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The Importance of Crisis and Failure: The Case of Saemangeum and the Green Life Theory Project*

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This paper explores the cross-disciplinary, continuous, and important roles of crisis and failure in modern South Korea. In particular, it explores the highly contested phase just before the completion of the state-led Saemangeum national development project at the end of Dae-Jung Kim's presidential term (1998-2003), and the activist mobilizations and legal battles to "Save Our Saemangeum (SOS)" ending in 2006. In addition, this paper ethnographically examines one civil leader's failed effort—a project he called Green Life Theory and then Greenism—to respond not only to Saemangeum, but also to the larger theoretical demand for an alternative to neoliberal capitalism. Ultimately, this paper argues that 1) the Saemangeum reclamation be understood as a post-authoritarian, democratic hope for cashing in and social redemption (Peterson 2009); 2) that the Green Life Theory Project is an attempt to "orchestrate time" (Cho 2015); 3) that both Saemangeum and the Green Life Theory projects illuminate a key difference between activists and academics in terms of endpoints (Miyazaki and Riles 2005); and 4) that both projects fail on disciplinary metrics in trying to achieve interdisciplinarity (e.g. Jean-Klein and Riles 2005; Riles 2000; Strathern 2004).

Keywords: Failure, Crisis, Activist and Academic Endpoints, Saemangeum, South Korea

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I. INTRODUCTION

“Crisis” has been an organizing trope across many disciplines to make sense of late capitalism, neoliberalism, and democracy (e.g. Mirowski 2013; Roitman 2013; Unger 2007). Nancy Abelmann (1996) and Namhee Lee (2007) argue that there is a historical and post-colonial dimension to both failure and crisis in the Korean context. Abelmann writes, “Because Korea’s liberation was imposed and because there are two Korean states that claim to be the legitimate offspring of colonial struggles, many historians endeavor to explain or explain away failure” (1996, 261). Lee theorizes this failure as a larger “crisis of historical subjectivity,” which she argues formed the intellectual basis of the post-colonial *minjung* movement (2007, 2). Haejoang Cho wrote soon after the late 1990s financial, or IMF, crisis in South Korea, “I/we live in a society where every week is critical, a society where crisis is chronic, a society that makes crisis chronic” (2000, 67). The salience of these words has only increased with the passage of time, particularly as South Korea faces chronic constitutional, legislative, and various trade and national security crises. Related to the North-South Korea pattern of conflict resolution (Snyder 1997; Grinker 1998), there are cultural as well as spatio-temporal components to crisis (Cho 2000; Cho 2015; Grinker 1998; Levine 2016; Snyder 1997).¹ Rather than being an exception, crisis is increasingly the rule in the context of late capitalism and neoliberalism (e.g. Muir 2015). This is particularly the case when there is a conflict between governmental and non-governmental, or civil, organizations in South Korea (Abelmann 1996; Grinker 1996; Lee 2007; Oppenheim 2008).

In this article, I will examine one defining conflict between governmental and non-governmental organizations in South Korea: Saemangeum. Saemangeum is a state-led, large-scale land reclamation project, and a “Green Growth” precursor that took over two decades and 2.9 trillion won to complete. Among other things, it contains the longest man-made seawall in the world stretching 33.9 kilometers. Opposition to this project was fierce among environmental activists. A coalition of civil groups coalesced around the slogan SOS—an acronym for Save Our Saemangeum in addition to the international distress signal—and approached Saemangeum as an unprecedented environmental crisis. One leader of this movement, Secretary-General Seung-Guk Choi, took Saemangeum as a symptom of an even larger crisis: a lack of alternatives to capitalism and neoliberalism. In response, he attempted his own alternative activist-academic project, which he called Green Life Theory. Both his efforts to stop the Saemangeum project and to create an alternative Green Life Theory project failed. However, the details of these failures offer many lessons about how activists and academics comport and “orchestrate time” (Cho 2015), how endpoints (Miyazaki and Riles 2005) contrast, the nature of democracy in a post-authoritarian society, and some pitfalls of interdisciplinarity (Jean-Klein and Riles 2005; Riles 2000).

For the purposes of this paper, the concept of “crisis” is large in terms of scope, scale, and complexity, and arrives with urgency. Time has an inverse relationship to this scope, scale, and complexity; in other words, there is increasingly less time to address a larger scope, scale, and level of complexity. Antonio Gramsci (1971) helpfully defines crisis as when “the old is dying and the new cannot be born.” There is recognition of overwhelming problem(s) and non-existent or insufficient solution(s). Failure, a related concept to crisis, is to not succeed on some stated criteria or standard. This concept has long had import across academic fields and is going through another renaissance in the social sciences and material culture studies (e.g. Carroll, Jeevendrampillai, Parkhurst, Shackelford 2017; Muir 2015; Riles 2000).

This paper is based primarily on socio-cultural ethnographic fieldwork inside the movement “Green Korea United,” which commenced in June 2001 and continued until June 2007. As a socio-cultural anthropologist, I am decidedly more focused on qualitative data rather than quantitative data. I conducted hundreds of semi-structured interviews, used various participant-observation techniques, and worked full-time for 14 months as a volunteer inside Green Korea, supported by research grants from the Korea Foundation, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and Cornell University. The immersive and open-ended nature of ethnography offered me many moments of empathy with Secretary-General Choi and other interlocutors (Levine 2016). I felt the pull of dropping all work in favor of responding to whatever the economic, political, or environmental crisis of the moment happened to be. There were many crises—from North-South tensions, Korea-US FTA negotiations, Roh Moo Hyun’s impeachment, etc.—we worked through, and I felt keenly the challenges of sustaining long-term projects inside South Korea’s fast paced and frequently changing environment. Nancy Abelmann reflected that “South Korea is simply not a place for very long-lived interests or projects” (2003, 60). Over the last eight years, as I worked full-time at two different national universities in South Korea, many academic colleagues lamented the inability to “study deeply” or engage in long-term projects. Many activist colleagues had echoed these sentiments when I conducted earlier full-time fieldwork in the early-mid 2000s. Crises of various kinds were frequently the disruptions or engines of failure for the much-coveted deep and long-term study.

Before Green Growth or the Green New Deal, both academics and activists in environmental civil movement organizations were resisting sustainable development and the larger and underlying economic, ecological, political, and social forces. Sanghun Lee, a leader in Korean environmental civil movement organizations, former high-ranking member of the Presidential Commission on Sustainable Development, and current professor at Hanyang University, traces the failures of several iterations of ecological modernization theory—most recently, Myung Bak Lee’s Green Growth and Green New Deal strategy—to confront the “illusion of

unlimited growth” (2015, 355). Lee positions himself as part of a “growing political-ecological critique of this latest phase of capitalism” (e.g. Castree 2008; Peet et al. 2011) that approaches South Korea’s Green Growth as “at best an example of very shallow greening, and at worst a smokescreen for a business-as-usual approach centered on a construction-oriented state” (2015, 355). Lee and many others used similar language to oppose the Saemangeum reclamation project.

II. ORIGIN OF THE GREEN LIFE THEORY PROJECT

Environmental groups did not need an alternative to Saemangeum but rather to all such development projects—as stated by Green Korea United’s Secretary-General Choi in 2005. To make his point, Choi referenced a recent TV debate, which aired on MBC’s *100 Minutes* in November of 2005. The debate was between a professor—Myung Rae Cho—representing the environmental movement and then Seoul Mayor Myung Bak Lee. They were not debating Saemangeum, but rather Cheonggyecheon, an ambitious stream reclamation project in Seoul which helped elect Lee president a few years later.

Mayor Lee came across as a plain-spoken, straightforward businessman who knew how to appeal to people’s pocketbook interests, while the professor appeared vague and unimaginative according to Green Korea staffers. One activist said the professor was merely criticizing Mayor Lee’s vision without offering an alternative in its place. The same Green Korea activist joked that the professor spoke ten words for every one that Lee spoke. Most Green Korea staffers agreed that the professor not only lost the debate, but also helped Lee look like the pragmatic and hopeful businessman he would stake his successful run for the presidency on just a couple years later. Green Korea’s Secretary-General did not disagree with this assessment, but he saw the problem as larger than either the professor or Myung Bak Lee. For him, it was larger than Cheonggyecheon or any other large-scale development project. The problem was of a large enough scale and necessitated urgency; in other words, it was a *crisis*. Green Korea’s Secretary-General thought civil movement organizations such as his own were relying too much on a small group of scholars for the work of debating and presenting alternatives to government and business development plans. Secretary-General Choi thought activists could do more than just follow or implement the work of these scholars. He thought activists needed to get engaged in the work of making theory and presenting alternatives to the public. The Green Life Theory Project was his way to begin this work. Yet by Choi’s own admission, SOS and his Green Life Theory project ended in failure. The Green Life Theory panel he moderated, and the books he prepared for Green Korea’s 15th anniversary celebrations, quickly began to collect dust in office storage. Choi did not even wish to discuss the project a couple days later even though it was all he could talk about in the

weeks leading up to the panel discussion. Before returning to Choi's failed project, it is important to ethnographically contextualize the Saemangeum project.

III. SAEMEANGUEUM RECLAMATION PROJECT

The Saemangeum land reclamation project has been a touchstone of the shifting moral aesthetics of activism in South Korea over the last two decades. Saemangeum is a carryover of the large-scale government-led development projects of the 1960s through the 80s as it was first identified by Park Chung Hee in 1971 as a potential site for development. One key difference, however, is that the project is located about 270 kilometers southwest of Seoul in North Jeolla province. The location of a major development project in a Jeolla province was by far the exception to the rule during Park's regime. This is the same province where Nancy Abelmann (1996, 1999) conducted her fieldwork with the Gochang Tenant Farmers' movement during the 1980s and 90s. Tellingly, when she returned to the area in 1993, one of the local activists chuckled about the ironic fortune of the region: "although the northwestern coast was impoverished because it missed out on state development programs, it was spared the environmental destruction of the rest of South Korea—How lucky we are to have been excluded²" (Abelmann 1999, 271). Environmental activists expected to encounter this sentiment among local residents as they mobilized against Saemangeum during the 1990s and 2000s. They were right to a certain degree. Local groups with ties going back to the *minjung* movements such as the Catholic Farmers' Union (Abelmann 1996) supported the activists, and yet there was also local opposition.

In 2001, I had the opportunity to go near the construction site of the seawall and surrounding estuarine tidal flats. Once completed, the seawall dyke would stand as the longest of its kind in the world, and the reclamation would be the largest in Asia after Hong Kong's airport opened in 1998 (Choy 2011). The 33.9-kilometer seawall was initially conceived in 1987 to increase arable land and food production by reclaiming 28,300 hectares of wetlands (Kim, Shin, Kim, Chang 2017). The multi-billion dollar project broke ground in 1991 amid growing concerns over surging rice prices and an agricultural sector left behind inside a region left behind during the nation's era of rapid industrialization. The estuary near the mouths of the Mankyeong and Geum rivers was not only prime fishing grounds for people, but also for hundreds of thousands of birds.³ Many species of birds, including the endangered Nordmann's Greenshank, Great Knot, and Spoon-billed Sandpiper, were counted and photographed in the area during their annual migration routes between Northeast Asia and Australia. Birders from the UK worked with Korean civil movement organizations to document the waterfowl and their deterioration as construction progressed during the 1990s.

The project was put on hold for two significant periods of time to conduct

additional environmental and economic impact assessments. A number of NGO workers and experts presented damning recommendations, which in the end were put aside by the Ministries of Agriculture, Maritime Fisheries, and ultimately the President. Even though Dae Jung Kim ran and was elected on his promise for “balanced development,” which included the Saemangeum project, he put a hold on construction and invited civil movement representatives to serve on the newly-formed Presidential Commission for Sustainable Development (PCSD) in 1999. Once on the commission, civil leaders, economists, and scientists alike recommended an immediate stop to seawall construction so that the initial plan could be significantly revised, if not scrapped completely. There was a growing list of grievances with more data to back them up as time went on: the initial plan for more rice paddy fields appeared anachronistic against the backdrop of rice surpluses and South Korea’s trade policy changes. Local fishing outcomes were already seriously depressed as water quality indicators plummeted. Also, a number of species of flora and fauna were showing signs of disappearance. Environmentalists and the experts they mobilized consistently argued that the estuarine tidal flats were already more of an economic and environmental resource than the newly projected farmland ever could be.

When I accompanied a group of Green Korea staffers to the area for a typical fieldwork trip in 2001, they were shaking their heads in disbelief at the environmental changes already underway—water levels were permanently receding, water quality showed signs of long-term toxicity, and waterfowl counts were plummeting. When President Kim announced his decision to go forward with the project in May 2001 with only “complementary measures” to improve water quality, civil movement organizations were up in arms. Green Korea and other environmental groups closed their offices for a week to organize a number of protest events while 54 PCSD commissioners resigned in solidarity. Mr. Lim, Green Korea’s Secretary-General at the time, was among those resigning. He said, “We civil organizations joined the research process as the government promised to respect our opinions, but they totally reneged on their promise.” Although Kim Dae Jung had a reputation as a peacemaker and negotiator, particularly with his governing commissions, the neoliberal policy outcomes of these commissions have led to disappointment (Song 2009). A coalition of particularly disappointed civil movement organizations issued a statement calling Saemangeum “the most environmentally destructive project in the world” and vowed that “if the government does not stop the plan immediately, we will launch an anti-government movement to drive the Kim Dae Jung administration out of power” (May 25, 2001).

Although they did not drive the Kim administration out of power, Green Korea and other organizations filed suit three months later with the Seoul Administrative Court demanding immediate project nullification. The suit would go through a series of delays and reversals over the next few years as NGOs

leveraged international pressure. In 2003, for example, Catholic priest Moon Gyu Hyun, Buddhist monk Soo Gyoung, and Christian and Won-Buddhist clerics organized the “Three Steps, One Big Bow (*Samboilbae*)” campaign, which attracted strong statements of solidarity from international NGOs such as Friends of the Earth and the World Wildlife Fund. Their dramatic trek lasted 65 days with those opposing the reclamation walking and bowing their heads to the road every third step from Saemangeum to Seoul. The campaign asked for atonement on behalf of all people for their destructive acts toward nature and appeared to bear fruit as the Seoul Administrative Court ordered a temporary suspension on construction in July of that year. Seven months later, however, the Court ordered the project to continue as planned. Environmental lawyers pressed on with an appeal and in 2005 the Court reached another decision. The Court rejected the NGOs’ petition for an immediate halt, but ordered the government to reconsider the project. The Court’s ruling forced the Ministry of Agriculture to consider three options: discard the project, alter the project’s aim of creating farmland and a reservoir, or appeal to a higher court. The Court wrote, “The project inevitably needs to either cancel or change the authorization for development, as it has no economic accountability and a high possibility of wreaking havoc on the environment” (Na 2005 quoted in Lee Y.J. 2007). Government lawyers appealed to the Supreme Court citing the nearness of the projected completion date and won. The seawall was completed in 2006 and opened to the public in 2010.

Relations between environmental activists and Jeolla residents were strained throughout. There were several instances of vandalism and counterprotests at activist-organized “Save Our Saemangeum (SOS)” events. Opinion polls showed majority local support for the reclamation, particularly during the 1990s. Jeolla residents had witnessed Gyeongsang provinces and areas around Seoul prosper for decades; Saemangeum was one of their few chances to enjoy the nation’s growing wealth after decades of hard work and thrift. Many residents saw Saemangeum as a fragile opportunity to cash-in after decades of deferred gratification (Nelson 2000). Democracy was achieved, residents would say, so why were these activists from Seoul standing in the way of their long-denied piece of the pie? Many activist leaders recounted distressing encounters with cab drivers to me during the mid-2000s, which they took to be an index of these changes. Several activists shared variations of a similar story: where cab drivers used to offer free or reduced fares when they found out their jobs, they now wondered what civil movement organizations were doing after democracy had been achieved.

Kristin Peterson writes of the transition from military to civilian rule in Nigeria that “the hope and hype of democracy was “interchangeable with” civilian rule in everyday discourse (2009, 47). Some have said the same thing about the ongoing transition between military and civilian rule in South Korea (e.g. Kwon 2000; Lee N.H. 2007). Yet as Peterson writes, “democracy was also about social

redemption,” or “...the hopeful means to alleviate suffering and to retroactively cash in on a social contract...” (2009, 47). This sense of democracy and development as social redemption was evident in local residents’ support for the reclamation project.

Saemangeum became a stepping stone to further development of the Yellow Sea coast, which was widely seen as a key site for South Korea’s economic future. In 2005, for example, South Korea was well on its way to becoming China’s single largest trading partner as Yellow Sea shipping routes between the two nations steadily increased (Chung 2009). In March of 2011, Myung Bak Lee’s administration finalized plans to expand the scale of the project yet again to make it into a major economic hub of Northeast Asia. The revised plan included industrial, renewable energy, research, hotel, resort, residential, and agricultural facilities on 401 square kilometers of reclaimed land (two-thirds the size of Seoul), which will be able to accommodate 760,000 residents.

Saemangeum propelled a familiar “national utopian imagination” for securing the nation’s future through massive development. Laura Nelson (2000) theorizes a future-oriented “national utopian imagination” that helped to secure “two generations’ cooperation in the project of building a nation” (2000, 188). Under Park Chung Hee’s dictatorship, state projects evoking images of collective prosperity insisted that people not judge their policies in the present, but rather at some future point (Han 2004; Lee 2009). Rob Oppenheim (2008) has specified this temporal regime during Park Chung Hee’s rule as fulfillmentism. Citizens were called upon, as Oppenheim (2008) argues, to hopefully look to the past in order to fulfill a brighter future. Much to the dismay of some activists and scholars, some citizens have taken to looking back to Park Chung Hee as the only president who not only promised but actually delivered hope (*huimang*) and self-confidence (*jasingam*) to the South Korean people. Myung Bak Lee and Geun Hye Park effectively mobilized these memories and hopes with his similarly large-scale development projects ahead of the 2007 and 2012 presidential elections (Lee 2009; Oppenheim 2008).

Much like the professor in the Cheonggyecheon debate with Myung Bak Lee, environmental groups demanding a nullification of the project without any alternative plan for existing development were seen as backward-looking, ideologically entrenched, and impractical. Unlike the high-speed rail dispute in Gyeongju, no serious alternative plan emerged from environmental groups (Oppenheim 2008). In the words of one sympathetic scholar-activist who had worked for environmental organizations but had moved to work for the Presidential Commission for Sustainable Development (PCSD), “a self-righteous activist attitude (*dokseonjeogin taedo*) and belief in only what is right and wrong” failed to “breakthrough the complex real world (*hyeonsil segye*) and present concrete alternatives (*guchejeogin daean*)” (March 2, 2007).

Seen another way, Saemangeum exemplified a sense of crisis where conflict-resolution is concerned: project supporters pushed rapid construction and extreme development targets while project opponents dug in their heels as equally extreme and uncompromising protectors of nature (e.g., Abelmann 1996; Grinker 1998; Snyder 1997). Roy Richard Grinker (1998) describes the precipitation of crisis as a common pattern of conflict-resolution “in a place such as south Korea, where communication across hierarchical boundaries is constrained by linguistic markers for respect and status...” (191). Relations between landlords and peasants, parents and children, and students and the government reveal a pattern of moralistic conflict-resolution whereby communication often only follows from an extreme and urgent crisis. Grinker argues that the violent clashes that sometimes ensue between these groups around a crisis are “to some extent necessary for communication” (1998, 191). In many ways, Saemangeum has been that crisis for environmental groups and the government since at least 1987 when the project was first conceived.

IV. GREEN LIFE THEORY PROJECT

In the weeks leading up to the Supreme Court’s decision on Saemangeum in 2006, Green Korea’s office went into “crisis” (*wigi*) mode. They closed regular office operations and held candlelight vigils in solidarity with five other cities for ten consecutive days ahead of the court ruling. Green Korea’s Secretary-General, the aforementioned Choi, was leading the uncompromisingly optimistic campaign to keep the two small openings in the seawall open. At that time, the wall stood over 30-kilometers, yet Choi was interested in the two openings amounting to about two kilometers. He took out a pen and piece of paper to illustrate the seawall with a line and drew circles to indicate the two openings. He continued to retrace the circles as he explained that the case was now in the Supreme Court’s hands. Those two openings could stay open, Choi continued, if the Supreme Court ruled in their favor or they could delay a decision for a few more weeks. Choi reasoned that a small delay could buy them even more time given weather and construction conditions.

Secretary-General Choi did not even want to entertain the possibility of compromise. He insisted that civil movement organizations “could not give up any more land” (March 6, 2006) and that the phrase sustainable development was an oxymoron. While he conceded that the activist strategies (*jeollyak*) to protest, issue press releases, hold press conferences, and file lawsuits were failing, he insisted that activists could not change beliefs (*sinnyeom*). Activists, Choi matter-of-factly said, “feed on belief (*sinnyeomeul meogno*)” while scholars “feed on knowledge (*jisikeul meogno*)” (November 22, 2005). He used the example of nuclear energy. If Green Korea decided to reverse its position on the government’s plan to expand its nuclear

energy program, he argued, they would certainly have it easier. Government and private sector money would come their way, but the moral costs would be too high. Without belief, Choi argued, what would be the point of life?

Secretary-General Choi had begun to formulate his own project—the “Green Life Theory Project” (*Noksaek Saengmyeong Iron Peurojekteu*)—when he became the sole secretary-general of Green Korea in 2006. Choi thought NGOs were losing the Saemangeum battle because they failed to offer a “grand theory” (November 22, 2005) anywhere near as complete or convincing as capitalism or neoliberalism. He thought NGOs needed more theorists who could write position papers on their behalf and begin to put forward a coherent alternative to capitalism and neoliberalism. Choi personally funded and prepared bimonthly informal meetings during which time a handful of leaders from about ten environmental groups in Seoul would get together and discuss recent books from the academic and popular press. They periodically met for about a year leading up to Green Korea’s 15th anniversary commemoration events in June 2006. This was to be the stage for the project launch to the broader civil movement (*simin undong*) community. Simultaneously, other members of this informal group were preparing to launch a new environmental think tank—the Eco-Horizon Institute (*Saengtae Jipyeong Yeonguso*)—“where field and theory meet” (*hyeonjanggwa ironi mannaneun*). Choi was highly aware of the institute and in a friendly competition with these colleagues.

When I shared a bus or cab ride with Secretary-General Choi during the months leading up to the launch, he would recount all the emergencies and distractions he had to deal with that week that took him away from what he really wanted to do—work on the project. The conversations we would have in the office kitchen and stolen in transit between events seemed to return him to his days as a university student activist (*undonggwon*). He would fondly recall reading certain books and being on “study break” (*hyuhak*), which afforded him the time and the space to do such theory projects. Secretary-General Choi and a handful of other colleagues in the field had a similar response to my presence and questions; the kind of reflection and thinking I was eliciting from them in the course of doing fieldwork often seemed to remind them of their university days.

The informal reading group of civil leaders and professors Choi had assembled to discuss environmental theories and strategies in 2005 and early 2006 became the more formal Green Life Committee (*Noksaek Saengmyeong Wiwonhoe*) ahead of Green Korea’s 15th anniversary celebration. Choi attracted some of the biggest names in the civil movement (*simin undong*) community to launch the commission and its large-scale alternative: Greenism (*Noksaekjuui*). One of these big names, Hee-Yeon Cho, told me that activists “mediate between theorists and citizens.” He presented a Foucauldian-inflected history of “Korean resistance discourses” (*Hanguk jeohang damnon*), and with this as backdrop he

offered a few recommendations on what Green discourse (*damnon*) should include, echoing many of Choi's precepts.

Secretary-General Choi's Greenism placed "humanity" (*ingan*) and the "value of life" (*saengmyeongui gachi*) at the center of economy and development. Echoing Dae Jung Kim's resistance discourse (e.g. Song 2009) as well as political-ecology critiques of the "greenwashing" construction-oriented state (e.g. Lee 2015), Green Korea's press release (GKU 2006) argued for "quality of life" as an alternative to South Korea's historical "development first approach" (*gaebaljisangjuui*). It went on to proclaim Greenism as "the new discourse (*damnon*) necessary for making this society..."(GKU 2006).

Choi's attention to theory-making points to the changing mode of knowledge production for activists and to the collaborative relationship between activists, academics, and the government. Both of these features are indicative of neoliberal capitalism for Mun Young Cho and constitute the basis of what she calls the "orchestration of time" (2015, 142-143). This orchestration is a "series of processes by which activists eliminate, restore, freeze, and defer the time of/for activism in order to valorize their prospects and practices under neoliberal capitalism" (Cho 2015, 143). In so doing, activists seek "the spaces of the otherwise" and use "the resilience and uncertainty of time in order to resist, and not serve, a neoliberal ethos of competition, isolation, and distrust" (*ibid*).

In the end, Choi's effort to get activists engaged in the work of theory and alternative-making resembled an academic conference more than an experimental space inviting activists, academics, and coordinators to work together. One Green Korea staffer joked that he and several other colleagues stayed up late the night before trying to understand just the first dense sentence of one professor's paper. Two of the panelists were university professors and the other was the director of a research institute. Several staffers sitting in the outer circle of tables surrounding the panel spent much of their time texting, passing notes to each other, and yawning. While nearly all of Green Korea's staff made an appearance at the event, few spoke and no outsiders attended. Choi took special care to rearrange the tables and chairs into concentric circles so as to encourage more discussion. However, when staff members did speak it was often only to clarify what the panelists had said. Even the secretary-general from another civil movement organization that Choi invited as a discussant was very critical of the decision to propose Greenism as separate from existing *simin* (citizen) discourses.

When I asked Choi how he thought the event went a few days later, he said that he had a lot to think about and changed the subject. This was a marked contrast to his excitement leading up to the event. His enthusiasm waned as stacks of Green Life Commission materials collected dust under the office stairs. Secretary-General Choi told me during one extreme moment of exasperation that doing nothing would have been better than all the things Green Korea had done to

oppose the Saemangeum project. Choi's accurate diagnosis of the larger crisis facing activists and academics in the era of neoliberalism and late capitalism, as well as his confrontation with the limits of his knowledge and agency, have been inspiring. His opposition to Saemangeum and to all that it represented in terms of neo-liberal capitalism was rooted in moral commitment and reflected in later critiques (e.g. Castree 2008; Cho 2015; Peet et al. 2011; Lee 2015). At that moment in the mid-2000s, however, when the Seoul Administrative Court restarted the Saemangeum construction project and Choi's Green Life Theory project fell flat, the sense of failure was deep.

V. CONCLUSION

Unlike Saemangeum, Cheonggyecheon or Green Growth, the Green Life Theory Project will likely not appear in many history books, activist campaigns, or scholarly articles. The project's short-lived and relatively inconsequential existence could be chalked up as just another failure amid a string of crises. Crisis has been an organizing trope for scholars (e.g. Mirowski 2013; Roitman 2013; Unger 2007) across the disciplines; it has also been of central importance to Koreans and Koreanists alike since at least the late 1990s financial, or IMF, crisis (Cho 2000; Levine 2016). Mun Young Cho (2015) traces various "project-oriented" activist examples to the "emergency relief" of the IMF crisis in South Korea. Secretary-General Choi's Green Life Theory Project is a case of "orchestrating time" in neoliberal capitalism (Cho 2015). Simultaneously, it reveals an activist endpoint (Miyazaki and Riles 2005) of moral belief or commitment in contrast to an academic endpoint of commitment to knowledge, open-endedness, and possibility (Cho 2015; Kim et al. 2017; Levine 2016). Saemangeum, in particular some of the local resistance to the environmentalist effort to stop the reclamation and efforts to "balance development" across South Korea, are also about a post-authoritarian, civilian hope for democracy as social redemption and cashing in on a social contract (Peterson 2009).

In the end, the Green Life Theory Project and Greenism failed to innovate on activist and academic work. At the same time, Choi's intention to respond to neoliberal capitalism and other large theories and ideologies failed to achieve success for either the activists or the academics involved. For the activists, they only participated begrudgingly and perfunctorily. Their boredom and disengagement was evident. For the academics, the project did not sufficiently differentiate itself from existing ideologies or discourses and was seldom referenced in future position papers, white papers, or other academic outputs. The Green Life Theory project did "orchestrate time" (Cho 2015) for Choi and did give some reprieve from his routine administrative tasks. Simultaneously, Secretary-General Choi's project achieved some degree of interdisciplinarity for both academics and activists, while it failed to

uphold basic standards of disciplinarity for activists and academics alike (e.g. Jean-Klein and Riles 2005; Riles 2000; Strathern 2004). Saemangeum has been similarly criticized for revising its goals and constituencies too often and too much (e.g. Kim, Shin, Kim, Chang 2017; Lee 2007). Both projects failed to achieve the synergy of interdisciplinarity in addition to achieving basic disciplinarity. In other words, Saemangeum and the Green Life Theory projects lowered standards with collaboration rather than raised them. This is an important reminder for International/Global Studies scholars and activists alike as the demands for interdisciplinarity and research impact grow as the same time as the frequency and scale of failures and crises increase.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ In this paper I situate my work in the anthropology of South Korea literature with the exception of Scott Snyder (1997), who is cited by Roy Richard Grinker (1998). Grinker is an anthropologist who wrote on the North-South Korea conflict. For more on conflict-resolution more broadly see Morgenthau, Thompson, Clinton (1993) and Redekop and Rioux (2012).
- ² For more on the wealth and government investment disparities between the Gyeongsang and Jeolla regions, see Abelman (1996), Lee N.H. (2007), and Oppenheim (2008). The Gyeongsang region was disproportionately industrialized during the colonial period given its proximity to Japan. Chung Hee Park, South Korea's president from 1961 to 1979, exacerbated this disparity by favoring his home Gyeongsang region with many state-led development projects. The Gyeongsang region had eight large-scale industrial complexes to Jeolla region's one, more than half of Korea's largest conglomerates (*jaebeol*) were owned by people from Gyeongsang region, people from Gyeongsang region who owned companies with 1,000 workers or more accounted for 61.3 percent of total sales in South Korea, and nearly all the nation's presidents come from Gyeongsang region (Lee N.H. 2007, 49). The cultural stereotypes surrounding the regions have also been noted. There are jokes about the low intelligence of Jeolla people at the same time they are praised for their traditional art, music, culinary, medicine, and modern literature practitioners. The Jeolla region has many of the same attributes—cultural and environmental stewardship for example—that “indigenous” areas around the world are noted for as well (e.g. Choy 2011; Levine 2016).
- ³ Environmental civil movement organizations substituted “bird” (*sae*) for “new” (*sae*) in the Saemangeum name. This move underscored the environmental commitment to reclaiming a prior natural resource for the “birds” while the government and industry planners were committed to transforming the land into something “new.”