THE 2008 ELECTION

Modern Korean Society
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Rapid Disenchantment with Roh MuHyun

• By time of his inauguration being criticized for asking people to moderate their anti-Americanism
  • Traditional visits to US bases made him seem coopted by the establishment
• Roh lost support from both left and right
  • Right criticized social spending as contravening free market principles
  • Left thought social spending was inadequate, and adamantly opposed sending troops to Iraq
    • May 2003—450 military medics
    • April 2004—1400 combat marines
  • South Korean conservatives see this kind of participation as repayment for US military support against North Korea while left-wingers see it as complicity with American imperialism
Vigils as New Repertoire for Social Action

- (based on 2006 interviews)
- Repertoire characteristics
  - Online mobilization
  - Casual participation not based on previous ideological commitment
  - Peaceful, festive crowds
  - Effect of internet architecture, captivation, and context
- Festive Vigils
  - People remembered what they did and how they felt
  - Passion a true sense of justice
  - “connected without sharing a collective identity” p87
  - Some recalled the solidarity of the World Cup finals
  - Some connected the vigils to kükki hullyŏn—high school training camps that ended with a candlelight vigil in which kids remembered their parents
Slow Decomposition of Authoritarian Repertoire

- Previous framework for some
  - Devoted activism
  - Physical and social cost for participants
  - Radical political claims

- Army vets
  - Thought vigils might be infiltrated by North Korean spies (kanch’ŏp)
  - Had been indoctrinated in military
  - Some were KATUSAs with good English and close work with Americans
    - These interpreted demands for revising SOFA, etc. as “anti-American”

- Others saw the movement as superficial because it didn’t demand enough sacrifice
Remnants of Oppositional Movement

- PKC (Pan-Korean Community)
  - Pan-Korea is a term that encompasses both North and South Korea
  - Protest songs, shouting slogans, letters to Misŏni and Hyosuni, salp’uri to assuage their souls
  - Understood protests in terms of the minjok-minju undong
    - Local people should be the leaders (chujin)
    - US presence prevents unification
    - Links present vigils to long line of protest
  - Tend to support confederation unification (understood by the right as North Korea’s policy)
Yi Aeju Dancing Salp’uri in 2012
Postauthoritarian Movement

• Candlelight protests remembered as expressing inarticulated feelings, but not along ideological lines
• Not a new generation of activists
• Candlelight protests were a well-established repertory for expressing many things
• Used to express opposition to Rho Muhyun’s impeachment in 2004
The 2008 Mad Cow Candlelight Festivals

• April 2008 dissatisfaction with President Myungbak Lee (elected in 2007, inaugurated 2008)
  • Pan-Korean Grand Canal, privatizing medical insurance, increasing competition in education, introduction of immersion English language education, and resumption of beef imports
• Beef imports became the metonym for all this in 2008
  • (just as Rhu Muhyun in 2002 had become the metonym for dissatisfaction with Korea’s lack of standing in the world and subordination to the US as illustrated in Hyosuni and Misŏni)
  • Internet surged with images of victims of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (mostly Britain 1984-2009)
• Backstory
  • In 2003 one BSE infected cow was detected in the US (Washington State, but calf had been imported from Canada). Four deaths in US, but all thought to have gotten BSE outside USA.
  • US beef imports were banned in 2003, but Myungbak Lee negotiated with the US a lift of the ban in 2008
Lee Myungbak

• Came up through Hyundai, and mayor of Seoul 2002-2006
  • Got high marks for daylighting Ch’ŏnggyech’ŏn and improving transportation

• Platform in 2007 Election
  • ROK become world’s 7th largest economy (from 15th) with $40,000 annual income
  • Won with 46% of the vote with 62% participation (28.5% of possible votes)
  • One factor in election was South Korean disillusion with “peace and reconciliation policy” with North Korea after North Korean nuclear tests
Cheonggyecheon old and new
Opposition to Lee Myungbak

- Grand Canal Project criticized as environmentally destructive
- Privatization of public corporations and medical insurance were criticized as outsourcing that would hurt the lower classes
- Deregulation of “special purpose” high schools
  - ‘special purpose” high schools are specialized elite schools with limited admissions for arts and music, athletics, foreign language, and the sciences
- Liberalization of university admissions
  - Universities allowed to set up admissions offices where they make their own exams, rather than conform to national standards
- Lee—expand choice and opportunity
- Opponents—this increases exam competition and favors the rich who can afford private tutoring and schools
Fear of Mad Cow Disease

• Politics of US beef imports
  • Would hurt relatively small-scale Korean beef farmers, while helping wealthy industrial conglomerates
  • Wealthy could still afford Korean beef, but poor, students, military, and incarcerated would be stuck with unhealthful American beef
  • [N.B. no mention of benefits of cheaper beef for the poor]

• Mad Cow became metonym for discontent with Lee Myungbak’s policies
  • Icon of the mad cow used for visual parodies criticizing Lee
  • Issues collapsed around mad cow—competition in schools, vulnerability to disease, government indifference to ordinary people’s safety
  • Choice in consumption did not seem real to them
Carnivalesque Festivals

• Media images of the Candlelight festivals of 2008
  • Fears of BSE derided as street rumors (koedam) that the government vowed to prosecute on the internet
  • Conservative media (*Donga*, *Chosun Ilbo*) blamed the agitation on leftists and thought of the internet as pathological
  • Liberal media (*Han Kyoreh*, *Kyunghyang Sinmun*) supported the protests as political

• Actual protests, says Kang, were carnivalesque
  • Mass arrests parodied as “chicken coop tours” 닭장차 투어 (닭장차 chicken coop bus, refers to buses with wire over their windows used as paddy wagons)
  • Crowds an undifferentiated solidary group that through their size made state authority ineffective
    • Created communitas in Turneresque terms?
  • Demolish fear with laughter
Take a chicken coop bus tour with P’odori
What the Protests Were Not

- Not Habermas’ civil society
  - Group of citizens gathering together to discuss issues as a self-governing collective [i.e. not like the coffee houses of Europe]
- Not Le Bon (social psychology of the mob)
  - Group of people carried away by emotions into mob activity (also Frankfurt School)
- Not political demonstration of “return to democracy being damaged by Lee Myungbak”
  - June 10, 2008 demonstration called in memory of June 10, 1987 demonstration that led to democratization
  - Fortress Lee Myungbak—shipping containers blocking Kwanghwamun
    - Older protesters protected the young who were allowed to withdraw
  - This demonstration devoted to institutional goals was more political and the teenagers began to withdraw from the protests at this point as older politically engaged protestors took over
    - Young people’s desire was not specific political goals but to express their feelings to authorities, and politicization drowned their voice
New ideological repertoire

• New repertoire
  • Casual participation without preexisting activist identity
  • Temporary alliances among citizens
  • Demand for government openness and transparency beyond formal democratization
  • Direct response to—or parody of—mainstream politics

• What captivates people?
  • Viral phenomena are metonyms for underlying sentiments
  • Misôni and Hyosuni about subordinate status of Korea to US in contrast to national pride of the World Cup
  • American beef—exaggerated fear of illness perhaps a response to perceptions of government disregard for people’s safety, and their vulnerability to international trade pressure
Remembrance of involvement

- Participated without formal objective in mind
- Afterward returned to school and work
- Became politically socialized to think of themselves as independent-minded citizens

Effect of Protests?
- Changed expectations
  - More assertive national identity
  - Force government to protect citizens more from outside forces
Youth in 2011-12

• Recall of 2006
  • Anti-American protests
  • Recreation of the solidarity of high school candlelight ceremonies
  • Festivals that fortuitously had political influence

• In 2012
  • Candlelight festivals remembered as personal growth in the context of school and work pressure that left little space for politics

• Tajŏng—beginning an alternative path
  • Faltering downer cattle captivated her as a metaphor for the pressure and regimentation of the South Korean school system
  • Participation with an “intimate public” gave her a sense of belonging and alternatives
  • In commodity society individuals exist as isolated consumers, and teachers said, “You must become one who eats not with a spoon and chopsticks, but with a fork and a knife.” (must become cosmopolitan upper class)
  • Protests gave Tajŏng courage to reject college and work for an NGO
Other Participants

- Chiyun—losing touch with politics
  - Originally participated because of the introduction of Period 0 in school
  - Went to rural occupational university, though, and lost touch with politics because other students only trying to qualify for job

- Surin and Minji—Ideal of participatory politics
  - Initially participated in the protests out of curiosity, but came to resent the, “You’re just students. Go back and study.” attitude of critics
  - Protests allowed them to express their political views and connect with like-minded people in a context in which their ability to express political view is limited
Still More Participants

• Kŏnho—self-correcting conservative
  • Initially blogged with progressives, but came to the conclusion that the internet spreads false information and street protests are meaningless
  • Thinks of himself as an independent critical thinker, and has plans to break into photography
• Binna—entrepreneurial activist
  • Initially actively involved in opposition to the naval base at Kangjŏng on Cheju Island
    • opposition was based on environmental destruction, and suspicion it was for US opposing China rather than Korea
  • Later worked for NGO and candidate’s campaign, but also kept up her GPA
• Ch’anki—Elite Lifetime activist
  • Politically aware, but enjoyed the festive atmosphere of the protest
  • Good English typical of more entrepreneurial students (KATUSA)
Relevant in 2018?

• “South Korea’s Candlelight Revolution and the Future of the Korean Peninsula” by Nak-chung Paik (Japan Focus, Dec 1, 2018)
  • “current changes in the peninsula cannot be adequately graspec without taking into account the crucial role of South Korea’s Candlelight Revolution”
  • What current changes?
    • Kim Jong Un’s New Year’s Address (missile and nuclear moratorium), DPRK visit to ROK Winter Olympics
    • Mun/Kim meetings: (1) P’anmunjom 2018.4.27, (2) P’anmunjom 2018.5.26, (3) P’yŏngyang 2018.9.18
    • Trump/Kim meeting 2018.6.12, moratorium on US/ROK military exercises
    • Train crosses from south to north for rail survey 2018.11.30
Paik Nak-chung’s “Candlelight Revolution”

- From late October 2016 until early March 2017
  - Loosely organized with NGOs by People’s Action against President Park Geun-hye
  - Up to 2 million came out in December 2016, the peak of action
- No organized leadership, yet peaceful and festive
  - In wake of these demonstrations Park Geun-hye found guilty and Mun Jae-in elected
- Was this a “real revolution”?
  - Korean name 촛불 항쟁 “candlelight resistance”
  - PNC says, yes, because “it was the activation for the first time of the constitution as such” p4
    - In the past constitutional protections were suspended at times because of north/south confrontation, but this time change was brought about constitutionally
    - Because of candlelight those who indulged in corruption and flagrant abuses of power were brought to justice
Why a “real revolution”?

- The Korean Peninsula exhibits a “division system” by which two nation-states of the same ethnic group confront each other.
- Candlelight demonstrations continues Korean political tradition of national demonstrations inaugurated 1919.3.1
  - May 18, 1980 “Kwangju Democratic Uprising” 5-1-8 민주화 향쟁
  - June 10, 1987 “Democratization Movement”
  - 2016-17 Candlelight demonstrations
- It doesn’t have to be violent to be a revolution so long as real change is brought about.
- Whatever Kim Jong Un and Donald Trump’s role in North-South détente “it is doubtful that the whole process would have started at all if South Korean citizens had not risen up and produced a new government determined to reject any military solution by the United States and ready to engage P’yŏngyang in a common endeavor to build peace” p7
Assessment

• Notice this assessment parallels other political assessments of candlelight demonstrations
  • For example, the politicization of Myungbak Lee fortress on 2018.6.10 marked the point when young people began to withdraw from the candlelight demonstrations as violence threatened (see Kang p127)
• Notice Paik’s attribution of specific political meanings to the demonstrations may over-interpret the specificity of their political content
  • Mun “as a ‘candlelight president’ had no choice but to comply with the popular mandate for a peaceful peninsula” p7
  • Progress on a North/South confederation (낮은 단계의 연방제) is a prerequisite to denuclearization and for “the implementation of the domestic agenda of the Candlelight Revolution.”
  • “Without continuous progress in inter-Korean relations and a heightened degree of institutionalization of that progress, the peculiar task of ‘carrying out the revolution by non-revolutionary means’ will soon lose momentum”