S-20 – The Science and Civilisation in Korea project: issues and opportunities in writing East Asian history of science from a different point of view

East Asia Commission  ISHEASTM

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Abstract: The Science and Civilisation (SCK) in Korea project is a new initiative in the history of science technology and medicine, based at the Korean Research Institute of Science, Technology and Civilization, Chonbuk National University. It aims to publish a comprehensive treatment of the history of science in Korea from early times up to the modern era, though the medium of two series of books, one in Korean and the other in English. This project necessitates a re-framing in a new context of a number of crucial problems for historians of science.

In this series of presentations we shall consider the issues that emerge from discussion of concrete examples, as well as raising more general historiographical issues. How, for instance, can the history of pre-modern medicine best be studied – can microhistory sometimes give us more insight into broad social and cultural issues than studies that begin and end with examination of the large-scale? Is it possible to write good history of science and technology without foregrounding the role of gender in their construction? Does geography simply describe what is there on the ground, or does it help to create the world we experience? How typical or atypical of the generality of developing countries is Korea’s recent rapid growth as a technological power? What has this development meant to the way Koreans live their increasingly online lives and experience their world? And what was the true nature of the ‘industrial revolution’ that lead to such a rapid pace of development under the authoritarian Park government (1961-1979)?

Throughout, this symposium will deal with issues highly relevant to the Congress theme of 'Science, Technology and Medicine between the Global and the Local'. Until the last century, the local/global opposition placed Korea in relation to its East Asian neighbours, principally the huge cultural, economic and military mass of China, followed by imperial Japan. In a matter of decades, Korea has become a player on the world stage; the processes by which this was brought about and the issues that remain to be resolved are relevant to the discussion of modernization and globalization in any part of the world.

Keywords: Korea – East Asia – Historiography – Global/Local – Tradition/Innovation.

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