Dams as Assemblages of Power: Japanese Engineers and the Post-Colonial, Cold War System of Development in South Korea.

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Dams are compelling objects of study since they constitute hubs that assemble complex, transnational political-economic, technological, financial, ecological, hydrological, and cultural networks over space and time. These networks in turn constitute “assemblages of power” that involve different actors operating at various scales—the local, regional, national, and international. Shifting attention away from historical work emphasizing the role of US Cold War strategists in spreading a hegemonic development philosophy centering around “river-basin development” throughout the developing world, my paper will instead trace the formation of assemblages of power within Japan’s influential technical and economic aid system in Asia after 1955. I examine how the earlier transnational networks that developed around massive infrastructure projects constructed during Japan’s earlier colonial era were reconfigured in the 1950s and 1960s by means of large-scale hydropower projects into a new, postcolonial technical aid network linking the United States, Japan, and various Asian nations during the Cold War.

This paper focuses on the Soyanggang Multi-Purpose Dam project (1967-1973), Asia’s largest rock-fill dam and a prominent symbol of President Park Chung-hee’s “miracle of the Han” development policies in South Korea. The project, paid for largely by Japanese government grants, loans, and credits from the 1965 Normalization Treaty that settled all claims from the colonial past, was supervised by Japan’s leading development consultancy, Nippon Kōei, a company that was run by former colonial engineers who had built what was equivalent to Japan’s entire domestic power production capacity during the colonial/wartime era in northern Korea. I argue that analyzing the power relations at different scales within transnational flows of ideals, materials, people, and capital around large-scale technical structures such as dams, which emerged out of entangled histories of Japanese colonial rule and the rise of the US Cold War order in East Asia, constitutes a promising direction in Asian environmental humanities.