



Unearthing the roots of empire in the Korean peninsula

By David Fedman, Department of History

More and more, I have come to think of my current book project much as I do the “green tunnel” of the Appalachian trail—sometimes exhausting, often solitary, and always walled off from the world by trees. Such an association is only natural. It was along this trail, after all, that my interest in environmental history first took root.

But it was a different mountain trail that delivered me to the topic that has been the subject of my research for the last seven years: a snaking path to the top of Namsan, the tree-smothered prominence that presides over Seoul, South Korea. It was there, in the summer

of 2010, that I happened upon a work crew of elderly Korean men systematically uprooting stands of acacia trees. Initially, I assumed that this was some sort of community-based trail maintenance spearheaded by the retirees that heavily traffic Korea’s hiking trails. But when I asked the group why they were felling what appeared to be perfectly healthy trees it became clear that something else was afoot. “We’re cleaning up,” one man replied. “We’re removing the traces of Japanese imperialism,” explained another.

My haste to finish the climb overtook my curiosity for details. But it was difficult to shake this encounter.

That a group of Korean senior citizens would take it upon themselves to cleanse the landscape of the material legacies of Japanese imperialism was fascinating. That such arboreal legacies were there in the first place was a topic that begged closer investigation. Suddenly, I saw in the fragrant white acacia flowers that predominate Korea's woodlands a way to re-examine well-worn accounts of colonial rule: from the perspective of the peninsula's forests.

So began a dissertation-turned-book project that has led me to dozens of archives across Japan, South Korea, and the United States. In the years to follow, I immersed myself in the history of Japanese forestry and natural resource management practices to try to understand the material impact and ecological legacies of Japanese colonialism in Korea.

What emerged from the archive was a complex and often contradictory story of colonial conservationism that did not easily square with many accounts of Japanese colonialism I had previously encountered. Contrary to popular narratives in both Koreas that cast colonial rule (1910-1945) as ruthlessly extractive, it became apparent that the Japanese state in Korea was firmly committed to forest regeneration and conservation. Motivated by utilitarian concerns about resource scarcity and fearful of cascading ecological decline, Japanese officials in the colonial Bureau of Forestry set out to reclaim denuded mountains and forests across the peninsula.

Therein lie the origins of acacia (*Robinia pseudoacacia*)—a tree species introduced by forestry bureaucrats precisely because of its hardiness and fast-growing properties. Well suited for reclamation and erosion control projects, it was planted in massive quantities as part of a largely forgotten campaign to cast the peninsula in the mold of the “green archipelago” of Japan. While one should approach the colonial state’s own data and promotional materials on the progress of this campaign with a critical eye, it is beyond dispute that Korea’s woodlands saw impressive accumulation of forest stock—until, at least, the ravages of the Asia-Pacific War precipitated a breakneck mobilization of Korea’s sylvan resources.

This is not to suggest that the colonial state’s reforestation campaigns in Korea were benevolent, beneficial, or even benign. As I argue in my book, *The Saw and the Seed*, the greening of the Korean landscape was in itself a form of colonial control. Despite Japanese efforts to cast their forestry reforms as for the betterment of Korea’s soil and society, the pursuit of agricultural self-sufficiency and sustainable timber yields came at a cost for many. In re-organizing the boundaries of woodland ownership, the state cut off countless rural communities from resources essential to their livelihood and survival. By outsourcing the heavy lifting of capital-intensive afforestation and erosion control operations, the colonial state siphoned off vast tracts of forestland and other critical resources to Japanese corporations and capitalists.

To examine the politics of forest conservation in colonial Korea, in other words, is to encounter a darker shade of forest green: a story of regeneration and conservation laced with colonial violence, forced assimilation, and rural hardship. It is a story, in the most basic sense, of forest dreams and forest nightmares.

That story has largely been forgotten. While small groups of Korean activists and scholars may associate acacia (to say nothing of the cherry blossoms in Korea) with colonial rule, much of this history remains buried in the archive. If it is the goal of the historian to dig deeply and broadly into archival materials, it is the aim of the environmental historian to expand our conception of the archive to include material registers, including the soil itself. Looking back on the trajectory of this long project, one thing is clear: I never would have embarked on this research had I not left the comfort of the library and ventured into Korea’s woodlands in search of the stories embedded in the landscapes around me.

David Fedman is assistant professor of Japanese and Korean history. His book The Saw and the Seed: Forestry and the Politics of Conservation in Colonial Korea is under contract with the University of Washington Press.