

The Author



Kyle Gibson is a Graduate Associate at the York Centre for Asian Research and a Doctoral Candidate in Environmental Studies, York University.

Contact

For further information on this research, please contact: [Kyle Gibson](#)

The Socio-ecological Implications of US Food Aid in the South Korean “Miracle”

Despite the horrors of three decades of imperial domination by the Japanese (1910-1945) and a brutal civil war that nearly decimated the country’s economy (1950-1953), South Korea began to embark on 30 years of nine per cent Gross National Product (GNP) growth rates in the 1960s that caused many commentators to hail its performance as a “developmental miracle.” As such, a voluminous literature has emerged attempting to uncover the source of South Korea’s success. However, there remains a considerable gap in our understanding of the socio-ecological aspects of South Korea’s development.

In part, this is because the literature on South Korean development overwhelmingly focuses on trying to explain the country’s rapid “growth”, done so primarily between competing neoliberal (World Bank 1993) and “developmental statist” analytical frameworks (Amsden 1989). By accepting economic growth as the sole measure of “development”, the extant scholarship endorses a narrative that overlooks the state of human metabolic relation to nature. Few scholars have considered the momentous socio-ecological transformations through which the so-called “miracle on the Han” was produced. Without an adequate analysis of the socio-ecological contradictions of the South Korean experience, a narrow fixation on its high growth figures will continue to lead scholars and policymakers to 1) erroneously offer it as a sound and generalizable model of development, and 2) fail to recognize the challenges facing South Korea as it attempts to manage the tensions between capitalism’s commodification imperative and the need to preserve the conditions of its reproduction.

Employing Jason W. Moore’s “world-ecology” framework, my research is an initial attempt to address this considerable gap in the literature through an examination of the socio-ecological dynamics of US food aid during South Korea’s developmental drive (c. 1960-1990). Each hegemonic economic regime in the history of world capitalism – Genoese, Dutch, British and American (Arrighi 1996) – emerged through the creation of a geographically distinct “ecological regime” that was able to secure the essential prerequisites for dynamic capital accumulation: food, energy, raw materials and labour. The “frontier strategy” of productivity and appropriation that sent hegemony scouring the earth to secure these crucial inputs over the past five centuries has become increasingly problematic in present times, however, as the seemingly infinite reserves of appropriable cheap human and extra-human natures have progressively dwindled (Moore 2015).

Asia Research Briefs

Asia Research Briefs provide short summaries or perspectives based on research by YCAR Associates. Their purpose is to share insights from academic research with journalists, policy analysts, community leaders and interested members of the public. For further information, or to subscribe to the series, contact: ycar@yorku.ca.

About YCAR

The York Centre for Asian Research (YCAR) is one of Canada's largest and most active communities of scholars working on East, South and Southeast Asia as well as Asian migrant communities around the world.

The Centre includes faculty, graduate students and research associates from the social sciences, humanities, fine arts, law and business.

YCAR facilitates and supports research projects, knowledge exchange and graduate student training, as well as engagement with wider communities in the conduct or dissemination of research. YCAR is located on York University's Keele campus.

For more information:

www.yorku.ca/ycar

Eighth Floor, Kaneff Tower
4700 Keele St., Toronto
Ontario, Canada M3J 1P3



Guided by these propositions, I take the post-Second World War political economy of food as my angle of vision to examine the South Korean development experience. More specifically, I examine the dialectical tension of the US's global hegemonic ambitions and South Korea's specific national developmental aspirations. On one hand, systemic imperatives arising from the contradictions of postwar US agriculture resulted in a flood of food aid to decolonizing ("developing") nations through Public Law 480. Hardly a disinterested act, this policy allowed the US to 1) mitigate agricultural surpluses stemming from Depression-era supply management policies, 2) quell revolutionary movements in nations experiencing the shocks of decolonization, and 3) literally "fuel" the cheap labour that was largely responsible for the economic "miracles" of its allies in the Pacific. On the other hand, although food aid was often viewed as an unqualified good to South Korean leaders at the time, my research traces how this historically specific form of development had profound socio-ecological ramifications on the Korean peninsula. It eventually led to the kind of mass depeasantization that furnished President Park Chung Hee's regime with "cheap labour," intensified uneven geographical development and hyper-urbanization, and brought about a situation of lasting food dependence. Indeed, in light of capitalism's infinite growth imperative, contemporary South Korea now faces the challenge of seeking out its own external sources of "cheap nature" to deal with domestically unresolvable issues such as waste management and food security.

Works Cited:

- Amsden, Alice. 1989. *Asia's Next Giant: South Korea and Late Industrialization*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Arrighi, Giovanni. 1996. *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times*. New York: Verso.
- Moore, Jason W. 2015. *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital*. New York: Verso.
- Rostow, Walt. 1960. *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- World Bank. 1993. *The East Asian Miracle: Economic Growth and Public Policy*. Washington D.C.: The World Bank.