AATK COLLOQUIUM – SPRING 2024

Science, Technology, and Medicine in Chosŏn Korea

April 5 (Fri), 2024, 8:00-10:00 pm (EST)

Via Zoom – OPEN TO PUBLIC

The Zoom link will only be sent to the registered participants as the event approaches.

Please register HERE.

Colloquium Committee: Joowon Suh (Columbia University), Hee Ju (UCLA), and Mijeong Kim (Washington University in St. Louis)

Moderator: Hee Ju (UCLA)

PANEL PRESENTATIONS

[1] The Artisanal Heart: Engineering and Statecraft in Early Modern Korea

Hyeok Hweon Kang (Washington University in St. Louis)

What happens if we tell the history of engineering from the edges inward, that is, not from Western Europe, where the breakthrough to technological modernity occurred, but from such places as Chosŏn Korea (1392–1910)? I answer the question by uncovering the knowledge of Korean artisans and practitioners. To date, historians have traced modern engineering back to Renaissance artists like Leonardo da Vinci or French officers at the cusp of the Revolution. I appreciate, however, the multiple ways in which rational design and production could be organized across cultures, particularly in Chosŏn and by its government workshops. Using little-studied manuscripts, drawings, and artifacts, I argue that Korean “engineers” (defined here as a group of technologists working between the ordinary artisans and the scholar-officials) began to study technology on paper by the eighteenth century, employing diverse media such as recipes, drawings, and manuals written in two scripts (literary Sinitic and vernacular Korean). This literature formed the basis of their “artisanal heart” (changsim), or the ability to innovate, and it did not just bring social and professional recognition to the practitioners. Korean engineers also inspired the literati to pursue practical learning and enabled the Chosŏn state to undertake technical projects of a stunning variety, from jade carving and tomb construction to making guns, water pumps, and steam engines.
Beyond Marginality: Rethinking Health and Illness in Chosŏn Korea

Soyoung Suh (Dartmouth College)

In previous work, I posited that the study of premodern Korean medicine should transcend the simplistic dichotomy of defining itself solely in opposition to Chinese, Japanese, or Western counterparts. Rather than striving for a distinctively Korean interpretation of health and illness, I emphasized the scholarly elaboration of confluences, the complicated meaning-making of different currents, such as “Chinese and Korean,” “universal and local,” “center and periphery,” and “native and foreign.” Building upon this framework, this presentation underscores the decentralized nature of medical practice in Chosŏn Korea. Although there were examinations for qualified court physicians, no license was required to become a practitioner. The diversity of healers and their dissimilar curative styles reflect the breadth of illness management beyond scholarly medical conventions. In particular, women stand out by virtue of the various body works they provided. Their unseen, informal, and often despised modes of labour provided necessary care to patients, not to mention to those who struggled with daily survival. The complexity of everyday caregiving and health maintenance in the Chosŏn era can be examined not only through scholarly erudition crafted through intertextuality but also through the unknown healers’ skilful hands-on methods. Reflecting on the legacy of diverse healers and plural modes of knowledge-making, this presentation introduces concrete case studies that illuminate Korean endeavors to confront uncertainty and mortality, situated within the complex interplay of gender dynamics and the process of vernacularisation.

About the presenters:

Hyeok Hweon Kang is Assistant Professor of East Asian Languages and Cultures at Washington University in St. Louis. He works and teaches on early modern Korea and East Asia, with a focus on the history of science, history of technology, and global material culture. He is currently completing a book under contract with the University of Chicago Press titled “The Artisanal Heart: Engineering and Statecraft in Early Modern Korea.” Portions of this work have received the Turriano ICOHTEC Prize from the International Committee for the History of Technology, the Joan Cahalin Robinson Prize from the Society for the History of Technology, and the ICAS Book Prize (English—Best Dissertation in the Humanities) from the International Convention of Asia Scholars. His publications have appeared in scholarly journals such as Isis: A Journal of the History of Science Society, History & Technology, Journal of World History, and the Journal of Cultural Analytics.

Soyoung Suh is an Associate Professor of History at Dartmouth College. Her first book, titled Naming the Local: Medicine, Language, and Identity in Korea since the Fifteenth Century (Harvard University Asia Center, 2017), examines the evolving concept of locality in medical knowledge-making, focusing on the geo-cultural specificities of herbs, soil, and human constitutions. Her scholarly articles appear in journals such as Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry, Asian Medicine: Tradition and Modernity, Asia Pacific Perspectives, Korean Journal of Medical History, and Journal of Korean History of Science Society. She serves as a co-researcher in the comparative history of illnesses project at Ewha Women’s University from 2020 to 2026. Currently, she is finalizing a journal article titled "Radiotherapies for
Women in Korea, 1930s–1970s" as part of her second monograph project, tentatively titled *Sudden Transition and Enduring Past: Breast Cancer in Korea, 1800–2010.*