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Modern Korean History (Prompt #4)

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Confucianist Masculinity and Natural Resource Management in Korea

The Korean peninsula is replete with natural resources. Vast forests of pine, fertile farmland, and a substantial horse population (Lee, Postwar Pines, 327) enabled early Chosŏn Korea to fortify itself and maintain control over the Korean peninsula. Despite the bountiful resources around them, however, the Korean masses were debarred from accessing these resources for centuries as a result of both Confucianism and foreign rule. In Chosŏn Korea, Confucianism provided for a frozen social order, obedience to the will of the elites, and the "hidden-and-forbidden woman" (Cummings, Korea's Place in the Sun, 29-30) who must always obey her husband. Japanese imperialism in Korea echoed these principles, but this time it was the Korean people as a whole—not only peasants and women—who were severely disadvantaged and suppressed. Throughout both the Chosŏn dynasty and Japanese occupation, the Korean populace was continuously debarred from accessing Korea's natural resources due to the Confucianist principles espoused by the Chosŏn state and the ordinances of the Japanese colonial government. In both instances, a Confucianist-inspired drive for masculinity encouraged leaders to prioritize the natural environment over the people's needs. Perceptions of Korea's environment and the purpose of its natural resources changed significantly from the early

Chosŏn dynasty through the Japanese occupation of Korea as a result of Confucianism, colonialism, and a desire for national masculinity.

Chosŏn dynasty Korea's Confucianist principles endowed the nation with a drive for masculine dominance that prioritized the military and elites in natural resource consumption while overlooking the needs of the peasantry. After the Imjin War with the invading Hideyoshi navy ended in 1598, the Korean peninsula's forests were significantly depleted due to shipbuilding (Lee, Postwar Pines, 320). Forests had also been decimated due to fires, weapon-building, and fortress reinforcement, and the lack of trees contributed to landslides (324). The Chosŏn government, galvanized by the threat of foreign invasion and intent on remaining sovereign, thus prioritized the growth and maintenance of high-quality pine forests along the coast (321). Chosŏn officials debarred the peasantry from accessing these forests, however, and the peasants were left with the "'miscellaneous trees'" (321) which were dwindling quickly due to high demand. After successfully expelling the Hideyoshi forces in 1598, Chosŏn became determined to defend itself from future aggression and engaged in the masculinization of the state. As a Confucian society, Korean women lacked the privileges and freedoms their male counterparts enjoyed, and the male was the dominant force both in and outside the home (Week 2 Lecture). Masculinity was a source of strength and authority, while femininity signified weakness and submission. When a group of Chosŏn diplomats discovered that male homosexual prostitutes were commonplace in Japan during their mission in 1712, they accused the Japanese of being "'morally bankrupt'" (Eckert, Male Concubinage, 238), suggesting that the Japanese had failed to uphold Confucianism and had therefore become emasculated. Their claim suggests that the Japanese navy's failures to conquer Korea could be attributed to this failed Confucianism and the influence of homosexuality. The Chosŏn Korean government, conversely, was

determined to prevent the perceived weaknesses associated with homosexuality and deviances from Confucianism to ensure a fierce, masculine, and defensive state. Using their Confucian doctrine, the Chosŏn Korean government therefore subjugated the masses to inadequate access to the pine forests necessary for cooking and homebuilding, prioritizing these forests for the defense of the nation. The scholar Yun Sŏndo criticized the Chosŏn government for being "'on behalf of pines… not [looking] after its people'" (Lee, Postwar Pines, 329), underscoring the absurdity of this inequity. Unlike the Japanese government during this time period, which maintained unique relationships with local leaders in order to facilitate natural resource collection in Japan, the Chosŏn government imposed blanket policies on all local landlords (330). Restrictions concerning pine were damaging for many Koreans, but the Chosŏn government's motivation was ultimately the safety of the Korean populace. Chosŏn Korea's prioritization of pine forests was driven by strict adherence to Confucianism and a desire for strong national masculinity. Although the peasants' day-to-day well-being was overlooked, the Chosŏn government believed forest management policies outweighed this issue to ensure the security of the nation.

Japanese colonial occupation of Korea induced the feminization of Korea's environment, a new state in which natural resources were extracted and removed from Korea for the militarization of Japan. The majority of Koreans were once more deprived of these resources. While Korea's relative success in self-defense during the Imjin War came to symbolize the strength of its masculinity and Confucianist values, Japanese modernization and imperialism eventually quashed these beliefs. As Japan emerged a dominant world player and imperialist power after rapid industrialization, the Japanese people's perception of Korea's might quickly changed. Once formidable enemies, the pre-industrial Koreans began to exhibit a sense of

"childlike innocence" and "purity" (Brandt, The Beauty of Sorrow, 34) to the Japanese, both in terms of art and their general way of life. Brandt writes that Japan now exhibited "impurity" and an "adult consciousness" (Brandt, The Beauty of Sorrow, 34) as the industrialized power in Asia, conveying the idea that Japan now deemed itself a masculine authority figure in contrast to colonial Korea, which was now indisputably a meek 'follower.' Japan's victory over China and colonization of Korea in 1894 solidified this novel relationship (Cummings, Korea's Place in the Sun, 205); just as Confucianism provided for the male's dominance over the female, industrialization enabled Japan to assert its masculinity as the colonizer of a 'pre-modern' people. In addition, Japan's victory over Russia impressed Western leaders, including President Theodore Roosevelt, who were awed by "Japanese manliness" (Cummings, From Sea to Shining Sea, 143). Colonial Korea, meanwhile, gradually became feminized and was transformed into a motherly 'breadbasket' of wartime natural resources including timber, charcoal, and a myriad of "chemical components" (Fedman, Wartime Forestry, 333). While earlier relations between Japan and Korea were not significantly affected by foreign powers, imperialist Japan's aspirations involved the elimination of Western imperialism in Asia, a war effort which required the harnessing of resources and populations outside of Japan. Under Japanese rule, Korea's forests were cut down for war-related functions "as never before" (334), far exceeding the deforestation of the Chosŏn dynasty. And unlike the Chosŏn dynasty, which carefully maintained pine forests for the future, the Japanese government quickly abandoned its "ambitious" (337) reforestation policy and emphasized that the benefits of depleting materials in the present were indeed necessary to expel Western imperialism (337). Despite the inequality brought about by colonial rule, one of Japan's 'progressive' contributions to natural resource regulation was the creation of a forest leasing system that allowed individuals and companies to own forestland (336).

Although most Koreans could not own land, the creation of such a system was markedly capitalist and equitable in comparison to the suppressive method by which Chosŏn Korea controlled its forests (Fedman, Wartime Forestry, 336). For Koreans during Japanese occupation, then, this opportunity for land ownership—although hard to obtain—was one of the ways that capitalism proved visibly beneficial to the Korean people (336).

Under Japanese rule, Koreans were once again generally debarred from consuming their own resources, but in contrast to Chosŏn Korea, resource conservation directives were much more explicit (Fedman, Wartime Forestry, 342). Due to the high resource demand of WWII, Japanese officials created propaganda campaigns advocating a "'low temperature lifestyle'" (342) in which Koreans would eat certain foods at certain temperatures, limit electricity and heating, and minimize firewood consumption (342). In a power dynamic resembling Confucianism, the Japanese assumed the role of a masculine authority figure who, as a consequence of industrialization, felt qualified to command a feminine, directionless Korea in the home—a nation that supposedly needed everything to be spelled out. In addition, despite the harsh environmental regulations imposed on native Koreans, the Japanese imperialist government likely turned a blind eye to Japanese settlers' resource consumption, and these settlers were "sometimes less than paragons of efficiency" (343), as demonstrated by their ondol overconsumption, the heated floors within Korean homes. In Ch'oe Sŏhae's short story "Escape," the peasant protagonist fixes these ondol floors to avoid starvation (Sŏhae, Escape, 117). Although the character labors for Chinese landlords in Manchuria, one can infer that Koreans worked similarly in Japanese settlers' homes while they faced uncomfortable conditions and natural resource restrictions in their own homes. This story accentuates the idea that Koreans under foreign rule faced harsh living conditions and were continuously deprived of the

opportunity to become autonomous landowners; instead, they were forced to work on behalf of others' estates, under the authority of dominant non-Koreans. Both under Japanese rule and abroad, Koreans were heavily restrained in their consumption of environmental resources. They were forced to sit idly by or facilitate foreigners' harnessing of the natural world for wartime efforts and personal consumption, unable to employ these resources to increase their own living standards and national security.

The Chosŏn dynasty and colonial Japan's treatment of the Korean peninsula's environment was quite similar in many aspects and substantially different in others. Chosŏn Korea relied on the pillars of Confucianism to limit the Korean peasantry's access to pine forests, maintaining this system through the justification that forest preservation was vital for the success of Chosŏn Korea's navy. Colonial Japan also stressed the importance of Korea's forests for East Asia's defense against the West, but Japan's true motivation was not the protection of the Korean people as much as it was the solidification of the Japanese monarchy's power over Asia and the well-being of the Japanese people over all others. Both regimes ultimately harnessed various Confucianist ideals in their control of the Korean people, a domination that reflected traditional relationships laid out by Confucianism, including the drive for the 'masculine' and masculinity's overpowering of the submissive female. Both the Chosŏn dynasty and the Japanese imperialist government upheld these principles in their management of Korea's forestland, and Koreans have suffered centuries of destitution as a result.