
Dissertation Synopsis

Upwellings of Oceanic Decolonization: Coastal Governance in Japan and Korea, 1894–1958
Gene Kim

This dissertation reconsiders the history of Korea-Japan relations from the perspective of the sea. It conceptualizes post-1945 disputes between Japan and South Korea over fisheries and maritime boundary delimitation as conflicts of “oceanic decolonization.” I argue that struggles over access to marine resources were central to the making of Japanese Empire in Korea and the formation of post-colonial national sovereignty in northeast Asia. Following developments from the late nineteenth century through the late 1950s, the dissertation begins with showing how coastal ecological pressures, legal transformations during the Meiji period, and local and prefectural support worked in tandem to push the expansion of Japanese fishers into Korean waters, positioning Korea as a solution to the coastal problems at home. Even prior to formal annexation of the peninsula in 1910, these processes effected the colonization of the sea by extending territorialized regimes of control over fisheries. Colonial coastal governance further reproduced principles of Meiji fishery law in Korea, with notable differences, but similarly leading to intensified extraction, new forms of dispossession, and a shared history of governing the oceans as extensions of land.

After 1945, these legacies became the basis for inter-occupation (between the U.S. occupations of Korea and Japan) and international conflict as South Koreans articulated a vision of post-colonial sovereignty that extended onto the oceans and saw the return of Japanese fishers to their coastal waters as a harbinger of resurgent imperialism. Japanese attempts to reassert access to Korean fisheries, including through appeals to international law, clashed with these assertions of oceanic sovereignty. These confrontations, often violent, were framed in both countries as existential matters for the survival of their nations, transforming the actors involved, including the fishers and Korean authorities who detained them, into proxies for these larger questions of post-colonial co-existence.

Upwellings of Oceanic Decolonization situates these Japan-Korea conflicts within a broader context of decolonizing and developing nations across the world challenging maritime powers and principles of international law that were seen as perpetuating imperial formulations and global inequalities in access to marine resources. I argue that the postwar transformations in global maritime order and ocean governance were fundamentally impacted by conflicts of oceanic decolonization like those in northeast Asia. This focus allows us to foreground the oceans as a critical site of decolonization and reframes modern Japan-Korea relations through their relationship to and at sea.

Gene Kim
genekim@fas.harvard.edu