

CHAPTER 1

South Korean Youth in the New Millennium

Faint Memories of Authoritarianism, New Opportunities for Political Participation

Chi-yun* was in eleventh grade in 2008 when she learned that South Korea would resume the importation of American beef despite widespread concern over bovine spongiform encephalopathy, commonly called “mad cow disease.” She was tipped to the change in policy after frequenting Internet communities dedicated to celebrity news and humor, where she saw a sudden outburst of messages condemning the government’s decision and then reports from candlelight protests across South Korea. She was curious about what had drawn such a large number of people to participate, so she attended a protest at Kwanghwamun Square in Seoul. As a college student three years later, she told me, “Somehow a picture of me with a big smile ended up on the main page of an Internet news site. It was from a candlelight festival, where people were performing, singing, dancing, and marching while chanting Article 1 of the Constitution, ‘The Republic of Korea is a democracy.’ It was a festive environment. . . . I went to the protest every weekend.”¹

Her picture on the Web site portrayed Chi-yun as a veritable “candle girl,” the face of the 2008 protests, and her story exemplifies how youth politics in South Korea had changed by the first decade of the twenty-first century: dissenters no longer weighed the repercussions of criticizing the government and instead made their feelings plain by participating in candlelight protests. The protests over U.S. beef importation were only the most recent in a series of Internet-born youth movements that had mass media, politicians, and activists asking how seemingly depoliticized young Koreans had come to fiercely criticize the government—and even to openly denounce the United States, their country’s closest ally.

What the head-scratchers failed to realize was that this question simply did not apply to the Korean “millennials,” born between the mid-1980s and mid-1990s and raised *after* the authoritarian era. The South Korean youths I encountered while researching this book were the first “digital natives,” who grew up using the language of computers and the Internet.² Like millennials in other countries, they were familiar with getting news from the Internet; they were also comfortable with expressing their thoughts and with finding like-minded people on social media. As a product of the particular context in South Korea, these young people shared distinct political and cultural experiences. They were the country’s first generation to *live* democracy rather than to fight for it—even if they were not entirely liberated from authoritarian legacies in the educational system, in compulsory military service, and even in the traditions of the democratization movement itself.

Chi-yun and her fellow teenage participants at the candlelight protests represent a new type of political actor that emerged with the Internet-born protests of the early 2000s: young Koreans able to participate in national politics with fewer preconceptions about and limits on what they might achieve. However, by “political actor” I don’t necessarily mean a self-identified intentional actor. Youth participants like Chi-yun did not always join the protests with the formal intention of undermining the government; nevertheless, their unreserved expression of grievances effectively scrutinized the ideological underpinnings of government decision making and envisioned democratic participation beyond the bounds of existing institutional procedures.

The chronological narrative I offer in this chapter has two purposes. One is to document the cultural, political, and economic changes experienced by young South Koreans that prepared them to participate in Internet-born street protests: the legacies of the authoritarian era, the postauthoritarian reforms and economic changes in the 1990s, and the development of Internet culture. The other is to critically reflect on “youth” as a social construct closely intertwined with both national and political identity. Since the early twentieth century, high school and college students had been imagined as agents of modernization and resistance against colonial and authoritarian rule.³ They were objects of education for competing political visions.

Kwanghwamun Square, where candlelight protesters have gathered since 2002, captures how youth were imagined and mobilized in important junctures of contemporary Korean history. The space served as a theater for

the national sovereignty and sacredness promoted by the regimes that followed the Korean War (1950–1953). Nearly 2.5 hectares large (about 6.2 acres), Kwanghwamun is surrounded by palaces from the Chosŏn dynasty dating from the fourteenth century, national government buildings, a national theater, and the U.S. Embassy; it evokes a narrative that South Korea is the only legitimate state on the Korean peninsula and the U.S. is an important patron against the Communist North. It is no coincidence that until the 1980s this ideologically charged space was barred from use by ordinary citizens and was therefore a prime target of protesters who contested the regimes' legitimacy. Even after democracy came to South Korea, these experiences with students remained as an interpretive lens through which scholars and critics viewed the youth collective at Kwanghwamun and other city centers. Yet, as I will show, young Koreans at these protests experienced a sociopolitical environment distinct from the political subjectivity experienced by the youth of the previous era.

Youth in the Colonial and Authoritarian Eras: Conveyors of the Nation's Political Ideals

As a social construct, Korean youth occupied an important space in the trajectory of Korean modernization and progress as the imagined conveyors of the nation's political ideals. The "young person" (*ch'ŏngnyŏn* or *sonyŏn*) was given particular significance in the early twentieth century when Korea was building a modern nation-state. As the country struggled to cope with Western and Japanese imperial powers, young men were considered agents to "depart from the past and achieve the future."⁴ According to literary scholar Dafna Zur, the *sonyŏn* was imagined as a modern subject, departing from a backward country to revive national glory; furthermore, the "Great Korea" to be achieved was symbolized as youthful.⁵

In the 1910s, Korean students studying abroad in the United States and Japan brought a new modern knowledge back to their homeland. In this period, the student with at least some high school education became a particular youth subject and was considered a prime agent of the country's advancement.⁶ During Japanese rule (1910–1945) and the subsequent authoritarian regimes, the student youth as a collective were given the identity of resisting injustice and confronting the leadership for the future of the nation. For instance, in the 1919 March First Movement against the Japanese, elite high school students made up a majority of those who poured into the streets to stand up against colonial rule.

After the Japanese occupation ended and the Korean peninsula became a frontline for Cold War ideological confrontation, youth were considered crucial agents who would fulfill the competing political ideals held by either the authoritarian regimes or the oppositional movement. Although the division of Korea was intended as a temporary measure to facilitate the surrender of Japanese troops on the peninsula, external political pressures maintained the divide. The Soviet Union backed Kim Il-sung as leader of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, while the United States championed Syngman Rhee (1948–1960) as president of the recently established Republic of Korea. Both North and South Korea claimed to be the sole legitimate polity on the Korean peninsula, each calling the other a client state of the aligned superpower. Until the Soviet bloc collapsed and South Korea achieved indisputable economic supremacy over the North in the 1990s, each regime's legitimacy was something to be vigorously confirmed and contested. Moreover, South Korea's authoritarian leaders—who seized power through a sequence of military coups—had to shore up their legitimacy in the face of the democratization movement. For decades, these leaders invoked national security and prosperity to legitimize authoritarian control. President Rhee justified repressive actions during his three terms in the name of protecting the country from the Communist threat and of pursuing reunification. After Rhee stepped down, Park Chung Hee (1961–1979) seized power through a coup and continued to justify authoritarianism in the name of national security and prosperity, as did Chun Doo-hwan (1980–1988) after seizing power in the vacuum created by Park's 1979 assassination.

Amidst this ideological contestation, youth occupied an important position as both foot soldiers for and symbols of competing visions. In the aftermath of the fraudulent presidential election of 1960 (which Syngman Rhee won by the impossibly wide margin of 64 percent), high school and college students were the first to organize protests. The discovery of the mutilated body of Kim Chu-yŏl—a high school student who had participated in the antigovernment protests—catalyzed national anger, and students nationwide took to the streets in demonstrations that at their peak drew participants even from junior high and elementary school. What would later be called the April Revolution of 1960 led to Rhee's resignation and exile in the United States. This was the first significant grassroots popular movement since the Korean War and served as the "prototype of South Korean radical movement," leading to further protests against colonial legacies, authoritarian regimes, and the North-South division.⁷ With the April Revolution,

cf.
p. 107

students established themselves as influential actors in Korean politics, challenging the status quo.

Park Chung Hee, who seized control in the resulting power vacuum, channeled this youth energy into his national development project while aggressively oppressing any oppositional student efforts. Park believed that strict ideological education combined with martial training would instill in students the values of anticommunism and patriotism, creating productive citizens for the project of state-driven industrialization and modernization. During his almost twenty years in power, he implemented a number of projects to sew these beliefs into the fabric of South Korean society. The “Charter for National Education” of 1968 begins with “We are born with the historic mission of national resurrection and prosperity” and stresses that “the love of the state and nation based on anti-communism and the democratic spirit is the way of our life.” Until 1994 this charter was printed on the first page of every textbook from elementary to high school, and students would memorize it. In addition, Park established a pledge of allegiance and required that ceremonies held by governments, schools, and even private corporations begin with reciting the pledge in front of the flag and playing the national anthem.⁸ Under Park’s ideological education, the patriotic and potent youth of the April Revolution were called to become docile and productive instruments of modernization.⁹

The official history curriculum and rituals established during Park’s two-decade rule continued well after the authoritarian governments had fallen. Until 2003, South Korea’s sole history textbook still emphasized the glories of the premodern kingdoms in order to instill national unity and patriotism while downplaying contemporary history (which was saturated with coups d’état and violence by the state).¹⁰ The successive authoritarian governments emphasized that the Communist bloc had been responsible for dividing the Korean peninsula, for ravaging the country during the Korean War, and for threatening South Korea’s liberal democracy. The government also painted the United States as the liberator of Korea from Japanese rule, and as a military and economic patron throughout the Korean War and postwar reconstruction.¹¹ It is no coincidence that until the 1980s Kwanghwamun Square was an arena both for demonstrating the country’s military preparedness against North Korea and for celebrating the national heroes who brought recognition to South Korea in international sports and science competitions. For instance, figure 2 shows a division of South Korean



Fig. 2 A division of South Korean soldiers marching before their dispatch to Vietnam on October 1, 1965 © Dong-a Ilbo.

soldiers marching into Kwanghwamun before being dispatched to Vietnam in 1965 to fight alongside the American military.

While the successive government regimes reinforced state nationalism, students nonetheless established themselves as voices for democracy and social justice, producing alternative visions for the nation. In 1965 college students led protests against the Park Chung Hee government’s proposal to normalize diplomatic ties with Japan without receiving an apology for violence during colonial rule. In the 1970s college students forged alliances with organized workers to protest inhumane conditions and the suppression of trade unions. These students and dissident intellectuals produced and developed a counternarrative to Park’s ideological education: that of *minjung*—literally, “the common people,” those who were “politically oppressed . . . and economically exploited” in the developmental state.¹² The *minjung* were imagined as normative agents for social change and “potential antidotes to

the brutal pace and deleterious side effects of development."¹³ College students had time, knowledge, and student councils and societies, all of which were prominent resources relative to workplaces and other sectors of society. As historian Namhee Lee documents, students "constituted, organized, and articulated" the "projected visions and potentialities" of the *minjung* movement by turning their universities into centers of social agitation, and became revolutionaries fighting against authoritarian rule.¹⁴

In subsequent 1980s democratization efforts, two iconic memories defined the youth of that era as a generation of activists: the Kwangju massacre of 1980 and the mass uprising of 1987. In 1980, when then-general Chun Doo-hwan attempted to take the presidency through an indirect election after seizing power in a coup, hundreds of thousands of citizens mobilized nationwide to demand a direct election and democratic freedoms. Chun targeted protesters in Kwangju, a city of 720,000, for reasons that remain unclear. He blamed the uprising on Communist agitation, a familiar justification for suppressing antigovernment movements in postwar Korea. The Korean Special Forces, nominally under the Combined U.S. Forces Command, were dispatched to Kwangju; the military isolated the city and killed hundreds of civilians in what would later be characterized as a massacre.¹⁵ Despite the Chun regime's strict control of the press, news of the massacre and stories of the citizens' resistance spread to activists and college students through underground publications.

For activists in the 1980s, Kwangju was the embodiment of the illegitimacy of the Chun government and of the U.S. policy to tolerate it in order to stabilize South Korea during the Cold War. Historian Bruce Cumings describes the Kwangju event as a defining point for a generation of South Koreans, much like the Vietnam War was for baby boomers in the United States.¹⁶ The memory of Kwangju also defined college as a bastion of the democratization movement, as writer Yi Ö-yöng recounts: "Tear gas and the scent of lilac are vivid memories for the democratization generation. When the lilac flower blooms on campus in the spring, student protests tend to hit their peak. Since the Kwangju uprising of May 1980, spring on college campuses began and ended with protests. In the 1980s, college students agonized whether to resist or escape into the scent of lilacs mixed with tear gas."¹⁷

In 1987 the torture and death of university student Park Chong-ch'öl during an interrogation was an impetus for spreading the democratization movement to a broader spectrum of college students and white-collar workers. Then, the day before scheduled nationwide protests on June 10, univer-

sity student Lee Han-yöl was killed by a tear gas grenade during a street protest. The two deaths transformed the June 10 protest into a prolonged nationwide demonstration. Millions occupied city centers, eventually forcing Chun to agree to a direct presidential election on June 29. The 1987 protests were a watershed event in the overthrow of the authoritarian regime and marked a coming-of-age for the so-called democratization generation, who remained politically active even after the transition to democracy.

During the 1980s democracy movement demonstrators repeatedly attempted to enter Kwanghwamun Square and the nearby U.S. Embassy to rebuke South Korea's authoritarian government and the United States for condoning human-rights violations. These incidents resulted in increased security for Kwanghwamun, and, before democratization in 1987, protesters succeeded in entering the square only four times. Those who were caught were sentenced to one to two years in jail.¹⁸ However, on July 9, 1987, Lee Han-yöl's funeral procession passed directly through City Hall Plaza to Kwanghwamun, which had filled with a crowd of more than one million people (see figure 3). The crowds in this space marked the significant achievements of the 1987 democratization movement. However, Lee's funeral was also a reminder of the steep social and physical costs, even martyrdom, of achieving this change.

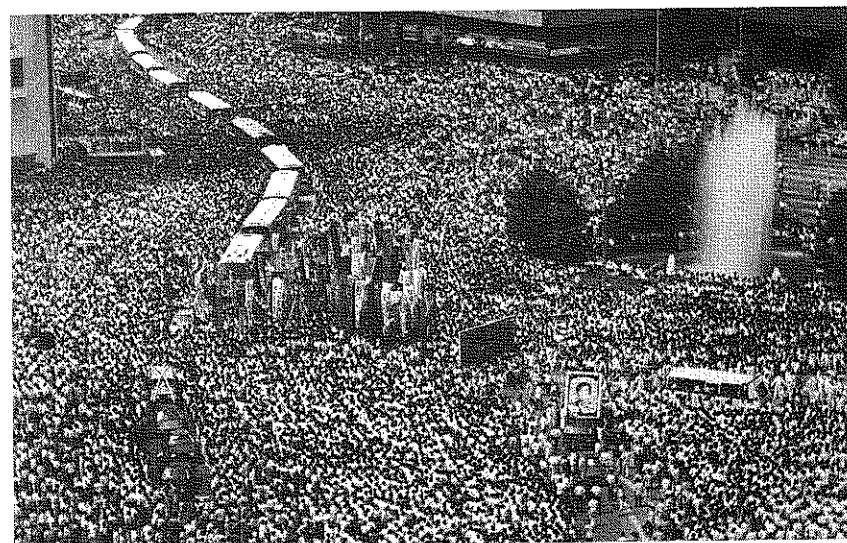


Fig. 3 The funeral march for Lee Han-yöl in downtown Seoul on July 9, 1987
© Koh Myoung-jin.

These efforts played a historic role in overturning authoritarianism and building a vibrant civil society in the 1990s, what anthropologist Jesook Song calls “as much an epistemological change as an organizational change.”¹⁹ From the radical movement tradition emerged a distinct student subject that still exerts influence on contemporary politics. “Generation 386” was originally coined in the 1990s, referring to people in their thirties (hence the 3) who went to college in the eighties (the 8) and were born in the sixties (the 6). In the 1990s, student participants of the 1980s democratization movement entered mainstream politics, established influential nongovernmental entities, organized the first labor party, and elected progressive politicians to the National Assembly.²⁰ Even though these Koreans were in their forties and fifties by the 2000s, Generation 386 remains a household term referring to the powerful cohort, which still retained “its symbolic value” as progressive agents of democratization until the Roh Moo-hyun administration (2003–2008).²¹

The student-youth of South Korea’s authoritarian era left legacies that persisted well beyond their time as protesters, and this rich history of ideological contention established interpretative frameworks that persisted into the twenty-first century. The four-decade contest between authoritarianism and the democratization movement had created strong associations among criticism of the government, anti-Americanism, and sympathy toward North Korea—qualities that typically resulted in oppression by the government. This period also created normative ideas about the political role of Korean youth and what it means to be a political actor. The radical movement tradition reminded South Koreans that criticizing the government could mean physical and social sacrifice. In a divisive ideological environment, the space outside the binary of the status quo and the opposition is small. In South Korea, a young citizen had to decide whether to be an activist or a conformist; dissent demanded devotion, and was accompanied by social cost. Taking action without first considering the ideological or social ramifications was foolish at best and dangerous at worst.

Youth in a Postauthoritarian and Neoliberal Era: The Changing Currency of Dissent

Although the Korean peninsula remained perhaps the final locus of the Cold War, the ideological paradigms that had dominated the 1980s slowly crumbled after democratization. The pillars of South Korean ideological contestation—anticommunism, alliance with the United States, and national

security—gradually became less relevant. As a result, many topics were no longer taboo, including sympathy toward North Korea, criticism of the United States, and denunciation of the government, which opened possibilities for political participation with fewer preconceptions and limits. At the same time, college students faced growing competitive pressure after the 1997–1998 financial crisis. As they increasingly withdrew from the political front, high school students became more active in voicing their political views.

In the 1990s South Korea’s civilian governments (led by former anti-government activists) reappraised the nation’s authoritarian past and introduced progressive perspectives to the official educational curriculum. Under the Kim Young-sam government (1993–1998), former presidents Chun Doo-hwan and Roh Tae-woo (1988–1993) were brought to criminal court for conspiracy and insurrection in connection with the 1979 coup, and for the 1980 killings of protesters in Kwangju. With the trial came an official rewriting of contemporary history, including redefining the 1980 Kwangju uprising: it was no longer a riot, but a “democratization movement.”²²

This change was further accompanied by a reevaluation of allies and enemies in light of extreme North Korean poverty, the 1997 financial crisis, and the American War on Terror. Since the mid-1990s, a series of reports about famine and destitution ravaging North Korea allowed Koreans in the South to view those in the North as poverty-stricken brethren rather than a threat to national security. In June of 2000 President Kim Dae-jung (1998–2003) made a historic visit to P’yongyang, the first such presidential visit since the division of the peninsula in 1948; it stirred romantic dreams of reconciliation. South Koreans were captivated by reunions of divided families and the opening to tourism of North Korea’s Kūmgang Mountain. As political scientist Chalmers Johnson notes, the reunions and the tours had effects similar to those of Richard Nixon’s 1972 visit to Beijing, which captivated Americans and shifted the Cold War stalemate. South Koreans saw the North–South summit as the “start of the end of the Cold War” on the Korean peninsula.²³

At the same time, South Koreans’ long-held belief in American benevolence began to fade. When the 1997 Asian financial meltdown brought South Korea to the verge of bankruptcy, the Kim Young-sam government turned to the International Monetary Fund (IMF)—which South Koreans deemed to be controlled by the United States—for an emergency bridge loan. The resulting \$57 billion loan came with “IMF conditionality” that South

Korea agree to restructure the nation's economy. The Clinton administration used the crisis to open Korean financial and commodities markets to foreign investors.²⁴ This caused South Koreans to doubt U.S. sponsorship of Korean economic growth and led many to view the United States as a global competitor attempting to "subjugate" the South Korean economy.²⁵

A few years later, in 2002, President George W. Bush declared North Korea to be part of the "axis of evil," against which the United States could employ preventive military—including nuclear—measures. Bush escalating the possibility of a peninsular crisis in this way further soured South Korean attitudes toward the United States.²⁶ Shortly after the "axis of evil" statement, 53.7 percent of South Koreans "disliked" the United States according to a Gallup poll, compared with only 15 percent in its 1994 survey. The generational difference was noteworthy: only 23.1 percent of respondents in their twenties and 21.2 percent in their thirties had a positive view of the United States, while 40.9 percent of respondents in their forties and 50 percent of those in their fifties and older viewed the United States in a positive light.²⁷

However, the seemingly jarring anti-Americanism after the "axis of evil" statement was not caused by the statement itself, rather it was a manifestation of South Koreans' gradually changing political milieu. As political scientist Katharine Moon explains, when Korea suffered from war and poverty in the 1950s and 1960s, American material generosity—from weaponry to gifts for local orphanages—was instrumental in rebuilding social capital and was gratefully accepted. But, as South Korea achieved rapid development and entered postindustrial society in the 1990s, the country no longer needed this generosity. Furthermore, with the end of the Cold War, the political legitimacy of U.S. forces as the "bulwark of the free world" no longer stood.²⁸ The growing criticism of the United States was a consequence of the growth of South Korea's civil society, accompanied by a weakening of the ideological binary that had dominated the authoritarian era. The changes in the 1990s had altered the currency of dissent. Criticism of the Korean government or of the United States was no longer associated with radicalism.

With this political liberalization, the exponential growth of consumer culture and aggressive economic restructuring gradually transformed the status of college students from being at the vanguard of social change to becoming cultural consumers, and eventually to becoming a precarious labor resource in a competitive market. In this recently democratized civil

society, new political parties, trade unions, and civic organizations addressed tensions in areas of environment, labor, peace, education, and gender.²⁹ The student movement declined in its influence, and its targets diffused in the absence of the authoritarian government. With democratization came the rise of personal desires for individual expression and fulfillment beyond collectivistic demands. This new demand, combined with rapid economic development and political liberalization, led to a striking expansion of cultural industry and consumerism.³⁰ The labels "Generation X" and "New Generation" (*sinsedae*) were widely used to distinguish the new youth from the politically charged youth of the democratization era. These terms marked social changes—for example, that Koreans in their twenties were no longer more progressive than older Koreans, and that political identity did not project college students as a collective. Some scholars view this change as consumerism and cynicism replacing the "romantic passion" of the 1980s, while others see the liberation of youth culture from the bounds of ideological burden.³¹

Additionally, the period of IMF involvement (1997–1998) ushered in new anxieties over high unemployment, loss of lifetime positions, and global competition, radically changing the culture of the university.³² The Korean won devalued by 40 percent, which raised production costs for some of Korea's chief industries and led to bankruptcies. Between 1996 and 1998, the overall unemployment rate rose from only 2.6 percent to a record high of 7.6 percent, and unemployment for Koreans between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four rose from 6.1 to 15.9 percent.³³ In 1997–1998, the average urban household income declined by 14.4 percent, and the number of households below the poverty line increased from 4 to 12 percent.³⁴ Until the mid-1990s a degree from a reputable university had guaranteed a decent job, which allowed students to concentrate on activism during their first few years without worrying about the future. However, during the IMF era university graduates had to compete with experienced workers for jobs.³⁵

Even though Korea recovered from the financial crisis, youth unemployment remained twice the overall unemployment rate (8.3 percent, compared with overall unemployment of 4.2 percent as of 2012).³⁶ Even when a new graduate landed a job, it was likely to be a contract or freelance position. As more and more youths sought university education as a means to secure employment, the college entrance rate among high school graduates rose from 60 percent in 1997 to 84 percent in 2008, further devaluing the

university diploma.³⁷ The opening of financial markets and influx of foreign corporations added a particular anxiety and pressure for college students and employees alike to equip themselves for global competitiveness—including acquiring English competency and a cosmopolitan sensibility, as well as honing their creativity.³⁸ English proficiency tests became a staple requirement for job applicants, and even for graduation from some universities. South Korea soon became the largest market for these exams, representing 18.5 percent of worldwide testing in 2006 (in a country with only 0.8 percent of the global population).³⁹

The generational categories popularized during this period, such as “Generation IMF” and “Generation 880-thousand won,” indicate that Korean youth was largely imagined as a precarious subject under global neoliberal reforms. “Generation IMF” was widely used to refer to the first group of college students to experience the new job market beginning in 1997. Economist Kim Se-gyun argues that this generation is liberal when it comes to cultural issues but conservative regarding economic concerns, and they generally supported Lee Myung-bak’s proposal to boost the economy in the 2007 presidential election.⁴⁰ That year, the term “Generation 880-thousand won” (*88 manwon sedae*)—coined by a best-selling book of the same name—was used to describe the current fragmented youth and their bifurcated condition in neoliberal Korea. The total of 880,000 won, roughly eight hundred U.S. dollars, was the monthly income one could earn through a minimum-wage temporary position—which a Korean in his or her twenties entering the market was likely to land in. This was also the price of the new “Prada” phone, a collaboration between the Italian luxury brand and a Korean cell-phone manufacturer. The term “Generation 880-thousand won” therefore captured the intensifying division between young Koreans who merely got by and those who inherited economic advantages.⁴¹

The youth imagined with these labels were no longer a political subject for Korea’s particular national ideal, but simply a local variant of the global youth left adrift amid neoliberal changes. As literary critic So Yŏng-hyŏn aptly notes, it became hard for young Koreans to imagine a future or progress. Faced with competition for survival, conceiving of a common generational identity or solidarity became impossible. For them, the status quo was not something to resist but a goal to achieve.⁴² We see similar generational characteristics in other countries. Japan’s “Lost Generation” grew up during that country’s recession in the 1990s and settled for odd jobs or part-time work, without opportunities for the higher-paying, salaried jobs that

their predecessors enjoyed. Italy’s “Generation Thousand Euro” (*Mileuristi*) was similarly comprised of young postgraduate employees who subsisted on monthly pay of one thousand euros (about 1,300 U.S. dollars at the time). Following the financial crisis of 2007–2008, a variety of comparable categories also emerged: “Generation 700 Euro” in Greece, “*Mileurista*” in Spain, and “*Génération Précaire*” in France.⁴³

Yet, while Koreans in their twenties were detaching from politics, teenagers increasingly gained access to the progressive knowledge and critical-thinking skills that had previously been available only to concerned university students. In 2003, during the Roh Moo-hyun presidency, modern and contemporary Korean history (since the 1860s) was added to the high school curriculum. Now students had access to multiple editions of history textbooks, ranging from those that continued to parrot the regime’s narrative to a revisionist history that critically appraised the authoritarian governments and U.S. patronage. The continuing effort to reappraise contemporary history culminated in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of 2005, which examined the period from Japanese rule in 1910 up until 1992. Along with the official changes, the Korean Teachers and Educational Workers Union (KTU), which was formed in 1989 by democratization activists and legalized in 1996, further brought critical-thinking skills into the classroom.⁴⁴ For example, the KTU developed and shared curricula about the status of U.S. forces in Korea after the deaths of Hyo-sun and Mi-sŏn in 2002, about the international antiwar and peace movements in reaction to the U.S. military campaign in Iraq, and about the politics of economic globalization associated with the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Korea in 2005.⁴⁵

Youths who participated in or observed the 2002 and 2008 protests recalled discussions in high school that introduced them to critical-thinking skills and a progressive worldview. For Myŏng*, then a high school student living in a city two hours from Seoul, the 2002 candlelight vigils were a privilege allowed to only a handful of elite students at her school: “We all had to stay in school until late in the evening to prepare for the college entrance exam. However, a few top students were ‘dispatched’ to the vigils. Teachers told them, ‘You need to go and experience the protests, because the topic can be on the critical essay exam.’”⁴⁶ Since 1993 the government has allowed universities to administer their own exams in addition to the standardized college entrance exam, and elite schools adopted critical essay exams. Kŏn-ho* was in ninth grade when he participated in the 2008 beef protests, and by

that time critical thinking and essay preparation had become part of the official curriculum. He recalled, "The 2008 candlelight protests were a big issue in my social studies class. We debated the topic. And, you know, the critical essay exam was an important part of university admissions at that time. . . . As these exams ask your opinion on current events, my classes incorporated a lot of current issues and newspapers."⁴⁷ Bin-na*, another participant in the 2008 protest, recalled a similar experience in her high school: "We had mock trials quite often and debated whether an action was right or wrong. . . . In junior high my homeroom teacher was greatly interested in social issues. He showed us a documentary about the Kwangju democratization movement and encouraged us to think about it. I also wrote lots of critical essays."⁴⁸

It is against this backdrop that the candlelight protests can be best understood. Teenagers at the protests were not only direct descendants of the 1980s radical movement tradition but new types of social actors who flourished after the achievement of democratization. They had little experience with ideological confrontation or the social costs associated with dissent; instead, critical perspectives once held only by student activists were now readily available through standard educational curricula. As a result, these teenagers were able to participate in Internet politics, and later in street protests, with fewer preconceptions and limits than their predecessors.

Youth on the Internet: The Convergence of Play and Politics

The young Koreans at the candlelight protests had already been actively using the Internet for entertainment purposes by early 2002, supported by broad access to high-speed connections and the early development of online games and communities. With access to alternative news sources and discussion forums, Korean youth had been developing their own modes of commentary characterized by vibrant debate and irreverent parody. These online practices produced the 2002 vigils as a convergence of playful participation and traditional politics, and they continued to evolve with the consolidation of the candlelight vigil into an established protest repertoire.

At the time, the active online presence for South Korea's youth was unique even among modern industrialized nations. This highly connected society of forty-seven million matured into the social media age well ahead of the global curve. While the nation was recovering from the 1997–1998 financial crisis, the government implemented initiatives to support the new media industry with the slogan, "Korea will lead in the information age, al-

though it lagged behind in globalization."⁴⁹ Growth and competition among telecommunication companies led to price reductions and a corresponding increase in demand for services. The monthly cost of home broadband decreased from forty U.S. dollars in 1999 to only thirty dollars by 2003.⁵⁰ In 2002 57.4 percent of all Koreans had a high-speed Internet connection, the highest broadband penetration rate in the world at the time, and still the highest as of 2012 at 98 percent (while the rate in the United States during the same period grew from 12 to 76 percent).⁵¹

Based on this infrastructure, a robust online culture established itself relatively early in the Internet age, with homegrown content and communities. South Korea's two major portal services, Daum.net and Naver.com, launched in 1997 and 1999. Offering free e-mail accounts and, later, free space for online communities, they quickly replaced English-based services such as Yahoo! and AltaVista. In 2002 90 percent of all Korean Internet users regularly logged onto Daum, making it one of the most visited Internet portals in the world.⁵² Similarly, South Korean social networking site Cyworld has grown exponentially since 2002—well ahead of both Myspace (launched in 2003) and Facebook (in 2005)—and it had twenty-five million users by 2011.⁵³ Online games, following the enormous popularity of StarCraft since 1998, also contributed to the vibrant Internet culture among young Koreans.⁵⁴ According to a 2003 report on online gaming among Korean youth, more than 70 percent of Koreans between ages thirteen and twenty-four played games on the Internet. Even more notable is that more than 40 percent of Korean youths were also members of an online community dedicated to games, 30 percent had attended offline meetings of that community, and more than 50 percent reported making friends through online games.⁵⁵ Clearly, Korean cyberspace was not merely a tool for offline relationships and agendas; by the end of the 1990s it was already a hub of new relationships based on shared interests.

Furthermore, three prominent online phenomena in the early 2000s suggest that the Internet had become a locus of vernacular politics: alternative news sources, parody sites like *DC Inside*, and discussion forums such as *Agora*. First, in 2001 and 2002 online news sites *Pressian* and *Oh My News* launched, serving as hubs for progressive news and commentary. These and other similar news outlets instantly attracted already active Internet users with live updates on critical events, progressive op-eds, and investigative reporting into issues not covered by the mainstream press. *Oh My News* additionally published news and editorials from "citizen reporters" (volunteer

contributors whose number had reached 75,000 by 2013), offering live updates and alternative perspectives on important issues even before mainstream press covered them.⁵⁶ The day before the presidential election in 2002, with progressive Roh Moo-hyun and conservative Lee Hoi-chang locked in a close race, *Oh My News* received six million visitors and 190 million page views—surpassing any mainstream media outlet.⁵⁷

Second, parody and satire sites had been increasing in popularity among young liberal users since the late 1990s, establishing parody as the signature style of Internet culture. *Ttanjung Ilbo*, an online parody of the conservative *Chosun Ilbo*, launched in 1998. Literally meaning “knocking the opponent to the ground,” *Ttanjung Ilbo* took a sarcastic view of the conservative media with wry humor and manipulated images.⁵⁸ Meanwhile, *DC Inside* began as a community dedicated to digital cameras (“DC”) and photography in 1999. Much like the American 4chan or Japan’s 2channel, *DC Inside* evolved from a community for sharing photos and Photoshopped images into one for cultural and political commentary using images and irreverent parody. As anthropologist Yi Kil-ho notes, *DC Inside* was responsible for producing many of the popular jokes, neologisms, and images that have gone viral on the Internet—and for trolling, including provoking others with inflammatory messages or disclosing the identity of anonymous users. Out of *DC Inside* grew *Ilbe*, an online community known for its extremely conservative perspective, derogatory remarks about political foes, and hateful content about women and minorities.⁵⁹

Third, *Agora*, an open online forum on Daum.net (now South Korea’s largest portal service), emerged in 2004 as a primary space for discussion about political and social issues.⁶⁰ Named after the ancient Greek word for “marketplace,” *Agora* became a veritable online public square where concerned Internet users gathered to share information and opinions on emerging issues before mainstream news covered them. For instance, when the government decided to resume importation of American beef in 2008, *Agora* became the center of information and debate about mad cow disease (as detailed in chapter 5). Scientific reports circulating on *Agora* drew as many as fifty-two million page views, with two million visitors daily during the heat of the 2008 protests.⁶¹

These three types of community—alternative media, parody sites, and discussion forums—served as crucibles both for the subversion of mainstream politics and for online protest: it wasn’t always easy to tell the difference between frivolous play and political criticism on the Internet. With

this infrastructure in place, the South Korean online community could disseminate, respond to, and even mobilize against events in a way never seen before.

Early in 2002 this newly expanding online space facilitated an important precursor to the youth-driven protests taken up in this book. Anti-American sentiment erupted when U.S. president George W. Bush announced his plan to visit South Korea in February, shortly after his “axis of evil” statement. The news rallied many South Korean peace activists and progressive politicians. Civic groups released statements criticizing Bush’s bellicose rhetoric; they described the United States as a barrier to inter-Korea peace efforts and reframed Bush’s visit as an attempt to sell fighter aircraft and other weapons to South Korea.⁶² Although street protests were confined largely to activists, Internet users—already wary of Bush’s plan for the Korean peninsula—were sympathetic to the activists’ arguments, discussing and recirculating them online.

Popular anti-American sentiment (*panmi*) then erupted unexpectedly when Internet users seized upon a controversial verdict at an international sporting match. On February 21, two days after Bush arrived in Seoul, South Korean short-track speed skater Kim Tong-sŏng was disqualified during the Salt Lake City Winter Olympics after finishing first in the 1,500-meter final. Rival Apolo Anton Ohno of the United States was instead awarded the gold. South Korean Internet users immediately accused Ohno of exaggerating the contact that disqualified Kim, and quickly concluded that the gold medal had been stolen. Their anger intensified when Jay Leno, host of NBC’s *Tonight Show*, defended the referee’s decision and made an inflammatory joke: “The Korean player was angry enough to have kicked *and* eaten his dog when he returned home.”⁶³ Leno’s remark spread rapidly among South Koreans on the Internet.

More than a hundred new communities appeared online devoted to self-proclaimed anti-Americanism. Internet users organized online protests and sent more than sixteen thousand angry e-mails to the U.S. Olympic Committee, shutting down the organization’s Web site. Koreans also participated in an online poll conducted by NBC about the ruling, resulting in a 96 percent response that the Olympic ruling was unfair.⁶⁴ As the online protests progressed, a number of parody images and songs went viral, typically originating from *DC Inside*. For instance, a “Lord of the Cheating” poster superimposed Ohno’s face onto the film poster for *The Lord of the Rings*. The original text, “The one who has the ring rules them all,” became

“The one who cheats rules the game.” Tongue-in-cheek credit lines identify as “producers” both Ohno and the judges who disqualified Kim.

The public outcry against what was considered an unfair home advantage for Ohno made anti-Americanism a pop-culture phenomenon.⁶⁵ “Fuckin’ U.S.A.,” a parody of Beach Boys hit “Surfin’ U.S.A.,” went viral. It begins with the Salt Lake City Olympics, then targets U.S. foreign policy for South Korea:

Did you see the short track race? . . .

You stole the Gold Medal.

You always get what you want by force. . . . Did you hear what Bush said?

He threatened North Korea and intervenes in South Korean politics.
You’re a bully.

At the same time, the most sought-after audio file on the Web was “Paper Plane,” a fictional comedic conversation between Kim Dae-jung and George Bush in which the latter pressures Kim to purchase F-15 fighters. In addition to circulating these files, Internet users organized a boycott of U.S. products, including Coca-Cola, Hollywood films, and U.S. restaurant chains, while opposing the government’s plan to purchase the jet fighters.⁶⁶

This online parody and subversion of mainstream politics that proliferated around 2002 didn’t simply mirror or even derive directly from existing politics. Instead, the well-developed online culture and postauthoritarian upbringing of modern Korean youth provided the sociocultural backdrop against which they were able to express shared emotion, produce irreverent parody, and dismiss taboos—something that cultural critics Paik Wook-in and Ho-young Lee argue had been possible only in personal settings during the authoritarian era.⁶⁷ By the time of Hyo-sun and Mi-sŏn’s deaths in June, South Korea’s younger generation was ready to revive the popular “anti-American” slogans of early 2002 and organize another collective action.

The emergence of South Korea’s postauthoritarian youth activism was a slow and uneven process. Even though authoritarian rule officially ended in 1987, early in the twenty-first century young people still heard its echoes when they enlisted in the military, attended school, or listened to their parents. However, changes in South Korean politics and culture since the 1990s gradually erased the remnants of authoritarianism as well as the sense of

sacrifice and fear associated with dissent, and weakened the taboo of criticizing the government or the United States. Given these changes, it’s difficult to conclude that modern South Korean students who participated in Internet and street protests were direct successors to the anti-American activists of the democratization era. These teenagers were much less bound by the need for ideological legitimacy that had tempered political action by the previous generation; the online protests surrounding the 2002 Winter Olympics and Bush’s War on Terror had left young people with a vibrant online space in which to express both nationalism and their newfound skepticism of U.S. peacekeeping efforts on the Korean peninsula. Furthermore, the irreverent criticism did not allow for an easy distinction between serious dissent and play. This convergence suggests the appearance of a new mode of political participation marked by little fear of dissent, yearning for national respect in accord with Korea’s recent economic and political development, lessening of the anxiety associated with political participation, and use of the Internet as a vibrant space for grassroots discourse.