



Vinalon and North Korea's Nationalism

Eunsung Cho
(Seoul National University)

First of all, I would like to thank the East Asia Research Institute for giving the opportunity to introduce my dissertation and research topics to me who have only been around for a year as a postdoctoral researcher. I majored in Modern Korean History and graduated from Columbia University's Department of History in May 2020.

Vinalon and North Korea's nationalistic social structure

My dissertation, entitled, "The Thread of Juche: Vinalon and Materially-Embodied Interdependencies in North Korea, 1930-2018," examines how North Korea's nationalistic social structure has been constructed by taking a material thing as my point of departure. Vinalon is a kind of synthetic fiber developed by the Korean scientist Ri Sŭnggi in 1939 during the Japanese colonial era. North Korea succeeded in the industrial production of vinalon in 1961. At the time, North Korea promoted that the construction of the Vinalon Factory in Hamhŭng was completed by North Koreans using their own efforts, resources, and technologies. Unlike nylon, which uses oil as the main raw material, vinalon uses locally-mined anthracite and limestone as the main raw materials. For these reasons, North Korea was proud of the industrial production of vinalon, eventually giving it the title of "*Juche* [self-reliance] fiber."

Although North Korea emphasizes solely its self-reliant aspect, vinalon has had a global history from the colonial period to the post-war era. I argue that the global network of technological knowledge made the industrial production of vinalon possible and that the industrialization of vinalon was a historically contingent process of experimentation. Uncovering the global history behind the industrialization of vinalon and probing vinalon as a material produced in the dynamics between *Juche* and the global, my work contributes to the rethinking of U.S.-Soviet-centered Cold War scholarship by investigating Second World-Second World and Second World-Third World relationships. Furthermore, focusing on the agency of the vinalon products in people's everyday lives, my project explores how vinalon threaded North Korea's *Juche* discourse through a variety of products that penetrated into the everyday and the gendering of those products. By analyzing the interaction between the scientific and the socio-political realms on the one hand and by exploring how the Mother Party discourse became embodied in the form of the material vinalon on the other hand, my project goes beyond the politics-centered narrative that has dominated scholarly work on North Korean ideology.

Incorporating methods and scholarship from social and global history, STS (science, technology and society), material culture studies, and gender studies, in this dissertation I utilized diverse sets of textual, material, and visual sources, as well as interviews. To gather every relevant source available, in particular, I made research trips to Korea, Japan, China, Germany, Russia, Czechia, Hungary, Romania and the U.S. for archival work or interviews. In so doing, each chapter of the dissertation unpacks different but connected arguments with various approaches.

In North Korea, clothes, socks, blankets, scarfs, bags, and other products made from vinalon became the objects by which people directly experienced *Juche* in their daily lives. By looking at vinalon as a thread that played a pivotal role in weaving the *Juche* discourse into North Korean society, my project shows that vinalon acted as an effective vehicle to project North Korea's *Juche* materially and discursively in the people's everyday lives.

As science, technology and society are closely connected in the modern world, I believe that the social history of science and technology should be investigated when analyzing the various agents that have made up the present world. In particular, it is already established as an important academic field to talk about the social history of technology, materials or things by paying attention to the various items that we, who live in a material civilization after industrialization, experience in our daily life. I think this is a field of research that fits the recent trend of the humanities and social sciences, which is moving towards exchanges, connections, and interdisciplinary convergences.

Social History of Science and Technology in North Korean People's Everyday Lives

Recently, I have published two journal papers: “When the Political Spotlight is On: Social Evaluations of Ri Sŭnggi and Ryŏ Kyŏnggu, Two Chemical Engineers in North Korea,” *International Journal of Korean History*, Vol. 26 No. 1 (Feb.2021): 255-285; “The Field of Reeds on Silk Island: A Study on North Korea's Reed Fiber Industry,” *Taegu sahak* 142 (Feb.2021): 173-210. The first paper analyzed how the social evaluation and attention on two famous North Korean chemical engineers, Ri Sŭnggi and Ryŏ Kyŏnggu, changed by the political interests and needs of the regime, based on North Korean sources from the late 1940s to the present. The second one is the first paper dealing with North Korea's reed fiber industry, which the North mentions as one of the accomplishments of the *Juche* Industry. This paper examined historically how North Korea's reed fiber industry began and developed while revealing the continuity it had with the colonial legacy as well as the way in which reed fiber contributed to the production of vinalon clothes that were utilized as a material medium of the *Juche* discourse. ■

- **Eunsung Cho** is Kyujanggak Fellow of International Center for Korean Studies, Kyujanggak Institute for Korean Studies at Seoul National University. She received her Ph.D. from the Department of History at Columbia University in the City of New York. Her research topics include scientific discourses, developmental representations, material culture, nationalism, and so forth. She will be joining Sogang University as an assistant professor of modern Korean history this fall.

The East Asia Institute takes no institutional position on policy issues and has no affiliation with the Korean government. All statements of fact and expressions of opinion contained in its publications are the sole responsibility of the author or authors.

“Vinalon and North Korea’s Nationalism”

Date of Issue: 27 July 2021 979-11-6617-185-7 95340

Typesetting: Kwang-min Pyo

For inquiries:
Kwang-min Pyo, Senior Researcher

Tel. 82 2 2277 1683 (ext. 203) ppiokm@eai.or.kr

The East Asia Institute
#909 Sampoong B/D, Eulji-ro 158, Jung-gu,
Seoul 04548, South Korea
Phone 82 2 2277 1683 Fax 82 2 2277 1697
Email eai@eai.or.kr Website www.eai.or.kr