

society, such as the effect of the invention of the Korean alphabet on textual communication, the Korean appropriation of Neo-Confucianism, the political agency of nonofficial local elites, and the interrelationship between the state and the *sarim*. Its careful examination of the materiality of letters, based on extensive archival research sprinkled through the chapters, calls attention to their physical form and effect on the semantic and functional values of the text. I recommend this book for scholars who are interested in textual culture, the history of communication and technology, and Korean studies.

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Seeds of Control: Japan's Empire of Forestry in Colonial Korea by
David Fedman. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2020.
320 pp.

As many of us are spending our days behind a screen rather than in a forest or a field, we tend to forget that plants are immensely fundamental to human beings: they harvest solar energy and turn it into things that support us for free. It follows that any civilization thrives when it is in control of its vegetal resources. Countries progress durably when their plants prosper. Japan, after abandoning its feudal society that closely and frugally had tried to manage the vegetal wealth of its limited lands—including colonized Hokkaido—was inventing ways to harvest trees from its expanding new colonial empire in Korea, before the collapse that came with war. It is this fascinating story of trial and error that forms the topic of David Fedman's book *Seeds of Control: Japan's Empire of Forestry in Colonial Korea*.

Forestry as “a vital element of state power” gets the attention that it deserves in this book. This is a most important point that Fedman makes: that forestry in colonial Korea was crucial and fundamental and that it came in tandem with many other things. Harvesting trees brought with it the necessity to invest in nationwide governance with legal systems and infrastructure, which in turn brought roads, settlements, and cities, and enticed mining companies into exploration. In the case of the Yalu River, it even brought in border security efforts. We learn how forestry further south brought similar control and imperial indoctrination—disguised as social discipline—and efforts were much

more tuned to educating and mind-controlling local actors and governments through newly set-up associations and clubs, all with proper forest management as a strategy for imperial control. Modernizing the society of Korea was not only a colonial and imperial strategy of oppression, it was also redoing society for the value-free purposes of the global money economy. As a social and political historian therefore, Fedman shows, with a strong understanding of government administrator psychology, many parallels with events taking place today, when governments all over the world tune power in order to soak their people in ideas of consumerism, wherein local realities suffer and disappear, together with their sustainable practices. In so doing, they forget that it is vegetal resources in the end that sustain our world. This was just one of my many personal takeaways from *Seeds of Control*.

The book is divided into three parts: “Roots,” “Reforms,” and “Campaigns,” which detail the emergence of a thoroughly planned and quite successfully managed forestry in colonial Korea. The first part, “Roots,” begins with the question of how forestry was modernized after the collapse of Japan’s own feudal society to become a social, cultural, and administrative construct that supported the new nation and legitimized political and administrative control by the state over remote inland, colonies included. Another root in understanding colonial forestry is the psychology of the imagery that was spread in which Korea was seen as a landscape of barren, denuded hills in desperate need of reforestation, while the northern primary forests of the Yalu region were waiting as mouth-watering resources to be exploited.

The second part, “Reforms,” tells the story of the insecure start of forestry under the Japanese colonial government and how it developed through strategy, trial, and error into a consolidated and thorough administration. Ownership had to be registered and controlled, while growing trees became the subject of government concern through its research and experiment facilities. Taking the Yalu region as a case, the book details how the timber industry geared up in a regional context; however, the last chapter of this part turns to the efforts to compel local farming communities to contribute to the greater goal of forestry for the empire.

Moving on chronologically, the third part, “Campaigns,” looks at how forests and their resources were used to aid the Japanese war effort, starting from 1937. On the one hand, propaganda persuaded people to tend forests under the slogan of forest love, while harvests were distributed to serve military purposes and wasteful burning of wood as fuel began to be strictly controlled. As a bonus, the last chapter, “Conclusion,” gives us an analysis of how this history impacted the Korean War in the early 1950s and how it relates to

president Park Chung Hee's reforestation policies.

The book unfolds carefully and with much attention paid to primary sources and factual detail, an approach highly commended and highly necessary in face of the realities of East Asia today. Japanese and Korean populist politicians or patriotic administrators often ignore history, or else treat it as a juicy story to malign the other side. It may corrupt research when national research funds are either channelled away from truths that governments do not want to hear, or—as often happens—end up as funds for research on harmless hero histories that blur what was actually going on. In a larger geopolitical context, where Korea and Japan were forced to become allies in the 1960s, in spite of history not accounted for, it follows that there is also a responsibility for outside researchers in the United States to help in sorting out problems of common history. Fedman, as a professor of the University of California, Irvine, takes a straight position above populist interpretations and is clearly aware of the balance that has to be introduced. Thankfully, he is not afraid of pointing out “the red-hot intensity of anti-Japanese sentiment in Korean society” and how this relates to a biased understanding of history. Therefore, the book often, after some clear analysis and having given the reader a point of understanding, returns to the point with additional nuance where an opposite view is explained. That is nice and important, of course, and the remaining uncertainty about the take-home message then becomes clear in the “Conclusions” at the end of each chapter.

However carefully this may have been done, in the swift flow of balancing the enticing text, we find some problematic interpretations of certain sources, for example a Japanese erosion control project blessed by Shinto priests in 1938 that is presented as “forest reclamation” (183); or that it was, “an unshakable conviction of many [Japanese] foresters that Korean species were, by their very nature, inferior to those native to Japan,” (99) referring to Ohnuki-Tierney, who only talks about the Japanese cherry blossom as being the superior flower when compared to national flowers of China and Korea, not about other plants, let alone forest trees.¹

A more important point of critique is with regards to the humanities' perspective (not only Fedman's) of the field of forestry. In an age where climate change, resource depletion, and biodiversity loss are the main threats to civilization, we cannot easily tie up Fedman's incredibly rich study to these pressing, and more urgent problems. The basics of soil, trees, ecology, etc. are

1. Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney, *Kamikaze, Cherry Blossoms, and Nationalism: The Militarization of Aesthetics in Japanese History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

not very well woven into Fedman's analysis, so that the lessons we can learn from history to tackle the more universal problems of today are not present. An example is Fedman's not so clear handling of Japan's "ruination theory" of the red pine tree. The idea was roughly that red pine indicated poverty, as red pines were the only trees that appeared when other, more profitable forestry trees had been indiscriminately harvested. Thus, red pines were a sign of a landscape in decline and—in hyperbolic extension—a nation in ruins, as Japanese discourse proposed. Fedman, in writing about these ideas, misses the essence. Writing about the "shade-intolerant *pinus densiflora*" (23) he states that, "second-growth red pine—a pioneer species ... gained notoriety as a harbinger of environmental mismanagement," which, in reality, was not an environmental problem, but a forester's missed opportunity. The Japanese foresters of the time were well aware that red pine was useful in forestry management, not as shade-intolerant tree, but as a light-loving tree that could bring the forest back. It would be a misunderstanding of *forestry* were it to be considered a weed, as it was a populist idea that red pines were somehow wrong.

The history of such ideas should be explained as a step towards understanding sustained biodiversity, which Fedman does a little better when giving an account of Korean pine forest management in the later Joseon period. Here we read that over-exploitation led to disastrous depletion (48-49). However, in this Korean case, the forestry management was officially announced but never implemented, and only favored the natural wild growth of red pine which appeared as light-loving pioneers on lands emptied of their forests. There was no effective national forestry *management* therefore. When King Gojong's father wanted to rebuild the Gyeongbukgung Palace, he had to rob large trees from historic grave sites to get proper timber. Rules in place had not been effective. In a similar practice, the Japanese, when they wanted to rebuild the Shuri Castle in Okinawa at the height of the bubble economy, got permission to cut huge cypresses (*Chamaecyparis obtusa* var. *formosana*) from a protected forest in Taiwan—which came out as a shameful act of neo-colonialism when the castle burned in 2019 after an electrical short occurred in the security system. I was expecting these to come up as illustrative examples of non-sustainable practice in Fedman's book, but they were not to be found. With regards to fire, that fire field cultivation should be favorable to biodiversity (62) is perhaps true in some parts of the Mediterranean or Australia, but not in Korea.

A thin understanding of the basics of soil, trees, and ecology is coupled with a lack of empathy for plants and plant science in certain areas. We do not see a clear differentiation, for example, between various species of pines, whereas

their culture and meaning in forestry varies widely. Naming them with their Latin names (in brackets, if so desired) would have helped to focus author and reader. In academics, it is standard to write plant names with a capital letter for the species, e.g. *Pinus densiflora*. It is also unclear what “American alcova” as a tree species is. It does not seem to appear even in a Google search. Furthermore, if the “Erbswalde Forestry Academy” was “one of Europe’s premier forestry schools,” its name should be correctly spelled as Eberswalde.

What slows the pace of pleasant reading at points is the unnaturally erudite phrasing of language or unnecessary use of uncommon words. Who of the young Japanese or Korean students, who are the ones that you would invite to read this book, will have heard of “cinched” (53), “jaundiced” (53), “cajole” (161), “browbeat” (162), “altercation” (162), “rending” (164), “profligacy” (176), or “sensorium” (178)?

A different matter is that not every reader will be familiar with Korean place names, and thus a few maps are provided, but checking here and there, I found that quite a few topographic names are not given on these maps; stricter editing of map material together with the text would have improved the book. In addition, several references in the footnotes are given without a publisher and year, and are also not found elsewhere in other footnotes, nor in the bibliography, thus leaving us in the dark.

But apart from such criticisms, we have an excellent, detailed, and carefully composed research on “Japan’s Empire of Forestry in Colonial Japan” as the subtitle promises. A fifteen-page bibliography with a large majority of sources in Korean and Japanese gives a wealth of discoveries; the fourteen well-chosen period illustrations, including newspaper cartoons, give the reader a profound taste of the times. This is an important book that should be on many bookshelves!

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