

The Korean Environmental Movement: *Green Politics through Social Movement*

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the characteristics of the Korean environmental movement by examining cases of environmental problems and conducting a cross-country comparison. It addresses two main issues. The first revolves around the question of the origins of the environmental movement in Korea. Rejecting the simple, linear reflection hypothesis that environmental problems produce environmental movements, the paper stresses the importance of the process by which environmental problems are socially constructed.

Second, the paper addresses differences within the Korean environmental movement in a comparative framework with other countries. It argues that the Korean environmental movement not only socially constructs environmental problems, but has become a political power that is dynamically reconstructing and transforming political, social, and cultural structures. The characteristics of this dynamic process are analyzed through case studies and consideration of their theoretical implications. The unique characteristics of the Korean environmental movement are also compared with those of the United States, Germany, Japan, and Taiwan.

Keywords: Korean environmental movement, social construction, green politics, political opportunity structure

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Introduction

The Korean environmental movement has unique characteristics that are rarely found in other countries. The environmental movement, which began as a part of the democratization movement, went through rapid development and institutionalization after an opening in the political opportunity structure as a result of the democratization process in 1987. The movement gained the power to change the political structure by securing strong resource mobilization capabilities. As sociologist Lee See-jae once remarked, the process of the establishment of the Korean environmental movement can be summarized as a double-edged process of institutionalization and empowerment.¹ Despite steady institutionalization, however, the environmental movement has exercised radical influence on changing institutions and structure without being co-opted into the established system. It has experimented with green politics through social movements, although it has not developed into party politics.²

This paper will first address the question of what lay behind the rapid development of the environmental movement in Korea. Does its origins lie simply in Korea's severe environmental pollution, or are there other factors involved? Rejecting the linear "reflection hypothesis" supposing that environmental problems lead to environmental movements, this paper stresses the importance of an environmental movement as a process of socially constructing environmental issues.

Second, the paper will address the question of what structural conditions and actions formed green politics through social movements, the most outstanding character of the Korean environmental movement. It will answer the question by examining both the characteristics of a political opportunity structure and the resource mobilization capabilities of environmental movement organizations. To answer these questions, the paper will review and compare a few

1. See Lee (2000) for analysis of the institutionalization and empowerment of the environmental movement in Korea.

2. In this paper, I define green politics as a politics that emphasizes life, ecology, and the environment, while at the same time promoting democratization.

exemplary cases of the environmental movement that demonstrate typical traits of each time period. These will include the outbreak of Onsan disease, the phenol contamination of the Nakdonggang river, campaigns against the construction of the Donggang Dam (hereafter the anti-Donggang Dam campaign) in Yeongwol, and the anti-Sae-mangeum reclamation project campaign. It will then analyze the unique characteristics of the Korean environmental movement by comparing it with the cases of the United States, Germany, Japan, Taiwan and China.

Research Questions

This paper will first address the question of why the environmental movement developed so rapidly in Korea. The key theoretical issue is whether the rapid development of the movement or growth of environmental awareness is a reflection of serious environmental problems in Korea, or whether it is a result of social construction. According to materialist theory, or the "reflection hypothesis," the aggravation of environmental problems is a major reason for the growth of environmental awareness and the environmental movement. Riley Dunlap and others emphasize that the environment is an important, independent variable influencing social change, a key tenet of environmental sociology (Catton and Dunlap 1978, 1980). They have criticized existing sociology for its failure to understand the influences and limitations that the environment places on society. According to them, the fact that the earth is experiencing environmental problems such as the destruction of the ozone layer or rapid climate change is important in itself. Materialists insist that conventional sociologists are so focused on social processes that they ignore human dependence on nature. This conceptual trend is meaningful in that it encourages sociologists to recognize the importance of the physical environment and its limits. But it is also pregnant with the danger of reducing the analysis of social processes to changes in the physical environment.

The social construction approach emerged in the 1990s as a reaction to the reflection hypothesis. Social constructionists such as Steven Yearly and John Hannigan do not deny the independent, causal force of nature, but focus on the importance of social, political, and cultural processes within which environmental problems are constructed as problems as such. Problems do not become part of the social agenda by themselves, but through a specific social process, with certain problems designated as being of greater importance, less importance, or no importance at all (Hannigan 1995, 30). According to Hannigan, the following conditions are required for the successful construction of an environmental issue:

1. Scientific authority behind, and validation of, claims
2. Existence of a "populariser" who can bridge environmentalism and science
3. Media attention in which the problem is "framed" as novel and important
4. Dramatization of the problem in symbolic and visual terms
5. Economic incentives for taking positive action
6. Emergence of an institutional sponsor who can ensure both legitimacy and continuity

According to Hannigan, the concept of environmentalism is a multifaceted construction that welds together a clutch of philosophies, ideologies, scientific specialties, and policy initiatives. Although the social constructionist perspective well illustrates the importance of the social process, it is limited in explaining which factors play more important roles than others. In addition, while the social constructionist perspective is useful in identifying medium-range variables, it is limited in analyzing changes of greater scale, such as those in the political structure itself.

In order to cope with these limitations, this paper will answer the second question, which pertains to the structural conditions and resource mobilization processes of "green politics through social movements," a prominent characteristic of the Korean environmental movement. To answer the above-mentioned question, it is necessary

to examine the change of the political opportunity structure in Korea and the dynamics of the actors, ideologies, goals, activities, issues, and processes involved in the environmental movement.

The political opportunity structure theory posits that structural factors such as political opportunity and political power relations condition the emergence, strategy, and dynamics of social movements (Eisinger 1973; Tarrow 1989; Jenkins 1987). In a comparative study of anti-nuclear power movements in four European nations, Kitschelt claims that differences in the political opportunity structure determined the strategies and effects of the anti-nuclear power movements (Kitschelt 1986). More specifically, the degree of openness of political regimes and their policy implementation capabilities explains the varying results of the strategies and effects of social movements. This proposition can be very useful for explaining the formation and progress of the Korean environmental movement as well.³

However, this approach only provides the linear explanation that change in the opportunity structure is a key variable for change in collective behavior as social movement. The Korean environmental movement developed rapidly with the opening of the political opportunity structure, and has grown into a political force capable of changing that structure after securing its own resource mobilization capabilities. Korean society continues to experiment with green politics through social movements via such interplays of structure and action.

What follows is a brief history of the environmental movement in Korea, as well as a comparison between that movement with those of other countries.

3. A political opportunity structure is comprised of structural factors, such as the degree of openness of political regimes and the characteristics of political power relations. The degree of openness of political regimes is related to the issue of how well the political institutional apparatuses of a nation respond to the (new) demands of the populace. The characteristics of political power relations are determined by the existence of allied groups of social movement organizations, the stability of political alliances, and the dominant group's support for social movement organizations.

Historical Currents in the Korean Environmental Movement

The environmental movement in Korea began during the period of industrialization. While it is true that rapid economic growth brought about economic affluence, it also exacerbated environmental pollution. Koreans enjoyed increased material wealth, but they also desired a cleaner environment, and this desire influenced the development of the environmental movement (Ku 2000, 113-116).

The 1960s–1970s

In the 1960s and 1970s, there were few environmental organizations equipped with an environment ideology or organizational structure. This period can be called the prehistory stage of the environmental movement. The Korean environmental movement began through the collective action of victims of environmental aggravation. Their actions can hardly be described as those of a social movement because they lacked organization and continuity. Nevertheless, they laid the foundation for the contemporary environmental movement. After the government's economic development plan was executed in the 1960s, pollution in and around industrial sites such as Ulsan, Onsan, and Yecheon became a serious problem and the residents of these areas began campaigning for damage compensation.

With the worsening pollution of the 1970s, campaigns for damage compensation intensified and a few environmental movement organizations were formed but they did not have the resources to support victims' movements. In fact, during this period, the only force that was able to raise concerns over environmental issues among the public and represent the victims was the press.

The 1980s

The period of the 1980s was an era of anti-pollution movements. After the democratization movement, the "Spring of Seoul" in 1980 was suppressed by military power and temporarily withdrawn; soon,

a new democratization movement developed. The anti-pollution movement became active alongside democratization, and later became a part of it. In 1982, progressive Protestant and Catholic clergymen established the Pollution Research Institute (PRI, Gonghae Munje Yeonguso). This institute made great efforts in supporting pollution victims, researching pollution problems, and educating the public about the environment.

Nongovernmental organizations led by college students and graduates, which were different from those of grass-roots environmental organizations, strongly identified themselves as part of the democratization movement. The anti-pollution movement organizations recruited student and anti-government activists with democratic inclinations, such as Choi Yul (Choe Yeol), a core member of the PRI. The declaration published during the evacuation campaign led by the PRI around the Ulsan and Onsan industrial sites demonstrates just such inclinations:

The pollution that is forcing voluntary migration is not limited to Ulsan and Onsan, but is a matter concerning the quality of life of the whole nation. It is important to realize that a few government-supported conglomerates and military dictatorships created the pollution problem. Thus, not only the residents in industrial sites such as Ulsan and Onsan, but people all over the nation have to commit themselves to a broader anti-pollution movement in order to bring down anti-nationalistic and anti-social conglomerates, as well as the military dictatorial regime causing these problems (CISJD 1986, 164-166).

Because of its resistant inclinations, the ruling power regarded the anti-pollution movement as anti-governmental and tried to prevent local residents from allying with professional environmental organizations (Ku 1996a, chap. 6). In 1988, the Korean Anti-Pollution Movement Association (KAPMA, Gongchuryeon) was established with Choi Yul as its co-president. KAPMA's ideology was oriented toward leftist environmentalism, urging environmental justice and the abolition of the monopoly capitalist system.

The 1990s to the Present

The period from the 1990s to the present has been an era of “new environmental movements.” As Korea underwent a process of democratization, diverse social movement organizations formed, made progress, and explored new ideologies and strategies. Indeed, the environmental movement has changed with the progress of democratization since the collapse of the Chun Doo-hwan regime, and up through the June Uprising of 1987. In this period, organizations in civil society—such as the Citizens’ Coalition for Economic Justice (CCEJ, Gyeongsillyeon), the YMCA, and the YWCA—actively joined the environmental movement. They criticized the anti-pollution movement’s radical strategies and insisted upon more professional and public-oriented activities.

The United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development (UNCED) in 1992 was a turning point for the Korean environmental movement. A new environmental movement replaced the anti-pollution movement. The anti-pollution movement organizations represented by KAPMA had regarded huge corporations and the government as the violators, and the people as the victims, while defining the environmental movement as a struggle between the two. After the UNCED, however, reformers began to pay attention to global environmental issues and modest popular movements.

There were five important changes that took place during this period. First, citizens became major participants in the environmental movement. In the 1990s, diverse professional environmental organizations were established under the expanded political opportunity structure, and organizations from civil society began to actively join the environmental movement, whereas in the 1980s, direct victims of pollution and members of the lower classes were the main constituents of anti-pollution movements. Second, the victims’ movement exercised greater overall social influence. It expanded not only in size but in quality as well, as campaigning for damage compensation expanded to include damage prevention. Third, the interests of the environmental movement moved beyond the interests of local

residents to the general issue of life and health of all citizens. Fourth, the ideology changed from leftist environmentalism into a realist environmentalism that accepted institutional reform and environmental managerialism. On the other hand, environmental movement organizations experimented with various ideologies such as deep ecology, eco-anarchism, and communitarianism. Fifth, in the 1990s, the big national environmental organizations, namely, the Korean Federation for Environmental Movement (KFEM)⁴ and Green Korea United (GKU) were institutionalized and stabilized as national NGOs. They also adopted modest methods of resource mobilization.

The political mobilization of the environmental movement was accelerated in 2000. The environmental movement actively participated in the Citizens’ Alliance for the 2000 General Elections (CAGE), which was initiated by a civil society movement to reform corrupt politics. Major environmental organizations such as KFEM and GKU participated in the campaign against the impeachment of President Roh Moo-hyun in 2004, which had been initiated by conservative, opposition party lawmakers.⁵

So the Korean environmental movement has not strictly confined itself to the issue of environment. It has positioned itself as a leading force of green politics, pursuing goals positive to preservation of the environment, life, and democracy.

4. In 1993, KAPMA, based in Seoul, united with seven local environmental groups to launch the Korean Federation for Environmental Movement (KFEM), Korea’s largest environmental organization. It became a member organization of “Friends of the Earth International” in 2002.

5. Conservative lawmakers allied to impeach the relatively progressive President Roh for a minor election law infraction, but various social movement organizations, including citizen organizations and labor unions, and an overwhelmingly large number of people organized an anti-impeachment campaign. In the end, the pro-president party secured a majority of seats in the general election held on 15 April 2004, and President Roh was reinstated on May 14.

The Roh administration, inaugurated in 2003, has pushed forward progressive policies to eradicate corruption in politics and enact political reform, but has not been very active in the environment. Despite this, however, major environmental organizations led the anti-impeachment campaign to protect democracy, which is an essential value of green politics.

Table 1. Stages of the Korean Environmental Movement

Category	Prehistory of the Environmental Movement (1960s–1970s)	The Anti-Pollution Movement (1980s)	The New Environmental Movement (1990s–Present)
Accidents and events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mercury contamination by pesticide (1978) Disease caused by air pollution from industrial sites (late 1970s) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Onsan Disease (1985) Tap water contamination (1989) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tap water contamination (1990) Phenol leakage incident (1991) Anmyeondo, Buan Anti-nuclear Waste Dumping Campaign (1990, 2003–2004) Anti-Donggang Dam Campaign (1991–2000) Saemangeum (1998–present)
Environmental movement organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not applicable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> PRI KAPMA 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> KFEM GKU CCEJ YMCA/YWCA
Types of movement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Grass-roots victims' movement for damage compensation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Grass-roots victims' movement Radical NGO movement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Grass-roots victims' movement Modest NGO movement Realist environmentalism
Ideology		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Leftist environmentalism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Environmental managerialism Ecologism
Issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pesticide Air and water pollution near industrial sites 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Air and water pollution near industrial sites "Pollution Disease" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Air and water pollution in large cities Nuclear power plant and waste disposal siting Conservation/preservation (Donggang river) Global environmental problems
Activists	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Farmers and fishermen near industrial sites 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Farmers and fishermen near industrial sites Intellectuals College students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Farmers and fishermen near industrial sites Intellectuals College students Middle class Housewives

Case Studies

Case studies are useful in analyzing the dynamics of the environmental movement. The cases examined here are major events in the history of the movement that involved a great number of people and media attention, and played a large role in effecting social change (Ku 1996a, 1996b, 2003b).

The Onsan Disease Outbreak (1983–1986)

The Park Chung-hee administration, which lacked political legitimacy after having taken power through a military coup in 1961, sought an economic growth policy financed by foreign capital. As part of the government plan to build a heavy and chemical industry in the 1970s, the Ulsan and Onsan areas in Gyeongsangnam-do province were developed as industrial complexes. In particular, Onsan was designated a non-ferrous metal industrial complex and began to show signs of heavy metal wastewater and air pollution in the late 1970s.

Compensation for damage done by the factories began in the late 1970s. But pollution worsened in those areas, and residents began to show symptoms of neuralgia and skin irritation. Despite harsh political oppression, residents engaged in collective action, rallying to defend their right to live. When the government suspended people's fishing rights because of pollution in 1983, people protested, occupying the streets.⁶ As the conflict continued, environmental organizations such as PRI, began to get involved.

In January 1985, the PRI claimed, "Over 500 people in Onsan suffer from pollution-related cadmium contamination—'Onsan Disease'—which was similar to the *itai itai* disease in Japan." With media coverage that elevated the Onsan Disease case to the status of a full-blown social issue, the Environment Administration (EA) began testing residents of Onsan people for the ailment. In April 1985, the

6. Caught up in the ideology of economic growth, the residents of these areas demanded their own transfer rather than the closure and transfer of the factories.

EA issued an official statement saying that the plague that had made many people in Onsan sick was not a pollution-related disease, and announced plans to move the residents. The residents and the PRI refuted the test results and organized group protests that expressed their dissatisfaction with the government's proposed dislocation compensation funds and its method of dislocation. The conflict over the Onsan Disease fell apart after 1986 and the villagers began to move to adjacent areas in several phases. But those areas were again occupied by pollutant-generating factories, which only increased the total amount of pollution in the area.

In the case of the Onsan Disease outbreak, its victims led a compensation movement under a repressive political opportunity structure. At that time, public environmental awareness was low and few environmental policies were in place. Despite the lack of ideological alternatives of symbol, the movement was significant in that the discourse on pollution-related disease grabbed the attention of a broad spectrum of people. In addition, voluntary environmental organizations such as the PRI had an opportunity to gain practical experience through this movement, which later was to serve as an important impetus for the development of the environmental movement. The Onsan case illustrates how the forces of a weak environmental movement, which had formed an alliance with victims, were able to socially construct environmental problems even within a repressive and closed political opportunity structure.

The Nakdonggang River Phenol Contamination Incident (1991)

The Nakdonggang phenol contamination incident was a historical incident that marked a turning point in both the Korean environmental movement as well as environmental policy. In March 1991, Doosan Electro-Materials, located in Gumi, Gyeongsangbuk-do province, leaked phenol extract into the Nakdonggang river, contaminating the source of tap water for the citizens of Daegu. A few days later, the Prosecutor's Office said that, "The company has secretly leaked a total of 325 drums of phenol waste to the river since

November 1990," touching off a frenzied movement to condemn the Doosan Conglomerate and boycott Doosan products. President Roh Tae-woo castigated it as an unforgivable, antisocial crime. In the face of mounting criticism, Bak Yong-gon, chairman of the Doosan Group, pledged a 20-billion won donation to the local government along with a public apology. Daegu citizens demanded monetary compensation and refused to pay their water bills. A civil organization handling tap water contamination was formed in Seoul, and the Korea Supermarket Alliance decided not to buy Doosan Group merchandise. Rallies and protests against the Doosan Group erupted all over the country.

As of April 1991, the government and Doosan Electro-Materials Co. claimed that the factory should resume its operations in order to address the problem of slackening exports. Doosan resumed operations on 18 April 1991, after the government shortened its suspension period. The government then suppressed the anti-Doosan merchandise campaign, calling it a violation of the Fair Trade Act. However, a mere five days after resuming operations, Doosan once again leaked phenol into the water, an act that resulted in the removal of both the environment minister and vice minister. The incident greatly influenced the development of the environmental movement in Korea. It provided momentum for the formation of many environmental movement organizations in Daegu, Masan, and Changwon, and promoted the participation of civil movement organizations in the environmental movement.

The phenol contamination incident illustrates how an environmental accident gave impetus to the formation of a social movement. At that time, environmental pollution expanded from areas adjacent to industrial sites to urban cities, and thereby raised public attention about environmental pollution. The wide media coverage of tap water contamination in 1989 and 1990 was particularly instrumental in raising widespread discontentment with tap water. Sensational, full-blown reporting of such incidents by the media also helped to trigger an explosion of public grievances. Also, during this period, the political opportunity structure was much more relatively open, thanks

to the democratization movement of 1987. The Roh Tae-woo administration employed exclusionary tactics for the labor movement, but utilized an inclusive one toward the environmental movement.

Unlike the Onsan Disease case, which focused on the interests of victims living near the industrial sites, the phenol contamination incident expanded its focus to concerns over the health of urban dwellers, and more broadly, the general public. In particular, riding on anti-*jaebeol* sentiments, the unethical practices of firms, as well as government irresponsibility and ineptitude, became issues. The phenol contamination incident showed how the forces of the environmental movement, which were primed to flourish under the open political opportunity structure after democratization, were able for the first time to successfully position the environment as a part of the national agenda. After this incident, the environmental movement amassed strength through organizational expansion and internal institutionalization.

The Anti-Donggang Dam Campaign (1991–2000)

The 1990 floods in Yeongwol and Jeongseon, Gangwon-do province inflicted great damage on the area. In response, the government announced its plan to construct the Yeongwol Dam⁷ in January 1991. Upon this announcement, residents of Yeongwol living downstream from the dam stood in favor of the government's decision, whereas residents of Jeongseon, whose lands were to be flooded by the dam's construction, were against it (Jeong 2001). However, once the government began to implement its plan, residents in submerged areas changed their positions in light of the possibility of receiving government compensation for lost land.

7. The official title of this dam is Yeongwol Dam, but environmental organizations renamed it "Donggang Dam" in order to illustrate the ecological importance of the Donggang river. The fact that the dam—as "Donggang Dam"—received wider publicity than it did as "Yeongwol Dam" shows that the symbolic tactics used by environmental organizations were more effective than those utilized by the government.

The issue changed in 1998 from a local to a national one as KFEM launched the anti-Donggang Dam campaign to protect the natural ecosystem. In April 1998, the Three-County Struggle Committee to Scrap the Yeongwol Dam Construction Plans was formed. This committee focused its activities on drawing public attention to dam safety and environmental destruction by launching a petition, sending open inquiries to the authorities, and organizing protests and rallies. In December 1998, the magistrate and the county council assembly of Yeongwol issued statements opposing the dam's construction.

The Ministry of Construction and Transportation (MOCT), the Korea Water Resources Corporation (KOWACO), and other experts continued to claim that a dam was necessary to prevent floods and supply water resources. Some residents of the submerged area supported it out of expectations of compensation. Confrontations between the two sides were serious, with the dam construction plans driving once-quiet mountain villages into division and conflict.

On a national level, the anti-dam construction forces steadily expanded their ideological legitimacy. Television broadcasts of the beautiful scenery and the unique ecosystem of the Donggang river had a sizable impact on public opinion. As tourists swarmed to the river to view the astonishing beauty on the verge of submersion, the anti-Donggang Dam campaign garnered popular support. The campaign succeeded in stimulating people's empathy to nature by combining cultural symbols such as the Jeongseon *arirang* and log rafts with ecological symbols such as rare species of *eoreumchi* (*Hemibarbus mylodon*) and otters.

The Kim Dae-jung government allowed the Office of the Prime Minister to form a citizen-government investigation panel to carry out joint research on the dam's construction. The five divisions of the panel assessed the safety of the dam, its local ecological and cultural values, economic cost and benefit, and social impact. After a year of research, the panel reached the tentative conclusion that the ecosystem of the Donggang area had irreplaceable value and importance, and that therefore, construction of the dam should be abandoned. On Environment Day, 5 June 2000, when the research was coming to an

end, President Kim announced the New Millennium Vision for the Environment, and promised to repeal the Donggang Dam construction plans to protect the beauty of the area. With that announcement, the ten-year campaign ended with the victory of the environmental movement forces.

The anti-Donggang Dam campaign, which attracted nationwide public attention, was an important turning point in the history of the Korean environmental movement. Through this campaign, environmental organizations successfully invoked an admiration of life and nature. The public at large, including cultural groups, religious organizations, the press, local residents, academia, and ordinary citizens, now had an understanding of the intrinsic value of living creatures such as mergansers, *eoreumchi*, and otters living in the Donggang river. This was a crucial turning point in correcting the government's supply-based water management policy.

The Donggang Dam case demonstrates how a new political process managed to stimulate among the populace altruistic interests in the ecosystem and democratic participation beyond personal health issues. This is the essence of green politics. In the Donggang Dam case, the object of ecological protection was extended not only to future generations but also to living creatures other than human beings themselves. In addition, participation by diverse groups accentuated the importance of participatory democracy and solidarity. Environmental organizations and the Ministry of Environment actively deployed water conservation campaigns and water demand-side management policy to solve the water shortage problem, which was the original impetus behind the construction of the Donggang Dam. This case attests to how green solidarity was able to change a seemingly immutable "development coalition."⁸

8. A "development coalition" is comprised of developmental state, capital, international organizations seeking the globalization of capitalism, and development-oriented media. It produces and reproduces a strong network based on the shared economic and political interests of development. Meanwhile, green solidarity is defined by a loose network mediated by green values and identity but can exert great influence, depending on the situation. Its solidarity structure is not fixed, but

In the Donggang Dam case, a strong environmental movement was victorious within the democratic government system. Through the process of institutionalization in the 1990s, the environmental movement forces gained the power to alter already-fixed government plans. They laid the stepping-stones to transform society's view on the environment by bringing about the conceptual change that preservation of the ecosystem was then more important than the prevention of floods and water supply.

The Anti-Saemangeum Reclamation Project Campaign (1998-Present)

The Saemangeum Project, planned in 1987 and begun in 1991, is the world's largest reclamation project. Its purpose is to reclaim 401 km² (283 km² of land and 118 km² of freshwater lake) of tidal flat through the construction of a massive 33 km seawall in the West Sea off Jeollabuk-do province. The project is conceived of as an environmental issue and constructed as a social issue because of the severe pollution of Lake Sihwa, a man-made lake that was the product of a reclamation project similar to Saemangeum. Since the completion of the seawall construction project in Sihwa in 1994, the water quality of the lake has deteriorated rapidly. In the floods of 1996, KOWACO released lake water to lower the water level, resulting only in the pollution of the seawater outside the lake. Environmental organizations criticized the lack of consideration for the environment in the government's development plan and staged protests in the sea. This case clearly demonstrated the limits of environment management capacity for man-made ecosystems and the bureaucracy's lack of responsibility.⁹

Since the pollution of Lake Sihwa became known, people thought that the Saemangeum reclamation project might cause a similar eco-

rather changes depending on the political opportunity structure and the issues at hand.

9. In December 1998, the government scrapped its original plan to make Lake Sihwa a fresh-water lake and decided to continue circulating seawater. This decision illustrates that some government-led development projects had structural problems.

logical disaster and began to perceive it as an important environmental issue. With the inauguration of the Kim Dae-jung administration in 1998, environmental organizations launched a large-scale campaign to repeal the Saemangeum project. In reaction, Yu Jong-geun, then governor of Jeollabuk-do, proposed the formation of a citizen-government joint investigation team to extensively review the project in January 1999. The Citizen-Government Joint Investigation Team to Assess the Environmental Impact of the Saemangeum Project was formed in May 1999. Experts recommended by the government and environmental groups conducted research for over a year in three sections—there was an economic cost-benefit analysis, along with assessments about water quality and the environment—but nothing much came out of it, mainly because each of the experts had a different philosophical, theoretical, and methodological approach to the problem at hand. In particular, the two sides failed to see eye to eye in the economic cost-benefit analysis section of their respective reports, and failed to reach a consensus, crippling the operation of the Joint Investigation Team. Without reaching an agreeable conclusion between the opponents and the advocates, the chief of the Joint Investigation Team submitted a report to the government in August 2000. Thereafter, severe confrontations mounted between the anti-Saemangeum movement, which was led by environmental groups, and the pro-Saemangeum camp of Jeollabuk-do province. Conflicts over environmental issues continued until May 2001, generating debates organized by the Presidential Commission on Sustainable Development (PCSD), heated media reports, and the religious Saemangeum Eco-Peace Movement.

Finally, on 25 May 2001, the Kim Dae-jung administration decided to continue with the Saemangeum project, but delayed the development of the Man-gyeonggang area, which suffered from low water quality, until the situation improved. On the same day, the Korean People's Alliance for the Life of Saemangeum announced the "Declaration of Our View on Saemangeum" and resolved to fight to the end. With this declaration, many environmental activists and intellectuals decided to withdraw from government committees such as PCSD. In

October 2001, scholars convened to found the Korean Society for the Life of Saemangeum in order to study and address the Saemangeum problem. Environmental organizations addressed the damage of Saemangeum in international forums, including the World Summit on Sustainable Development held in Johannesburg, South Africa, in August 2002, and the 8th Conference of the Contracting Parties to the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands in Valencia, Spain, in November 2002.

The Roh Moo-hyun administration, having assumed power in February 2003, decided to continue the Saemangeum reclamation project and explore ways to change the project goals, now that the rice production promotion policy had been stopped under the preceding administration.¹⁰ In response, a Catholic clergyman, a Protestant minister, a Buddhist monk, and a Won-Buddhist monk launched a "three-steps-and-a-bow" (*sambo ilbae*) march—a Buddhist practice in which one prostrates oneself with every three steps—for the length of 305 km from Seoul to Saemangeum between 28 March and 31 May 2003, under the slogan of "Save the living creatures in the Saemangeum tidal flat." The news of the sacrificial, life-risking march to protect life in Saemangeum touched many people, which helped garner support for the anti-Saemangeum campaign. On 15 July 2003, the Seoul Administration Court (SAC) ruled to suspend the Saemangeum project by approving the petition by environmental groups to stop construction. The Court sustained their assertion that water would be polluted if the seawall were completed. The move to suspend a government-initiated development project to protect the environment was highly unusual. Yet, contrary to the SAC ruling, the Seoul High Court ruled on 29 January 2004 to continue construction, based on the MOAF's appeal. Yet the anti-Saemangeum movement is still far from over.

10. In August 2001, the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MOAF) made an official statement to abandon the rice production promotion policy due to rice surplus. This change in policy shook the foundation of the Saemangeum project, which was to reclaim land to produce more rice for national grain security.

The development coalition and green solidarity have engaged in severe confrontation and conflict over the Saemangeum case for a long time. The development coalition mobilized all possible resources under the slogan of economic growth and development, whereas green solidarity vied for sustainable development, environmental preservation, and respect for life.¹¹ Unlike the Donggang Dam project, the Saemangeum project has completed all the legal procedures necessary for construction, and construction has been going on for 10 years at a cost so far of roughly one trillion won (approximately 0.8 billion US\$). Thus, the development coalition's political and economic interest with regard to the project seems extremely strong, making it more difficult for green solidarity to intervene. Yet environmental movement forces are attacking the limits of the developmental state and changing the terrain of politics and policy by emphasizing the ecological importance of tidal flats at the mouth of the river, probably the only one of its kind in South Korea. The Saemangeum case illustrates that the Korean environmental movement has become a political force capable of reformulating the political terrain in the sense that it has turned an ongoing massive development project into a policy agenda, and it has changed public awareness of the environment and ecosystem.

Case Comparison

The four cases reviewed above have such typical characteristics that make them representative of different eras in the history of the Korean environmental movement. These four cases confirm that since the 1980s the main issues of the environmental movement expanded from self-interested concerns to ones more altruistic, universal, and ecological. Moreover, the main actors of the movement extended from pollution victims and forces for democratization, down to ordinary citizens, workers, the middle class, religious groups, as well as

11. Religious groups, which started to actively participate in the anti-Donggang Dam movement, began to take a central role in the anti-Saemangeum movement.

artistic and cultural communities. The goals of the movement changed from those centering on direct compensation and collective relocation to the improvement of policy and systems of ecological values and culture. The scope of influence has also expanded from the said compensation and relocation to putting pressure on corporations and government to make substantial policy changes. Particularly, in the case of the anti-Donggang Dam campaign, a large-scale construction project already approved by the government was scrapped due to problems posed by green solidarity, marking a representative case of empowerment of the Korean environmental movement. Perhaps the most important change is seen in how the empowerment of the Korean environmental movement brought the government to make reforms at the policy level, albeit passively, in order to lessen conflict over environmental issues. This tendency can be observed in the gradual improvement of the environmental impact assessment system as well as the active participation of civil environmental organizations in policy making. As a consequence of the environmental movement having become empowered, some ministries of the developmental state, such as the Ministry of Environment, create partial fissures within the developmental state apparatus and are incorporated into green solidarity. In the case of the Donggang Dam project, the Ministry of the Environment forced the MOCT to remedy its environmental impact assessment for an extended period of time, delaying dam construction. In the case of the Saemangeum project, the Environment Ministry publicly predicted that the water quality of Lake Man-gyeong would be below satisfactory level, impeding the smooth implementation of the project.

In conclusion, a comparison of the four cases shows that the environmental movement has come to have enough broad and influential power to bring about change in both the political terrain and the cultural system of Korean society. Green solidarity has expanded its ideological legitimacy and practical resource mobilization capacity within a developmental state in which a development coalition holds dominant power.

Table 2. Comparison of Cases of the Environmental Movement

Case Category	Onsan Disease	Phenol Contamination Incident	Anti-Donggang Dam Campaign	Anti-Saemangeum Campaign
Time period	1982-1985	1991	1991-2000	1998-present
Political opportunity structure	Closed	Relatively open	Open	Open
Main issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health of residents in industrial sites (pollution-related disease from heavy metal contamination) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concern with citizens' health concern • Immorality of <i>jaebeol</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flood and shortage of water • Dam safety • Ecosystem of nature 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Water contamination • Protection of tidal flat ecosystem • Life • Peace
Type of reaction	Reaction after the incident	Reaction after the incident	Precaution	Precaution
Main actors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Victims • Democratization movement forces (Anti-Pollution movement) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Victims • Citizens • Environmental organizations • Civil organizations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Citizens • Environmental organizations • Religious groups • Art and culture communities, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Citizens • Environmental organizations • Religious groups • Art and culture communities • Korean Confederation of Trade Unions, etc.
Movement goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compensation for damages and collective relocation • Democratization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compensation for damages • Improvement of environmental policy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preservation of nature • Improvement of dam policy • Diffusion of ecosystemic value 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protection of nature • Fundamental correction of development-oriented policy • Diffusion of ecosystemic value

Table 2. (Continued)

Case Category	Onsan Disease	Phenol Contamination Incident	Anti-Donggang Dam Campaign	Anti-Saemangeum Campaign
Time period	1982-1985	1991	1991-2000	1998-present
Movement outcomes	Collective relocation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partial compensation • Policy improvement • Reinforcement of environmental movement • Spread of environmental conscious values 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Withdrawal of dam construction • Introduction of water demandside management policy • Spread of ecovalues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intensified confrontation between development coalition and green solidarity • Diffusion of ecosystemic value
Media coverage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disclosure of damage with a focus on victims 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sensational report • Negative labeling of the corporation (<i>jaebeol</i>) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Heavy reporting on the importance of the Donggang ecosystem 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Division of media coverage between development and preservation
Main interest	Self-interest in health	Self-interest in health	Altruistic interest in future generations and the ecosystem	Altruistic interest in future generations and the ecosystem
Movement characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Environmental justice movement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health-oriented environmental movement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nature preservation movement • Water resource policy change movement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nature preservation movement • Green life movement

Discussion

The Korean Environmental Movement: The Reflection Hypothesis vs. Social Constructionism

Is the Korean environmental movement a reflection of environmental problems? Or is it a product of social construction? Aggravation of environmental pollution is a primary condition of the environmental movement. But as illustrated in the four cases above, the way the problem is socially constructed is actually more important than the environmental problem itself.

In Onsan, cases of sickness erupted in large numbers from 1982, but the problem began to be constructed as a social issue only in 1985, when it received wide media coverage. In particular, the sensational reports that the ailment had similar symptoms to the *itai itai* disease contributed to the government's decision to speedily begin collective relocation. The disease, once called "the Onsan plague," earned the new moniker "Onsan disease," which became a major driving force behind the environmental movement, combined with the fear of pollution-related diseases.

In the case of phenol contamination, even though the contamination was accidental, the public statement by the Prosecutor's Office that the immoral *jaebeol* conglomerate deliberately dumped industrial waste into residents' water source gave the incident new meaning. Extensive media reports placed the firm and the government in a quagmire after having enabled the development of a discourse powerful enough to incite public anger and greatly influence governmental and corporate policy towards the environment. If the incident had been defined as simply an accident, this would have not been so. An environmental accident, combined with the significance of being an immoral crime involving an unethical *jaebeol*, produced a new social outcome: an explosion in the environmental movement.

In the Donggang Dam case, a large-scale public development project initiated by the government in the name of the public interest turned out to be environmentally harmful. Starting with this case, a

general concern with life and nature as irreplaceably valuable took precedence over human-oriented problems such as flooding or water shortages. A social consensus was reached that in order to prevent flooding and water shortages, methods other than dam construction needed to be explored, while protecting the environment itself. This case was also significant in that the movement included not only local residents, but also various social groups such as environmental organizations, civic groups, and religious organizations, all working together under a banner of green solidarity.

The Saemangeum case is an even more dramatic example. Thanks to the environmental movement, a largely-ignored tidal flat earned new meaning as a place teeming with life. People had very limited knowledge about the ecological value of tidal flats when the Saemangeum project was launched in 1991. The term itself had negative associations with things dirty and messy. But after witnessing the pollution of Lake Sihwa, the public learned that a large-scale development project could have a negative impact on the ecosystem. Expanding their knowledge through this experience, people recognized mudflats as coastal wetland and assigned them positive meaning as virtual treasure houses of the natural ecosystem. Within ten years, the environmental movement redefined "the great history of transforming useless mudflats into precious farmland" as "a nature-destroying, uneconomical project." Although physical actions have not changed, the social construction of these actions has changed dramatically.

Based on these four cases, the Korean environmental movement can be explained better by the social construction theory than the reflection hypothesis. The cultural system in the field of the environment has changed swiftly through social change characterized by rapid economic growth and democratization. The value of life beyond the environment is, at least ideologically, now considered to be as important as development and the creation of economic value. Through this change, environmental problems are socially constructed in a dynamic fashion.

The Political Opportunity Structure and Empowerment

Environmental movements cannot develop under conditions in which the regime is too closed to respond to public demands and resistance forces have little solidarity. Korea and Taiwan in the 1960s to the 1970s and contemporary China are prime examples of this fact.

The Korean environmental movement of the 1980s developed slowly, dependent on the limited resources of the democratization movement under a repressive political opportunity structure. After the democratization of 1987, environmental movements expanded their resource mobilization capacity and in the 1990s became a central force in a newly formed civil society. Significantly, the environmental movement acquired the power to play a leading role in opening up the political opportunity structure. This is well demonstrated by examples of nationwide resource mobilization, such as the Citizens' Coalition for the 2000 General Elections and the candlelight vigils opposing the National Assembly's decision to impeach President Roh in 2004. Also worthy of note is the fact that the Korean environmental movement has the characteristics of new social movements, which are based on values and identity, unlike old social movements, which were based on economic class interests. In this sense, a prominent characteristic of the Korean environmental movement is empowerment through new green politics.

For an in-depth analysis of the characteristics of the Korean environmental movement, it is necessary to compare it with those of other nations. The following is a comparison with the United States and Germany, which are quite different from Korea in terms of political, social, and cultural structures, as well as with Japan, Taiwan, and China, which are geographically close and culturally similar to Korea (Yang et al. 2002). The comparisons will focus on the political opportunity structure and the characteristics of the environmental movement.

The environmental movement is highly developed in the United States and Germany, but in different ways. In the United States, which has a pluralist political structure, the environmental movement focus-

es on lobbying for policy change. Thanks to the advanced legal system of the U.S., environmental organizations rely on legal suits rather than direct engagement in political movements. Beginning initially as a nature preservation movement led by the upper class in the early twentieth century, the environmental movement in the United States developed after the 1960s in response to modern environmental problems. At the same time, the environmental justice movement for the lower class developed in reaction to environmental discrimination and racism against people of color. The U.S. environmental movement began to engage in national and global NGO activities, but failed to become politically empowered.

Meanwhile, the environmental movement in Germany developed as a new social movement struggling against then-existing institutionalized politics, based on the changing political opportunity structure in 1968. With a less open legal system but more open political system than the United States, the environmental movement in Germany developed into a form of party politics with the establishment of the Green Party. The overflowing energy of environmental movement politics enabled its resources to expand into party politics. As an "anti-party party," the Green Party today experiments with new politics, putting into practice the four principles of ecology, social responsibility, grass-roots democracy, and nonviolence.

Compared with the above-mentioned examples, the environmental movements in Asian countries outside of Korea are politically weak in terms of their capacity to create new systems. The Japanese environmental movement began as a victims' movement in a conservative political culture. Until the 1960s, the Japanese government repressed this movement, just as the Korean government in the 1960s and the 1970s repressed all aspects of civil society as part of the mobilization of all available resources behind the goal of economic growth. The victims' movement developed into an environmental movement through both the filing of legal suits and the launch of a reformative autonomy movement. In the 1960s and 1970s, pollution was the main environmental issue in Japan, but with gradual improvements in the system and technological advances, it made a transition into a cooper-

Table 3. Five-Nation Comparison of the Characteristics of their Respective Environmental Movements

Country Category	United States	Germany	Japan
Political opportunity structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open structure • Weak opposition • Advanced legal system 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open structure • Multi-party politics • Formation of alternative political structure to corporatism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open structure • Conservative central political structure
Main issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nature preservation • Water, air, and soil contamination • Environmental health • Environmental justice and environmental racism • Global environmental problems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nuclear power • Climate change and renewable energy • Air pollution • Forest destruction • Ecological tax reform 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pollution-related disease • Co-op • Air pollution from incinerators • Climate change, etc.
Resource mobilization method	Legal suits, lobbying, and direct action by national and local movement organizations	Party politics and grass-roots social movement	Reformative local government campaign, grass-roots movement, legal suits, and co-op movement
Characteristics of change	Reform within the system	Structural change through new politics	Reform within the system

Table 3. (Continued)

Country Category	Taiwan	China	Korea
Political opportunity structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Democratization in a repressive, closed political structure (the late 1980s) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Repressive, closed political structure • Impermissible coalition of opposition forces 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Democratization in a repressive, closed political structure (1987) • Strong and dynamic coalition of resistance against dominant power
Main issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nuclear power and nuclear waste • Contamination of industrial sites, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contamination of industrial sites. • Water quality, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Waste contamination of industrial sites • Environmental health • Water, air pollution, and waste • Nature preservation • Nuclear power and nuclear waste, etc.
Resource mobilization method	Residents' movement and relatively weak national movement organizations	Sound resource mobilization based on environmental education	Nationwide large-scale movement organizations and nonpartisan movement politics
Characteristics of change	Reform within the system	Reform within the system	Structural change through movement politics

ative movement in the 1980s. A noticeable feature of the Japanese environmental movement is visible in the contrast between inactive national organizations and quite active local grass-roots organizations. Local environmental organizations are better equipped to engage in activities that save communities than those that might be deployed by an ideology-charged national resistance movement.

In Taiwan, the environmental movement was thwarted under the martial law enforced by the Guomindang (Nationalist Party), which controlled the government until 1987. The main focus of the movement was on the compensation of residents in industrial sites for harm experienced from environmental pollution. Several incidents incited public discontent with environmental pollution, and the environmental movement developed rapidly with changes in the political opportunity structure, including the lifting of martial law. Although the Taiwanese environmental movement does not have much societal influence when compared to Korea, it has successfully formed alliances with political parties and forced them to adopt an anti-nuclear power generation policy.¹²

In China, the environmental movement has not yet developed, despite serious environmental problems, because the country's economic growth is recent and its political opportunity structure is still repressive. Several NGOs, including Friends of Nature and the Global Village Cultural Center, operate in China, but they are mainly involved in organizing moderate environmental education programs within the system.

By contrast, the Korean environmental movement is similar to Germany's in the sense that it pursued and achieved political empowerment as a way of playing a leading role in institutional reform. However, while the German environmental movement has grown into a viable political party, the Korean movement remains one of movement politics under the structural condition of weak party politics

12. The Democratic Progressive Party, which took over in 2000, pushed for an anti-nuclear development policy, but had to withdraw from this stance after it confronted objection of diet.

(Lee 2000). The environmental movements in the United States, Japan, and Taiwan seem to seek institutional reform rather than a fundamental transformation of social institutions and structures. The U.S. and Japanese environmental movements effect change mainly as the result of movement politics, whereas the Taiwanese are deeply engaged in party politics through the Green Party and the Democratic Progressive Party.

Table 4. International Comparison of Political Opportunity Structure and Empowerment of Environmental Movement

Political Opportunity Structure	Closed	Open
Empowerment of Environmental Movement		
Strong		Germany Korea
Weak	China	U.S. Japan Taiwan

Table 4 compares six countries in terms of political opportunity structure and the empowerment of environmental movement. It is difficult for an environmental movement to develop under a repressive and closed political opportunity structure. Korea and Taiwan in the 1960s and 1970s, like China in the present, had weak environmental movements in a closed political opportunity structure. At present, Taiwan, Japan, and the United States have an open political opportunity structure but weak empowerment of the environmental movement. Meanwhile, the environmental movement in Korea and Germany succeeded in empowerment, turning "green values" into a new political agenda, which has contributed to the even further opening of the political opportunity structure.

What are the reasons behind these differences? From the discussion in this paper, it can be inferred that the differences depend on the strength and dynamics of the power and sustainability of solidarity between social movement forces. The Korean environmental movement succeeded in becoming politically empowered by achieving institutional reform through movement politics. But this does not mean that it has succeeded in transforming social, political, and cultural systems into those based on an ecologically oriented paradigm. Korea is still a developmental state, as it still invests resources in economic growth and development. Unlike Germany, the Korean environmental movement has not developed into party politics, but is rather defined as a new social movement seeking institutional reform to create an ecological value system and social system based on new ideology and a new movement format. This change has been possible because of the change in the political opportunity structure facilitated by democratization. Moreover, the environmental movement has succeeded in achieving a state of political empowerment with the purpose of changing social structure. The Korean environmental movement can be summarized as a politics of green solidarity that seeks to transform the old paradigm of the development coalition.

Conclusion

The Korean environmental movement developed because of environmental problems from rapid industrialization. However, it was not the automatic result of mere societal reflection on environmental problems, but rather the outcome of specific political and social processes related to popular reaction to environmental problems. This paper analyzed the process by which forces of the environmental movement socially constructed environmental "problems," making the best use of openings in the political opportunity structure. In the Onsan case and phenol incident, the construction of meaning by environmental organizations and the media in response to the resulting environmental damages was crucial. In the Donggang Dam and

Saemangeum cases, in which potential damage was predicted before any real damage was done, the sociocultural dispute was at the center of the conflict over the environment and then constructed into a sociopolitical agenda. From these examples, it can be argued that environmental problems are only a precondition of environmental movements and that scientific, social, and political processes are more important. In other words, it is the process that frames the problem.

The Korean environmental movement made rapid growth in a short period of about twenty years. Starting off as a part of a long-standing political movement for democratization, it pursued "green" values such as environmental preservation, respect for life, and grass-roots democracy in the existing social structure. The environmental movement expanded the breadth of green solidarity, engaging in intense struggle against the development coalition. It underwent institutionalization by actively participating in advisory bodies of the government and broadening the exterior of green solidarity within the government. While the German environmental movement employs an institutional reform strategy through the Green Party in an advanced system of party politics, the Korean environmental movement practices its own green politics seeking democracy, environment, and a better quality of life through nonpartisan movement politics under an outdated party politics system. Green politics as expressed through social movements, which is a new phenomenon clearly distinct from an old politics based on class and interest, has significant practical and theoretical implications for the future of our society.

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