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Forests in Pyongyang’s web of life: trees, history and politics in North Korea

Abstract

Kim Jong Un in 2015 asserted North Korean institutional desire for the generation of “Forests of Gold.” Forestry practice has been a vital element in North Korean developmental culture since its foundation in 1948. This paper will recount the forest histories of North Korean political and developmental culture. It will consider the interplay between nationalism, identity and narrative and the nation’s forests, especially the role they have played within North Korea’s sense of the authenticity of its own topography. The paper will consider Pyongyang’s forest present, and contemporary focus on afforestation and arboreal practice in today’s North Korea.

Keywords: Central Planning, Development, Forest History, North Korea.

Whether North Korea²³ has ever been the ‘people’s paradise’ envisaged by its future first leader, Kim Il Sung in 1946 is intensely debatable and not something this paper aims to explore or consider. North Korea’s forests are known in global public, political and media discourses to be anything but dense. They are instead renowned for being barren, denuded and destroyed; images of tree-less hills and degraded landscapes are as much cyphers for its terrain

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2 Romanisation strategies are considerably different between the two Korean nations. For ease of use and objectivity, the author uses the current North Korean Romanisation style when referring to names, quotations and places sourced from within North Korea. However, this paper both makes quotations from documents derived from historical texts published earlier in North Korea which may not conform to the current North Korean style. This paper also uses material published by the Government General of Chosen and which uses colonial era spellings of places on the Korean Peninsula. For the purposes of authenticity and objectivity the author retains these variations when used in direct quotation.

3 The research for this paper has received generous support from the Australian Research Council project FL120100155 *Informal Life Politics in the Remaking of Northeast Asia: From Cold War to Post-Cold War* and the Academy of Korean Studies (AKS-2010-DZZ-3104) during the author’s Post-Doctoral Fellowship with the Beyond the Korean War Project (University of Cambridge). The author also wishes to thank the University of Leeds and the Brotherton Library in the United Kingdom for the many hours of archival research in the Brotherton Annex collection of North Korean materials and the Owen Lattimore collection during his doctoral studies from which he constructed the historical periodisation of North Korean environmental and forestry history.

in the eyes of external viewers as the frequently used satellite images of the nation at night portraying it as a void; dark and opaque in between the energy of both China and South Korea.⁴ While far less of a composite construction, visual examples from the huge sub-genre of images of North Korea as entirely destitute in terms of timber and forest resource are no less political.⁵ It matters in the weaponised practices of North Korea's de-legitimation that it has no trees, that as a state it has debased its environment so that not even the barest stands of timber survive. For North Korea, however it is absolutely vital that its national landscape has abundant numbers of trees, that it is somewhere and somehow verdant. Kim Il Sung's focus in 1946 on the importance of forests in the frameworks and practices of state building in what was to be the new North Korea is in this sense perhaps even more vital to the sustainability of that state than at its foundation.

Given their importance and vitality this paper will explore the historical arboreal landscapes of North Korea, termed "Forests of Gold" by Kim Jong Un's 2015 New Years' Address and repeatedly referred to since then.⁶ While it cannot hope to be exhaustive, the paper will outline the developmental imperatives and context which drove Pyongyang's initial focus on forestry matters, including both the generation of new socialist landscapes and the reconfiguration of the timbered spaces of Japanese colonialism. It will then suggest a periodisation of North Korean forest history which maps both onto and around Pyongyang's developmental strategy and past adherence to classical modes of central planning familiar to analysis of other seemingly communist states. Finally, it will encounter North Korean forestry policy as it exists in the present, in opposition to external narratives of de-legitimation, and deeply embedded in Pyongyang's claims to political and governmental authenticity and functionality.

This paper is primarily a work of historical geography, however its theoretical frame incorporates much recent work in the fields of political and critical geography as well as more thoughtful philosophical analysis of North Korean politics and ideology. It is most important for the reader to understand that this will not be a history of a passive resource or Nature in North Korea, material which is done to, Nature which is simply out there. Instead the author of this paper holds North Korea's forests as active participants and agents in that history, a Nature which is with us and in us, or in this case, within its politics, culture and ideology, a key part of the nations' 'web of life.'

4 Shim 2013.

5 Smith 2015.

6 Rodong Sinmun 2015.

This nature in North Korea is part of a political/ideological web of life considered by the work of Cumings,⁷ Scalapino and Lee,⁸ Park⁹ and Myers,¹⁰ but ultimately best conceptualised by Heonik Kwon and Byung-ho Chung¹¹ and their reconsideration of Clifford Geertz¹² and Max Weber's¹³ political analysis, reframing North Korea's own politics as a theatric, charismatic space. Such a space requires development and exploitation of national landscape to serve as a stage for North Korea's politics. Timber, Forests and other arboreal resources are very much part of this performance, very much actors on the stage. The work of Sonia Ryang¹⁴ and Suk-young Kim¹⁵ on the cultures and performances of North Korean politics, social organisation and space also inform this author's conception of the stage on which both human and non-human actors interact under Pyongyang's rule. Cultural Geographers such as Denis Cosgrove¹⁶ and Noel Castree¹⁷ analyse such as stage as symbolic and socially or politically constructed. Erik Swyngedouw¹⁸ and Winstanley-Chesters,¹⁹ also explore the scaling processes of that construction which North Korean forests are part, particularly at moments of foundation and generation. The action of non-human materials and their "thing power" in such moments is best considered by Jane Bennett²⁰ and Sarah Whatmore,²¹ and the notion of the wider web of life in which these materials act, by Jason Moore.²² This paper also utilises Thongchai Winichakul's articulation of ecological and material spaces and topographies as forming part of a national eco-body.²³ Finally this paper holds in mind scholarship derived from the field of Historical Geography which specifically addresses the forested landscapes of the region. In particular the landmark writing of Conrad Totman, particularly *The Green Archipelago*, gives a fascinatingly detailed examination of the place of the tree and forest in Japanese history.²⁴ Towards the end of his career Totman briefly focused on Korea and the interplay between Japanese political prerogatives

7 Cumings 1981.

8 Scalapino and Lee 1972.

9 Park 2002.

10 Myers 2010.

11 Kwon, and Chung 2012.

12 Geertz 1980.

13 Weber 1967

14 Ryang 2012.

15 Kim Suk-young 2014.

16 Cosgrove 2004.

17 Castree 2001.

18 Swyngedouw 2015.

19 Winstanley-Chesters 2015: 116-138.

20 Bennett 2010.

21 Whatmore 2005.

22 Moore 2015.

23 Winchikaul, 1994.

24 Totman 1989.

and energies and Korean national sensibilities.²⁵ While Totman would never fully explore this, David Fedman's recent doctoral dissertation *The Saw and the Seed*²⁶ and John Lee's analysis of Chosŏn as a Kingdom of Pines,²⁷ continue the spirit of Totman's analysis both during the Chosŏn dynasty and the colonial period, bringing Korean forest history and its place within national and political development almost to the North Korean present.

Colonial Pre-Histories of North Korea's Forests

Before this paper moves to the forest history and arboreal web of life of North Korea, a little historical context is required. The first *Annual Report on Reforms and Progress in Korea*, published in 1907 by the Japanese Resident General (predecessor to the Governor General), in Seoul is a revealing summary of Japanese views of the forestry management practices of the peninsula, prior to its co-option by colonial institutions.²⁸ Coupled with later statements that Korea has "no forestry law to speak of,"²⁹ the conceptual difference between the bureaucratic legalism of Imperial Japan and Tokyo's perception of forestry practices under the Chosŏn dynasty is fairly clear. At the earliest moment of the colonial project, Japan sought to extract value from Korean forestry resources and terrains, capitalising on this element of the peninsula's web of life.³⁰

Given all of this, the Resident General records that a "joint" enterprise was "negotiated" with the Korean government which built a new forestry coordination and trans-shipment centre at Antung (present day Dandong in China), opposite the Korean town of Sinuiju (which the document names, Wiju), on the mouth of the Yalu River. This centre served to coordinate and develop timber shipments along the river from the northern interior forests of North Pyongan and Chugging provinces. The annual report notes the lengthy journey made by the timbers. This project in total extracted some 71006 cubic "shaku" of timber from these ancient forests.³¹

Further to these efforts, the Resident General sought in these early days to reorganise Korea's forestry institutions wider strategy and approach. In a section of the 1908 Annual Report marked as "Agricultural and Industrial Encouragement" the Resident General describes a series of new forest projects

25 Totman 2004.

26 Fedman 2019.

27 Lee 2017: 319-332.

28 His Imperial Japanese Majesty Residency General 1907.

29 Government General of Chosen 1910.

30 His Imperial Japanese Majesty Residency General 1908.

31 Shaku is a Japanese measurement of length formulated in its modern form in 1891. A Shaku corresponds to 10/33 of a metre.

guided by the logics of Capital and colonialism, which were to be the core institutions for new approaches to timber and forest management. They were to cover 83,300 acres and include the planting of a number of new species imported directly from Japan. Along with these practical projects, the landscape of research had also to be remodelled and reframed.³²

Beyond developments at specific vanguard sites and within the structures of academic research, the Resident General also suggested changes to the landscapes of forestry education, and institutional changes which moved forest administration responsibilities from the agricultural section of the Department of Agriculture to a new Forest Bureau – itself employing “several Japanese experts in forestry.” Finally, legal frameworks surrounding forest ownership, use and conservation were to be reworked to support the impending arrival of ‘modern’ practice.

Before this new forestry legislation was brought in,³³ and the outline plans for extensive surveying of private forest resource were unveiled, there were a series of cadastral surveys during the spring and summer of 1910. By August the peninsula’s entire forest stock (other than on Jeju), had been surveyed and was found to be some 16,000,000 Cho.³⁴ The wider national forest landscape was found to be in similarly denuded and degraded conditions as the initial State Forest stock and more extensive afforestation strategies were to be undertaken. By 1910 of course the Government General had assumed political sovereignty on the Peninsula and “model afforestation” centres under the careful control of Japanese experimental institutions were no longer necessary. Forestry management was thus devolved back to the provincial administrations now coordinated by the Government General, and afforestation strategy undertaken through the propagation of a number of seedling bed’s in different Provincial territories. The Government General also sought to encourage other, private sector, stakeholders to begin afforestation projects.³⁵

Having gained sovereign control of the Korean Peninsula, its institutions and forest resources, reviewed those resources and begun a series of afforestation projects, wide-scale legal reconfiguration was enacted with *Serei* (Imperial Decree number 10), issued through the Governor-General in July of 1911. Its stipulations came into force at the end of the year and both asserted the Government General’s overall control of natural and forest resources at the same time as the new colonial administration’s ability to open up State Forests to both preservation and exploitation by private or non-state actors.³⁶

32 His Imperial Japanese Majesty Residency General 1908.

33 Government General of Chosen 1910.

34 Cho is a Japanese measurement of area. A Cho is equivalent to 0.9917 of a hectare.

35 Government General of Chosen 1911.

36 Government General of Chosen 1912.

This transfer of responsibilities sought to break the bounds of reverence between local communities and their sacred or customary forests, in a similar manner as the colonial Japanese administration would seek to break the cultural and linguistic connections between the Korea and Koreans of the Imperial present and historical Korea and Koreans. The forest web of life of historical Korea was to be completely reconfigured by new logics and processes; Chosŏn's eco-body reimaged.³⁷ Korean Forestry management and resource was to be catapulted into colonial modernity by a quasi-free market in forest management, one in which the institutions of Japanese power would make deep inroads.

Government General reports are subject to statistical dispute, as well as any later dispute and rejection by North Korea on ideological grounds. Andrew Grajdanzev for example in 1944 utilising a later set of data points provided by the Government General of Chosen asserts that comparisons and reportage made by the Annual Report of 1938 "...are of doubtful value..." owing to the failure to correctly account for different methods of forest stock assessment in the later years of the colonial government.³⁸ Further to this Grajdanzev asserts that in later years the Government General undertook large scale privatisation of forest resources, utilising the revised legal frameworks to deliver Korean arboreal landscape into the hands of companies such as the *Chosen Ringyo Kaihatsu Kabushiki Kaisha* (Korea Forestry Development Company.) In fact, Grajdanzev notes that this particular organisation was granted for no charge some 500,000 *cho* of forests in Korea (a quarter of the remaining "good" forest).³⁹ This ownership transfer was not to allow the Corporation to engage in afforestation or forest protection, but for whole scale deforestation. Accordingly, Grajdanzev and the Government General recount an increase in cubic meterage of timber felled across the peninsula from some 700,000 in 1910 to 2.8 million in 1939.⁴⁰ This wholesale denudation of Korean landscape during the final decade of Japanese rule would be the contribution of its forests to lively matters of its imperial project, timber burnt in enormous quantities to support industrial and military production. Just as countless Japanese Imperial subjects would sacrifice their physical bodies for the good of the Emperor, so innumerable Korean trees would be immolated. The desecration of Korea's ancient forest landscapes would prove an extreme provocation for Korean nationalists, in particular for those that would form the elite of that future polity whose later historiography sited its foundational moments deep within the forests of its north. For North Korea these arboreal terrains could be characterised as 'tainted topographies.'

37 Winichakul 1994.

38 Grajdanzev 1944: 123.

39 Grajdanzev 1944: 126.

40 Grajdanzev 1944: 124.

Encountering the Tainted Topography of Colonial Forests

Kim Il Sung on the second page of the first volume of his collected *Works*, as a young man, before the Korea's Liberation and his ascent to power describes the impact of the Japanese colonial period on the peninsula's topography, from his perspective.⁴¹ It is clear that colonisation's impact on the physical material of the land and its resources was felt as keenly by those resisting it under Kim's control as was Japanese institutional control. During the pre-Liberation period this may have been down to the particular geographic orientation of Korean nationalist resistance to the Japanese, as it is remembered by North Korean historiography as generally having been focused on the mountainous spaces towards and beyond the Chinese/Manchurian border. Regardless of the reliability of this extremely contested history, upon attaining power late in 1945, Kim Il Sung would find himself primarily responsible for the rehabilitation of Japan's apparently nefarious colonial developmental approach on the peninsula's landscape.

Aside from Kim Il Sung's many assertions of his capabilities so far as correcting the many "plunderings" and "robbings" of Korean resources by the Japanese, the first important statement of future arboreal strategy that would reconfigure this colonialised topography came in April 1947. In contemporary North Korea *Let us Launch a Vigorous Tree Planting Movement Involving All the Masses* serves as the foundational moment in the forestry sector. In the North Korea of the late 1940s however, the document seemed more focused on both generating a level of political legitimacy and charismatic authority for the relatively new government, and served as a statement of intent focused on reversing the impact of Japanese power on its territory.⁴²

The document recounts a general sense of the tainting of Korea's natural landscapes by the colonial period, describing it as a "plundering" and a "devastation," however the text also becomes more specific on arboreal and forestry matters, declaring that: "...they robbed our country of forests..."⁴³ This denudation would have to be restored, the pre-colonial web of life restored, the vibrancy of the peninsula's forest matter regained, and this reconfiguration would require a model example. North Korean political process and developmental strategy has been configured it seems to always require a model, not just during the period post the Chinese Great Leap Forward, but throughout its entire institutional history. Topographic tainting when it came to North Korea's forests therefore would have its model, its exemplar at Munsu Hill in Pyongyang itself. According to Kim "...as the name signifies, the hill

41 Kim Il Sung 1930: 2.

42 Kim Il Sung 1947: 171.

43 Kim Il Sung 1947: 171.

used to be as beautiful as a piece of embroidered silk...”⁴⁴ However during the colonial period “It lost this beauty and became ugly, denuded by the Japanese imperialists...there is not a decent tree on this hill and there is nothing there except the old barracks used by the Japanese imperialists aggressor troops...”⁴⁵

For North Korea’s developing historiography and institutional memory, Munsu’s denuded landscape as a revolutionary model would stand in more generally for the wider forest stock on the Peninsula.⁴⁶ According to Kim Il Sung it follows that North Korea’s more general forestry strategy should correct this colonial-era denudation.⁴⁷ While in other economic sectors removing the impacts of Japanese colonialism would take many forms – from land reform, to education, culture, linguistic structure and even architecture – so far as North Korea’s Nature was concerned it would be forestry policy that would remove the taint of colonial modernity. Forests and timber would contribute extensively to the construction of a new North Korea, their lively energies and vibrant materiality becoming enmeshed and entwined with the future national ambitions.⁴⁸ Beyond simple measures of capacity, forest development would contribute metaphysically in the integration of North Korean political charisma and historical mythology.

Forests of the North Korean Socialist Modern

These initial efforts of North Korea to reconfigure the impact made by the Japanese colonial period and its attendant Imperial and Capitalist logics, on the nation’s forests are in fact foundational to its history.⁴⁹ The theatric politics of contemporary North Korea⁵⁰ sources its political energy and authority from the struggles of national pre-history and the moments of national foundation, both of which as the reader will have seen, include forestry. The necessity of ridding national forest topographies of Japanese influence however was soon overcome by both a greater historical challenge, and the diplomatic and geo-political triangulations presented that North Korea has always attempted. While Japanese colonial influence was certainly dramatic on the Peninsula, its landscapes were generally greatly degraded, even annihilated by the Korean War of 1950-1953.⁵¹ Enormous levels of environmental rehabilitation, including to national forestry stock would be required, an effort that could not be achieved by Pyongyang on

44 Kim Il Sung 1947: 171.

45 Kim Il Sung 1947: 171.

46 Kim Il Sung 1947: 171.

47 Kim Il Sung 1947: 171.

48 Kim Il Sung 1947: 172.

49 Kim Il Sung 1946: 172.

50 Kwon and Chung 2012.

51 Cumings 1981.

its own. External support would be required and it would be from this support network, rooted in the political landscape of the early Cold War politics that North Korea's particular vision of environmental modernity would derive.

Classical socialist central planning was initially fundamental to North Korean developmental strategies, even in forestry matters. The Soviet Union under Lenin had sought to reconfigure its industrial and agricultural sectors through a rigorous and ambitious policy of central planning.⁵² Such an approach to planning may ultimately have been more about political and ideological narratives than practical reality and its application and theoretical underpinning would lose some legitimacy and coherence during periods of revolutionary urgency such as China's Great Leap Forward, the later Stalinist period and radical developmental policy under Khrushchev.⁵³ In spite of these disruptions North Korea would at least until 1980 continue to organise wider national strategy along these lines. North Korea's announcement in September 1953 of a "Three Year Plan" for the reconstruction of the country was however little concerned with forestry rehabilitation. The 1953-1956 plan undertaken with credit lines from the Soviet Union was primarily focused on the rehabilitation of core transport and industrial infrastructure.⁵⁴ It would not be until after 1956 following the plan's completion, Stalin's death and the destalinisation period under Khrushchev that North Korea's lively forest matters could again come to the forefront of the national political mind.

This would be a North Korea changed by new geo-political realities. Khrushchev's 1956 "Secret Speech" and his critique of Pyongyang's political ideologies and strategies of April 1956, *On the Personality Cult in North Korea* required a shift in North Korea's position.⁵⁵ Following the Sino-Soviet split, Pyongyang would seek Beijing's support and Maoist influence can be felt on North Korea's developmental approach. China's Great Leap Forward and its harnessing of the energy and power of mass politics would have a great impact generally on the next period of North Korean planning, but more specifically on its forestry policy. North Korea's First Five-Year Plan (1957-1961), for example, sought to utilise the energies of the mass movement. Thus *Tasks of the Party Organisation in Ryanggang Province* declared that tree planting "should be carried out through a mass movement."⁵⁶ This application of the ideologies of mass politics and revolutionary energy to forestry policy clearly reflects the Great Leap Forward's ideological influence. While perhaps connection

52 Davies 1988.

53 Davies 1988.

54 Kim Il Sung 1954.

55 Szalontai 2005.

56 Kim Il Sung 1958: 222.

could be made with collective bouts of “energetic tree planting” on Munsu Hill remembered by Kim Il Sung,⁵⁷ unlike China’s radical adoption of landscape focused *Yundong*,⁵⁸ whilst it would adopt mass movement rhetoric, North Korea sought a different path. Forest planning outlines by Kim Il Sung and institutions in Pyongyang focused on detail, technical aspects and execution of forest strategy with less emphasis placed on more utopian possibilities. *Tasks of the Party Organisation in Ryanggang Province* from 1958, for example, sets out a highly organised pyramidal or hierarchical approach to forestry policy for the province, demanding that organisational responsibility rest primarily with official afforestation stations rather than the energetic desires of a mass movement.⁵⁹

The early phase of North Korean forestry policy however would not really survive the first planning period. By the end of the decade North Korean sovereignty had a sense of solid permanence and its developmental institutions echoed this in their organisation. North Korea would also begin a process of triangulation with its political allies and friendly neighbours, and new developmental strategies would derive from this. North Korean narratives record the early 1960s as a changed era so far as central planning was concerned, one more focused on new realities of production and capacity increase, than previous efforts at post war and post-colonial rehabilitation. Forestry development continued to play an important role, but the sector was to be primarily concerned with the development of orchards and other fruit production. Much less consideration was to be given to the eradication of the last vestiges of colonial taint in forest land. Instead forestry policies under the First Seven Year Plan were to focus on the construction of an authentically North Korean socialist modernity.

Foremost during this period in North Korea, modern landscapes were to be productive spaces. Forestry strategy prioritised orchard development, stressing their role in both increased production and the generation, through the entwining of their lively matters and political imperatives, of utopian terrain. Kim Il Sung in 1960 for example was particularly concerned with the generative energy for output of such enterprises.⁶⁰

Forestry policy during the First Seven-Year Plan with its focus on politically charismatic, ideologically utopian and developmentally productive processes

57 Kim Il Sung 1947.

58 Transformative mass campaigns during the Great Leap Forward were known as *Yundong*. For more information see *Mao's War on Nature*, Shapiro 2001. Such campaigns sought to utterly transform landscapes and the social relations of those connected to them.

59 Kim Il Sung 1958: 222.

60 Kim Il Sung 1960: 21.

such as fruit growing would soon have it foundational text. *On Planting Orchards through an All-People Movement*, of spring 1961 ostensibly seeking to consolidate existing forestry policy, reconfigures the sectors' goals, asserting the need for forest institutions, practices and strategies to focus on producing economic output. Forest landscapes would certainly have to be transformed to fit this focus. The sectors' goals were thus aligned with wider planning goals and policy in industrial and agricultural sectors. Forested areas therefore rather than being seen as peripheral, were deemed central to food production. They were also later envisaged as a key area in which utopian "mass line" principles appropriated by North Korea from Maoist China, could be healthily and safely reconfigured to suit local political frameworks and ideologies.

Even with its focus on productivity and economic utility, the First Seven-Year Plan did not apply all the classic tenets of Socialist central planning policy to the developmental culture of North Korean forestry. Initially there were no specific goals set for either production levels or developmental capacity as had been common in planning policies and strategies of the Soviet Union. However, towards the end of the planning period statements of productive intent within the forestry sector acquired new quantitative indicators. Kim Il Sung states for instance in *On Developing the Successes Achieved in the Rural Economy* from 1963, that: "we have planted 120,000 Chongbo of orchards in different parts of the country."⁶¹ Kim's focus on the achievement of quantitative gains is then also coupled with demands for infrastructural and technical improvement within these productive forests: "We must establish an effective system of orchard management so as to improve fertilisation and cultivation."⁶²

The incorporation of forestry policy within the framework of developmental planning and that framework itself appears to have become disrupted in the final years of the First Seven-Year Plan. Scheduled to last until 1967, the plan was extended to 1970 and similar to the case of the First Five-Year Plan, appears not to have achieved its outlined goals.⁶³ This failure perhaps reflects the disruption caused by incorporating both Maoist "revolutionary models" and "revolutionary speeds" into North Korean policy. These drove a more overtly utopian approach into an economy whose structure and practice was organised on institutionally technocratic and productivity-driven lines. In spite of considerable evidence to the contrary and the reorganisation of planning frameworks in 1967 and 1971, Kim Il Sung and North Korea's official political narrative maintained that the Plan was ultimately successful. This success is

61 A 'Chongbo' is a traditional Korean measurement of area equivalent to 9.2 hectares.

62 Kim Il Sung 1963: 403.

63 Chung 1972: 527-545.

suggested by Pyongyang to have moved North Korea closer to a utopian reality, to the socialist modern which was entirely distinct from its colonial past.⁶⁴

The final period of the First Seven-Year Plan saw forestry policy come to be directed more closely by Pyongyang's central institutions in order to achieve as much growth in output and productivity as possible. This drive for productivity however was itself was disruptive to institutional and developmental processes. Given the counterproductive or irrational imperatives of revolutionary urgency driven through the previous planning period, during the next, the First Six-Year Plan institutions sought to rework productive forestry development so that it was more practically and institutionally cohesive. Forest landscapes and productive cultures during this period would exist under the second of "three major objectives for the technical revolution." This objective directed North Korea's developmental institutions to "continue to accelerate the technical revolution in the rural areas, to reduce the difference between agricultural and industrial labour."⁶⁵ Although the core directional text for forestry during this planning period did not appear for a further year with the publication of *Let us expedite the Introduction of a Supply of Running Water in the Rural Communities and Press Ahead with Afforestation*,⁶⁶ institutions of local and provincial government level were already exposed to new developments in forestry strategy.

Absent both from the First Six-Year Plan as a whole and forestry strategy more specifically, was a focus on grand utopian national targets, such as targets for forestry and afforestation. A profusion of specific goals continued to be set for particular localities and institutions, but national targets, such as the 400,000 Chongbo of afforestation demanded under the First Seven-Year Plan, were not outlined in the new plan. In the place of any aggregate national target for forest reconfiguration or afforestation, the new plan set a series of smaller goals for particular agencies and institutions; the People's Army, for example, "must plant 15,000 hectares of forests every year, of which 5000 hectares should be planted with oil-bearing trees... the Ministry of Public Security should plant 5000 hectares every year."⁶⁷ Cooperative farms were also given detailed instructions.⁶⁸

North Korea again appears to have found the implementation of the goals of the First Six-Year Plan difficult and disruptive. In 1976 Kim Il Sung announced that "The Party Central Committee has defined the new year 1977,

64 Kim Il Sung 1971: 326.

65 Kim Il Sung 1972: 31.

66 Kim Il Sung 1973.

67 Kim Il Sung 1973: 276.

68 Kim Il Sung 1973: 276.

as a year of readjustment for easing the strain created in certain branches of the economy in the course of carrying out the Six-Year Plan, and for preparing to embark on a new long-term plan.”⁶⁹⁷⁰ However, efforts made to fulfil the goals of the First Six-Year Plan in the developmental sector were not wasted. This planning period contains perhaps the most overtly utopian or charismatic environmental strategy advanced during North Korea’s developmental history, the “Five Great Nature-Remaking Tasks.” “The Tasks” were dramatic, sought to reconfigure topographies wholesale and to harness the liveliness of their materialities for political and ideological gain. “The Tasks” would go on to influence North Korea’s political and ideological agenda, even when its own realities and possibilities have seemed far from utopian. “The Tasks” in a sense are a key moment in the construction of a North Korea identifiable in our present, replete with theatric political energies, grand narratives and a tendency to include all life within its ideological and social matrix. “The Tasks,” more prosaically would also contribute to the formulation of specific targets for forestry sectors during the next planning period, the Second Seven-Year Plan which was to run from 1978 to 1984.

The Second Seven-Year Plan was introduced in December 1977 and its goals appear similar to those defined by previous plans. The first paragraph of the plan is even similar to that of the First Six-Year Plan.⁷¹ In practice, however, policy during this period proved to be less overtly utopian than during earlier periods. Previous planning periods had emphasised the requirement for: reconstruction (the Three-Year Plan); capacity building (the First Seven-Year Plan); diversification and consolidation (the First Six-Year Plan). The Second Seven-Year Plan in contrast was to focus primarily on modernisation, mechanisation and the building of research capacity.

In words very familiar to contemporary analysts of North Korea, a “scientific” approach to economic development would become a key goal of the Second Seven-Year Plan.⁷² Ryanggang Province was suggested as a priority area for the realisation of the plan’s goals. Ryanggang in particular would be required to diversify its production of timber and forest products. In spite of the suggestions and requirements of the plan, subsequent critical comments from Kim Il Sung indicate a local failure to engage it.⁷³ The plan was, however, clear that none of the strategies for productive development

69 Kim Il Sung 1977: 5.

70 Chung 1972: 527-545.

71 Kim Il Sung 1977: 519.

72 Kim Il Sung 1977: 519.

73 Kim Il Sung 1979: 290.

within the forest sector should exist in isolation. In an echo of other ideological elements within North Korean politics, instead it called for the dissolution of differences between industrial and agricultural sectors, which would have had important implications for forestry policy and culture. The plan not only urged greater connection between forestry and other sectors of industrial production, but also that afforestation should become a goal shared by all members of the wider socio-economic community and the population.⁷⁴

Contemporary North Korean Forests

This paper truncates its historical view of North Korean forestry policy and culture here, in 1979, which is some four decades from the present at the time of writing. The author of the paper does so not because this where the historical narrative ends, but as far as North Korean forest matters are concerned this where the concrete lines of developmental ambition and connection which lead from the colonial past and reconfigurations of its forest landscapes and arboreal matter dissipate. This is where ambitious plans to create a beacon of socialist modernity under North Korean institutional and developmental control end. The Fifth Party Congress of the Korean Workers Party was held in 1980, an event at which North Korea's more charismatic and theatric aspirations for a utopian landscape as well as practical policy goals were finally checked. Environmental development and specifically, the forestry sector had concrete, structured goals and complex frameworks of priorities abandoned and national targets for the reconfiguration of forestry have been neglected ever since. History recounts that from 1980 onwards North Korea was faced by the challenges and troubles which beset its allies and supporters across the world which would lead to the collapse of the Warsaw Pact, the famine period of the mid 1990s, the conflicted muddling through of its later years, and its complicated present. In North Korea's recent history and during the famine period, far from respecting its forests and arboreal landscapes and including them within its national web of life, its eco-body, Pyongyang appears to have been as destructive to these forest spaces as the imperatives of Japanese colonialisation.

However, in the very recent present North Korea's current leader Kim Jong Un has incorporated extensive focus on forest and arboreal culture within his New Year's Addresses of 2015 and 2016. In 2015 Kim, as recounted at the beginning of this paper, asserted a key developmental priority for the year to be the generation of "forests of gold" in North Korea.⁷⁵ In 2016 forests and the lively matters of arboreal culture were framed in the New Year's Address

⁷⁴ Kim Il Sung 1979: 287.

⁷⁵ Rodong Sinmun 2015.

within the wider ecosystem of state responsibilities and aspirations that included a “forest of arms.”⁷⁶ In common with a number of figures of political authority throughout Korean history, including most Governor Generals of the colonial period, Kim Jong Un has even been seen planting trees (sometimes in the company of his wife Ri Sol Ju), on March 2nd.⁷⁷ The “thing power” of North Korea’s forest past and present is projected through the authoritative power of Kim Jong Un, bestowed, embedded and enmeshed in the wider network of national politics and institutions.

In this enmeshing there is also a mirroring both of Kwon and Chung’s conception of North Korea’s politics as charismatic and theatric⁷⁸ and Cosgrove’s socially or politically constructed landscapes.⁷⁹ Forests and forested landscapes in North Korea thus become an activated, lively, energetic, charismatic and politicised terrain. They were such terrains in the history presented within this paper and continue to be in the contemporary North Korea, though are perhaps marked by changed or diminished geopolitical circumstance and developmental possibility. Whatever changes and challenges have been encountered by North Korea and its politics or development in more recent history, what has not diminished or been negated is the charismatic energy required to underpin its politics and ideological and historiographic relations with its physical and material terrains and territory. This importance of this energy is of course not unique to North Korea and this utilisation of and connection with Nature or natures is also not unique. The usage of similar political energies and interactions with material objects and forces are to be found in the political frameworks and eco-bodies of many nations. In Pyongyang’s case however such energy and exchanges dominate the place of environment and ecological materials in national historiography and North Korea’s wider web of life in which forests and arboreal culture play a key role.

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76 Rodong Sinmun 2016a.

77 Rodong Sinmun 2016b.

78 Kwon and Chung 2012.

79 Cosgrove 1984.

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