

**East Asian Modernity: The Post-Colonial State, Science,
and South Korean Historiography (1948-present)**
Panel Organizer, Dr. John DiMoia, National University of Singapore

Following the division of the Korean peninsula in 1945, South Korea found itself in the position of defining its history as a post-colonial nation while holding onto the elusive dream of 통일 (reunification). The material problem of rebuilding its infrastructure and industrial base following the Korean War (1950-1953) was further complicated by the intersection of competing ideological interests, as the nation became one of the world's single largest multilateral aid projects through the early 1960's, and was subsequently celebrated as a major Cold War success story.

This panel looks at the numerous tensions and contradictions implicit to the recent South Korean story, particularly in the institutions (AERI, the Atomic Energy Research Institute, 1959), individuals (Lee Tae-Kyu), materials (rice), and language mobilized by the ROK to construct the story of the South Korean "Miracle on the Han" primarily as a story of political economy. The three papers seek to interrogate the South Korean narrative in terms of the nation's historical legacy within the Northeast Asian region (Russia, China), as well as its interactions with its close neighbors (North Korea, Japan, Taiwan) and new partners (United States), focusing on the medium of scientific and technical exchange.

In constructing the South Korean story, what kinds of images and language were mobilized to promote the interests of the state? How were individuals, and even material goods, "Koreanized" in order to celebrate the nation? Finally, what does the South Korean story of modernization have to tell us about the multiplicity of modernities available to East Asian nations, whether in the past, or still in process?

Individual Paper Abstracts

**New Rice for Unification and Independence:
Tong-il Rice and South Korean Agronomy in the 1970s**

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In several decades after the liberation of Korean peninsula (1945), South Korean agronomy was still influenced by Japanese agronomy, which was the only major enterprise

for Japonica rice research. The first generation of South Korean agronomists, who had been educated in Japanese system in pre-1945 era, established education and research systems with the various aid programs by the USA. Despite the importance of the American aid, South Korean agronomists could not help depending on Japanese for the research topics or the experiment materials. The change was brought by the international “Green Revolution” in rice in the 1960s. The International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) in the Philippines became a new source of reliable information and a training center for agronomists and agricultural administrators. Especially, in the late 1960s, Korean Trainees in IRRI succeeded in hybridization of Japonica and Indica rice, which had long been believed to be impossible by Japanese scholars. This new hybrid rice, highly productive and disease-resistant, was named as “Tong-il [unification],” and earnestly promoted by the government in the 1970s. *Tong-il* rice contributed to solidifying Park Jung-hee regime in the mid-1970s by its productivity, and, as its name implies, became a component of the myth of the prospering South Korean nation-state under Park’s dictatorship. At the same time, *Tong-il* also made an epoch for South Korean agronomy. From the 1980s, *Tong-il* became a sign of “independence” of South Korean agronomy, as South Korean agronomists could rewrite their history from it, without touching the uneasy stories in the colonial period.

**The First Modern Research Institute in South Korea:
The Atomic Energy Research Institute (1959-1973)**

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The Atomic Energy Research Institute (AERI) was founded in South Korea in 1959 as a result of the US-led “Atoms for Peace” initiative and the bilateral agreement with the US on “Civil Uses of Atomic Energy.” Although there had been some progresses in science and technology along with a few educated scientists and engineers in South Korea prior to 1959, the government-driven AERI firmly established science and technology in the country. The government, formed following the country’s liberation from Japanese colonization of 36 years, was interested in mobilizing science and technology in the reconstruction of the country.

South Korea and the United States shared the prospect of civilian nuclear technology, but envisioned different paths of nuclear R&D at AERI. While American scientists and government officials wanted to support basic nuclear research, their Korean counterparts were more interested in building an indigenous capability to develop nuclear

reactors and fuel cycles. Perhaps as a result of this tension, Korea largely went its own way. In 1973, AERI merged with other nuclear-related research institutes to become the Korea Atomic Energy Research Institute (KAERI), with an even stronger emphasis on the development of nuclear reactors and fuel cycle facilities. Thus, rather than passively receiving technological assistance, Korea actively used the Atoms for Peace initiative of the US as an important opportunity to wage its own “Atoms for National Reconstruction.”

Challenging Nationalist Historiography: Lee Tae-kyu (이 태규) and the Origins of a South Korean Scientific Community (1948-1970)

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In the effort to narrate their competing stories, North and South Korea have both made numerous attempts to appropriate the past, drawing upon key symbols and institutions to claim exclusive rights to Korean tradition. This paper looks at a more recent development, the effort by South Korea to lay claim to Korean tradition in the process of building a scientific community and a modern, industrialized nation.

Chemist Lee Tae-kyu remains one of the central figures to this story; and indeed, his bust can now be found featured prominently in front of one of the main campus libraries on the KAIST campus (대전), and numerous undergraduate awards in the sciences at Korean universities bear his name. A graduate of Kyoto University, Lee was a professor in Japan during the war years (1931-1945), and spent considerable time in America (1939-1941, 1948-1970) before returning to Korea in the early 1970's.

In his role as a scientist, therefore, Lee Tae-kyu was not only “Korean,” but he was also “Japanese” (Ri Taikēi) and “American” (Alexius T. Rhee, or A.T. Rhee) at various points in his life. This paper examines the legacy of this considerable time abroad, specifically his tenure at the University of Utah (1948-1970) working alongside chemist and close friend Henry Eyring. The narrative of a Korean scientific community emerging in the mid-1960's appears far more complicated when placed in the context of the colonial legacy; and here, the Cold War legacy of a figure who assisted in establishing a Seoul-Salt Lake City network for the training of graduate students.