

CONTINUITIES AMIDST CHANGE

Deforestation and Land Control in Late Choson and Colonial Korea

by Karis Ryu

Abstract

The Korean peninsula as a natural environment was constantly influenced by the actions of the human actors that ruled over it. This environmental history paper observes the exploitation of Korean pine trees and agriculture under two different and consecutive forms of state power: the late Choson kingdom, a ruling body indigenous to the peninsula, versus externally imposed Japanese colonial rule during the early twentieth century. While acknowledging the dichotomy between indigenous innocence and colonial tyranny that is often discussed in political and cultural histories of colonial Korea, this environmental history offers greater nuance and insight into the predicament of non-human actors within the same narrative. Maps, Choson dynasty annals, and secondary scholarship are used to identify both the Choson and Japanese states as environmental exploiters and to uncover the role of the Japanese Government-General of Korea in propagating ideas of Korean ineptitude in order to justify Japanese interference with Korean lumber and agriculture, and ultimately the acceleration of environmental exploitation to produce materials for the Second Sino-Japanese War. While fully acknowledging the atrocities of colonialism, this paper first and foremost strives to shed light on the reality of environmental damage under all forms of concentrated political power. The reality of environmental damage enacted by state agendas is continuously present in different capacities under different forms of rule, underneath the shifting plates of cultural changes and political conflicts.

Acknowledging the irrevocable entanglement of environmental manipulation with political state-building efforts is key to understanding the history of environmental exploitation in Korea. The Korean peninsula has long been a transformative, intermediary frontier in the midst of a multitude of cultural and political entities from the Chinese to the Mongols to the Japanese, its location making it a territory of contention and conquest throughout history. Korea is also home to an illustrious legacy of indigenous dynasties that enacted their own political agendas. The Korean environment, meanwhile, is also subject to a wide range of temperate possibilities, lending to what John S. Lee identifies as “significant climatic variations.”¹ The survival of populations and maintenance of political entities depended on working with these climatic changes. Therefore, survival in Korea was contingent on harnessing the environment in order to cope with climatic extremes.

This paper inspects the Korean environment under the jurisdiction of two forms of hegemonic power: the late Choson kingdom, of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and twentieth-century Japanese colonial rule. Careful to avoid the trap of simplifying environmental damage into the impacts of the “colonizer” versus the powerless “colonized,” this paper observes the Korean forests and fields in a particularly transformative timeframe, from the final centuries of late Choson to the twentieth-century height of wartime Japanese colonialism: the “cusp” of social and technological change. Existing historiography covering the impacts of Japanese rule has been divisive, with “colonial modernization” cautiously used as a term that describes both the atrocities of colonialism and the technological advancements made during the period.² The initiative of this paper is not to dismiss or fixate on Japanese colonial rule itself, but to understand how two distinct polities exploited the same place.

Late Choson was characterized by on the one hand, a political power that strove to protect and strengthen its kingdom through the manipulation of forests and extraction of natural resources, and extractive methods practiced by locals in order to survive Korea’s cold seasons on the other. Japanese imposition tainted perception of all Korean environmental practices, in general, with paternalistic assumptions of ignorance and unsustainability while promoting modern technological reforms that would replenish what Koreans had depleted. This advancement of “progress” was a complicated interaction between conservation and exploitation, especially when Japan accelerated industrial production during the 1930s for the Second Sino-Japanese War, a military conflict with China that later became a theater of World War II.³ Late Choson-era exploitative practices were always hierarchical, supervised by a larger political state controlling the behaviors of a common populace in order to prioritize its own prosperity. The Japanese reframing of all practices, state and local, as evidence of Korean ignorance, and of Japanese supervision as more

- 1 John S. Lee, “Protect the Pines, Punish the People: Forests and the State in Pre-Industrial Korea, 918–1897” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2017), 22.
- 2 Jin-Yeon Kang, “Forging the Colonial State as an Arbiter of Internal Boundaries: Japanese Colonial Rule and the Agrarian Relational Shift in Korea,” *Agricultural History* 89, no. 2 (2015): 162.
- 3 David Fedman, “Wartime Forestry and the ‘Low Temperature Lifestyle’ in Late Colonial Korea, 1937–1945,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 77, no. 2 (2018): aaa.

environmentally intelligent and efficient, was in itself ignorant of the fact that environmental extraction was maintained, if not exacerbated, during twentieth-century colonial rule. Japan's interventions in the name of rescuing Koreans from themselves ultimately accelerated and brought about new forms of environmental damage.

The Korean peninsula of the late nineteenth century was home to an array of floral diversity, and the red pine tree was of particular significance.⁴ Proliferation of the red pine tree, and its ultimate placement at the top of Choson's "sylvan hierarchy," was both the intentional result and unprecedented byproduct of various Choson state-building efforts.⁵ The red pine became integral to how the state enforced kingdom boundaries and infrastructure. Timber built ships and structures in the capital city.⁶ After the Imjin Wars, Japan's first attempts at invading the Korean peninsula in 1592 and 1597, forests were used to expand protective military garrisons.⁷ Meanwhile, local villages developed dependences on forests for sustenance and warmth. Villagers took to the hillsides to gather branches and roots for fertilizer and sustenance.⁸ By the eighteenth century, the need for timber was only increasing. Pine forests, therefore, and the harvesting of them, are integral to understanding the needs and motivations of the different players that composed Choson society.

On the other side of the Choson coin was agriculture and land development. Korean agriculture consisted primarily of rice cultivation, a system of "intensive horticulture" that led farmers to, as they exhausted their holdings, search for available land "beyond the natural growth of hillsides" and harvest fertilizer.⁹ Rice paddies were grown in wet fields, and while practices were not "monolithic," swidden farming required deforestation and land clearance.¹⁰ The fertilizer that villagers gathered and made from hillside waste denuded the environment, which became overrun with scrub pines.¹¹ Thus, also important for consideration is the relationship between agricultural intensification and environmental damage. Local agriculture would come under the scrutiny of the late Choson state in its efforts to counteract the growing scarcity of the environment's essential resources.

The Choson period itself spanned centuries of commercial development. By 1700 Korea saw the steady growth of commercial centers, as well as surges in urban population growth.¹² These concentrated populations, especially in urban centers, needed timber for construction and wood for fuel.¹³ Korea itself experienced throughout the Choson period a "broad ranging expansion of commercial activity," both within the kingdom and with external states such as Tokugawa Japan.¹⁴ Commercialization, and the concentration of social and economic activity within designated centers, thus shaped the landscape and culture of Choson. The

construction and conduction of economic activity depended on resource extraction, especially from Choson forests, and the very nature of the commercial order that developed would affect the late Choson state's attempts to oversee economic activities and exert control over both its people and its environment.

By the end of the nineteenth century, ecosystems were overburdened by timber extraction: the uplands deteriorated and lowlands suffered. Deforestation and land exhaustion were especially apparent in areas that surrounded urban centers, where rising populations in concentrated spaces required more resources.¹⁵ The constant demand for timber resulted in a scarcity in wood for both the state and Korean villagers. Even by 1700, almost all reclaimable land was under some form of cultivation.¹⁶ Choson was in a precarious environmental condition. Exploitation had brought the kingdom to this point, and the continuation of existing practices would continue to deplete the forests and hills. Out of this mire rose the kingdom state as the key player in determining the Korean response to these environmental issues.

*Building a Kingdom:
Exploitation and the Choson State*

Established in a "tumultuous environment," the Choson state sought ways to solidify and strengthen its rule. State forestry became one of its key methods.¹⁷ In its earlier stages, fifteenth-century Choson saw the beginnings of a formal forest system through the "Great Code of Administration" in 1469.¹⁸ The Great Code was the first document to lay out severe consequences for what were deemed as illegal forestry activities by the state on local subjects. Specifically, the government was concerned with an "irresponsible populace": uncivilized villagers who lacked the prudence and the knowledge to efficiently use the environment.¹⁹ The state established "Restricted Forests" to combat timber scarcity and created a corvée system to execute industrial activity, from wood cutting to the construction of state infrastructure.²⁰ Jurisdiction of oversight over the forests, specifically within the capital city of Seoul, was divided among the offices of the bureaucracy in somewhat blurry ways. From the Board of Military Affairs to the Royal Secretariat, the "overlap of duties and functions" concerning state forestry defined the way in which the central government came to impose itself over the administration of forestry and the distribution of its products.²¹ The Choson state employed forestry as a way to strengthen its borders, increase its control over the people, construct the kingdom, and ultimately enforce its own political authority.

The "Restricted Forests," then, were not completely for the sake of conservation. Returning to the state's concerns with its unknowledgeable population, it is important to consider whether the state's interests lay not with efficient distribution of wood to its subjects, but with the preservation of resources for state use, and thus the barring of villagers from

4 John S. Lee, "Protect the Pines, Punish the People," 23.

5 John S. Lee, 26-27.

6 John S. Lee, 78.

7 John S. Lee, 35.

8 C.D. Totman, *Pre-industrial Korea and Japan in environmental perspective* (Leiden: BRILL, 2003), 141

9 Ibid., 163.

10 Wooyoun Lee, "Deforestation and Agricultural Productivity in Choson Korea in the 18th and 19th Centuries," in *Community, Commons and Natural Resource Management in Asia*, ed. Yanagisawa Haruka (Singapore: NUS Press, 2015), 31.

11 Totman, *Pre-industrial Korea and Japan*, 155.

12 Totman, 134.

13 Totman, 140.

14 Totman, 130.

15 Totman, 140.

16 Totman, 143.

17 John S. Lee, "Protect the Pines, Punish the People," 67.

18 John S. Lee, 81.

19 John S. Lee, 70.

20 John S. Lee, 89.

21 John S. Lee, 82.

utilizing the same sources. In his aptly titled dissertation “Protect the Pines, Punish the People,” John S. Lee argues that the Choson government occupied itself with guarding Korean pines from “the very people it governed,” due to “statist interests” in utilizing the timber for its own infrastructure.²² Timber was needed to build ships for the navy, garrisons in the forests, and buildings in the capital city. While the state was concerned with deforestation, its motivations in enforcing regulations were more indicative of its state-building agenda than a sense of environmental preservation.

Throughout the middle to late Choson period, the government enacted a variety of codes, including the 1768 law code that included a tax rate for forestry, and limited the lands available for swidden in an effort to “control its ever expanding practice.”²³ By the nineteenth century, lumber shortages had only increased. Even as protections increased, so did the rate of illicit activities, resulting in extensive damage to “both private and state forests.”²⁴ The annals of King Kojong, the last king of Choson during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, reveal what the forests looked like from the people “above” in the Choson social order. In one such account from 1866 concerning the *pongsan*, or government-restricted forest, of Uijeongbu, Kojong calls for the prohibition of pine tree cutting in the name of protecting the trees themselves from exploitative practices. He also identifies this action as beneficial to the *baekso’ng*, or subjects, who live in the area by preserving their environment.²⁵ His rhetoric exhibits both concern with state jurisdiction and the framing of it as concern for Choson subjects. The annal reveals that illicit activities continued to be a problem, even in areas designated as state grounds. Cracking down on such activities was a continued effort by the Choson government all the way through its final stages.

The development of commercial systems in Choson resulted in a unique brokerage system conducted by middlemen and local elites. Infrastructural development led to a “center and locality” dynamic within the Choson dynasty between the capital city and its surrounding towns. By the 1800s, what John S. Lee identifies as “High Choson,” Korea was a “brokered state” in which the intermediate space between the government and commoners was occupied by factions of nobles and merchants.²⁶ Especially following intense wars in the 1600s, local elites increased in power within Choson society, reclaiming land and monopolizing available forests.²⁷ The development of private forests alongside state lands, then, was indicative of the rise of private enterprise simultaneously with the state’s efforts to strengthen its hold on the Choson kingdom. The Choson government partnered with intermediate “brokers” in order to carry out state forestry and strengthen the state. Strengthening the state economically and politically required increasing market potential, which meant that an increase in regulations was also accompanied by the rise of local

elites, and cooperation with private merchants and private shipping.²⁸ Within state supervision of forests, merchants became responsible for the distribution of wood products.²⁹ Although the military largely retained control in the southern provinces, other regions developed a “dependence on merchants” through external conflicts and famines.³⁰

Choson state forestry was defined by both the increasing scrutiny of the state and a “reliance on brokerage in a changing economy.”³¹ From a political perspective, this dynamic contributed to the formation of a unique state system of jurisdiction. From an environmental perspective, however, damage continued, if not worsened. Wooyoun Lee argues that it was this form of state forestry that led to the collapse of Choson itself. Due to inefficient regulation of conservation, Lee characterizes the Choson government as “lax” in terms of permitting environmental damage.³² Deforestation reduced biodiversity, destroyed the “water control system” by increasing rain runoff into bodies of water, and opened reservoirs to sedimentation.³³ Whether actions were taken from the local or state level, exploitation was motivated by profit and power and had negative consequences for the environment.

A Missed Chance for Sustainable Practice?

The ecological damage inflicted through forestry during the late Choson period, both local and state-run, was extensive. Due to the potent mix of both state and private tree cutting and land clearance, even amidst claims of conservation, deforestation was “endemic in the agriculturally rich and populous regions of Choson.”³⁴ Even as the state sought to create “restricted” spaces, land clearance was accompanied by “no afforestation plans.”³⁵ Wooyoun Lee specifically inspects representations of biodiversity in Korean and Japanese traditional paintings of their respective environments, finding that realist paintings of Seoul by Chōng Sōn “conspicuously lack diversity of species” save the “ubiquitous pine tree, and willows by the side of rivers.”³⁶ Deforestation and land clearance clearly affected the Korean environment in drastic ways that impacted native flora and fauna.

On the other hand, an environmental method emerged during late Choson that claimed to make the practice of forestry sustainable. *Kum-songgye* were pine protection associations chartered by villages in southeastern Korea that engaged in a communal forestry system.³⁷ They were formed mostly for local interests, and were even in opposition to the state, at times.³⁸ *Songgye*, in the words of Chun and Tak, was a “community-based grassroots movement to protect people’s interest.” Such locally based systems enacted a range of activities, from establishing wood quotas to sectioning off forests into spaces for “specific activities.”³⁹ Local governments had the potential to convert state “restricted” forests in which peasant behaviors were made illegal into *songgye* forests, which were “sustainably maintained” due to their ability to “[weave] the social fabric of

22 John S. Lee, 68.

23 Wooyoun Lee, “Deforestation and Agricultural Productivity,” 35.

24 Wooyoun Lee, 35.

25 “의정부에서 기리진에 소나무를 베는 것을 금하도록 아뢰다,” [U’ijo’ngpueso’ karijine sonamuru’l penu’n ko’su’l ku’mhatorok aroeta / Decree to prohibit the felling of pine trees in Uijeongbu], From Choson Dynasty Annals, *Kojong sillok* 08/09/1866, http://sillok.history.go.kr/id/kza_10308009_003 (accessed December 2019).

26 John S. Lee, “Protect the Pines, Punish the People,” 30–31, 35.

27 John S. Lee, 34.

28 John S. Lee, 177.

29 John S. Lee, 181.

30 John S. Lee, 178.

31 John S. Lee, 192.

32 Wooyoun Lee, “Deforestation and Agricultural Productivity,” 34.

33 Wooyoun Lee, 45.

34 Wooyoun Lee, 51.

35 Wooyoun Lee, 30.

36 Wooyoun Lee, 37.

37 John S. Lee, “Protect the Pines, Punish the People,” 217.

38 John S. Lee, 220.

39 Young Woo Chun and Kwang-II Tak, “Songgye, a Traditional Knowledge System for Sustainable Forest Management in Choson Dynasty of Korea,” *Forest Ecology and Management* 257, no. 10 (2009): 2023.

the village” through shared “agro-forestry activities.”⁴⁰ According to Chun and Tak, *songgye* had the potential to establish communal, local forestry circuits that gave villagers a sense of ownership and accountability over their resources.

Whether such a system was truly sustainable, especially when juxtaposed with the political agenda of a larger state, is difficult to conclude now. What is true, however, is the elimination of *songgye* by the arrival and imposition of Japanese colonial rule onto the Korean landscape. The next phase of environmental exploitation on the peninsula was defined by the arrival of a new power that not only took exploitation to a new scale, but reframed Choson impacts on the environment as those of an incapable and uncivilized state and populace.

*From Kingdom to Colony:
Japanese Reconfiguration of Korean Land*

When Japan colonized Korea at the turn of the twentieth century, the established colonial governmental system, the Government-General of Korea (GGK), took it upon itself to reconfigure environmental conflict as indicative of Korean ineptitude. Japanese officials justified their arrival through the “implication of thin or bare vegetation,” as indicated through the Korean Forest Map of 1910, and painted Koreans as “undeveloped people” with “histories of devastation.”⁴¹ Both Japan and the West condemned Korea for “building their own ecological deathbed.”⁴² Even when research suggested that devastation was more due to Japanese newcomers than Korean natives, the GGK subsequently edited studies. Indigenous agricultural practices were causes of “land erosion,” and shifting cultivation, one of the ways in which Koreans farmed, was decried by professor of agronomy Denzaemon Hashimoto as “extreme predatory agriculture.”⁴³ By deliberately framing of Korean practices as responsible for fundamental damage, the GGK claimed Japan to be the power that was capable of turning the tide that Choson had caused. This declaration heavily influenced subsequent historiography on colonial environmental efforts.

The colonial government redefined the Korean rural environment through a variety of methods. First, Japanese officials came to occupy a particular space within the “brokered state” left by the obsolete Choson. As colonial arbiters, they rearranged the land system into one based on private ownership, which exacerbated the divide between peasants and landlords.⁴⁴ This restructuring fundamentally transformed Korean agricultural practices. Private ownership led to massive land reclamation, and a new emphasis on “economic transactions and contractual relations” rather than social relationships between landowners and farmers fostered animosity between the two parties. Organizations emerged for both peasants and landlords, backed by primarily leftists and the colonial state, respectively. Peasants came to “identify Korean landlords with the Japanese.”⁴⁵ Thus, colonial arbitration pitted classes of Korean people against each

other in a way that prevented one group from accumulating power and ensured the Japanese state ultimate sovereignty and control over Korea’s people and environment.

Environmentally, land reclamation, the ushering in of new technologies, and the intensification of agricultural production had long-lasting consequences on the peninsula. Reclamation projects were capitalistic business projects. As it was more worthwhile to invest in Korea than mainland Japan, the number of proposals for reclamation licenses increased throughout the late 1910s to early 1920s with “increases in rice and farmland prices.”⁴⁶ While not all proposals were accepted by the GGK, reclamation projects were primarily conducted on large scales, and the rights for Korean projects, even when initially proposed by Korean people, were often transferred to Japanese overseers.⁴⁷ Reclamation ultimately served to reinforce the food supply of the Japanese Empire and, as a medium for colonial arbitration, promoted colonial landlord-tenant relationships.⁴⁸ More and more, Korea became a producer of Japanese resources.

In addition to reclamation projects, Japanese officials replaced traditional Korean rice with “superior strains” and constructed more extensive irrigation networks, reshaping the Korean environment into more intensive agricultural systems.⁴⁹ Korea became a “convenient granary” for Japan, and Japanese officials sought to organize Korea into a site of efficient crop production.⁵⁰ Agriculture intensified for rice, millet, barley, and wheat on the peninsula through the Japanese regime, as well as for soybeans along the western coast especially (Appendix).⁵¹ Thus, the GGK used both physical manipulation and social reconfiguration of intra-Korean relationships to exert its control over Korea’s natural resources. However, as a non-Japanese colony, Korea was also expendable. When impacted by the global economic depression of the late 1920s, Japan set up economic protections for its nation that resulted in the accumulation of Korea-grown rice and grains within the peninsula, and a significant decrease in the prices of agricultural products.⁵² As much as the GGK claimed to be technologically and intellectually equipped to “better handle” the Korean landscape than Koreans themselves, first and foremost in its agenda, as expected of an empire, was the well-being of its nation-state, not the sustainability of its practices.

- 46 Chaisung Lim, “Reclamation Projects and Development of Agricultural Land in Colonial Korea,” *The Review of Korean Studies* 21, no. 2 (December 2018): 29.
- 47 Lim, 27.
- 48 Lim, 28.
- 49 Kang, “Forging the Colonial State,” 166.
- 50 John Wesley Coulter and Bernice Bong Hee Kim, “Land Utilization Maps of Korea,” *Geographical Review* 24, no. 3 (1934): 419.
- 51 Coulter and Bong Hee Kim, 420–421. See Appendix.
- 52 Kang, “Forging the Colonial State,” 175.
- 53 Wooyoun Lee, “Deforestation and Agricultural Productivity,” 26.

The Science of “Ondology”

Of particular significance was the cultural and environmental debate surrounding the technology of ondol, or underfloor heating through the transfer of heat from an active stove in Korean homes. The ondol system was integral to Korean life on all social levels; by the seventeenth century, ondol had become “the rule throughout the court compound in the capital.”⁵³ In 1872, King Kojong declared that Kyo’ngki, Junwo’n,

40 Chun and Tak, 2024.

41 Taisaku Komeie, “Colonial Environmentalism and Shifting Cultivation in Korea: Japanese Mapping, Research, and Representation,” *Geographical Review of Japan* 79, no. 12 (2006): 669–670.

42 John S. Lee, “Protect the Pines, Punish the People,” 237.

43 Komeie, “Colonial Environmentalism,” 672–674.

44 Kang, “Forging the Colonial State,” 161–163.

45 Kang, 171–173.

- 54 “경기전, 준원전 등을 온돌로 고쳐 대청을 만들어 이안하고 환안하게 하다,” [Kyo’ngk-ijo’n, junwo’njo’n tu’ngu’l ondollo koch’yo’ taech’yo’ngu’l mantu’llo’ ianhako hwanan-hake hata / Fixing kyo’ngki-jo’n and junwo’njo’n to ondol systems], From Choson Dynasty Annals, *Kojong sillok* 05/14/1872, http://sillok.history.go.kr/id/kza_10905014_002 (accessed December 2019).
- 55 Wooyoun Lee, “Deforestation and Agricultural Productivity,” 27.
- 56 David Fedman, “The Ondol Problem and the Politics of Forest Conservation in Colonial Korea,” *Journal of Korean Studies* 23, no. 1 (January 2018): 27.
- 57 Fedman, “The Ondol Problem and the Politics of Forest Conservation in Colonial Korea,” 33.
- 58 Fedman, 47-49.

and Yo’nghee halls were to have their main floors remodeled into ondol floors.⁵⁴ Other dynastic records stated that “even the slaves of officials” slept in ondol rooms, and in *Ojuyo’nmun*, an encyclopedia dated to the nineteenth century, author Yi Kyugyo’ng noted that people had expanded the ondol stove into an “ondol sluice system.”⁵⁵ Even during the final century of Choson rule, the state was more concerned with everyday living than “sustainable” forestry practices, in the purest form of the word. While the scale of it could be seen as luxury, ondol as a technology was a way in which Koreans coped with frigid winters. Upon charging into the peninsula, the forces of imperial Japan discovered that ondol was an irrevocable part of Korean life and sustenance.

When Korea became a Japanese colony in 1910, colonial authorities implemented the cultural reconfiguration of ondol in an attempt to assert Japanese authority. The Japanese perceived the timber required for such extensive heating to be wasteful. Ondol was a problem caused by the “imprudent Korean farmer.”⁵⁶ The calls for research into alternative fuels and the reform of the Korean household itself extended from Japanese intellectuals during the 1920s to “reform-minded Koreans” such as Yun Ch’iho.⁵⁷ By the 1920s, it was established that the Korean home *had* to be reconfigured: the question was how that would happen. Methods for “rehabilitated ondol” were proposed and proliferated by Japanese and Korean figures, from flower trays to increase oxygen circulation to remodeled “forest love cook stoves” that minimized the energy consumed by ondol.⁵⁸ According to “veteran woodsman” Doke Atsuyuki in a 1911 article published in the Japanese journal *Chōsen oyobi Manshū* (“Korea and Manchuria”), it was the responsibility of the Japanese to help Koreans overcome a nature of “sloth” that enabled them to degrade their landscape with little to no qualms.⁵⁹ This mentality enabled Japan to claim the upper hand, even in retaining or “preserving” Korean traditions.

The process of reconfiguring ondol during the early colonial period, then, was a way in which Japan claimed a sense of environmental awareness and enlightenment that, in comparison, Korea lacked. Even while retaining the forestry industry itself, the GGK could manipulate the way it was run in the name of conserving Korea’s waste. However, when Japan entered the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937, the need for resources, supplies, and labor became more visceral and militaristic. The Japanese state then used this same authority to justify exploitation of Korea’s environment. Just as Japan had the responsibility to prevent Koreans from degrading their landscape, it also claimed the responsibility to properly utilize it.

The Second Sino-Japanese War engaged the Japanese empire in accelerated mobilization of its military and colonial resources. Korea became

an arena of “forest plunder” as the GGK ramped up the production of timber, charcoal, and chemicals. Korean forests were put under intense extraction practices, and Japanese policy focused on enhancing yields, rationalizing consumption, and varietizing fuel sources.⁶⁰ Early in the war, afforestation was still a public commitment of Japanese forestry officials, but as the conflict intensified, afforestation became a pretext for increased exploitation by the Korean Forestry Development Company (KFDC). In fact, afforestation was “curtailed” starting in 1942. As Korea was stripped of its forests on all levels from national to private, Japan fed a larger Korea-Manchuria economic bloc within the East Asian commercial sphere it strove to create. The state increased forestry quotas to accommodate for the war effort and sought to obtain concentrated control over the distribution of forestry products that ranged from construction materials to synthetic fibers.⁶¹

Amidst large-scale industrial mobilization, however, conservation continued to be a steady practice during wartime, but with different intensity, and with different motivations, than before. Key to this was a public relations campaign that encouraged “village-level sufficiency in fuel consumption.”⁶² Conservation rhetoric was geared toward local efforts and abilities, “practical objectives,” rather than the larger political capabilities of the GGK and Japanese empire. Changes were to start from the home, the hearth itself, especially concerning heat consumption, and this emphasis enabled the GGK to control the practices of Korean people from the most basic levels up. Such campaigns were also a useful framework to define conservation as the responsibility of locals. By making conservation a local effort, GGK could push for fuel conservation without specifically altering its extractive practices, all the while continuing to mobilize colonial production for the war effort. Both threads were ultimately rooted in utilizing the environment to maintain and extend Japanese imperial power.

Japan also wove environmentalism into cultural and political loyalty during the war period. Household actions that adhered to the GGK’s encouragements toward fuel conservation and remodeling of ondol were encouraged as “expressions of imperial fealty.” Such activities were grouped into what was identified as a “low-temperature lifestyle” that was first and foremost based on “individual” decisions. It was up to individual Koreans, then, to take the actions that would “tighten the social fabric of local society.”⁶³ Japanese empire-building on the Korean peninsula established levels for environmental interaction. On the local level, Koreans were to be diligent workers who combated laziness in order to ensure a sustainable environment for themselves and for the Japanese state. On the state level, meanwhile, the GGK used that basis to increase extraction of forestry and agricultural resources from the Korean environment.

59 Fedman, 53-54.

60 David Fedman, “Wartime Forestry and the ‘Low Temperature Lifestyle’ in Late Colonial Korea, 1937-1945,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 77, no. 2 (2018): 333-334.

61 Fedman, “Wartime Forestry and the ‘Low Temperature Lifestyle’ in Late Colonial Korea, 1937-1945,” 339-340.

62 Fedman, 341.

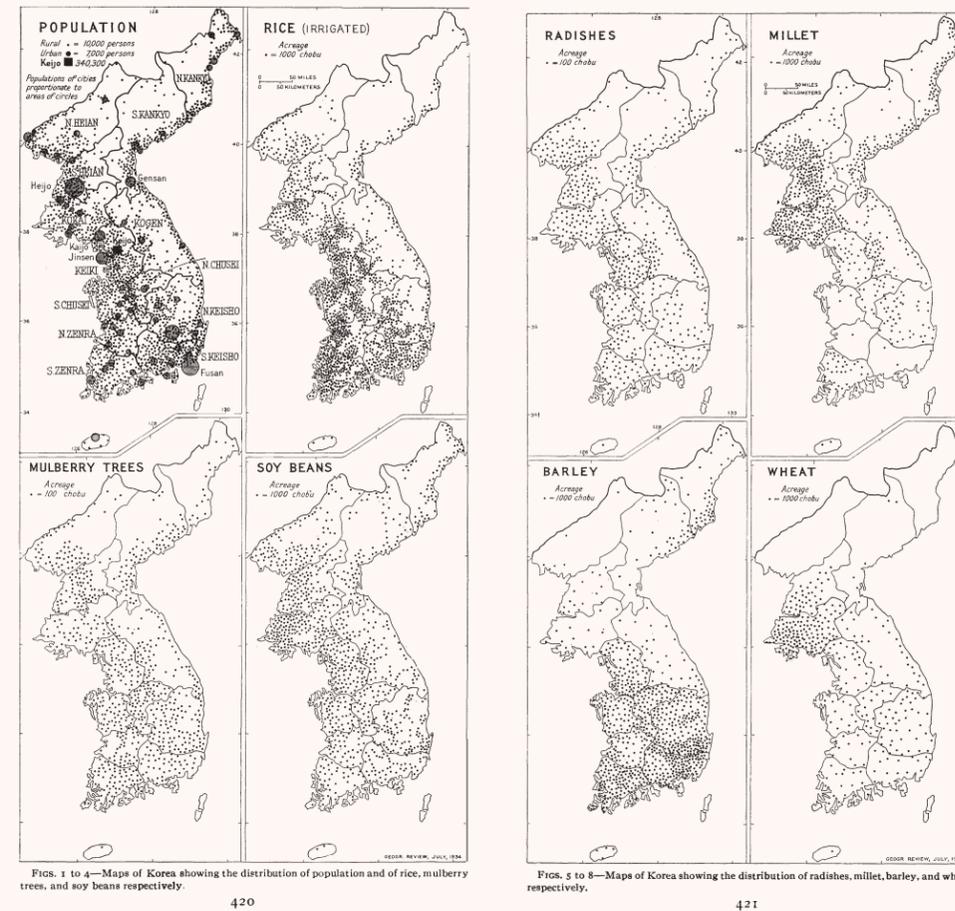
63 Fedman, 342-343.

Both late Choson and imperial Japan were hegemonic states that utilized the Korean environment for the expansion and maintenance of power. Both dove into the forests and fields as sources of productivity and mechanisms to bind subjects irrevocably in service to the state. Exploitation was based in the same essential industries, agriculture and forestry, and it was also conducted through the lens of state responsibility for an irresponsible populace that could not be left alone, lest the people extensively damage the environment. From this perspective, exploitation was a sustained continuity due to both the necessity of it for the survival of Korean people, especially for heat amidst climatic extremes, and the political agendas of the state.

The key difference between the two powers is that the Japanese empire explicitly took exploitation to a larger scale. The Japanese state claimed to be more knowledgeable about prudent environmental practice than the Koreans. The GGK's claim to legitimacy was similar to the late Choson state's except that it extended the idea of incapability to Korean nature itself, using a cultural argument to argue for Japanese superiority and to encourage assimilation and loyalty to Japanese society. This involved a substantial reworking of cultural frameworks to center on the initiative of modifying Korean practices in agriculture and heat consumption on the local level, making conservation and sustainability a local responsibility. However, the Japanese state simultaneously dismissed all vestiges of traditional Korean interactions with the environment as impractical, which swept potentially sustainable practices such as *songgye* into obscurity in favor of "forestry cooperatives or forestry associations" that better acquiesced with the hierarchy of colonial rule.⁶⁴ Designating conservation as a village matter enabled the Japanese state to maintain steady exploitation of Korean resources, even increasing such production for the Second Sino-Japanese War. The Korean environment suffered further damage to its forests, and its land was extensively manipulated into intensive agricultural plots.

Therefore, environmental exploitation must be understood as a continuity through a variety of levels and motivations, from the survival of villages to the expansion of state governments, throughout both the late Choson and colonial periods. It is important to understand the Choson state as a significant actor on the Korean environment, and as a contributor to deforestation and land clearance, before the arrival of the colonial government, as well as observe colonial-era resource extraction through the lens of intensified damage by the Japanese under a guise of cultural enlightenment and conservation. At the end of each day, trees continued to be felled, land continued to be taken from locals and controlled by larger powers, and semblances of conservation veiled the larger, more deeply ingrained currents of environmental damage pushed by state agendas.

64 Chun and Tak, "Songgye, a Traditional Knowledge System," 2025.



Hee Kim, "Land Utilization Maps of Korea," *Geographical Review* 24, no. 3 (1934): 420-421.

About the author

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THERE ARE JUST TWO THINGS

Ríos Montt, Justice, and The Meaning of the Law During and After the Guatemalan Civil War

by Michael Flynn

Abstract

After a fiercely contested trial, in 2013 Guatemalan judges convicted the former head of state, General José Efraín Ríos Montt, of genocide and crimes against humanity, only for the country's highest court to overturn this ruling ten days later. Human rights and watchdog groups tend to see this opposition as a disingenuous and transparent attempt by those connected with the former military state to subvert any attempt to establish real law and order. Yet many in Guatemala, even during the trial, remembered Ríos Montt as the purveyor of "law and order," and Ríos Montt's lawyers themselves appealed to the same principles as the prosecution. In this essay, I examine how the very meaning of law—that is, the basis on which one could claim legitimate authority in relation to the shared social values of Guatemalan society—was contested during and after the Guatemalan civil war. While reformist elements in Guatemala attempted to tie legitimate law to abstract or universal principles, defenders of the old regime advocated for a self-legitimizing definition of law that tied it to the state. From the time of the Ríos Montt regime (1982-1983), through the post-civil war construction period (1996-2011), and culminating in the highly-publicized trial of Ríos Montt (2011-2013), both sides mobilized these antagonistic definitions of law and order in order to retain or gain ground in the battle over Guatemala's institutions and historical memory. Considered within this historical context, the trial takes on new meaning as a public theater in which both sides consciously sought to shape and co-opt principles of legitimate law and authority.