

ANTI-AMERICANISM AND NATIONAL IDENTITY IN SOUTH KOREA

BY

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## **Abstract**

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The goal of my thesis is to investigate the nature of anti-Americanism in South Korea, a nation which has had a long and intricate relationship with the United States. Starting with a brief survey of anti-Americanism as a global phenomena and moving through important historical milestones in the evolution of anti-American sentiment I use socio-historical research to get to the heart of what anti-Americanism means in South Korea. My research suggests that anti-Americanism as it exists in South Korea is not an ideological or deep seated hatred of the United States but rather an incidental component of a much larger quest for a national identity.

\*Note: Korean words were romanized using the McCune-Reischauer system, and family names are listed first and given names second.

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## **Introduction**

The democratization of South Korea has brought with it spikes and surges in anti-Americanism that seem to many Americans to be at odds with their understanding of South Korea. The word in Korean for the United States is Miguk (미국, 美國) which translates as “beautiful country,” an ironic description considering that in 2002, South Korea ranked behind only Bangladesh and Argentina for holding unfavorable attitudes towards the U.S. (McAdam 263). While such attitudes may be difficult to reconcile from an American perspective, the unique composition of the modern South Korean sociopolitical environment addressed in this paper will help to illuminate the nature of anti-Americanism in South Korea.

The relationship between the United States and Korea dates back more than 100 years with the signing of the Shufeldt Treaty in 1883, which normalized relations between the Kingdom of Korea and the United States. Since that time, the Hermit Kingdom has undergone tremendous social and political upheaval on numerous occasions, from the end of a 500 year dynasty to experiencing colonization, civil war, cold war, authoritarian rule and most recently, democracy. The US and South Korea have shared a strong bond based upon mutual strategic trade and security issues since WWII and the partitioning of Korea into North and South. The United States was initially seen as beneficent savior from the communist threat immediately to the North, but South Korean perceptions towards the United States have begun to shift in recent decades. Many South Koreans feel that American policy makers have had a difficult time keeping

up with the rapid pace with which South Korean society has changed since the 1970s, relying heavily on an out dated Status of Forces Agreement that leaves the two nations on unequal footing, which has created a widening gap in the relations with what was once one of the United States' staunchest allies.

The central theme of my thesis is anti-Americanism in South Korea as it relates to a paradigm shift in national self-identity. This trend in the South Korean national consciousness is comprised of numerous intricate, interrelated issues that many have referred to as 'anti-Americanism.' I use several key historical events and trends to demonstrate the progression and evolution of modern Korean identity and its profound effect on the shaping of 'anti-Americanism.' By employing socio-historical research, I will seek to analyze the complex relationship between anti-Americanism and South Korean national identity. I intend to show that anti-Americanism in South Korea reflects and contributes to the formation of national identity.

Anti-Americanism in South Korea is an issue that has received much attention in both western and Korean media as well as in scholarly circles in recent years. Undeniably, the United States and South Korea have close economic and strategic ties such that relations between the two countries have served as a powerful force in South Korean political and social spheres. Sensationalism surrounding anti-American sentiment has often pointed to the potential for anti-Americanism to cause serious disruption in multiple arenas of US-South Korean interaction as in the case of massive protests in late fall of 2002. It is therefore important to understand the political and social constructs in which anti-Americanism exists to accurately define the nature of South Korean Anti-Americanism.

## **Background**

South Korea has risen from the ashes of war and destitution to become the fourth largest economy in Asia. Such a rapid rise has produced a substantial chasm between those who grew up in abject poverty in the aftermath of the Korean War and those who have never known anything but relative affluence and privilege. As ideological reform has swept through South Korea, the political pendulum has been viewed by scholars such as Bruce Cummings as having begun to swing away from a right of center, anti-communist and pro-American stance to one that is more tolerant of dissent towards America and more accepting of North Korean sympathizers. With roots predating the colonization of the Korean peninsula by Japan, the relationship between the United States and Korea has always been a dynamic one. South Korea has undergone a myriad of transformations since the demarcation of the Demilitarized Zone at the thirty eighth Parallel, a division that symbolizes an ongoing ideological and territorial conflict between the sovereign nations of North and South Korea. The United States is inextricably linked to this most defining aspect of life on the Korean peninsula. Ideologically opposed to North Korea's *chuch'e sasang* (주체사상, 主體思想- translates to self-reliance) brand of Marxism and communism throughout the Cold War, the United States operated under a policy of containment against the USSR and People's Republic of China. Out of socio-political necessity, the United States and South Korea became fast allies as the Korean War drew to a close, forming strong and binding ties that continue to this day.

Modern-day South Korea got its start as an impoverished and war-torn nation caught in the middle of an ideological struggle between superpowers during the 1950's. South Korean perceptions and attitudes that initially embodied reverence for American

muscle and might slowly began to exhibit disenchantment with the United States. In some underground circles in the budding nation, the US was seen as a somewhat ambivalent ally that seemed content to use South Korea as a chess piece in a political stalemate between the global ambitions of capitalism and communism. Under various authoritarian regimes and eventual democratic leadership, South Korea's perceptions of the US exhibited a continuous ebb and flow that shifted throughout the political and social spectrum. Silently simmering with mounting frustration, anti-Americanism was fuel for a growing number of disaffected South Korean youth. Many felt a sense of helplessness and anger with perceived US complicity in the Kwangju Massacre, a student led movement in the early 1980's for democracy that ended in slaughter.

Upon the arrival of democracy to the southern half of the Korean peninsula, the once muted voices of dissent and dissatisfaction with the United States began to vent anti-American sentiment without fear of recrimination. Some groups began to protest against the United States with increasing frequency and regularity. Recent events, such as the massive beef protests throughout South Korea, have given scholars cause to reexamine anti-Americanism in South Korea.

The purpose of this study is to analyze anti-Americanism in South Korea and understand its socio-political underpinnings and manifestations. Understanding the nature of this sentiment is central to ensuring continued positive relations with Korea and the United States. In order to get to the root of such sentiment it is important to ask questions that dig deeper than 30 second news spots: What is anti-Americanism in South Korea? How wide spread is infiltration of anti-Americanism in various strata of Korean society?

How pervasive is such sentiment and what do these findings mean in terms of overall perceptions of the United States?

In searching to comprehend sociopolitical concepts of ‘other’ and ‘anti,’ a window is opened into the very nature of national self-identity. Attempting to define and dissect anti-Americanism in South Korea, in all its complexities and various forms, offers the chance to prop open this window and peer into the soul of a nation. If we are to move forward as allies, a careful and detailed analysis of anti-Americanism is essential to progress for both nations.

### **Anti-Americanism in the World: Old and New**

The purpose of this survey is to provide a brief overview of anti-Americanism as it exists in other parts of the world in order to illustrate the point that such sentiments are not a new phenomenon, which will help to lay the groundwork for a comparative analysis of anti-American sentiment in South Korea. There is perhaps no single phrase in recent memory that has so saturated scholarly publications, garnered as much attention or been used as a rallying cry for so many disparate groups as anti-Americanism. The difficulty in pinning down an exact definition of anti-Americanism as a comprehensive concept becomes apparent upon even a cursory examination. Dislike for America as a form of cultural currency across numerous strata of society is nothing new and is perhaps in fact “as old as political modernity and could be said to be one of its founding discourses” (Ross and Ross 1). With roots dating back to the American Revolution, elite academic circles in Europe have often focused on America and all things American as an anathema to European sophistication and a divergence from their own cultural evolution and refinement.

In Europe, scholars of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries would often give voice to the view that there was something inherently bad about America; the mere fact of its existence tainted and rendered inferior everything associated with it. This “guilt by association” stance is the line of thinking that prompted French anthropologist Georges Louis Leclercq to assert that inhabitants of North America were predominantly “retarded and degenerate” (Markovits 31). In his view these backward characteristics were soon imbued upon immigrant populations to America shortly after arrival. This regression then, was considered emblematic of the New World, a land that took the culture of Europe and reduced it to a more barbaric “American” state.

It is not hard to see echoes of such sentiment in European popular culture even today. Any discussion of French etiquette and tradition in comparison to that of the United States immediately conjures up notions of superiority and inferiority across the transatlantic divide. The irony of such widely accepted disdain for things American is that America was a “European creation” which bore countless similarities to the nations which had carved out its existence but which had nevertheless “consciously defected from its European origins” (Markovits 23). In this sense, the ideological and social proximity to the United States can be seen as a motivator for the development of anti-Americanism in Europe.

Manifestations of anti-Americanism can be glimpsed on any given day during a typical broadcast on CNN or Fox News where images of flag burning in Tehran or outright violence against American troops in Baghdad have become almost cliché. In the minds of many Americans what is considered “anti-American” has been linked permanently with the Middle East since the tragic events of 9/11. This perception is not

without merit, for in that part of the world, a longstanding discontent for America has spilled over into various segments of society. Rather than viewing such violence as acts of extremism and terror, a view held by many Arabs is that anti-Americanism is nothing more than a “rational response to U.S. policies” (Lynch 202). Continued U.S. support of Israel and the decision by the U.S. to go to war against Iraq under the Bush administration are two primary issues that have only served to solidify negative views towards America in the eyes of many in the Middle East. In the Arab world, “anti-Americanism has become far more intense and widespread in response to the increasing fear of U.S. power, driven by the combination of an increasingly present United States and a negative normative evaluation of American intentions” (Lynch 199). It is thanks in part to this growing sentiment that extremist jihadist groups have been able to recruit in such staggering numbers in recent years.

The reasons and motivations behind various forms of anti-Americanism can encompass as broad a range ideologically as each respective entity is geographically. To give one example of the diverse divide of disdain “[i]n Islamic fundamentalist circles, the United States is castigated for being the embodiment of modernity, but Europeans accuse it of not being modern (or postmodern) enough—for practicing capital punishment and for believing too much in God” (Krastev 6). Such seemingly opposing approaches to anti-Americanism are primary examples of the difficulty in dissecting it as a concept.

In the Far East, anti-Americanism exists as a somewhat different entity. Often written off by conservative media pundits as an extension of perceived Chinese xenophobia, anti-Americanism as witnessed today can trace its origins back to “the violence of the turn of the twentieth century” (Karl 236). Many Chinese citizens today

view the United States as a transgressor who “habitually badgers their pride, belittles their accomplishments,” and violates their sense of “national sovereignty, and attempts to thwart the rise of their country’s international influence” (Ma 2).

Even in Japan, one of America’s strongest allies, events such as the periodic protests against U.S. forces stationed in Japan serve to remind an otherwise enamored public of the persistence of perceived inferiority to the United States that always bubbles beneath the surface, a painful remnant of the failure of Japan’s once ambitious imperial past. In response Japan has recently given rise to a cultural “etiquette (*saho*) of anti-Americanism” that attempts to reconcile a sense of “subordination” to the U.S. by crafting a relationship that relies on respective “difference and the recognition of equality” (Harootunian 201). In this sense, the legacy of American occupation is still a part of modern Japanese society.

Anti-Americanism as a phenomenon has existed almost as long as there has been an America. Initially seen as a European reaction to the existence of the U.S., anti-Americanism has become a truly global occurrence, stretching across multiple strata of society. It is with this in mind that we examine what such sentiment means.

### **Approaches to Anti-Americanism**

Now that a cursory survey of the history and breadth of anti-Americanism has provided glimpses of this phenomenon as it has existed, the next step is to understand some of the ways scholars have attempted to comprehend and analyze the nature of anti-Americanism. Broadly speaking, approaches to anti-Americanism fall into two camps: resistance theory and scapegoating. On the scapegoating front there are those who are

‘anti-anti-Americanism’ proponents, tending to see all things anti-American as an irrational response to American exceptionalism which is to say “—the idea that the United States is radically different from and, in the more common formulations, superior to—other countries” (Tyrrell 100). Scholars of this ilk tend to dismiss anti-Americanism from other nations as an emotional response to the unprecedented influence and power of the United States in modern history. Academic proponents of this view “attribute anti-Americanism to psychological problems, a kind of neurosis rooted in the ‘envy’ of America’s great wealth and power” (Friedman 498).

When discussing a European manifestation of anti-Americanism, for example, Pascal Bruckner argues that one should understand that anti-Americanism for all its vehemence “is not a criticism of America, of its mistakes, its faults, or its crimes” (Bruckner 16). Rather it is an “autonomous view” that is circular in reasoning and is sustained by an interpretation of events that will serve to “confirm or reinforce” its legitimacy regardless of whether or not such events actually support or contradict accepted reasons for anti-Americanism (Ibid 16). This approach does not acknowledge legitimate criticism of American policy or actions, but instead views anti-Americanism as something akin to an inferiority complex by those who align themselves with anti-American ideologies or attitudes. Paul Hollander, one of the most adamant proponents of this school of thought believes that “the scapegoating impulse is central to anti-Americanism, followed by envy and ambivalence” (Hollander 4). Looking at anti-Americanism more as a reflection of some inner failure or flaw which is too difficult to internalize, this view suggests that “Anti-Americanism as a by-product of nationalistic grievances, resentments, and competitive disadvantage is among its most prominent

incarnations” (Hollander 6). By grouping anything ‘anti-American into the “irrationally against us” category, the implication then seems to assume that there are only two camps to which one can belong: if one is not ‘for us’ then one is ‘against us.’ To reiterate the claim of failure on the part of the ‘other’ integral to this understanding of anti-Americanism, Hollander asserts that “[w]eakness is a major stimulant of anti-Americanism” which has its roots in pre-existing circumstances which are by and large “unrelated to the actual qualities or attributes of American society, institutions, values, or foreign policy” (Hollander 6). Such weakness, then, is the fault of those who hold these types of views against America and not the converse.

Another approach is to see anti-Americanism as a reaction to “Americanism” or perceived American power, foreign policy, even the very ideological constructs upon which America is founded. According to John Kane, a reaction to Americanism constitutes a “prophetic idealism” which is “...at the heart of American identity that makes ‘Americanism’ a genuinely ideological term and that makes ‘anti-Americanism’ something more than a natural reaction of foreign peoples to preponderant, often overbearing American power” (Kane 29). In this sense, anti-Americanism can be likened to other “anti-isms” such as anti-communism or anti-fascism in that “one resists, not just a country, but an idea” (Ibid 29). The central issue to Kane is that the mythology of an idealized America—the promise of a better world that can only be found in America—clashes severely with America’s schizophrenic nationalism, an ever-prevalent hypocrisy that embodies both the altruistic ‘pursuit of happiness’ and ‘equality’ with latent racism, obsession with materialism and its perceived hegemonic agenda. This line of thought

supposes that anti-Americanism stems from America not being able to live up to its own ideals, as a particular type of moral failure on the part of the United States.

Following a similar vein but expanding the notion of ‘America’ beyond the actions of Americans and their government to a political construct, Haig Patapan believes that there is a theoretical conceptualization of America, that incurs the wrath of anti-Americanists “because it represented, and still claims to be, an ambitious political experiment” (Patapan 55). Extending beyond derision that stems from a palpable and measurable failure on the part of America to fulfill its self-described destiny, this “philosophical” approach to anti-Americanism purports to exist as a “critique of modernity” the very embodiment of which America claims to be. Elaborating on this idea further, one can view America and Americanism as a political manifestation of “modern political thought” or even “more generally modernity” (Ibid 61). It is Patapan’s conclusion that “the great experiment that is America will always be shadowed by a critical anti-Americanism” (Ibid 71). No matter what America does then, anti-Americanism is bound to follow.

While scholars who view anti-Americanism as a more serious and difficult social construct warn of a persistent and growing split in global society, there are those who see such proclamations as excitations of the ‘Chicken Little’ variety. Rather than cause for overwhelming concern, such skeptics take the position that “the current notion of Americanism is to a great extent the invention of anti-American discourse” and owing to this fact “any specific political context and any political discourse can invent its own version of America as a hate object” (Krastev 7). Americanism then, could be seen more

as a tool by “anti-Americanists” to further an ideological agenda than an actual internalized hatred of an American ideal perpetually doomed to fall short of its mark.

Still others argue that despite the terrorist attacks of 2001, anti-Americanism is much less serious than the alarmist camp would have us believe. From this perspective, anti-Americanism is less an entrenched ideology than it is a resistance to policy based on real life experiences, which can fluctuate with changing administrations. When taking this approach, it can be argued that “using anti-Americanism to explain the cause of opposition to U.S. policies does not just put the cart before the horse; it says the cart is the horse—it reverses causality” (Friedman 504). According to this model, such confusions of causality would have profound implications for any evaluation of anti-Americanism as the basic premise upon which “cart equals horse” assessments are made and would be considered inherently flawed.

When assessing the various schools of thought on anti-Americanism, pros and cons of each approach are readily apparent. Examining the ‘irrational’ component of anti-Americanism is almost intuitive. What rational individuals would devise and orchestrate such a vicious attack on innocent Americans as we witnessed on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001? So then, if such actions are irrational, the result of extreme expressions of misallocated internal distress and envy of the world’s last ‘superpower,’ why do certain policy decisions seem to elicit more extreme responses than others? Does this mean that every protest against the U.S. government is a disproportionate response to policy or baseless attack on a nation which is merely the victim of its own success? This analysis is too polarizing and is too broad in stroke. While there are no doubt groups who hate America

in large part because of its success, it is simply not plausible to believe that is the case in every situation.

Is anti-Americanism then merely resistance to policy? Certainly there have been spikes in anti-American sentiment that have appeared to coincide with policy decisions, such as the 2003 invasion of Iraq. However this perspective also misses the mark and assumes that policy alone is the most accurate predictor of anti-Americanism. This belief does not take into consideration individuals, groups and governments who need a scapegoat no matter what the United States is doing abroad. As one of only a few superpowers, the U.S. is their last, best target to advance their own causes.

Similarly, America as a moral failure, a social experiment gone awry or the embodiment of a philosophy that provokes an antagonistic ideology among its detractors all describe conceivable ways in which anti-Americanism is manifest. However, each approach only explains away one piece of the puzzle, offering insight into one corner of a complex labyrinth of thoughts, attitudes and ideologies. This is not to suggest that any one perspective is without merit, but rather a more inclusive examination of anti-Americanism is required in order to peel away at the multiple layers that comprise this contested concept. Anti-Americanism as a global phenomenon is not one thing or another but rather it is many things in many places at the same time.

### **South Korean Anti-Americanism**

In South Korea, the complexities of anti-Americanism are part of numerous intricate social and political realities. Amidst a noticeable increase in sound-bite friendly protest cries of “Yankee go home” and images of thousands of South Koreans gathering to

demonstrate against the importation of American beef, a growing consensus in the field of Korean/American relations has begun to move toward deconstructing anti-Americanism. Upon examining the various theoretical and analytical approaches taken such a shift, evidence of a polarizing debate emerges. A collection of papers from a conference on anti-Americanism from 2004 illustrates this point. Ronald Meinardus observed that when comparing a rise of anti-Americanism in South Korea to that of decline in Germany, such sentiments are “more structural” in South Korea, framed by “U.S. inspired policy decisions” that have “opened the door to the accusation of unilateralism” (Meinardus 86). Meinardus posits that it is the way in which Korean and American relations are framed in bilateralism that allows for a rejection of the United States when perceived as acting unilaterally in its own interests. In his paper entitled “The Structural Basis of ‘anti-Americanism,’” Bruce Cummings addresses potential causes of anti-Americanism as rooted in more ingrained political and social elements, citing issues such as a post-Korean war “unspoken policy” of racism and more recently a Korean surge of “anti-Bushism”(Cummings 97-101). A 2004 report focused on anti-Americanism released by the Rand corporation suggests that “South Koreans’ attitudes toward the U.S. were systematically associated with beliefs about the state of US-relations...” (Larson et al. 119), a dynamic which is part of a larger continuum. This would seem to imply that there is something pervasive and inherent in the current sociopolitical spheres of South Korean and American interaction that is conducive to anti-Americanism. In other words, anti-Americanism as seen when manifested in the form of protest to a specific event can be viewed as an expression of a *pre-existing* discontent for the United States that has been brought to the surface.

Conversely, some hold the view that anti-Americanism does not exist in the true definition of the term, but rather is a misunderstood series of reactions to events that do not necessarily follow a linear progression. Kim Sung-Han asserts that one common expression of anti-Americanism is “popular anti-Americanism, which tends to be episodic and exists among those who respond to events in an emotional manner.” (Kim S. 195). In his work entitled “Anti-Americanism and the U.S Role in Inter-Korean Relations,” Victor Cha explains that to the thousands of candle light protesters demonstrating over the accidental death of two school girls by US tanks, such actions were not “anti-American per se but...the expression of a new Korean identity.” He goes on to state that anti-Americanism is a “much more contested and far less one-dimensional notion than popular perception gives it credit for” (Cha 116). This approach suggests that misunderstanding is the primary causative force behind American reaction to perceived acts of anti-Americanism and the issue is not so clearly black and white.

It is this multi-faceted nature of anti-Americanism that presents such a daunting challenge to understanding this phenomenon. The reasons for its existence, the factors that have allowed anti-Americanism to thrive, and the public and policy decisions that continually shape and define this particular South Korean brand of anti-Americanism are all essential to comprehending and defining anti-Americanism in South Korea.

In the words of Chung-in Moon, anti-Americanism “has been by and large misunderstood,” and although South Korean anti-Americanism “as an ideological phenomenon has visibly dwindled,” episodic instances of anti-Americanism appear sporadically “and democratic maturity and civic alertness to American exceptionalism ...could easily escalate into anti-American movements” (Moon C. 147). The evolution

and progression of such movements, sentiments and ideologies deserve analysis and categorization in order better understand what anti-Americanism means in South Korea today.

## Chapter One

### The Kwangju Uprising

*O Kwangju, and Mudung Mountain.  
Between death and more death,  
City of our eternal youth, flowing  
with blood and tears!*

(Translation found at <http://www.hrsolidarity.net/mainfile.php/1999vol09no05/958/> accessed November 20<sup>th</sup> 2008)

Arguably the most profound change of the last fifty years in the US-ROK relationship has been the path to democratization. While a democratic government was technically instituted in 1987, it has taken decades for the “full impact of democratization to work its way through Korean government and society in practice” (Snyder 9). An element of primary concern to the relationship between the US and ROK is the “growing influence of South Korean public opinion on its foreign policy orientation” (Ibid 10).

There are many forces at work shaping public opinion and South Korea’s struggle to come to grips with a fractured identity riddled with an authoritarian and colonized past. “[I]n this light, the growth and popularization of the anti-American movement in the late 1990’s and early 2000s is a consequence of democratization and marks a major stride forward in the politics of democratic deepening” (Moon K. 141). The most profound force over the last twenty years that has shaped the discourse of anti-Americanism is that of the Kwangju uprising – an event that has permeated throughout every strata in Korean society. In the popular culture in the novella, “There a Petal Silently Falls,” renowned author Ch’oe Yun uses prose to address the tragedy of Kwangju. Her narrative is rich in unexpected descriptions that are written with a hauntingly beautiful elegance that conveys a sense of aching sorrow and deep unimaginable loss:

Clouds covered the moonless sky like the huge wings of a scavenging bird.  
Among them were a few stars, twinkling painfully, spots of pus from a sore,  
bringing goose bumps to the back of my neck (Ch'oe 27).

In the story the main character is a young girl who lost her mother during the Kwangju massacre and witnessed her death. She becomes something of a living ghost after she sees her mother lying in the street. From that point on the girl becomes lost in a blurred state of reality, a twilight existence in which she is listless, confused, afraid and often lacking the will to live. Malnourished and detached from the world, she stumbles through the countryside wandering, vaguely aware that she wants to find her brother-who may be dead-and tell him about their mother. The haunting sense of loss and tragedy woven throughout the tale is a metaphor for the pain felt by all of those who suffered as a result of the Kwangju uprising.

The importance of understanding the Kwangju uprising is that it “fundamentally altered Koreans’ view of the United States” (Shin 512). Largely considered one of the first major iterations of anti-Americanism to firmly take root in South Korea, disdain for the United States circa 1980 is inextricably and ironically tied to one of the most renowned pro-democratic movements in South Korean history. Second in infamy only to the March 1<sup>st</sup> movement of 1919 in which scores of Koreans were killed while protesting Japanese rule, the Kwangju massacre in May of 1980 burns brightly in the collective Korean consciousness. With reverberations still felt in the cultural currents of Korean society “the tipping point for the anti-Americanism now so prominently on display in South Korea, was the brutal suppression of a popular uprising in the southwestern city of Kwangju in May 1980” (Drennan 280). The summer of 1980 was a tumultuous time in

Korean politics. Growing public unrest with continued authoritarian rule culminated in the assassination of Park Chung-hee in late 1979, marking the end of an eighteen year dictatorship.

As the country tottered precariously on a political precipice of uncertainty, a majority of South Koreans favored moving the nation towards democracy. Unsure how best to proceed the process stalled and activists soon took to the streets. Taking advantage of the nation's lack of direction, a South Korean general Chun Doo-Wan quickly performed a series of chess-like maneuvers that sought to establish himself as the next dictator of South Korea. A distinctive ideological counterpoint to these intentions, widespread student and civil protests soon gripped South Korea demanding the repeal of martial law which had been implemented after Park's assassination. Over 100,000 students gathered at Seoul Station on May 15<sup>th</sup> in protest of martial law and Chun's military grip on the nation. Seeking to decisively quell the pro-democratic movement, Chun cracked down on dissent, dispatching troops to areas of dissent. Fearing military reprisal in Seoul, student leaders relented and regrouped to strategize. The military crackdown further enraged residents of Kwangju, South Chölla province-then a city of approximately 800,000-roughly three hours south of Seoul. Historically exploited for its natural resources, south Chölla province has a long history of difficult relations with Seoul and had not prospered under Park's 1972 *Yushin* reform push for industrialization. Home to democratic leader and frequent political prisoner Kim Dae Jung, Kwangju soon became a hub of pro-democratic activity. Students and citizens took to the streets en masse on the 18<sup>th</sup> of May. After being blocked and beaten by military troops at the gate of Chönnam University the students marched downtown where they were followed by the

troops who this time used even greater amounts of violence against the students, resulting in the first casualties. Enraged by the lethal tactics employed by the military, more protesters took to the streets numbering well over 100, 000 by the 20<sup>th</sup> of May (Lewis 6). The death of civilians brought a sense of panic and desperate urgency to Kwangju as illustrated in the following excerpt from field notes written by an American anthropologist (then graduate student Linda Lewis) studying in Southern Cholla Province who witnessed the events firsthand:

They're killing people down here today-again. Lots died yesterday, too, although I didn't find out about it until today. . . . Mother came panting in . . . semi-hysterical. On the main drag (Kumnamno) she had seen a student bayoneted, front to back and thrown on a police van... (ibid 6)

By the 22<sup>nd</sup> of May protesters had begun to arm themselves with weapons confiscated from nearby towns. A carnivalesque atmosphere with ominous overtones descended upon Kwangju as large groups of protesters clashed with police and military for control of the city. These clashes had become more than civil unrest. The people of Kwangju (by virtue of their stand against subjugation) had become the defacto voice of the South Korean people. 1980 was a year of unrest and possibility and the citizens of Korea were in the midst of seeking to re-chart the course of their history which had been fraught with victimization at the hands of the state in its various incarnations. The fierce spirit of the oppressed had been suppressed for too long. Signs and protest songs had ceased to be effective instruments for resistance. In May of 1980 South Koreans in Cholla province became active participants in a push to exist as more than the recipients of history they were unable to shape. With weapons in hand, against seemingly

insurmountable odds the people of Kwangju were, at least temporarily, motivated actors seeking to directly impact and redefine their fate.

A convoy of taxicabs charged military blockades in reprisal for the brutal treatment they had received when trying to transport wounded civilians to nearby hospitals. Events continued to escalate and a Time correspondent in Kwangju at the time was overcome with a sense of “an impending danger: with the youthful protesters stockpiling weapons, and troops encircling the city, Kwangju could turn into a bloodbath” (Time 35). Taking control of Kwangju city hall and repelling military forces to the outskirts of the city, the armed protestors and the military became locked in a standoff that lasted for days. Group infighting among the various civilian factions stalled negotiations. The uprising came to an end with a swiftly carried out military assault on the insurrection resulting in the deaths and capture of many of the movements’ leaders.

Frustrations throughout the uprising ran high. During the unrest, Chun had effected a media blackout and cordoned off the city, cutting phone lines and surrounding Kwangju with military forces. In essence, the uprising of Kwangju was happening in isolation from the rest of Korea. The success of Chun in hiding the massacre kept the uprising from spreading to other parts of the nation. Alone but determined, the residents of Kwangju had put up an admirable fight against a much more well equipped and resourceful adversary.

Compounding the frustrations of the absence of national attention and support was the sense of astonishment at the lack of U.S. intervention. A common sentiment shared among those active in the protests was the inevitability of the United States to step in and to stand up for democracy and defend against the abuse of human rights. South

Koreans had by and large understood that the Status of Forces Agreement which governed relations between the U.S. and South Korea would protect them from abuses of power by the Korean military. Reflecting on her experiences during the Kwangju uprising, Lewis noted that “[a]s a U.S. citizen, in the early days of the uprising I was continually questioned, not with hostility but with dismay and confusion about the apparent lack of an American response” (Lewis 18). Not well versed in the complexities and intricate nuances of operational control vs. command, the average Korean citizens assumed that the soldiers dispatched to Kwangju did so under the authority of the United States.

In actuality, special paratroopers were sent in specifically because they were national troops who functioned outside the purview of American authority as the U.S. essentially had “responsibility without control” (qtd in Drennan 293). It is precisely this point that is at the heart of understanding the rise of anti-Americanism after Kwangju. There are some American scholars who contend that the U.S. should be held accountable for allowing Kwangju to happen even if it was not technically possible to intervene believing “you don’t have to pull the trigger to be responsible for the crime” (Shorrock 128). This understanding of the issues is indicative of the type of misinformation campaign that began to take root in Korea following the massacre, a direct result of the asymmetrical power relationship between the U.S. and Korea and the understand of that relationship held by most Koreans. The United States had no control over the Special Forces deployed to Kwangju and was not in a position to stop the detachment from deploying. Scholars who held the United States accountable for inaction regardless of

whether or not such action was possible only contributed to the growing uncertainty surrounding perceived U.S. complicity in Kwangju.

In the subsequent weeks and months after the uprising, half-truths about the role of the United States in Kwangju began to snowball. Fed by a government eager to shift blame and responsibility away from itself, new attitudes towards the United States began to form. An elderly woman protesting the U.S. not long after the uprising remarked "[p]eople in Korea believed that Americans are angels. We thought that you saved Korea from colonial rule under the Japanese. We believed in Americans as models of democracy" (Stokes, NY Times). Echoing a sentiment that was just beginning to take root in South Korean thought she asserted that "suddenly your image changed overnight. We could see a demonic aspect. You were Satan all of a sudden. Now there is hatred and fear among people in Kwangju" (Stokes NY Times). In this sense it was not the United States in and of itself that was the focus of the sudden shift in perception. There was not an ideological opposition to the values and norms of American society. Rather the US, which had been revered in modern Korean society, had been caught, unbeknownst to most Americans, in the socio-political turmoil raging through South Korea in the 1980s. For the purposes of the protests of the US and the Korean military that followed, it did not matter that the boots of soldiers were strapped to American feet but that they were perceived as marching in step with the oppressive regime.

Thus, the immediate effect of the Kwangju massacre was that "for Koreans [it] became a turning point to seriously reconsider the meaning of the US to South Korea" (Kim Y. 115). The aftermath of the Kwangju uprising and Korean perception of American involvement marked the birth of modern anti-Americanism in South Korea.

Having just witnessed one of the bloodiest events since the Korean war “[t]he tragedy of Gwangju made students and anti-government activists believe that social justice could not be achieved so long as the US government backed up the military government of South Korea” (ibid 115).

The events of Kwangju ostensibly linked the U.S. to a bloody autocratic suppression. Before Kwangju “the United States was viewed by many Koreans as the ‘beautiful nation,’ the country that had saved Korea from communist conquest and that continued to provide indispensable protection after the armistice” (Drennan 254). It is argued by Glassman, Park and Choi that after Kwangju a broad spectrum of political thought had been infiltrated by such sentiment giving rise to a revisionist approach to history. Such an approach touched upon collective remembrances such as the Korean war where “U.S. involvement in the war [was] now dismissed by many (especially young Koreans) as just another example of the American Pursuit of self-interest in its fight against communism” (ibid 254). Such interest was often regarded as contrary to the needs of the Korean people. Essentially, “[t]he Gwangju crackdown brought to the surface the anti-American. . . ideology that had been a political taboo in postcolonial Korean society as students and intellectuals began to question U.S. support for the dictatorship” (Glassman, Park and Choi 354). This dictatorship was viewed with increasing distrust and disdain in the eyes of many Koreans who turned the focus of their ire to the next most obvious suspect, the United States. Such sentiment was not born of a hatred of all things American, but part of an ongoing commitment to a new historiography free from domination, the latest obstacle to which (in the minds of many) happened to be America.

Prior to the events of 5.18 in South Korea, anti-Americanism was mostly relegated to the left-leaning segment of the Korean political sphere. Activist groups that were opposed to authoritarian regimes resented perceived US complicity in the bloody suppression of the Kwangju student uprising of 1980. Such groups had begun to make inroads into campuses across the nation but remained largely an underground movement. Under strict, government-imposed censorship and lack of tolerance for those espousing “anti-US sentiment, state controls on the press censored media coverage of stories that painted the U.S. in a negative light” (Oh and Celeste 336). Furthermore the post-Korean war/anti-communist climate fostered an “anti-leftist system within the environment of Cold War confrontation [that] significantly restricted domestic political discourse until democratization in 1987 by restricting political rights and opposition activities” (ibid 336).

Government suppression of burgeoning ideological rifts in perceptions of the United States only succeeded in temporarily removing anti-Americanism from the larger context of legitimate socio-political discourse. After Kwangju, firm roots of anti-American sentiment had been planted in the fringes of society and were beginning to grow towards the mainstream segments of society. These roots have led some scholars to conclude that “grasping the connection of the 1980s pro-democracy movements with ideological anti-Americanism is central to comprehending the true nature of anti-American sentiment in Korea today” (Hwang 63).

## **Conclusion**

However violent the clashes between anti-American factions of the protest movement and police became and despite the pervasiveness of intellectual anti-Americanism that dominated campuses across Korea, it is important to retrace the development of anti-Americanism to see it for what it is. Prior to 1980, a culture of anti-Americanism was profoundly absent from Korean society. The Kwangju uprising and the misunderstanding of the role of the United States forced many Koreans to reassess the way in which they viewed the U.S. Still suffering the pains of decolonization, and growing weary of dictatorship after dictatorship a movement began to try to heal the wounds of the nation in terms of both a difficult past and an increasingly intolerable present. That anti-Americanism was a function of this movement is really no surprise. Although Kwangju was the impetus, the close ties between South Korea and the United States' support of authoritarian regimes would likely have surfaced sooner or later. In the case of Kwangju, Koreans did not express anti-American sentiments because they hated America. Instead anti-Americanism was—by virtue of the role of the US in modern Korean history—simply an expression of a more complicated search for an overarching story or worldview.

The events of Kwangju were not acts of anti-Americanism, but rather the catalyst that allowed anti-Americanism to play a prominent role in the social movements of the 1980s. Without Kwangju, anti-Americanism may have never become such a dominant discourse among the anti-state factions before democratization in South Korea. That a single event could hold such transformative power is indicative of the true nature of anti-Americanism in South Korea. That is to say, anti-Americanism as evidenced by the case

of the Kwangju uprising is a collective reaction triggered by a specific event; as such, anti-Americanism was incidental to the social movements of the 1980s not the causative force that defined them. While there was almost certainly a shared belief among adherents to the various social movements of the 1980s, America was not the enemy in South Korea as it was in North Korea. Even at its zenith in the 80s, anti-Americanism was more about South Korea than it was about the United States.

## Chapter Two

### The Minjung Movement: Shaping anti-Americanism

The literal translation into English for *minjung* (민중, 民衆) is ‘the people’ but there is no equivalent that captures the complex nuanced Korean meaning. A hodgepodge collection of “nationalism, Marxism, left-Catholic liberation theology, anti-dependency economic views, pacifist and antinuclear slogans, national reunification demands and West European-style peace advocacy” this movement garnered strong student support and was a rejection of “perceived US hegemonic collusion with Korean dictatorships” (Hwang 63). *Minjung* ideology offered a revisionist and interventionist approach to history and sought to explain the Korean sense of victimization. Although the phrase was not coined until the 1980s, in typical *minjung* style, social activism from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onward was retroactively fitted with the *minjung* moniker and appropriated into the *minjung* movement as part of a reassessment of a historiography many saw as in need a cohesive and progressive direction.

The term *minjung* has been used to describe a people, theology, historiography, an ideology, literature, movement an intellectual discourse and numerous other manifestations that thrived in the 1980s. The people who made up the *minjung* movement came from all walks of life: from student protesters clamoring for democracy to struggling farmers trying to shuck the yoke of tenant law, from ivory tower intellectuals seeking to re-contextualize Korean historiography to everyday citizens left behind during Korea’s rapid industrialization. And yet there is an overarching theme to what it meant to be *minjung*. A sense of disenfranchisement from the state-manufactured status-quo, a

collective desire to struggle against entrenched and corrupt power structures, a shared urgency to shatter complacent paradigms that failed to adequately articulate what it meant to be Korean— all of these were common elements of *minjung*. The struggle of the *minjung* was not a class struggle in the sense of the proletariat rising up against the bourgeois, but rather a struggle of the suffering (Wells 13). The workers did suffer, but so too did the “students, teachers, writers, artists and journalists [whose] socioeconomic positions differ[ed] significantly from those of the workers” (Ibid 14).

This suffering, or ‘Koreans as victims’ solidarity between classes extended beyond socioeconomic pains. Regardless of social status, all *minjung* suffered “under the implementation of values that they all find alienating” (Ibid 14). For *minjung* historiography this suffering stretched back in time and sought to reconcile a past fraught with colonization, civil war, the pain of a national identity carved out by larger forces and the cold realities of dictatorship. If Korean history is seen through this lens –a people who are casualties of forces outside of their control again and again – then it is easier to understand the burning desire to play the victim no more and rise up against the autocratic regime and take power from the latest tyrant in a long series of oppressors and at long last return Korea to the people.

The events of Kwangju helped to ignite the fire of the *minjung* movement in popular culture. A government that would brutally suppress its own people, even a government that had brought relative prosperity to a former third world nation could not be tolerated. It was the pairing of the United States with the Kwangju massacre that brought a strong anti-American component to the *minjung* movement. The *minjung* wanted to topple the regime and in the eyes of many, America had blood on its hands

from perceived collusion with the dictatorship. However, “the minjung movement as a whole took painstaking care to show that its criticism was directed to the U.S. government’s policies and actions only” (Lee 112). Rather than protesting the American people or ‘American values’ or culture, the *minjung* movement took issue with the policies of a nation seen as governing with hypocrisy and that supported freedom and democracy only when convenient. The 1980s saw the exponential growth of the *minjung* movement with student demonstrations occurring with ever-increasing frequency and becoming bolder and brasher in expression – including a three-day occupation of the United States Information Service (USIS) building in Seoul in May of 1985 and the seizure of several regional offices of the Ministry of Labor later that November.

### **Authoritarianism and *minjung***

The *minjung* movement thought of itself as the voice of the people and as such struggled to secure the wishes of the people, the overwhelming majority of whom longed for the democratization of South Korea. Resistance to the successive authoritarian dictatorships which had dominated South Korea since its inception was a defining aspect of the *minjung* philosophy. Beginning with Japanese colonial rule a “separation of the state and society” had started to set in, as the authority of the state began to embody rule by “alien power” as opposed to “moral authority” (Koo *Civil* 40). This political shift served to engender a pronounced “anti-state orientation” that became a cornerstone of Korean intellectual thought and identity (Ibid 40). This orientation only increased following the Korean War. Although touted by its leaders as a democracy, with brief exceptions from 1948 until 1987 South Korea was a nation under a continuum of dictatorships. An artificially partitioned land divided at the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel provided the perfect backdrop for a

series of autocratic regimes. This “political development in Korea continuously denied the Korean people opportunities to restructure state power according to their nationalist ideals and democratic political values” (Ibid 40). Such a lack of opportunity brought with it an extreme sense of frustration that had begun “with the end of colonial rule, which brought not a genuine liberation but another form of foreign domination, unwanted national division, and the revival of the old power and the colonial apparatuses of control” (Ibid 40). Under the iron-fisted and militaristic thumb of South Korean rulers, any and all abuse of human and civil rights were easily explained away as necessary to combat the threat of communist incursion from the North. The bloody civil war that pitted the former Japanese colony against itself in 1950 served to cement the claim to power of Syngman Rhee who had lacked in popular support before the war. Rhee was a brutal autocrat who had slaughtered thousands of his own citizens shortly after the creation of South Korea, in the name of stability. Although the Rhee government was largely seen as a weak puppet regime of the U.S. before 1950, a cultivated fear of communism eventually worked its way into the psyche of the public, giving Rhee the legitimacy he sought.

The goal of the Rhee Regime was simply to maintain power at all costs. Portrayed in starkly black and white absolutes, Rhee’s implied message was clear: if you are against us you are with the communists. To those in power there was no greater sin than that of siding with the Red North. Owing to the communist scare, fear became the *modus operandi* of the South Korean government, the primary currency in which freedoms were purchased and sold, the essential staple of the socio-political diet. The government told the people to fear the Reds from the North, but an even greater fear was the perception of

collusion from those in power in the South. Citizens were afraid of being seen as communist sympathizers or supporters, offenses which could result in grave consequences. Rhee's success lay in his ability to accuse "the government's critics of communist sympathies or of cooperating with the communists [which] proved effective in focusing these fears and silencing dissent" (Sohn 17).

The constant squeeze of corruption, tyranny and fear that had gripped South Korea during the Rhee presidency could not stifle the sense of growing unrest among the general populace forever. On April 19<sup>th</sup> 1960, students and workers filled the streets in protest of the Rhee regime's brutal rule. In massive numbers, protesters gave a show of force so passionate and powerful that their efforts culminated in the ousting of President Rhee. His political demise was paradoxically "an inglorious end to a distinguished political career that included, ironically, his own role as a street demonstrator sixty-two years earlier" (Kim in Rhee Intro 5) when he had protested against the Yi monarchy. Rhee's ousting gave rise to a parliamentary democracy on April 26<sup>th</sup> 1960. Largely considered the foundation of the modern South Korean student movement, the events of 4.19 cemented in place the role of students as active participants in the push for social and political reform.

Although the April 19<sup>th</sup> movement was a success, the new government was ineffectual and lacked legitimacy with the people. After a nearly a year of political chaos and floundering, Park Chung Hee rose to power in a bloodless coup, with the backing of the newly established KCIA (Korean Counter Intelligence Agency, an organization tasked with suppressing opposition to President Park using whatever means necessary). The President set out to move Korea from a 3<sup>rd</sup> world nation to an industrial powerhouse.

His efforts were extremely successful, with the South Korean annual household income increasing twenty-fold under his direction. These advances came at a tremendous cost, however. Increasingly dictatorial, personal freedoms (which had never truly had an opportunity to flourish) continued to evaporate during his presidency.

Narrow wins against rival political groups prompted President Park to suspend the South Korean constitution which had been established in 1963, and establish the Yushin constitution. The rationale for this change was a state of national emergency and the need to defend South Korea in this time of international crisis. The implementation of the Yushin constitution relied on an electoral college with seven year presidential terms and no limit to the number of terms a president could serve. Noted for its “severe restrictions on people’s basic rights as democratic citizens” (Sohn 50) it had the effect of making Park’s de facto dictatorship legitimate.

The backlash to Park’s authoritarian rule post 1972, began to grow exponentially at the grassroots level. Forced into the underground, at the risk of their freedom and facing the very real possibility of torture or even death, those who yearned for a better existence began to solidify their movement. Ironically “as political repression increased under the Yushin regime, the dissident movement was not stifled but rather became hardened, producing a core or radicalized dissident leaders. Simultaneously, the concept of *minjung* was sharpened into an ideology and a political strategy” (Koo *Civil* 144). It was paradoxically under this most oppressive of regimes that the *minjung* movement began to take a more definitive shape.

Availing themselves of the broad scope of influence and power granted by the Yushin constitution, the KCIA cracked down harshly on all those whose voices were

considered dissident. Such extreme measures helped to solidify the “South Korean democratization movement of the 1970s [which] was born out of an intense hatred of the Yusin era” (Lee 35). During the 1970’s, jail cells were overflowing with political prisoners and thousands were sentenced to labor camps for their dissent. An almost tangible curtain of paranoia had descended upon South Korea under the Park regime. Neighbors couldn’t trust that the businessman or housewife next door wouldn’t betray criticisms of the regime uttered in confidence. Patrons of restaurants or bars whose tongues had loosened from the consumption of too much rice wine had to always be mindful of prying eyes and ears, lest a clouded moment of judgment come back to haunt them.

It is no wonder then, in such an environment, that independent student groups from local universities had to use the utmost caution in accepting members into their inner circles to discuss matters that were anti-state. Junior members had to be vouched for by senior participants in order to be accepted, creating a senior/junior bond that was very filial in nature and served to forge deep and lasting relationships. Such “ties were the gateway to the movement” (Lee 161), often guiding the ideological leanings of the junior members as they became more active *minjung* participants. These inner circles often sought to rectify a history of oppression through a rogue nationalistic approach to scholarly texts and revisited modes of cultural expression from traditional folklore. These nationalist minded *minjung* were “interested not only in political activism but also in a culture that embodie[d] counter-hegemonic oppositional practices of life in order to account for the long durations in history when minjung. . . remained silent and their political practices . . . unrecorded” (Abelman 26). The extreme suppression efforts of the

Park regime only seemed to strengthen the resolve of its adherents (rather than extinguish the *minjung* movement). During the 1980s the silent voices of oppressed *minjung* began to more actively work in concert to revitalize their movement through intricate webs of underground support.

### **Ideology of the *Minjung***

The ideological underpinnings of the *minjung* movement have been described as the struggle to rise as a group against a tyrannical oppression found in the works of Marxist ideology resonated especially strongly with many in the *minjung* movement. Under the iron-fisted guidance of Park during the Yushin years, Korea's rapid ascent to an industrial powerhouse was astonishing but hardly complete. For those left behind during this unprecedented transition, many shared a feeling of disenfranchisement and alienation. To the oppressed intellectuals, the words of Karl Marx became a call to fight against despotism and cruelty. Such feelings were echoed in the sentiment of *minjung* scholars in the 1980s like Cho Hunyon who believed that it was essential to "equate class liberation with national liberation," as the entire country of South Korea could in essence be viewed as a "neocolonized class": he felt that the Korean brand of capitalism was merely a thinly veiled variant of imperialism (Wells 13). Cho believed that a "*minjung* revolution" (qtd. In Wells 13) had brought the nation to this stage of class liberation.

Although Marxist texts were illegal, many *minjung* risked jail-or worse- in order to spread Marxist scholarship throughout the underground student movement. The appeal towards Marxism, considering the political landscape of South Korea in the 1980s, seems understandable, but some in the *Minjung* movement embraced an ideological approach

more taboo than Marxism by turning towards North Korea's *Chuch'e* (self-reliance) ideology .

North Korea had become the defacto enemy of the South Korean state after the 1953 armistice and its brand of communism/Marxism/*Chuch'e* ideology was portrayed by the South Korean government as the epitome of all things anathema to South Korean democracy. There was no transgression considered more obscene in pre-democratic South Korea than voicing support for North Korean ideology. Kim Il-Song had crafted a cult of personality that placed him prominently in the role of the 'Great Leader'. Kim had his own take on Marxist/Leninist philosophy which had been the ideological underpinnings of North Korea since its inception a view centered strongly on the concept of self-reliance or *Chuch'e* ideology. The extreme isolationism practiced by the North Korean state typifies this type of 'bunker mentality' of 'us' against 'them' so essential to the maintenance of the totalitarian regime. While fear, oppression and force were facts of daily life in North Korea, some *minjung* adherents in the 1980's looked up to North Korea's strong message of self reliance and its stance on the rejection of western imperialism. Such concepts seemed to fit neatly into the *minjung* theme of righting the wrongs of history and asserting independence from the great powers which had always been such a dominating force throughout much of Korea's existence.

The appeal of the Marxist/Leninist/*Chuch'e* ideological call to rise up against oppression was obvious. The *minjung* saw themselves as an exploited and subjugated class who must fight against tyranny in order to survive. The contraband ideologies being disseminated through college campuses gave voice to the collective sense of powerlessness and frustration felt by the *minjung*. The thoughts captured in the

revolutionary writings of these prohibited bodies of work resonated strongly with the *minjung* who felt that action against the regime was essential and inevitable. With the introduction of photo copier machines, translated works of illegal texts began to circulate throughout the *minjung* community with much greater frequency becoming mandatory reading for those in the movement. With such increased dissemination and acceptance, student activists began to be emboldened in expressing their support of state banned ideologies. Flyers started to pop up on the bulletin boards of elite college campus denouncing the Korean government, imperialist America's influence and questioning the rejection by the South of *Chuch'e* ideology. With scars of a not so distant colonial past fresh in the minds of many in the *minjung* movement, the perceived imperialistic transgressions of the United States was seen as one more insult against Korean sovereignty. It was not the culture or people of America that *minjung* activists found so abhorrent, but rather the role that US policy played in stifling the Korean dream for democracy.

### **Kwangju and *Minjung***

The motivations of the *Minjung* changed profoundly after the Kwangju uprising. Some scholars viewed Kwangju as “an event that incubate[d] the *minjung*'s will for revolutionary struggle” (qtd. In Jungwoon 34). No longer satisfied with critique of oppression the *minjung* desired to rise against tyranny and alter the face of South Korea for the people. After Kwangju, the United States found itself a target of the proposed revolution. Overt criticism of the United States had not been foreign to the *minjung* movement prior to the 1980's in South Korea, but it was not a driving force that garnered

wide support. In fact, many dissident intellectuals previously saw the United States as a source of support for the push for democracy and an ally in the fight against tyranny. The cleavage between this romantic view and reality is epitomized by an infamous quote from general John A. Wickham Jr, (then) commander of US forces in Korea who stated in a New York Times interview in October of 1980 that “Koreans are like field mice, they just follow whoever becomes their leader. Democracy is not an adequate system for Koreans” (Cummings A17).

It was not until after the bloodshed of Kwangju had subsided that South Koreans began to reassess their relationship and views towards the U.S. Debate over whether or not the U.S. Army explicitly or implicitly had any involvement in sanctioning the massacre, or whether or not they bore some form of moral responsibility as the defacto military authority in South Korea continues to this day. Regardless of the reality of any U.S. involvement (in the minds of large numbers of Koreans), a verdict of guilt and complicity had already been reached. In that sense, any debate became moot as the perception of American involvement in one of the bloodiest events in modern Korean history became a cornerstone of *minjung* protest culture, a cause around which to rally.

Clearly, at least in the eyes of some of the more active *minjung* participants, a paradigmatic shift had occurred after Kwangju. In an essay published to commemorate the 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the uprising, the Chonnam National University General Student Association celebrated the revolutionary struggle of the *minjung* who were “equipped with anti-American sentiment and high revolutionary awareness [making] a qualitative leap into civil war, the highest form of the minjung revolution” (qtd in Choe 30). The

reconstructed historiography of *minjung* evidenced in the essay points to a rethinking of the United States and its perceived complicity in the Kwangju Uprising.

Intricately linked to the concept of *minjung* is the idea of rectifying a ‘failed history.’ A belief that by and large Korean sovereignty had been repeatedly compromised throughout recent history was shared among the *minjung* with many participants feeling a collective responsibility to do their part to readjust the course of Korean history. One hundred years of living under the shadow of colonization, war and tyranny left a burning desire in many *minjung* to ensure future generations would not have to live in shame of freedom unrealized. The *minjung* movement became the embodiment of South Korea’s desire to rise up against oppression, a noble endeavor but one that had fallen short far too often since the demise of the Chosŏn Dynasty (1392-1910). Kwangju became the archetypal model for what it meant to be *minjung*. It represented the spirit of the movement, the ultimate sacrifice paid for the most noble of causes. The passionate disavowal of the Park regime’s authoritarian rule exhibited by the *minjung* that was so pervasive in the 1980s soon began to be directed with equal fervor towards the United States specifically because of the events of Kwangju. Forever altering the terrain of Korean perception of the U.S., for the *minjung*, Kwangju had come to symbolize everything that was wrong with Korean society. The path to democracy was fraught with difficulty and the 1980s saw American policy establish itself as yet another obstacle to South Korean democratization.

### **Minjung and Democratization**

In June of 1987, Chun Doo Hwan named retired general Roh Tae Woo the official candidate of the Democratic Justice Party. Roh had been integral in orchestrating the

coup that had placed Chun in power, a strategic move that enraged many Koreans and was a contributing factor to the Kwangju uprising of 1980. An indignant South Korea became incensed at the selection of Roh as the Democratic Party's leader with the assumption that this was in essence a maneuver to ensure power stayed in the hands of the corrupt autocratic regime. The *minjung* movement which had been permeating multiple strata of society throughout the 1980s was at a zenith in the summer of 1987. The scars of Kwangju still fresh in the minds of the *minjung*, those in the movement were driven by a mandate to correct the failure of history and put an end to the clutch of tyranny and avenge the massacre of seven years ago. Massive protests swept through Seoul and other large cities, with citizens, students and activists alike clamoring to make their demands for democracy heard. This was the culmination of everything the *minjung* had struggled for and the frenzied activity of the movement was a force completely undeniable. It struck a sense of trepidation among those in power and it was "[i]n reality, fear of the minjung [that] played an important role in the 1987 nationwide democratization campaign. In this sense, Korea's contemporary democracy has been realized at the expense of the bloodshed in Gwangju" (Ch'oe 3). This fear resulted in concessions made by the ruling party to allow democratic elections for the first time since the 1960s. The dream of the *minjung* seemed to have come to fruition. The will of the people to fight against a past wrought with defeat and suffering crafted a new narrative that was carved into the annals of modern Korean history.

The *minjung* had sought to rebel against subjugation, owing to a feeling of debt to the nation to redirect Korean history and restore Korean sovereignty. While anti-American protests increased markedly throughout the 1980s, it was democracy that the

*minjung* fought for and not demise of the U.S. The United States government became a target of the *minjung* movement for its believed contribution to the Kwangju massacre. However, with the enemy at least partially thwarted after 1987 “[t]here was also a growing realization among many Korean people that an anti-American *minjung* ideology was largely a hodge podge of inconsistent, contradictory, anti-intellectual slogans” (Oh 95). In this sense the *minjung* ideology which helped to transition South Korea into a legitimate democracy lost some of its previous pull. Such *minjung* sentiments “were emotionally appealing” for students and workers suffering at the hands of tyrants but the appeal began to diminish upon the realization of democracy (Ibid 95). The drop off of heated *minjung* protests and social activism demonstrates again the role anti-Americanism plays in South Korean society. It is an element that waxes and wanes in importance but remains tangential to movements which have always been focused primarily on South Korea.

### **Role of Social Movements**

The *minjung* movement was born out of necessity and urgency. The human spirit can only be savaged and subjugated for so long before the need to rise and free itself from the grip of repression becomes overwhelming. Such is true for nations as well, and in the case of South Korea a breaking point had been reached. The *minjung* sought to redirect the flow of history, altering the currents of perceived failure so that they traveled over fresh ground forming eddies that doubled back and gently erased the painful memories of colonization, division and democracy lost. The goal was a re-remembering and rethinking of South Korea couched in new modes of thinking shared through the passing

of worn texts read in earnest and secrecy. The spirit of the *minjung* was that of revolution and the righteousness felt by its adherents was that of a certainty of purpose almost religious in nature.

That the United States became one of the targets of the *minjung* in the 1980s was not due to an oppositional world view-after all both desired democracy. Rather, the actions of the *minjung* were dictated by a resistance to oppression and staking a claim as the rightful heirs to Korean history. The United States, by virtue of its geopolitical standing throughout the cold war, was caught in the surge of anti-autocratic fervor that had taken hold of South Korea in the 1980s. Perception is reality and after Kwangju the U.S. was perceived (rightfully or wrongly) as a supporter of a corrupt dictatorship. To that end the United States was viewed as an obstacle to democracy and drew the ire of many *minjung*. It is telling that *minjung* influence waned after democracy was realized in 1987. Once again the point becomes clear that anti-Americanism comprised only one component of a larger whole, and is not the focus of social movements per se in South Korea.

## Chapter Three

### The Birth of the Citizens Movement and Decline of anti-Americanism

The 1980's in South Korea had been a watershed decade for social activism. Years of authoritarian rule had cemented a desire for democracy into the psyche of the general populace. Student activism which had first entered the national consciousness in April of 1960 with the ousting of Rhee Syngman had since become a mainstay of political dissent in South Korea. Initially a refuge for intellectual elites to voice criticisms about an oppressive ruling government, the protest movement spilled out into society at large in the 1980s. The protests before and after the crackdown of Kwangju had begun to incorporate a broader range of participants. During the height of the Kwangju massacre, the protesters out on the street were both citizens and students. Similarly the twenty million plus demonstrators that incapacitated the administrative government in June of 1987 and eventually forced democratic elections were comprised of multiple segments of society all clamoring for democracy. This appropriation of the student protest movement by larger and more disparate groups is indicative of a shift away from an elite or radicalized minority towards an accepted mainstream ideology.

Throughout the 1980s this trend continued as dissatisfaction with the ruling regime became more common place and widespread. The student movement, although a distinct polity in its own right, relied heavily on support from citizens to flourish and sustain itself. The remarkable success of the *minjung* movement in helping to bring about democracy in South Korea would not have been possible if the only active participants had been university students. While the foot soldiers in the social movements of the

1980s were predominately students, owing to their access to ideological texts and highly organized communication networks, the ranks of the movement filled with academics and citizens alike. Such necessary support from the public is evidenced by the fervent bouts of anti-Americanism before democratization and the social disenfranchisement afterwards. As the push to overthrow the Chun regime grew more frenetic in the mid to late 1980s, more left leaning groups began to embrace North Korean *chuch'e* ideology as the paradigm for reunification between the two Koreas. These groups saw the United States as both the originator of national division and an obstacle to reunification. While their views may have been on the extreme end of a diverse spectrum of ideologies they were only one variation in a larger movement that comfortably housed many contrasting and contradicting world views. All held in common reform and change and democracy and as long as that remained true, splinter groups and infighting among the various sub-movements were less important than the overall goal which had the popular support of the people.

### **A Changing Era**

After the elections of 1987 the dynamic of the social movement was turned on its head. The cause to which generations of dissidents had committed themselves had come to fruition. While there was admittedly dissatisfaction with the outcome of the election (a ruling party win with only 37% of the vote) citizens had actively participated in free elections for the first time in decades. The unity which had been such a pervasive component of the *minjung* movement began to lose its cohesiveness as the students, who were used to passionately fighting for their cause, turned their attentions to reunification.

While many South Koreans in the late 1980s and the 1990s may have agreed in principal with the *idea* of reunification, the immediacy with which the students wanted this to take place disenfranchised large chunks of their previous support.

Reunification had been a goal of many in the *minjung* movement since its inception but a decidedly anti-communist state and strict censorship greatly curtailed public expression of such sentiments. With the ushering in of democracy, the student movement became divided into two distinct groups, the moderate Constituent Assembly (CA) and the leftist National Liberation (NL). The NL group felt emboldened to vocalize their desires to reunify, and espouse *chuch'e* sympathetic tirades and protested vehemently the hegemonic designs of an imperial America, a goal not shared by the CA group. It seemed that a new dawn had arrived for political movements. A professor at Korea University in 1988 asserted that “this is the beginning of viewing [history] in a new perspective.” Another ‘revisionist’ history professor from the same University posited the view that “the American role in the division {of Korea} is the base of the students' anti-Americanism,” and that it was “the U.S. support for the Chun Doo Hwan regime [that served] as the detonator” (Washington Post 1988). Such opinions are clearly an extension of goals and attitudes of the *minjung* movement throughout the 1980s, but now they stood on their own without the romantic trappings of the fight for democracy serving as a buffer between radical left and moderate middle. Having ostensibly achieved democracy, the slogans and chants of the late 1980s social movements had begun to ring hollow for many Koreans. A student activist interviewed in 1988 acknowledged that “we are worried because of the cold reaction from the people,” a comment that highlights the

fact that while students may not be quick to acknowledge it, “their protests only bring about change when the public is standing behind them” (Chira A12).

In 1989, two high profile arrests of reunification advocates created a media frenzy that portrayed North Korean sympathizers in a harshly negative light and drew a rather apathetic response from the general public. National Council of Student Representatives member Im Soo Kyung and Reverend Moon Ik Hwan were arrested on August 15<sup>th</sup> for violating national security law and traveling to North Korea. Reverend Moon was a notorious dissident who had had previous brushes with the law in his pursuit of a reunification agenda. Im Soo Kyung was a college student who traveled to North Korea to participate in the World Festival of Youth and Students event because it was believed that her “participation could be a significant medium in expanding the anti-U.S. and pro-reunification movement” (Choi H. 184). Protests of the arrests ensued, but it was not with the same surge of mass support from citizens that students witnessed two years prior in the summer of 1987. In December 1989 the editor of the student paper at Korea University commented that “it is getting harder and harder to get students to rally around political causes now, as [s]tudents are becoming selfish and uninterested (Breen A40). The death of seven police officers in a fire started from a molotov cocktail thrown by a student in 1989 further exacerbated the widening rift between radical student groups and the general populace who were growing tired of such extreme measures. It was this lack of connection between the leftist leanings of the more active student groups and their former participants that paved the way for the next phase in Korean social movements.

## Citizens Movement

This trend of evaporating support continued into the 1990s “as the *minjung* movement was systemically undermined as growing middle-class antipathy towards radical student ideologies and activism was encouraged by “conservative forces in the media” (qtd in Prey 2004). This is not to say that there were not periodic instances throughout the 1990s that garnered attention. In the summer of 1996 student activists calling for reunification and an end to the national security law were involved in a fierce physical confrontation with law enforcement officers at Yonsei University in an attempt to walk to the DMZ to greet fellow students returning from a North Korean rally (ibid 2004). These instances still received media attention; however they failed to garner the sympathies of the public the way they once had.

The 1990s became a period of shifting paradigms in social movements. The decline in popularity of the *minjung* and student movements gave way to a *shimin* (시민) or citizen movement that became the primary force behind social change throughout the 1990s. There is a continuity between the *minjung* and citizen movements as many of the leaders of the citizen movement were once political activists in the 1980s who no longer felt connected to the increasingly extreme student movement. Therefore the new movement contrasts from that of the *minjung* in that it “differs not only from those of the revolutionary political movement but also from radical political activism” (Kim D. 3). The citizen movement really began to take off “with anti-foreign and national unification movements losing their ground”(ibid 3) in the early 1990s and addressed similar concerns to that of the *minjung* movement, but sought institutional “reform” rather than “radical transformation of the institutional” (ibid 3). Thus, the leaders of the citizen movement

sought to achieve their goals through proceedings and legal actions rather than street demonstrations and Molotov cocktails. The face of social movements had changed in the eyes of most Koreans, as cries of “yankee go home!” in the streets were replaced by peaceful movements taking place out of concern for ordinary citizens, usually associated with “consumption, education, housing, the environment, and gender equality” (Shin K. 6). It was during this time that a respite from the previously ubiquitous anti-American protests separated from the concept of social movement. The 1990s saw an overall drop in radical protest and with it overt signs of anti-Americanism. This lull in activity contrasts markedly with the massive protests discussed in the following chapter.

## **Conclusion**

The 1980s were a time of tremendous political and social upheaval. South Korea had gone from a nation ruled by an authoritarian regime to the beginnings of democratic consolidation. One of the bloodiest civilian massacres in recent memory had served as the catalyst for a wave of anti-American protests, slogans and demonstrations as the U.S. fell from a position of near reverence in some circles to that of abhorrence in others. The 1988 Seoul Olympics were held in, an event considered by many to be South Korea’s crowning achievement, a hallmark of success. As the last days in that decade waned, a new trend began to emerge among the many participants of the *minjung* movement that was moving activists and the general population away the raucous street demonstrations that had been so prolific throughout the 1980s.

While the *minjung* movement did not fade away entirely, its prominence was diminished even as media circus events such as the incarceration of reunification

advocate and political dissident Reverend Moon filtered onto millions of TV sets across the nation. Former student activists, disenchanted with the increasingly violent and extreme tactics utilized by adamant *minjung* adherents became the leaders of a citizen movement that swept across Korea in the 1990s. This movement preferred the use of lawsuits and policy proposals to that of radical revolution and sudden social upheaval marking a departure from the anti-American, anti-regime rhetoric that had preceded it. It was not until the 1990s had ended that South Korea would again witness a resurgence in anti-American activities.

## Chapter Four

### Resurgence of Anti-Americanism



*FUCKING USA!*

*Did you see the short-track skating race?  
A vulgar country, Fucking USA  
Are you so happy over a gold medal?  
A nasty country, Fucking USA  
Such as you are, can you claim that the USA is a nation of justice?  
Why the hell can't we say what we have to?  
Are we slaves of a colonial nation?  
Now shout it out: "No to the USA"  
A wretched thief that stole our Olympic gold medal, Fucking USA  
A wicked robber that tries to rob everything by force, Fucking USA*

*Did you hear Bush's reckless words?  
A shameless country, Fucking USA  
It makes war threats to the north as well as intervention into the south  
A country of gangsters, Fucking USA  
Is the USA still a beautiful country?  
Is the north still an "enemy" to be killed?  
How much more do we have to endure before we realize?  
Now shout it out: "Yankee, go home!"  
You dirty Yankees, wait and see  
We will reunify the country with the independent force of the Korean nation  
We will build a dignified country, a reunified country*

*Remember well our tears of blood  
You, author of Korea's division, Fucking USA  
Don't forget the Nogun-ri massacre of civilians!  
You murdering country, Fucking USA*

(<http://www.prato.linux.it/~lmasetti/antiwarsongs/canzone.php?lang=en&id=7973> accessed on December 20, 2008)

The song *Fuckin' USA* written in 2002 by activist singer Yoon Min-Suk is unabashedly anti-American in tone, yet appropriating a decidedly American genre (rock music) to convey anti-Americanism. The above lyrics references several incidents that were feeding the frenzied hype around Korean and American relations in 2002. The first stanza addresses the controversy surrounding the men's 1500-meter speed skating event in the 2002 Salt Lake City Winter Olympic games. In that race, Kim Dong-Sung crossed the finish line first but was disqualified for blocking American speed skater Apollo Ohno, who received the gold when Kim was disqualified. Many Koreans were furious over the judges' decision and flooded the U.S. Olympic Committee server with so many emails that it crashed.

President Bush's 'axis of evil' speech is condemned: "*Did you hear Bush's reckless words? A shameless country, Fucking USA. It makes war threats to the north as well as intervention into the south. Is the USA still a beautiful country?*" The song sarcastically takes issue with the Korean word for the United States (*Miguk* which translates to beautiful country).

The lines "*You dirty Yankees, wait and see. We will reunify the country with the independent force of the Korean nation. We will build a dignified country, a reunified country*" illustrate the determination to create a united Korea, a goal that the song's author obviously feels is impeded by the United States. The idea of independence addressed in the song is a reflection of the sense of struggling national identity shared by many activists who long to create a new narrative with a fiercely independent and proud Korea. The third stanza references a Korean War mass killing of Korean civilians. The

song ends with placing the blame for Korean division squarely on the United States and rehashes old ideas about American collusion with enemies of Korea.

The above song encapsulates a mounting sense of frustration that was prevalent with an increasing number of South Koreans in the summer of 2002. The decade before had seen a relative decline in overt acts of anti-Americanism with a shifting focus to more explicitly domestic concerns through legal avenues as opposed to street demonstrations. The song became a viral internet hit in 2002, evidence of a shift in modes of communication for a new generation.

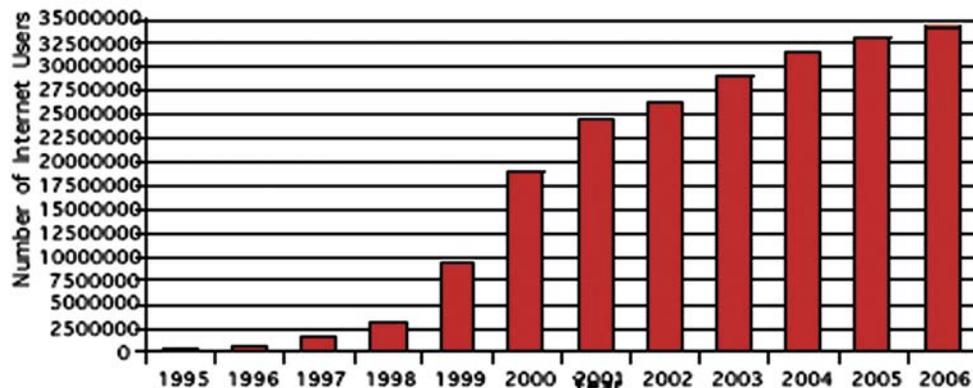
### **Anti-Americanism via Cyber Space**

From the late 1970s through the late 1980s, anti-Americanism in South Korea was largely relegated to elite college classrooms and clandestine student gatherings that were for the most part inaccessible to the general public. The internet era that began to permeate Korean society during the 1990s allowed for technological advances in modes of communication that suddenly opened up numerous channels of information for a vast majority of Koreans. Soon, online media began to appear on the internet, setting the stage for online activism and allowing social movements to reach large swaths of the population in ways previously unimagined.

Perhaps the most notorious of Korea's new online media is OhmyNews, an internet based citizen journalist enterprise, whose "success in exercising progressive influence is the result of the social and political conditions of Korea's recent history" (Kim E. 553). The brainchild of leftist media hawk Oh Yeon Ho, OhMyNews was founded in 2000 with a handful of 'citizen journalists' intent on reshaping the entrenched

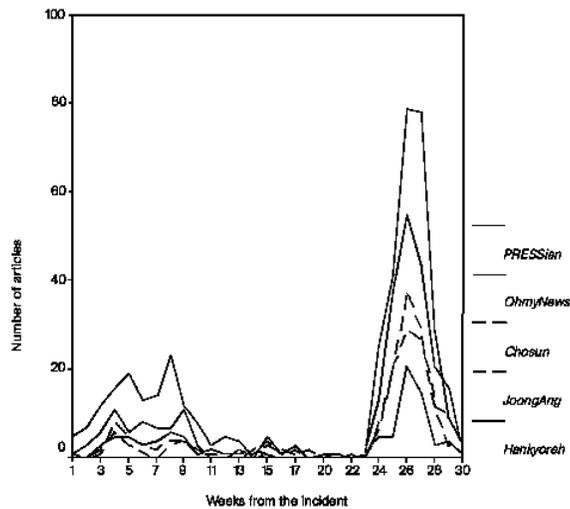
mediascape of political conservatism. Oh did not have to wait long to realize the fruits of his labor.

The success of these activists in mobilizing and shaping Korean public opinion relied heavily on the participation of South Korea's 'netizens,' typically younger, more

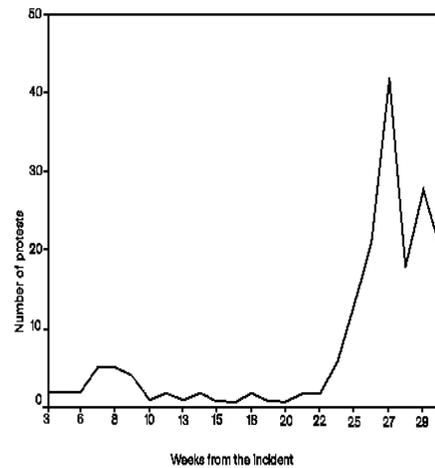


progressively minded and technologically savvy. One of the most wired nations in the world (see graph above from Korean Internet Statistics Information System ISIS, International Telecommunication Union as compiled by Joyce), South Korea is the ideal breeding ground for the hybridization of the internet and alternative forms of media.

The anti-US Armed Forces sentiment fostered by the protests were soon reinforced through the progressive online media outlets resulting in a surge of anti-American tinged rhetoric which may have been the tipping point in the election as he was behind in the polls just prior to the presidential election. Grassroots efforts from OhmyNews posters however, who saturated the internet with pleas for the youth of Korea to vote have been largely credited as the driving force behind Roh's surprising ascension to the Presidency. In a nod to the '20 and 30 something' year old users of OhmyNews who played a major role in his election, OhmyNews was granted the first interview by Roh after inauguration.



• Figure 1 Number of news stories in each news medium by week from the incident



• Figure 2 Number of protests by week

In a case study on “the roles of independent online news services as agenda builders for anti-US protests in South Korea,” Song noted the apparent correlation between the marked increase in coverage of the 2002 schoolgirl incident and a rise in protests (figures 1 & 2. Song). As mentioned above, many believe that it was the online news media’s coverage of the incident that forced the conservative major dailies to cover the issue. A snowball effect soon ensued with coverage leading to protests which then lead to more coverage and more protests and so on. As OhMyNews was made up of everyday ordinary South Korean citizens and provided a wealth of resources to their computer screens it had become a vehicle for self expression that offered an ease of access to grassroots movements that previous generations had never had.

## The Two Girls Incident

The 2002 death of two school girls run over by a US tank while walking home on a rural road 20 miles outside of Seoul sparked an unprecedented wave of anti-American protest that swept the entire nation. The protests were the largest such anti-American

demonstrations since those seen during at the height of the *minjung* movement in the 1980s and marks a dramatic shift from the American ‘neutral’ 1990s. The deaths occurred during the World Cup and initially received little media attention from traditional conservative media outlets. In the tradition of the *minjung* from a generation before, grassroots activism (this time in cyber space) became a driving force for shaping the socio-political environment. In South Korea “use of electronic information systems have produced a rapid, efficient, and powerful system of forming public opinions on various issues” (Shin *Correlates* 31).

The summer before the November 2002 presidential elections had ushered in a wave of excitement and nationalism as South Korea hosted the World Cup jointly with Japan and performed much better than expected. Thrilled to experience history in the making “it was the first time in anyone’s recent memory that Koreans came together not to oppose someone or something, be it a dictator, the communists or insensitive remarks made by right Japanese politicians, but simply to celebrate Korea and being Korean” (Hahm 224).

A news story that had taken a back seat to the WorldCcup concerning two young middle school girls crushed by American tanks during a routine training exercise suddenly exploded into the political discourse as election season got underway. Anti-Americanism abruptly reentered the spotlight after a relatively dormant period. These protests seemed to draw energy from the charged atmosphere of just a few weeks earlier. The palpable and pervasive shared elation and surging sense of national pride that was engendered by South Korea’s unexpected success in the 2002 World Cup which had

drawn hundreds of thousands of South Korean soccer enthusiasts known as ‘Red Devils’ to the streets soon took on a more ominous tone.

Exuberance soon began to fade, as details surrounding the death of the two fourteen-year-old school girls began to circulate. Shock and dismay at the loss of innocent life quickly changed to outrage and anger after the US soldiers involved in the incident were acquitted of all serious charges. Suddenly Koreans were pouring out of their apartments and schools *en masse*. Some of these candlelight vigils boasted more than one million participants and were rapidly flooding the streets of Seoul. Once more the specter of anti-Americanism, which had been dormant for several years, reared its head. Much like the *minjung* protests of the 1980s, the candlelight vigils were about more than the issue at hand; they became a bitter reminder of a not-too-distant painful past. While democracy had been achieved, many Koreans believed that Korea was still not a land ruled by Koreans. The ‘two schoolgirls’ incident and perceived lack of accountability had the effect of bringing “back to everyone, including those of the new generation, the old sense of futility and helplessness that Koreans had become so accustomed to but believed they had recently overcome” (Hahm 224). The protests grew to a level that drew the attention of average Americans as evidenced in a 2002 Pew Research Center Survey which revealed that Americans believed South Korea to be “the Asian nation most critical of the United States”(qtd in Kim *Ambivalent* 280).

Internet powerhouse, OhmyNews has been widely considered to be the driving force behind the massive candlelight vigils which were orchestrated and coordinated via the internet and are believed by many to be “an example of an OhmyNews reporter coordinating offline political action” (Joyce 10). Such lines between citizen journalists

and emotionally driven activism were soon blurred as posts on OhmyNews began to filter in:

*We are owners of Korea. We are Koreans who deserve to be able to walk in Gwanghwamun.. I cried when I watched the TV documentary broadcast of the event, because until now I didn't understand those who struggle so strongly.*

*It is said that dead men's souls become fireflies. Let's fill downtown with our souls, with the souls of Mi-seon and Hyo-soon. Let's become thousands of fireflies this coming Saturday and Sunday. Let's sacrifice our private comfortable lives. Please light your candle at your home. If somebody asks, please answer, 'I'm going to commemorate my dead sisters.' Holding candles and wearing black, let's have a memorial ceremony for them.*

(Post made by angMA on OhmyNews as quoted by Ronda Heuben)

Protesters took to the streets in the thousands the day after 'angMA's' post. The sacrifice called for by angMA seemed to resonate with many Koreans. The people of South Korea wanted to be in charge of their own destiny and would not sit idly by while they watched a miscarriage of justice in their own land by a foreign occupying force. Fear of losing a grip on a tenuously positioned sovereignty prompted thousands of South Koreans to pick up candles and follow in the footsteps of the generation before them.

### **The 2002 Elections: the Politics of anti-Americanism**

There is a widely held belief that President Roh Moo Hyun "was elected on a platform highly critical of US foreign policy by an increasingly *anti-American* electorate" (O'Conner 230) in 2002. Indeed, this seemed to be the case as the largely youthful contingent of supporters were the same demographic seen on nightly newscasts participating in anti-American protests in the streets of Seoul. With the introduction of anti-American sentiment into the electoral process, the political divide of right vs. left became a generational divide as well. Presidential candidate Roh Moo Hyun was a

product of the 3-8-6 generation (born in the 60s, student activists in the 80s and in their 30s in the 1990s) and was the embodiment of the *minjung* movement which was a primary catalyst in the push for democratization in 1987. Nowhere was this generational divide more evident than on the internet where scores of ‘netizens’ took to cyber space to coalesce around the controversial issues that saturated the 2002 elections in support Roh Moo-Hyun. The youth of Korea had found a voice and the birth of new modes of communication made expression as easy as a click of a mouse, ushering in an era of unprecedented internet activism. Also, the protests surged around election time and fizzled out almost as soon as the elections were over. Given the emotional rhetoric espoused by the Roh campaign and the younger, progressive vote, the correlation between anti-American sentiment and Roh’s election seems almost intuitive. In 2002, Roh Moo Hyun campaigned with the slogans “liquidation of old politics” and “generational replacement in politics” (Shin *Correlates* 29), a phrase that was understandably appealing to the younger generation who typically trend towards a more progressive political ideology than older voters.

Reform was a subject weighing heavily on the collective consciousness of many Koreans in the summer of 2002 after the two school girls incident. The Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) between the United States and South Korea protected the two US soldiers involved in the death of the girls from prosecution under Korean civil law. After a trial in American Military courts, it was determined that deaths were accidental and the two soldiers involved were acquitted of serious charges in late November and subsequently sent back to the U.S. The lack of accountability within the Korean legal

system for the deaths infuriated many Koreans and was the impetus for the massive street demonstrations that occurred in the just before the elections of 2002.

A month before the elections were held, Roh was behind significantly in the polls and was not favored to win the election. It was not until around the time of the uptick in protests that a surge of popularity for Roh became apparent. As stated above, many have attributed the success of online grassroots activism in organizing the youth vote to Roh's victory. As protests were growing around the country, Roh could be found on the campaign trail promising "the establishment of 'balanced' bilateral relations with the United States" (Jhee 314), an obvious appeal to the frustrations over the 'unequal' SOFA agreement with the US. Roh's opposition, Lee Hoi Chang, helped make the case for him by "demonizing" Roh as an "anti-American politician" (ibid 314).

There have been several research studies conducted on the prevalence of anti-American sentiment of voters during the 2002 election that analyzed post election survey data to determine what impact anti-Americanism had on voters' decision-making processes. Using questions that were considered "proxies" for anti-Americanism such as "what extent they agreed with stationing of US troops in South Korea" and George Bush's "axis of evil" (ibid 314) comments, the author of the aforementioned questions concluded that there was not a strong correlation between anti-American sentiment and a vote cast for Roh Moo Hyun.

Given that the data analyzed only indirectly got to the question of "do you hold anti-American sentiment," I believe these analyses mischaracterize the mentality of the voters during 2002. This is an important point to grasp as the study infers a lack of anti-American sentiment in supporters of Roh without any direct evidence. There was

obviously a strong connection between anti-American sentiment and support of Roh as the demographic protesting the U.S. and voting for Roh were one and the same, largely youthful and progressive—a contrast to the older generation that tended to hold more typically 'pro-American' views. However, this once again illustrates a unique characteristic of South Korean anti-Americanism. Voters who supported Roh did demonstrate against the United States, burn US flags and fight with riot police. These same voters did not necessarily have a problem with the US being stationed in South Korea. The key issue is one of national identity and sovereignty. The US was protested against because of what many Koreans believed was an unfair SOFA agreement that treated South Korea as an unequal partner, one that was forced to kowtow before the mighty US. This sentiment fits exactly the mood of the *minjung* movement of the 1980s and the frustrations of South Korean social movements over the last forty years whose main concern was Korean identity and sovereignty. It is not the case that anti-Americanism had no impact on the voting block in 2002. Rather it was South Korean anti-Americanism in its typical form that motivated youthful progressive-minded voters to express themselves by casting ballots for change.

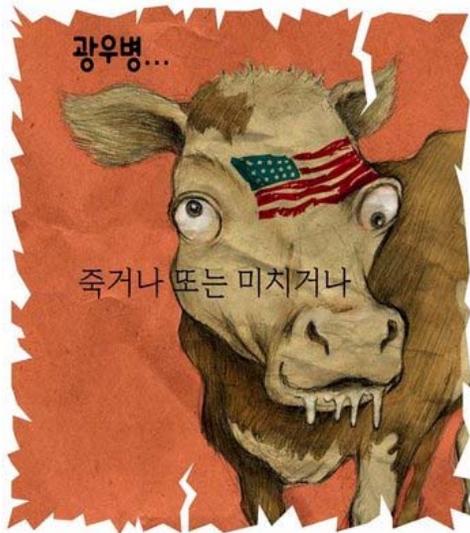
### **Beef Protests**

The landslide victory by current President Lee Myung Bak had been seen by many as ushering in a new era of conservatism and a political shift from the progressive left. The perceived failure of the previous administration to adequately address economic concerns laid the groundwork for President Lee's rise to power despite the cloud of a fraud investigation hanging over his head during the election. The inauguration of a

conservative president into office would seem to convey the message that the South Korean public at large is content with a return to a more pro-American government and perhaps more tolerant of a hard line approach towards North Korea. The political left, however, soon capitalized on an opportunity to humiliate President Lee and seized upon negotiations between President Lee and President Bush reopening old wounds of Korean sovereignty.

By allowing American beef to reach once more the shelves of Korean grocery stores and the tables of Korean households, President Lee had made concessions that Japan and Taiwan had not, which is to allow US beef to be imported into Korea that was less than 20 months old. The political protest laden maelstrom that ensued caught the administration completely off guard. The issues involved run much deeper than beef and focus on much more than the anti-American sentiment that at first glance seemed to fuel the activist movement.

Only days into his presidency, Lee Myung Bak found himself confronted with his first major crisis as protesters once more took to the streets. In response to President Lee's decision to reopen American beef imports, hundreds of thousands of Korean citizens demonstrated their displeasure, holding candle light vigils and even burning American flags.



Mad Cow Disease: Die or go crazy

(Images from <http://populargusts.blogspot.com/2008/05/branding-mad-cow.html> accessed April 4th 2009)

With images of angry and sometimes violent protests regarding the decision to import an American product peppering the US media in the summer of 2008, it is not surprising that such actions have been interpreted by many to be yet another manifestation of deep rooted anti-Americanism. A deeper examination suggests that “at the heart of the problem is the perception that Lee is toadying up to an administration



(Image from [http://61.19.218.149/journal/enjournal/e5/2008/171\\_6/t171\\_6.pdf](http://61.19.218.149/journal/enjournal/e5/2008/171_6/t171_6.pdf) accessed April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2009)

that runs roughshod over Korean national sovereignty” (Cummings *Beef* 1).

Issues of sovereignty have been haunting Korean citizens for generation upon generation and independence is one of the central pillars of the activist platform. It makes sense, then, that few are willing to stand quietly while the progress achieved from the social movements of the 1980s is undone in the name of politics.

Sparked by claims from a popular Korean investigative TV show that Koreans are somehow genetically more susceptible to Mad Cow disease than other ethnic groups, and that Americans were not even eating the beef they were exporting to Korea, Koreans turned out to participate in some of the largest protest movements since the 1987 democratization movement (Beck 15; Ramstad A11). Upset at a president whom many considered “weak” for concessions to Washington, hundreds of thousands of Koreans marched through Seoul to make their voices heard (Ramstad A11). Among the complaints were allegations that “the US wanted to send ‘garbage the Americans will not eat’” an image flying directly in the face of a Korean desire to be treated as an equal sovereign nation (Kirk 11).

Also of concern to some participants was the potential damage that could be done to Korea’s farmers. According to a spokesman from the group, Solidarity for the Progress of Korea, “the farm industry is not ready for trade protections to be taken away” (ibid A12). Although the subject of tainted US beef galvanized the public to protest, the issues at the heart of the matter are more directly tied to Korean sovereignty. The candle holders and sign wavers were not demonstrating their hatred or disapproval of the United States, but rather seeking to address grievances they had concerning the state of their own

government and its relation to the United States through the Status of Forces Agreement which has a direct impact on a modern independent South Korea.

Although protests centered on an import seems little enough cause for concern (even one potentially carrying mad cow disease), some scholars have pointed to a continuing manifestation of a new form of anti-Americanism suggesting “that a small matter of beef imports has put masses of Koreans into the streets and threatens to trample the very foundations of Korean-American relations” (Cummings *Beef* 1). By contrast, others feel such claims are complete mischaracterizations of the situation, noting that “in 2002 many politicians (most famously Roh Moo Hyun during his run for president) had proudly brandished anti-American sentiments; in 2008 no one made moves overtly to take advantage of radical nationalism” (Hahm 141). Rather, protest over beef imports is indicative of the fact that “in six short years, radical nationalism went from being the most visible and potent political sentiment in South Korea to one that had to be disguised as concern over concrete policy issues” (141). It may be, however, that expressions of nationalism have begun to mature and protests like that over mad cow disease are the new face of dissent in South Korea.

While it is certainly too early to assert definitively that South Korea has seen the end of radical nationalism, even a temporary decline in such activity supports the view that anti-Americanism is not a primary force in and of itself but rather an expression of a nation on a path towards decolonization, democratic consolidation and a restructured national identity.

## **Conclusion**

The 2002 presidential election in South Korea once again brought anti-Americanism to the forefront of the arenas of public and political discourse. The death of two young school girls seemed to polarize a nation along ideological and generational lines. Massive protests paralyzed downtown Seoul for days on end. The youth vote, energized by an online movement unprecedented in scope, came out in great numbers to support the progressive candidate and elect him on a platform of anti-Americanism. When seen in this light, it would be easy for a casual observer to make the case anti-Americanism is a mainstay of modern Korean society. After all, how else could one explain the hate filled song lyrics, burning effigies of George Bush, the cries of “Yankee go home!”? Without question all of these things happened and more. Even years after the fact, shades of anti-Americanism can be found in popular culture and elsewhere in Korean society. Despite the apparent harshness and popularity of such sentiment, the ebb and flow of anti-Americanism is indicative of a different construct. The death of the school girls was tragic, but the protests centered more on the perception that the perpetrators were above the law. To many it seemed that they had escaped justice because of an ‘unfair’ status of forces agreement was the galvanizing force that led to the candlelight vigils. It was not opposition to the United States on a deep rooted basis or rejection of American culture, values or principles that caused the uproar. Instead it was the painful reminder of a history of national crisis.

Koreans had suffered at the hands of larger forces dating back to its relationship with imperial Japan, and up to the national division by Superpowers. Even after democratization and what has often been referred to as the ‘economic miracle’ of South

Korean development, here was evidence that true sovereignty was still not in the hands of South Koreans. Harking back to the *minjung* movement of the 1980s, South Koreans were once more acutely cognizant of the struggles of decolonization and the search to construct an overarching narrative of a completely independent Korea free from the oppressive dominant forces that had dictated existence on the peninsula for over 100 years.

Anti-Americanism in South Korea as illustrated by the above examples are merely pieces of a much more complex puzzle. It is the larger concern of constructing an independent modern Korea that is the primary focus of South Korean social activism. Anti-Americanism in this sense goes hand in hand with the search for Korean national identity. As the nation continues to grow and its democracy evolves and matures so too will its attitudes towards the United States. If the relatively civil beef protests of 2008 are any indication of future trends, anti-American sentiment in South Korea is likely to see a decrease in support from radical social movements. Thanks in part to a shift away from extremist movements issues related to Korea's progressing democracy are likely to play a more prominent role in Korean society.

## Conclusion

Anti-Americanism is a phenomenon that has existed almost as long as America itself. Theories regarding the root cause of anti-Americanism are numerous and range from reactive to policy driven to scapegoating and more. Trying to forge a single descriptive concept detailing what specifically constitutes anti-Americanism in all of its various manifestations is an undertaking tremendously broad in scope and not likely to produce a definitive answer. For example, there are certainly adamant anti-Americanists who hate the United States because of its standing in the world as a superpower. Also, unquestionably, there are nations whose governments profess an ideological opposition to the principles upon which America was founded. Recently it became chic, if not cliché, to bemoan the numerous international rifts created from policies enacted during the Bush administration, a clear example of reactive theory. In whatever context anti-Americanism occurs, the difficulty in deconstructing the root causes is that most analyses do not offer a comprehensive overview of the scope of anti-Americanism. Therein lies the most difficult aspect of evaluating multiple spheres of anti-Americanism: it is many things to many people at the same time.

Ironically, the most common thread connecting various approaches to anti-Americanism is that there is not currently a theory with a conclusive answer. It is the amorphous nature of anti-Americanism that varies from nation to nation and even within countries and between groups that makes it such a difficult puzzle to piece together. This lack of scholarly consensus is indicative of the complexities inherent in attempting to solve the problem of ‘what is anti-Americanism.’ The fact that the debate on anti-

Americanism has not produced any definitive answers does not mean that the discussion is without merit. It is precisely the complexity of anti-Americanism that allows us to probe deeper into its meaning from multiple vantage points. While untangling the convoluted contortions of anti-Americanism as it exists throughout the world is a worthy enterprise, the goal of this study is to shed light on what anti-Americanism means in South Korea.

Modern history has presented South Korea with numerous challenges that predate its formal status as a nation. Colonization, the attempted eradication of the Korean language and culture, civil war, poverty and dictatorship constitute what many in the *minjung* movement saw as evidence of a failed history and a contested sovereignty. Increasingly frustrated with a series of autocratic regimes, a grassroots-oriented underground collection of intellectuals and students began in earnest to shoulder the responsibility for setting Korean historiography on its proper course. Starting with the ousting of Rhee Syngman in 1960, participants in these social movements often felt a sense of grave responsibility for their role in redefining Korea's national identity. Hidden largely from the light of day and facing persecution by the KCIA, social activists burst onto the national scene with the assassination of President Park Chung Hee in 1979. Seizing upon the opportunity for a chance to reclaim Korea for the people, students, professors, intellectuals, laborers and other citizens began to coalesce around the prospect of democracy. After General Chun Doo Hwan established himself as the de facto leader of South Korea in what was essentially a bloodless coup, the energies directed towards democracy began to include protest. With an iron fist, general Chun violently stamped out the Movement, most forcibly in Kwangju, with enormous civilian casualties as a

result. This was the tipping point for anti-Americanism in South Korea. Prior to Kwangju, America was seen as a shining beacon to many intellectuals and was hardly ever disparaged, even among social activists. This attitude was shattered after Kwangju. The massacre raised questions about the reasons for America's notable absence during the military crackdown. The perception was that Americans were ultimately in charge of the Korean military. It seemed logical to many Koreans that even if the Americans did not directly authorize the killings, they surely knew what was happening and chose not to intercede and were therefore complicit in Kwangju. The veracity of this position matters not nearly as much as its acceptance among the general populace. The United States did not help the Korean people in their time of need and therefore lost its standing in the eyes of many South Koreans.

So this view of the United States continued throughout the 1980s as the *minjung* movement grew in size and the push for democracy became ever stronger. In the summer of 1987, the *minjung* finally achieved everything they had been working for for so long. Democratic elections were held as an almost direct consequence of the actions of the *minjung* and other democratic social movements. Once the dust settled in the late 1980s, however, the extremist bouts of apparent anti-Americanism that had fueled so many Molotov cocktails and protest songs had seemed to run out of steam for the *minjung* and the citizens' movement took hold. The reason is that anti-Americanism in South Korea is more than a black and white issue with clear lines of demarcation dividing pro and anti American camps. South Koreans wanted to take charge of their own history and move beyond the failures of the past towards a truly sovereign democratic future. Activists soon turned to issues such as reunification, which was taboo prior to democratization.

The appearance of a marked surge of anti-Americanism again in the summer of 2002 only serves to further illustrate the point that such protests are about much more than the United States. The death of two young school girls run over by a US tank saddened the nation, but what drove its citizens to action was the release of the soldiers involved. This went straight to the heart of national identity and sovereignty, issues that have been central to social activism in South Korea for decades. While the protesters burned American flags and gathered around US military bases, the streets were packed with more than radical protestors who held fierce oppositional views to the United States. These rallies also consisted of citizens who saw cracks in the fragile democratic sovereignty they had fought so hard to secure. They saw a nation that had come of age but was still locked in an outdated, unequal partnership with a larger power, a painful reminder of a colonial past.

The apparent contradictions of the voting motivations of Roh's youthful supporters in the 2002 elections serve to highlight the issues surrounding sovereignty and national identity. Individuals who protested against the US and the SOFA did not necessarily want the American troops gone from their nation. The concerns were more complex than media clips of anti-American protests seemed to suggest. It was once again Korean national identity that was at stake. Anti-Americanism did play a role in the elections but only as a vehicle to express deeper anxieties about Korean national identity and the unequal relationship of the Status of Forces Agreement.

In the years since the 'two-girls' incident, anti-American sentiment has seemed to fade from the main arena of socio-political discourse. The recent beef protests were more about the perception of President kowtowing in an unequal relationship with disregard for

welfare of the people. To be sure, this was an issue that happened to involve the United States, but it was not a function of a deep-seated dislike for America. This ebb and flow of anti-American sentiment, that at times seems to reach dangerous crescendos, is part of South Korea's gaining confidence and desire for construction of a new national identity, a historiography that moves beyond years of contested sovereignty towards a triumphant and autonomous South Korea. Anti-Americanism in Korea has existed "more as a positive projection of Korean nationalism rather than a negative reaction to specifically American Culture" (Robertson 5). We may very well see another spike in anti-Americanism in the near future, triggered by a specific event or a reaction to policy. It is my view, however, that as South Korea matures and the United States policy towards South Korea evolves to treat South Korea as more of an equal partner these anti-American outbursts will diminish in intensity and frequency.

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