

Premodern Korea Lecture Series

A promotional poster for a lecture series. The background is a light gray. On the left, the text 'Premodern Korea Lecture Series' is written in a large, dark blue serif font. Below it, the title 'Engineers of the Confucian State: The Making of Early Modern Korea' is written in a smaller, italicized dark blue serif font. Underneath the title, the speaker's name 'H.H. (Hyeok Hweon) Kang' and his affiliation 'Assistant Professor of East Asian Languages and Cultures Washington University in St. Louis' are listed in a small, dark blue sans-serif font. At the bottom left, the 'Institute for Korean Studies' logo and 'THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY' are repeated. On the right side, there is a circular portrait of a man with glasses and a dark jacket over an orange shirt. The portrait is framed by a decorative, blue, geometric pattern resembling a traditional Korean architectural motif. At the bottom right, the Korean text 'GW 한국학연구소' is displayed in a dark blue sans-serif font.

Engineers of the Confucian State: The Making of Early Modern Korea

H. H. (Hyeok Hweon) Kang

Friday, April 17th, 2026

1:00 p.m. EDT

Virtual Event via Zoom

◆ Event Description

This talk introduces the “ingeniators” of Chosŏn Korea (1392–1910), technical leaders who exercised authority over the state’s material design, standards, and production. Drawing on newly uncovered archives, surviving artifacts, and experimental reconstructions, I show how these figures oversaw government workshops that produced guns, built tombs and bridge, and even made early torpedoes and steam engines. Over five centuries, ingeniators rose in social standing and intellectual authority, finding a stable footing among the *chungin* (middle people) while exchanging knowledge with physicians, interpreters, editors, and *yangban* scholars. Even more important, their ingenuity developed into enduring systems of knowledge—from “prototyping,” the practices of drawing, modeling, and measuring, to “mechanics,” the application of natural philosophy to material design. These practices, I argue, helped govern the Confucian state by sustaining its many material

enterprises. They also reveal a form of early modern engineering fully commensurate with other traditions, inviting us to rethink the history of engineering beyond Renaissance Italy or the French Polytechnique.

◆ Speaker



H.H. (HYEOK HWEON) Kang is Assistant Professor of East Asian Languages and Cultures at Washington University in St. Louis. He is a historian of Chosŏn Korea and early modern science and technology. His research interests include social and intellectual history, material culture studies, and global history. He is currently completing a book manuscript on engineering and statecraft in Chosŏn Korea, under contract with the University of Chicago Press.

◆ Moderator



CELESTE ARRINGTON is Korea Foundation Associate Professor of Political Science and International Affairs at the George Washington University. She is the Director of the GW Institute for Korea Studies and Co-Director of the East Asia National Resource Center. She is also a Visiting Research Scholar at Princeton's School of Public and International Affairs. Her comparative research examines public policy, law and social change, lawyers, and governance, with a regional focus on the Koreas and Japan. Other research interests include Northeast Asian security, North Korean human rights, and transnational activism. Her first book was *Accidental Activists: Victim Movements and Governmental Accountability in Japan and South Korea* (Cornell, 2016). She has published numerous articles and, with Patricia Goedde, she co-edited *Rights Claiming in South Korea* (Cambridge, 2021). Her newest book, published in 2025 in Cambridge's Studies in Law and Society series, is entitled *From Manners to Rules: Advocating for Legalism in South Korea and Japan*. It analyzes the legalistic turn in Korean and Japanese regulatory style through paired case studies related to tobacco control and disability rights. She received a PhD from UC Berkeley, an MPhil from the University of Cambridge, and an AB from Princeton University. She has been a fellow at Harvard, the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, and the Ludwig-Maximilians-University in Munich. GW's Office of the Vice President for Research awarded her the 2021 Early Career Research Scholar Award. Her article with Claudia Kim won the 2023 Asian Law and Society Association's distinguished article award.

This event is on the record and open to the public.