

Research Note

Storytelling from the Visual Archives: Marginalized People and the Materiality of Infrastructure*

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Introduction

My interest in digital archives and visual sources originated from an unexpected research experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. At that time, based in North America, I was working on my dissertation that examines the history of water resources and infrastructure development in twentieth-century South Korea. Due to COVID restrictions, all of my scheduled archival trips were cancelled, and it was necessary to re-plan the entire process of my research. Fortunately, this was not the worst possible scenario. Just prior to the outbreak, I conducted the first archival work in South Korea. While analyzing primary sources that I collected from the trip—mostly engineering papers, policy reports, memorandum, correspondence, propaganda, newspapers, and so forth—I began to scrutinize digitized sources accessible online amid the lockdown.

In the digital archives, I encountered a type of source that I had previously overlooked during my archival visits: visual images. When present at the site of the archives, I unconsciously paid much greater attention to traditional textual materials. I may have considered that the bundle of documents in boxes was a more valid form of historical source for the study of how experts and those in political office transformed natural rivers into national economic sources. Of course, some visual mate-

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rials drew my attention, such as hydrological maps that manifest engineers' perspectives on the natural world. However, I treated visual materials primarily as supplementary sources that enhance the comprehension of what the textual materials already told.

Upon closer examination of visual sources widely available in digital archives, I discovered that images are not merely illustrations of the written content but rather in some instances convey something contrary. Some photographs of dam construction feature historical actors I had never seriously considered, including laborers, women and children, animals, and even elements of the natural environment including rocks and trees. Their presence in the nation's water development projects was scarcely mentioned in texts discussing engineering feasibility, economic potential, and national water resources development agendas.

Another point of view that I learned from the images was regarding the substantial materiality of infrastructure. Among several images depicting the landscape of a dam construction site, I found manual laborers working on the ground. They are shown to be collecting rocks and gravel with manual tools, which would be used for the dam construction. While textual documents rarely specify the sources of the raw materials of the dam structure, photographs reveal that their extraction and transportation happened within ordinary surroundings of a local community. Photographs are not simply illustrative presentations of traditional sources; they sometimes help us identify neglected historical actors and material culture.

In this short paper, I intend to extend this research experience to discuss the complexity of visual images as historical sources. What I offer here will not be a clear-cut cookbook recipe on the use of images for writing history. Instead, I will use my experience to explore the vexed problems of narrating histories with images. On one hand, I hope to point out the challenges of using visual sources resulting from the lack of information. On the other hand, I would like to address my conviction that images provoke us to imagine alternative narratives by highlighting underrepresented actors and the materiality of historical events.

The essay starts with an introduction to the National Archives of Korea, where I have accessed numerous visual materials relevant to my research topic. The National Archives provides a range of digital images but only with limited explanation regarding how they were produced, distributed, and read at that time. Next, I articulate historical research as a form of storytelling, placing images in narrating alternative stories. Through my case study, the following section will demonstrate how visual archives have facilitated the exploration of marginalized communities and the material dimension of infrastructure development, an aspect largely overlooked in the prevailing narrative. I will conclude the essay by discussing the potential for new insights that would be gained through collective experimentation and conversation in an effort to write history from visual archives.

Digitized Visual Materials in the National Archives of Korea

If historians of modern and contemporary Korea vote for the most widely used archives, the National Archives of Korea (hereafter NAK) would be the strongest candidate. NAK houses historical materials produced by official institutions, which are readily accessible to those without language barriers. NAK is digitizing many of its holdings, but most documents still need to be read in person at the archive. During my first archival visit, I spent most of the time at NAK consulting engineering reports, correspondence between domestic and overseas institutions, and government propaganda.

Upon returning from the trip and facing lockdown measures, I revisited the NAK website, exploring online sources. Most of the sources available online are visual images that I had previously glanced over. It seems that NAK, and probably other digital archives, tend to favor scanning visual images over textual documents because one piece of image is more effective in making the digital archives accessible than three hundred pages of government documents. The vividness of the image lends material form to a world that can often feel abstract, making it a compelling point for capturing the attention of online visitors. In the case of my research, if I search “Soyanggang Dam (소양강댐)”—the biggest dam on the Han River in South Korea—the result shows 1,040 items. Out of these, there are 164 materials accessible online, with 157 of them being visual sources.¹

Taking a closer look at those digital sources, I found some interesting photographs that capture historical actors absent from the textual records. One photograph depicts a group of workers, sweating profusely, working on the earth with a shovel or a pickaxe. Another one includes children and a woman with a baby on her back wandering around a dam construction site. Other images depict the harsh nature that humans come across in dam construction environments, such as heavy boulders and unruly currents on which textual documents rarely elaborate.

The visual sources from the National Archives were fascinating, but I found it challenging to juxtapose the narratives in the texts with the features in the images. The primary problem was the lack of historical explanation about the production, circulation, and use of the images. The available information only includes a title, photograph date, and producing organization, while the identities of the subjects are widely unknown. It is also uncertain who took those pictures for what purposes, how the taken photographs were distributed, and by whom the photographs were consumed. Moreover, the absence of tangibility of online materials made it worse, sometimes missing helpful scribbles or captions that might be written on the back of the

¹ Searched from the National Archives of Korea, <https://www.archives.go.kr/>, on 1 June 2024.

photographs or somewhere. These problems render images ambiguous as historical sources, making them more difficult to interpret. As Peter Burke mentioned, “Images are mute witnesses and it is difficult to translate their testimony into words.”²

At the recent digital archives workshop held at Pusan National University, I had conversations with a few historians struggling with similar issues regarding how to effectively address visual sources in their research. One of my colleagues who studies garbage disposal in Seoul has collected a series of photographs describing unconventional actors, namely scavengers. She was interested in those marginalized from the city’s wastescape but had difficulty writing their stories. Other than those images, textual sources focus primarily on emerging garbage disposal technologies, municipal policies, and futuristic visions instead of underrepresented figures in the images. I believe many historians have the same experience facing challenges in using photographs in their research, but those images are too compelling to discard.

Storytelling with Photographs

Online archives have made me reconsider my assumption that images merely serve as visual confirmation of established narratives. In the critique of modern visual technologies, Donna Haraway demystified the “objectivity” of photography, saying, “vision in this technological feast becomes unregulated gluttony ... which no longer seems just mythically about the god-trick of seeing everything from nowhere, but to have put myth into ordinary practice.”³ If we use photographs as representations of historical facts, the absence of details becomes a significant obstacle in writing history with visual sources. However, considering the subjective influence inherent in visual documentation, images, even without much information, provide historians with inspiring opportunities to imagine photography’s historical contexts. Photographs are not merely “traces on the photographic plate” but the products of the selection of the subjects, adjustment of color and lighting, and scenes’ composition.⁴

In this vein, photography is as much a historian’s storytelling rather than a reflection of the real world. William Cronon elucidates that the construction of narratives, what professional historians do with valid sources, “makes us *care* about its subject in a way that a chronicle does not.”⁵ Historians craft varied narratives from the same

² Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 14.

³ Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1991), 189.

⁴ Burke, *Eyewitnessing*, 22.

⁵ William Cronon, “A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative,” *Journal of American History* 78:4 (1992), 1347-1376, quotation on 1374. Emphasis in original.

chronicle based on their political visions and desires that they seek to convey. Likewise, photographers produce different images from the same event to affect potential viewers' moral vision in a particular way. Photographs thus need historians' analytical attention, considering "how practices of seeing, representing, and subject positioning are linked to systems of knowledge and power that shape what can be understood as true."⁶ Photography constructs visual culture, presenting the world from a



Figure 1. Manual laborers at the Soyonggang Dam Construction Site. Source: "Soyonggang Dam Construction 1 소양강댐건설공사 1," National Archives of Korea, CET0064857.

specific point of view.

When examining images, I found that a recent method in the history of technology, so-called "reverse engineering," provides valuable insight.⁷ This non-traditional

⁶ Kyle Grayson and Jocelyn Mawdsley, "Scopic Regimes and the Visual Turn in International Relations: Seeing World Politics through the Drone," *European Journal of International Relations* 25:2 (2019), 432.

⁷ Hyeok Hweon Kang, "Reverse Engineering as History and Method: The Portuguese Espingarda in Chosŏn Korea," *History and Technology* 38:2–3 (2022), 144–66; Sangwoon Yoo, "Semiconductor Reverse Engineering: Development of TV Sound Integrated Circuits, 1977–1978 반도체

methodology addresses the need for historians to better understand and materialize the embedded knowledge by making and unmaking artifacts with their own hands. For photography, this hands-on practice might not be possible because the ocular device and subjects are mostly unknown. Nevertheless, we can engage in thought experiments, envisioning all the possibilities of what might have occurred when the photograph was taken or when someone was seeing it.

For example, several pictures of laborers digging the ground with manual tools prompt us to consider questions of power, control, and agency in the history of dam construction. Reviewing construction photographs has led me to reflect on the relationships at the site by imagining the daily interactions between supervisors and manual laborers, the identities of the anonymous workers in identical uniforms, and the dialogue, negotiation, cooperation, and discipline that might occur during the process of taking pictures. In addition, considering that the Bureau of Public Information (공보처) produced these photographs, it is evident that the photographers demonstrated diligence and sincerity in their portrayal of the intense and arduous labor essential for state-building. Although this might not be a traditional method, it offers valuable insights in examining the technological and social practices of water infrastructure development.

Visual sources offer possibilities for constructing alternative narratives to those created solely through textual materials. Archives are places where memories of the past are preserved, but they are also places where the past is selectively and systematically forgotten.⁸ Visual archives, with their diverse and rich materials that help capture actors often disregarded in traditional sources, encourage more engaging and meaningful inquiries into what we would like to care.

Material Culture in Photographs

The examination of visual culture also leads us to material culture, not only because photography encompasses a set of material practices—from taking pictures to circulating copies—but also because photographs capture the material presence of historical events. In the field of sound studies, scholars have recently utilized photographs of acoustic artifacts, such as a picture of war tubas with a marching army, to elucidate the sensory engagement of ordinary people and its political effects.⁹ The images of audio-based technology highlight that sonic experiences are tangible in the real

역공학의 기술사: TV 음향 집적회로의 개발, 1977-1978,” *Journal of Science & Technology Studies* 과학기술학연구 22:3 (2022), 107-133.

⁸ Ann Laura Stoler, “Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance,” *Archival Science* 2 (2002), 87–109.

⁹ Keisuke Yamada, “Cover Essay: Visual Images in Sound Studies,” *Technology and Culture* 64:2 (2023), 303–7.

world. Similarly, visual sources guide us to envision material and everyday experiences associated with artifacts.

Scholars have shown that materiality serves as an analytical focal point for infrastructure studies. In everyday life, material properties of infrastructure are often invisible as it is “part of the background for other kinds of work.”¹⁰ When utilizing tap water within our households, we often overlook the extensive infrastructure behind it, including plumbing, water treatment plants, and intake facilities. Similarly, when we access the internet, few necessarily think about a collection of wires, cables, signal amplifiers, data centers, and so forth. Infrastructure reveals its materiality only in moments of failure, necessitating the assistance of maintainers to fix any malfunctioning components within the physical system.



Figure 2. Soyanggang Dam Construction Site. Source: “Soyanggang Dam Construction 2 소양강댐건설공사2,” National Archives of Korea, CET0064857.

¹⁰ Martha Lampland and Susan Leigh Star, *Standards and Their Stories: How Quantifying, Classifying, and Formalizing Practices Shape Everyday Life* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 17.



Figure 3. Children at the Soyanggang Dam Construction Site. Source: “Children near the Soyanggang Dam Construction Site 소양강댐 건설 현장 인근 아이들 모습,” National Archives of Korea, CET0064857.

Paying attention to the materiality allows us to perceive infrastructure not merely as a neutral backdrop of economic and social activities but rather as a process of cultural, political, and ethical choices.¹¹ The construction and maintenance of water infrastructure in Mumbai not only determines access to water but also reshapes social identities of citizens, often resulting in the exclusion of minority groups from the legitimate municipal services.¹² If exploring the use of the internet on a smartphone from the material perspective, we take into account invisible maintainers, environmental degradation caused by mining in developing countries, and massive greenhouse gas emissions from a data center.¹³ Material arrangements of infrastructure exert political power and foster inequalities.

¹¹ Susan Leigh Star, “The Ethnography of Infrastructure,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 43:3 (1999), 389.

¹² Nikhil Anand, *Hydraulic City: Water and the Infrastructures of Citizenship in Mumbai* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

¹³ Kate Crawford, *The Atlas of AI: Power, Politics, and the Planetary Costs of Artificial Intelligence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), chapter 1.

Visual archives contribute to reveal that the material components of infrastructure do not originate from thin air. In the case of the Soyanggang Dam, photographs from the National Archives indicate that dam construction was an extensive material practice disrupting the rural environment. In Figure 2, the worker in the center and blurred others in the distance should be members of the Nation Construction Corps (국토건설단), judging from their same military-like outfits. The main subject's muscle suggests that hard work was involved in collecting aggregates with a shovel, which could be used for the dam structure. In this dirty and brutal labor site, there is an unexpected guest on the left edge, a child squatting down while looking at the camera. If we move our eyes to the background, we can see several thatched houses. Figure 3. depicts a woman holding one hand and carrying a baby on her back. These subjects captured by the lens tell that the work of gathering and transporting raw materials for the dam construction took place within the everyday space of a local community.

The photographs prompted me to examine the raw materials of the dam, an understudied aspect of the history of the Soyanggang Dam. One news article highlighted the remarkable scale of the construction project, pointing out that the volume of aggregates utilized for the dam was the same as the quantity that each citizen accumulated seven *kamani* of soil.¹⁴ However, the article, along with other textual materials, rarely delineates the origins of the aggregates used in the construction. Engineering reports only demonstrated that building the dam with aggregates would be a more rational choice than using reinforced concrete, considering the construction costs. Yet, the calculation of construction costs in the official records concealed arduous labor, dust and noise which might disturb the local community, and cheap workers mobilized by the nation. Sourcing raw materials constituted an essential part of infrastructure building, but textual archives widely ignore those activities.

While dominant narratives focus on technological specifications and the economic results of dam construction, photographs provide unexpected opportunities to tell alternative stories. Although traditional documents state the sacrifice of displaced people due to submersion, they hardly elaborate on the broader impacts of raw material work on the environment and local communities. Visual materials have led me to imagine the hard and dusty labor in a local community, reflecting on where to begin and end the story of the dam construction.

¹⁴ *Kamani* refers to a traditional woven straw sack, typically used for storing and transporting grains. One standard *kamani* can hold approximately 80 kilograms of rice. *Joseon Ilbo*, 25 November 1972, 4.

Beyond Narrative Dilemma

Could images be valid historical sources more than visual representations of textual records? One serious epistemological challenge of narrating stories with images should be the so-called “narrative dilemma”: if it is possible to narrate different stories from the same visual materials, how can we guarantee historical factuality, the very fundamental premise of history? As I previously mentioned, the National Archives offer only little information about the pictures. So, I must employ my imagination to utilize the photographs, meaning that my interpretation could vary. However, we are not able to write history by using only our imagination. History is not a fiction.

William Cronon has already discussed the narrative dilemma in history, although he does not focus on the use of visual materials. Explaining that historians write contesting stories from the same historical event, Cronon points out the danger of postmodernist deconstruction of texts and relativism. While acknowledging the power of narrative, Cronon rejected the assertion that “the past is infinitely malleable, thereby apparently undermining the entire historical project.”¹⁵ One of his suggestions, as an effort to seek a safe ground from the narrative dilemma, is based on the fact that we write history for a scholarly community. Peer scholars consistently caution us about fallacious, biased, and erroneous interpretations, thus allowing our stories to be scrutinized not merely as stories but as nonfiction works. Criticism often promotes integrity by compelling us to address conflicting evidence and counternarratives. “We tell stories *with* each other and *against* each other in order to speak *to* each other.”¹⁶

Honestly, I do not have a clear answer on how to overcome the narrative dilemma in using images, but Cronon’s argument may provide a clue. Even if textual documents are limited, we write history, and communities review its legitimacy. In the same manner, we can position visual materials at the center of our historical analysis to develop more meaningful research questions, identify what historical actors we would like to care about, and discuss new and insightful approaches. There should be no simple way of writing narratives with images, but having more methodological experiments and conversations would lead us to inspiring and productive historical inquiries.

¹⁵ Cronon, “A Place for Stories,” 1374, (note 5).

¹⁶ Ibid., 1373-4. Emphasis in original.