

A Dredged Nation: The Four Rivers Restoration Project and the Envirotechnical Transformation of South Korea

Chihyung Jeon

“Restoration or Devastation?” A 2010 news report in the journal *Science* asked this question about the Four Rivers Restoration Project of South Korea, which at the time was underway at full speed. The Four Rivers Project (2008–2012) was one of the largest engineering projects in Korean history (around USD 20 billion). The government and those who supported the project claim that it “revived the rivers,” giving them due maintenance and creating spaces for leisure and sports; whereas critics say that the project was simply an “environmental disaster” that “killed the rivers” by digging up the riverbeds and blocking water flow with numerous dams and weirs. The idea of “renovating” or “transforming” the nation’s land at an unprecedented scale excited President Lee Myung-bak and other supporters of the project. The prospect that its ecological and social consequences would be indelible enraged the opponents, including environmental activists, academics from all disciplines, religious groups, and concerned citizens. For both groups, there was no question that South Korea—its nature, economy, and politics—would never be the same after the Four Rivers Project. What is the envirotechnical impact on Korea given that its four major rivers, and the natural-cultural systems that comprise, them have been transformed in such a short time?

My research project titled “A Dredged Nation” is a study of the contested goals, desires, processes, consequences, and repercussions of the Four Rivers Project. I use **“dredging”**—a major technical component of the project—as a notion that characterizes the simultaneously ecological, technical, and political courses of action taken regarding the rivers and the Korean society. In “A Dredged Nation,” I examine how this river management project ended up dredging not just the rivers, but the nation itself, stirring up mud and rubbish as well as conflicting visions of development and conservation. The Four Rivers Project was the culmination of the last half-century’s developmental drive that has transformed South Korea from a poor, agrarian nation into an industrialized one, with a turbulent political history. But the goal of my project is not simply to recognize the political symbolism, economic interest, and environmental damage within the Four Rivers Project. Rather, I regard the rivers and their ruthlessly hurried transformation as a disorderly current into which ideas, materials, machines, and people were thrown to forge an envirotechnical order for South Korea, one that continues to unsettle—or dredge—current forms of natural and social lives through engineering and management initiatives newly branded as “green.”

One of the main themes of my research is the discourse and practice of **mobility**. Whether dam construction and dredging operation caused the rivers to flow better or stagnate has been highly disputed among supporters and critics. In opposition to the government’s advertisement of improved water management for transportation and leisure, the critics framed the debate as a contrast between natural mobility and forced immobility of the rivers.

But the theme of mobility becomes even more significant when we include other human and non-human actors that move in and along the rivers, such as the cyclists on the Four Rivers Bikeway and the robotic fish for monitoring water quality. There are also organisms and things that played a role by appearing stagnant or losing mobility, such as algae, worms, (non-robotic) fish, birds, and dredged silt. I follow the mobile trajectories and immobile conditions of these human and non-human entities to describe the envirotechnical order that emerged out of the Four Rivers Project. As scholars in environmental history, science and technology studies (STS), and mobility studies have shown, the mobility of nature, artifacts, and people shapes, and is shaped by, political processes, power relations, and interminable negotiations. The Four Rivers Project reveals these dynamics in a painfully vivid way.