

Towards Environmental History of Modern East Asia

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In Korea, environmental history as an academic field is still lesser known outside of a relatively small circle of scholars. Compared to the more established ones like the histories of science, medicine, or architecture, environmental history is new and growing. This premature status of the field brings benefits as well. As the boundary of the field is still porous, environmental history enjoys the influxes and outflows of scholars from and to natural science, sociology, anthropology, and policy studies. The oldest organization for environmental history in the world, the American Society for Environmental History (ASEH), founded in 1977, also began with gatherings and conference sessions by like-minded historians, sociologists, geographers, as well as environmental scientists.¹

In East Asia, the Association for East Asian Environmental History (AEAHEH) was founded right after the First World Congress of Environmental History held in Copenhagen in 2009. Since then several Korean scholars have participated at the biennial East Asian Environmental History (EAEH) conferences held in Tainan, Tianjin, and Hualien. In 2021, the sixth EAEH conference is scheduled to be held in Kyoto, September 7-10. Due the current pandemic situation, the conference will be held online.²

The Korean Journal for the History of Science (KJHS) offered me a chance to guest-edit this theme issue on environmental history. With this role, I was honored to serve the emerging community of scholars. After conceptualizing the organization of the theme issue, I began contacting potential authors. Many scholars lamented that they were not able to make enough progress due to the pandemic in 2020. Others had already committed themselves to other opportunities and duties. Some others were simply too busy to meet the due date set up by the editorial team. Plus, environmental history, might seem small at first glance, to my surprise, evolved for the past decade to an extent that choosing three to five representative works was a daunting business. It was extremely difficult to do justice to all the excellent works that I

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¹ "Reviews and Notes," *Environmental History Review* 1:3 (1976), 43-44.

² Association for East Asian Environmental History, The Sixth Biennial Conference of East Asian Environmental History (EAEH 2021), September 7-10, 2021, Kyoto University, Japan and online. <http://www.aeah.org/eah2021.htm>

want to include. Considering the readership of the KJHS, I negotiated a lot. I hope I found a balance between providing for our readers the recent scholarship on the familiar topics and introducing important new agenda among the environmental history scholarship worldwide.

After recruiting the authors for the theme issue, I persuaded them to meet each other (certainly, online). Some liked the idea of getting timely feedbacks on the preliminary version of their work. As a guest editor and an author myself, I needed that moment to expedite the process and to create a quality assurance point. Thanks to Joong-Yang Moon, the President of the Korean History of Science Society, and Manyong Moon, the editor in chief of KJHS, we were able to find commentators for each of the paper. Professor Akihisa Setoguchi of Kyoto University, also the President of the AEAHE, gave a keynote address titled “What is “Wildlife”? : Science and Human-Nature Relationships.” The workshop “Modern Industrial Natures in Twentieth Century East Asia” was held on April 26, Korean Standard Time. Institutional sponsors were Korean Society of Ecological & Environmental History, Center for Anthropocene Studies of KAIST, and Korean Research Institute of Science, Technology, and Civilization of Jeonbuk National University. By becoming part of the ASEH’s Environmental History Week 2021, we invited environmental historians, broadly defined, from abroad. To facilitate the discussion, we used virtual presence platform during the networking and ice-breaking sessions.³ A total of 63 participated at the workshop. I was fortunate to find extraordinary staff to take care of every aspects of the workshop.⁴ As one of the authors was not able to join the workshop, we did a follow-up meeting on May 24th where some of us shared progress on our projects and found common themes among the papers.

In retrospect, all the five authors of this theme issue worked hard digging up old documents from digital archives, making phone calls to get the right quotes and relevant numbers, meeting people who can share interesting stories, or creating maps to show the changes shown in the essay. Thanks to these efforts and additional support from the editors, commentators, and reviewers at the workshop and through the review and editing process, I am happy to introduce the following four papers.

Victor Seow and Hongyun Lyu’s paper focuses on the city of Shiyang and its tumultuous life history from the rise of Shiyang through the construction of large factory sites for automobiles during the “Cold War” to its recession like its contender,

³ For more information about the workshop, please visit <https://sts.ust.ac.kr>. See also, Kang Juhee 강주희, “Hwangyeongsaga ssoaolin gong ‘환경사가 쓰아올린 공 (Stakes in Environmental History: Afterword to the “Modern Industrial Natures in 20th Century East Asia” Workshop),” *Kyosusinmun* 교수신문 (2021. 5. 10) <http://www.kyosu.net/news/articleView.html?idxno=66519>; Kim Jae Ho 김재호, “‘20segi dongasia: Hwangyeong, saneop, geundae’ gukjewokeusyop gaechoe ‘20세기 동아시아: 환경, 산업, 근대’ 국제워크숍 개최 (‘Modern Industrial Natures in 20th Century East Asia’ Virtual Workshop was held),” *Kyosusinmun* 교수신문 (2021.4.30) <http://www.kyosu.net/news/articleView.html?idxno=65924>

⁴ I thank Richa Kumari, Sanghee Bae, Juhee Kang, Hyunah Keum, Hyekyung Lee, Huong Van Le, Junyoung Lee, and Yujeong Kim again for their excellent work for the workshop.

Detroit, as a result of the gradual decrease of its manufacturing capacity of trucks and heavy-duty vehicles. The authors particularly found the supply of food and raw material for the workers and residents was critical in the process of constructing and maintaining a comprehensive infrastructure for automotive mass production. While large-scale projects and collective efforts bring *deja vu* to many readers who are familiar with similar projects in Korea, the Soviet Union, Japan, and Manchukuo, Seow and Lyu's paper brings to fore an important aspect of environmental devastation. Chinese experts in hydrology and geology expressed their concerns over leveling mountains in Shiyao and other cities in mountainous regions.

Yeonsil Kang traces the history of asbestos production and poisoning of workers and the environmental degradation before we knew about this asbestos disaster. Kang begins her paper from the year of 1938 when the largest asbestos extraction mine began its operation, and ends it in 1993 when a deceased worker poisoned by asbestos got recognition as the first case of occupational cancer by the worker's compensation system. Throughout the periods of the Japanese colonization, Cold War international aids programs, and Korean state-sponsored expansion, asbestos industry became entangled with political and economic systems of national, regional, and international scales. Kang raises important questions about how hazardous industry travels much faster than advancement of safety and health regulation. This paper reminds us of the value of environmental history in helping us better situate the contemporary topics of slow disaster and transboundary catastrophes.

Walter Grunden takes the theme of neglect and tragedy to the history of chemical weapons in East Asia. Particularly, Grunden focuses on the medical issues of the workers in Japan's chemical manufacturing plants and the long-term effects of abandoned chemical weapons on the environment of Japan and China. He follows the career of Koizumi Chikahiko 小泉親彦, a Japanese military physician, who began as a sympathizer for the workers and their poor health and working conditions and changed his position afterwards. Coming up again in Grunden's essay are the issues of the attitude of experts like scientists and physicians and the responsibility of the government. Victims are not sufficiently compensated by either Chinese or Japanese government. "Bureaucratic inertia" of these governments brings us to the repeated themes of engineered efficiency and rationalistic planning which left longer-term effects on society and nature.

Jongmin Lee's paper also deals with the nature of border-crossing expertise about wastewater and human waste treatment. While acknowledging the legacy of Joseon and colonial developments, Lee's paper focuses on the efforts of the first-generation sanitary engineers who co-produced environmental engineering as an academic discipline and environmental job series [*hwangyeong-jik*] as part of the new bureaucracy for Seoul. One sanitary engineer argued that domestic expertise was not advancing sufficiently due to the wastewater and human waste treatment plants which were built with foreign money and imported machines. On the other hand, environmental managers in corporate factories organized themselves with help of journalists,

academics, and bureaucrats. Even with their own association of a large membership, the organization's leaders found it hard to separate their interest from that of the company owners. This shows the professionalization of Korean environmental engineers was not as straight-forward as it looked from the beginning.

After reading this theme issue, I hope you would feel the field of environmental history more familiar. If we turn our attention to 2021, many emerging topics that draw public attention including climate change, water crisis, animal rights, and pandemic, can benefit from more environmental history, a study of human influence on the planet, of water usage and recycling, of human and their relationship with the rest of the world. For the past decade worldwide, environmental history has been growing. I hope you join us building it together for the decades to come.