethinking of the field and the charting of fresh approaches to the study of the environment in Korea.

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List of References