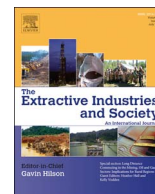




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Original article

Rare earth minerals, technology metals and extractive landscapes in North Korea's web of political life

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines a moment, using material sourced from within the United States National Archives, Record Group 242, in which North Korea's spaces and geographies of mineralogical knowledge and extraction, particularly those of Rare Earth minerals and technology metals used for the most part for war and military capacity were reconfigured at the behest of a nexus of local, geo-political and ideological interests. Documentary and Cartographic material sourced from Pyongyang's Mining/Resource Ministries and from the pre-Liberation colonial government, during the US Army's occupation of Pyongyang in 1950 allows for new perspectives on the place of these materials within North Korea's web of political and material life. This paper suggests that the nexus of interests and processes which enabled the extraction of Technology Metals and Rare Earths in North Korea would prove vital for the development of Pyongyang's present and future relationships with nature and developmental possibility. The physical and social landscapes generated by this development would later support North Korea in its political quest to capture both real and imagined Socialist modernity.

1. Introduction

This paper considers resources collected from the United States National Archives, (RG242). Record Group 242, or the Captured North Korean Documents Collection has underpinned much recent research focused on North Korea and its history. Captured by US Army document gatherers during the occupation of Pyongyang in October and November of 1950 the collection provides a unique insight into early North Korean governance and institutional development. This paper is concerned with the boxes of documents and cartographic materials contained in the collection which were sourced from Pyongyang's Ministry of Mining and from other institutions tasked with managing North Korea's geological development and mineral resources following the end of the Japanese colonial period in 1945. These boxes contain the blueprints, shaft and face layouts of all the active mines in North Korea in 1950. They also contain an extensive repository of documents from mineral and mining institutions throughout the country, including daily and output logs, longer term planning documents, internal and external contracts and agreements and research papers from academic institutions focused on mining, mineralogy and geology within North Korea (as well as some in translation from other nations). The author of this paper has identified blueprints specifically covering the topography, terrain and shaft plans of the following mines: Ullryul, Yangdok, Chodong, Chaeryong, Sinpung,

Musan, Kaechon, Kumhwa, Ilgon and Tongban (RG242, SA2009, 5/146).¹ Many of these sites are described in later North Korean government literature as being among the most important in the field of mineral development and a number of them are considered by external agencies to be sites of Rare Earths or Technology Metals extraction (Ferenc, 1979).

Unlike other collections of documents addressing the mineral histories of North Korea or Korea, such as the Gottsche collection in Hamburg, and the Government General of Chosen's series of annual reports, Record Group 242 allows for a very detailed view of particular locations. It is the author of this paper's assertion that through an examination of these materials a fascinating glimpse may be gathered of developmental interaction between Russian and Soviet technicians and North Korean institutions and workers within the mining sector. This examination does not simply cover interactions in the mining of common minerals. The materials also allow a view of those cultural and social spaces from which rare minerals, technology metals and the base ores and materials of Rare Earths in future would be extracted. This paper does not just consider the human and social aspects of these spaces and terrains, but also considers the minerals and metals themselves as actors, lively participants within a developing political and social culture, at least in part responsible for the production of the North Korea visible in our present.

Rare Earths, Technology Metals and other minerals, such as those mined and extracted within the landscapes described in the Captured

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¹ There is no agreed system for notation so far as Record Group 242's catalogue and shipping advice numbers is concerned. However for this paper the author adopts Professor Charles Armstrong's very rational model.

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Documents collection, are politically ‘lively matter.’ They are players in North Korea’s development, central to national rebuilding and reorientation with Soviet partners. The documents of 1945–1950 place both ‘rare’ and common minerals centre stage in the process of national development. Some of these minerals such as uranium and plutonium had been vital players in the end of the war in the Pacific, and would become enormously important in the minds of most humans during the Cold War (Thompson, 1985). Both were certainly important in the minds of the Soviet technicians and engineers supporting their North Korean counterparts in the time of these captured documents. North Korean radioactive materials have continued to be elements of concern throughout the globe in the present, but for Pyongyang and its politics, radio-isotopes and technology metals appear as important as did forests and trees during the nation’s reconfiguration from the Japanese colonial period. These lively matters and vibrant elements play the roles of both North Korea’s first and last line of defence within its contemporary political current politics. They allow for Pyongyang’s continued survival in what it considers an extremely hostile geo-political environment, as well as for a potential response to future aggression from external agents. In this framework such metals and minerals form part of the wider networks of North Korean political sensibility and citizenry, agents of support and energy for the survival and continuity of its ideology and government.

Geopolitical focus on North Korean lively radioactive minerals and materials has reached extraordinary levels in late 2017. Repeated testing of nuclear devices and both intercontinental and medium range ballistic missile technology by North Korea has generated political concern of a type not seen since the Cold War. Verbal interventions by the Trump administration and counter responses by North Korea have been seen of a tempo and temperature perhaps unique to world politics. Relations with the People’s Republic of China, so long a provider of diplomatic cover for North Korea (Rodong Sinmun, 2016) have also deteriorated to an extent that Beijing proved willing to allow severe pressure to be placed on Pyongyang. UNSC resolution 2321, passed unanimously on the 30th of November 2016 for the first time restricted one of the most vital elements of North Korean export and trade, non-nuclear and non-dual use minerals (United Nations, 2016). Considering that Pyongyang’s trade in minerals and particularly coal is a vital contributor to its economy, the fact that China almost immediately banned imports until the 1st of January 2017 was an extraordinary signifier that policy in Beijing had shifted against Pyongyang (SCMP, 2016). Equally on February 17th, 2017, the Chinese Commerce Ministry let it be known that no further imports from North Korea would be accepted until the turn of 2017/2018 (O’Carroll, 2017) and a number of North Korean shipments already in Chinese ports were impounded and rejected (O’Carroll, 2017). United Nations Security Council resolutions 2371 (August 5th, 2017) and 2375 (September 11th, 2017) (United Nations, 2017a, 2017b), further restricted North Korean trade, banning all exports of coal, iron, lead, seafood, textiles, the import of natural gas, restricting oil and petroleum imports and disallowing joint ventures with North Korean companies and the employment of North Koreans abroad. The United States has also banned North Koreans entering its ports and airports as well as making it illegal for American citizens to travel to the country (United States Department of State, 2017).

Whether such pressures and restrictions will persuade North Korea to pull back from its exploitation of its lively rare earth and radioactive minerals is yet to be seen. Certainly in the future North Korea’s exploitation of these resources for financial gain will be much more difficult. Utilisation of contemporary Rare Earth and rare minerals sites such as the Yongju Deposit (Pacific Century Rare Earth Minerals Ltd, 2013a), a site familiar from 2013 joint enterprise between North Korea’s Ministry of Mining and the Australian company (Mining.com, 2013), SRE Minerals will certainly be problematic. The diplomatic turmoil and intense media focus of 2016 and 2017 surely however demonstrate the key role which minerals, both common and rare are

playing within the geo-political space inhabited by North Korea. The Premier of the Russian Federation’s in his own analysis has suggested that the North Korean government would ‘rather eat grass’ than give up its nuclear or technology programmes (NPR, 2017) Pyongyang itself conceives of the fissile products of these minerals as its ‘Treasured Swords’ (Rodong Sinmun, 2017a) and local media and political narrative (Rodong Sinmun, 2017b), regard the achievement of such capabilities as the pinnacle of nation building. All of these are suggestive of the deep and vital place of mineral exploration and exploitation within North Korea’s political, military and social histories since its foundation in 1948.

2. Theoretical framework

This section on the paper’s theoretical framework encounters North Korea as a theatre state driven by the energy of charismatic politics. The paper also conceives of landscape, terrain and space as symbolic, constructed and performative, functioning at multiple scales. Finally the paper considers the inhabitants of these terrains as lively, vibrant and part of widely defined web of life, no matter whether human, animal, vegetable or mineral.

Firstly this theoretical framework addresses North Korea’s politics and ideological culture. North Korean politics and political culture is characterised by the analysis of political science scholars generally as an example of extreme autocracy (Byman and Lind, 2010), which is derived from the ideologies of Marxist-Leninism and Stalinism, shaped by Korean nationalism (Myers, 2010). However recent writing by Kwon and Chung (2012) reconsidering Clifford Geertz (1980) and Max Weber (1967), reframes North Korean politics as a space of political charisma and theatre. Kwon and Chung declare Pyongyang to be a theatre state in which politics is both performative and performed. This performance requires development and exploitation of mineral resources to engage as both actors and stage within North Korea’s politics. North Korea therefore uses minerals, rare earths, technology metals, and coal in the performance of its politics. Political theatrics shape North Korean physical, ideological and cultural landscapes through symbolic, political, and material processes unfolding at multiple scales (Cosgrove, 1984, 2008; Castree, 2001; Swyngedouw, 1997, 2015). A key interest of the author of this paper is the nature of agency in the complex encounters between agents of the state, capital, and mineral objects. Bennett (2010) and Whatmore (2005) guide this inquiry from the standpoint of non-human material world as ‘vibrant’ or ‘political’ matter. Lorimer (2007) also provides connection back from this lively material to the charismatic realm of political action. Through all this rare elements and minerals for this paper are not simply inert objects, but vibrant matters with political lives of their own. North Korea’s charismatic politics and the lively and vibrant matters resident within its terrain are enmeshed in the production of space (Lefebvre, 1992) and a developmental history. Within this the spaces of mineral exploration are not simply places of extraction and exploitation but social and lived spaces of what North Korea would conceive of as a ‘socialist modernity’. This state of modernity through the function of both the nations’ charismatic politics and the liveliness of the materials at hand allows both human development and the ores of technology metals and rare earths to be part of its web of life (Moore, 2015).

The notion of ‘socialist modernity’ itself requires some consideration. While Adorno and Bauman’s (Adorno, 1973; Baumann, 2000) analysis of the modernity produced by global Capital was not available to socialist or communist academia, neither was the terrain produced by Marxist theory and its derivations in the Communist Bloc available coherently to the intellectual critique of the Capitalist academe. Thus Modernity in these terrains has only become known academically in retrospect, after world communism’s collapse, and primarily in relation, to its physical products (Zarecor, 2011). Thus there are architectures and built environments of ‘socialist modernity’ (Zarecor, 2011), and attendant artistic and cultural production (Pence and Betts, 2008). In

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