

Agricultural Development and Transformation of Nature in Soviet Central Asia: Theoretical Background and Reality

CHIDA Tetsuro

Slavic Research Center (SRC), Hokkaido University, Hokkaido, Japan

CHIDA Tetsuro is research fellow of Slavic Research Center (SRC), Hokkaido University (Global COE Program “Reshaping Japan’s Border Studies”). He received his M.A. in Area Studies at the University of Tokyo (2003). He was research fellow of the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (2003-2005) and Attaché of the Embassy of Japan in Turkmenistan (2008-2010). His major concern is history of Central Asia in Soviet time, history of geographical science in the USSR and Russia, and contemporary politics of Turkmenistan. His major publications cover widespread topics about Soviet Union and Central Asia in modern time: “The Relationship between the Kyrgyz SSR and the Center in the Middle Khrushchev Period (1957-61) Based on Materials from Four Archives in Moscow and Bishkek,” in *Central Eurasian Studies Review*, Vol. 6, No. 1/2 (2007) (in English); “Grandiose Canal Construction Projects in Turkmenistan and the Aral Sea Problem in the Post-War Stalin Period,” in *Slavic Studies (Surabu Kenkyuu)*, No. 56 (2009) (in Japanese); “Geographical Science and the Conception of ‘Region’ and ‘Space’ in the Soviet Union as a Multinational ‘Territorial’ Empire,” in *Regional Studies (Chiiki Kenkyuu)*, Vol. 10, No.2 (2010) (in Japanese). tetsuroch@slav.hokudai.ac.jp

Abstract

“Transformation of Nature” is a key concept for understanding the Soviet “socialistic” principle of the human-nature relationship. Soviet philosophers and geographers gave its theoretical background after World War II that human-being could maximally utilize natural “productive forces” for its own sake, which became possible only under socialism. For them “human” and “nature” develops not independently, but “dialectically” with their close and strong interactions. Joseph Stalin proclaimed the shelter-belt making program of “Transformation of Nature” in 1948, which further expanded into the “Great Construction of Communism” campaign, calling for the short-term construction of water facilities including 1,100 kilometer Major Turkmen Canal. In March 1953 immediately after Stalin’s death, the Soviet authority abruptly shut down obviously reckless “Transformation of Nature” projects. However, Nikita Khrushchev continued implementing quick-impact agricultural projects like Virgin Land Campaign, which certainly conferred short-term benefits, but at the same time gave serious damages to the environment of the steppe. The second half of the reign of Nikita Khrushchev concurred with the dawn of scientific and technical revolutions, when Soviet geographers of the Academy of Sciences in Moscow restored the concept of “Transformation of Nature” with significant theoretical modification. In short, it should be done as a result of intensive scientific studies and technical substantiation, and with serious consideration of the feedbacks from the environment, subjected to transformation. That is, geographers called upon the concordance between “development” and “environment” in human activities. In fact, the Soviet authority completely abandoned or made significant alterations to some water facility construction projects due to their economic unfeasibility or uncertainty during the 1970s. On the contrary, local (republican) authorities strenuously continued to pursue extensive development of irrigation. Such diversifications between “theory” and “reality” will be discussed through the analysis of water policy in the Aral Sea and the Ili-Balkhash basins.

Keywords: Aral Sea problem, environmental history, Central Asia, Soviet Union, transformation of nature, water policy