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Forces of Nature: New Perspectives on Korean Environments

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Forces of Nature: New Perspectives on Korean Environments, the first book in the new series ‘Environments of East Asia’ from Cornell University Press, is an edited volume focusing on the environments of the Korean peninsula, featuring a diverse group of environmental humanities scholars. The concept for this book originated with a 2018 conference at UC – Irvine and employs an interdisciplinary approach to Korean environments that is accessible to both Korean studies scholars as well as environmental humanities scholars who may not be familiar with Korea and its history. As such, *Forces of Nature* is an essential addition to the growing body of English-language scholarship on Korean environments as well as a companion to existing collections covering the environmental histories of China and Japan.

The primary aim of this edited collection is to ‘reveal the myriad ways in which Korean communities have shaped, and been shaped by, physical landscapes, with implications that reverberate well beyond the peninsula’ (p. 4). To do this, the chapters are organised into four thematic sections that address different ‘forces’ that have played a role in the relationship between humans and the environment, including 1) the impacts of imperialism on Korean ecosystems, 2) environmental crises, 3) agricultural processes and policies, and 4) cultures of environmental action and debates over environmental issues. The book puts ‘flora, fauna, soil, energy systems, and climate events...front and center in analysis and argumentation’, which is a counterpoint to the tendency in Korean studies (in both Korean and English) to represent the environment as a ‘passive backdrop’ for the human history of the peninsula (p. 5). Additionally, *Forces of Nature* endeavours to push the field of Korean studies of environment in two new directions: 1) it resists eco-nationalist frameworks, and 2) it combines a variety of methodological approaches for an interdisciplinary approach, including perspectives from history, visual studies, film studies, ethnography, art history and other fields (p. 12). The book is largely successful on both counts.

One of the greatest strengths of *Forces of Nature* is in how its editors have organised and contextualised the articles they have gathered. Each of the book’s four thematic sections is preceded with a brief introduction to relevant Korean history, politics and social phenomena, knowledge of which is critical to understanding and appreciating the following chapters. Much of the content of these overviews will be familiar to a Korean studies audience, but it is invaluable in making the book accessible to a wider scholarly audience. They also brought much-needed cohesion to what otherwise might have been a disjointed (but very interesting) collection of essays covering a wide variety of topics

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and geographic locations. Likewise, the introduction of the book successfully engages with the broader strokes of Korean political and intellectual history to ground the reader in why the volume is a notable contribution to both Korean studies and environmental humanities. Furthermore, the book contains a chapter that gives a holistic overview of the geography and climate of the Korean peninsula. This chapter connects observations about the landscape and climate to historical trends and behaviours and is written accessibly to those unfamiliar with Korean history or scientific terminology. The editors have gone to great lengths to have *Forces of Nature* make meaningful contributions in multiple fields while reaching a wide audience with different areas of expertise.

A particularly helpful addition (for Korean studies scholars especially) was the extensive inclusion of Korean words, in both romanised and Hangeul forms. In many cases, understanding the particulars of the meaning and usage of words such as *saengmyeong* (생명) and *gotjawal* (꽃자왈) are critical to understanding the unique context for Korean environmental movements, scholarship and thought. This is somewhat uncommon for existing English-language Korean studies scholarship, which tends to favour romanisation exclusively. Poignantly, the use of Korean words highlights the major differences in environmental activism and thought in Korea compared to the West in ways that bring new insights to understanding the many dimensions of environmental issues in different parts of the world.

One thing this volume lacks is a cohesive conclusion that harkens back to the goals and themes stated in the introduction. The omission of a conclusion in this case may be understandable, since this book represents the beginning of a conversation about Korean environments. The topics covered are wide-ranging, including colonial dam construction's impact on fish ecologies, the relationship between the climatic irregularities of the Little Ice Age and eighteenth century Korean art, Korean zombie films as a response to the growth of the beef industry, and the role of communal environmentalism in South Korea's organic farming movement, among others. But this is by no means a comprehensive look at Korean environments – it is more like a sampler, to whet the appetite and give the reader a taste of what the subfield of Korean environmental humanities has to offer.

In lieu of a conclusion as such, the editors include an epilogue that offers remarkably specific and well-defined trajectories for where this conversation about Korean environments could go in future historical and ethnographic research, as well as how each of these trajectories would contribute to both environmental studies and Korean studies. Scholars researching in either of these fields are given plenty of ideas to pick up and move forward with in their own research.

As a student of both Korean studies and the environmental humanities, I thoroughly enjoyed reading this volume. There are multiple essays that I intend will return to in my research, and I learned a great deal about the social and

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political context for Korean environmentalism. This volume is an invaluable starting place for those looking to expand their understanding of environmental issues to include a non-Western culture and part of the world that, as of yet, has few entries in the environmental humanities corpus. In other words, there is (and will be) a lot more where this came from, and I, for one, am eager to see how the field continues to grow.

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