

The Changing Perception of America in South Korea: *Transition or Transformation?*

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Abstract

The general South Korean predilection for the United States, which has been mistakenly called “chinmi” (pro-Americanism), is nothing but a blind sense of amity to America imposed by the harsh requirements of the Cold War and nurtured by the undemocratic and militantly anti-communist political regimes of South Korea. “Banmi” (anti-Americanism), emerged as a corollary of two synchronous processes since the 1980s, i.e., the political democratization of South Korea and the breakdown of the Cold War system. Since America had been persistently mythologized and assimilated in post-Korean War South Korea, the tracks of the perceptual transformation include disillusionment with the discrepancy between U.S. foreign policies and its professed ideology, trade issues, awakened consciousness of South Korean national self-respect, and changes in the Korean perception of the world. The rise of anti-American sentiment should therefore not be construed as a token of the radical shift in Korean attitudes toward America but as a reflection of the normalization of the way Koreans view America and the world. Discussions on the future of anti-Americanism in South Korea should take into account the history and the nature of South Korean people’s love and hate of America.

Keywords: anti-Americanism, pro-Americanism, democratization of South Korea, Korean nationalism

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Prologue

In South Korea, it is widely believed that the country's attitude toward America has been shifting. And concerned scholars generally consider that South Korea, once one of the friendliest Asian countries to America during the Cold War, has turned into a country that does not hesitate to express its anger at American attitudes toward Korea and the world. But this does not imply that the overall perception of America in South Korea has shifted from pro-Americanism (*chinmi* 親美) to anti-Americanism (*banmi* 反美). Politically, South Korea's attitude towards America has not changed in any drastic way. Korea's military and diplomatic relations with the U.S., despite some minor interruptions, remain basically unchanged. Notwithstanding such recent radical demands as the withdrawal of U.S. troops from South Korea, the majority of the population still believes that protests against American policies should not lead to hostile anti-Americanism incapable of tolerating the presence of U.S. forces in South Korea. Nevertheless, no one can deny that America has been gradually demoted from its status as a reliable ally to that of a selfish empire eager for strategic and economic stakes in the Korean peninsula. In particular, the rise of anti-American sentiment even among the more general population calls for analyses other than simply describing the changing image of America in South Korea.

The rise of anti-American sentiment has been one of the most striking social changes in South Korea in the past two decades. Upon closer inspection, however, it is clear that these changes are more complex than a mere transition from pro- to anti-Americanism. Rather, they reflect a structural transformation in Koreans' way of perceiving America and the world. Contrary to some hastily made observations, Koreans' anger at and protests against U.S. policies today does not mean that anti-American ideology in the country is prevalent. Furthermore, *banmi* (anti-Americanism) in South Korea cannot be identified with anti-Americanism in other parts of the world, such as that in France¹ or the Middle East. While anti-Ameri-

1. "One definition of Frenchness has come to be non-Americanness" (Astier 1993, 236).

can sentiment has indeed been steadily rising in South Korea, it has been neither an expression of a political or cultural hatred of the U.S., nor an expression of an indigenous ideology denying everything American. Today, many South Koreans feel basically ambivalent towards the United States. Koreans blame America's arrogance and unilateralism even as they envy and emulate the country's power and democracy. The result is a compound set of emotions made up of Korea's recent awakening toward American arrogance, while still feeling a sense of bondage with America. With this in mind, any serious inquiry into the ongoing eclipse of emotional ties between the two countries should begin with the understanding of the nature of South Korean people's love and hate of America. In other words, analysis should deal with Koreans' unique way of perceiving America, not with the perceptual shift from love to hate itself.

Love and Hate for America

The common assumption that South Koreans' attitude toward America has undergone a radical shift from pro- to anti-Americanism since the end of the Cold War rests on the false notion that South Korea's pro-American position during that era was constructed entirely by its own choice. Strictly speaking, genuine pro-American sentiments have never existed in South Korea. Although there seemed to be ubiquitous good feelings toward America in most parts of South Korean society today, the love for America from the Korean War to the late 1970s was not supported by a self-motivated pro-American ideology. During the Cold War, South Koreans engraved on their hearts a mythologized image of America, and thus were eager to absorb its culture.

The general and persistent predilection for America in South Korea was built on stereotyped and erroneous images of America that shaped national sentiment during the course of political developments on the Korean peninsula from the end of the World War II. The southern half of the Korean peninsula came under U.S. military

rule from the summer of 1945, and the U.S. backed the establishment of an independent, though divided, Republic of (South) Korea in 1948. Two years later, the United States swiftly made the decision to intervene in the Korean War to repel the communist North Korean attack across the 38th parallel. This disruption came in the initial phase of building a new nation, and in the eyes of many South Koreans, then, America was a benevolent ally to be trusted as its only reliable guardian. The U.S. was welcomed as the savior who delivered Korea from the colonial rule of Japan and as the blood-sworn ally who had faithfully helped repel the communist invasion in 1950. In addition, the United States was not only a generous patron willing to support Korea's economic development, but a sworn ally who would resolutely defend them from future attacks from communist North Korea. While America was regarded as its determined patron, few suspected that U.S. policy toward South Korea was not established for the benefits of the South Korean people, but rather as part of a grand strategy to achieve global dominance in which South Korea would be a bulwark against potential communist expansion into Northeast Asia. Indeed, South Koreans looked up to America as its savior, ever-present ally, and ideal figure that would help promote Korean affluence in the future.

However, what underlay this mythologized image of America was not a positive knowledge of, or judgment on America on the part of South Koreans, but the geopolitical imperatives of South Korea that was in desperate need of a reliable military and economic patron. Therefore, in spite of the nationwide sense of ties to America, Koreans have never espoused genuine pro-American feelings based on their detailed knowledge and estimation of America. Rather, their predilection for America was derived from an emotion incidental to the geopolitical situation into which South Korea was plunged, accompanied by the overwhelming military and economic presence of America in South Korea. Pro-Americanism therefore was not the result of reasonable deliberation. What has been construed as pro-Americanism is at best something as obvious as the air that South Koreans had to breathe every day.

As a result, so called pro-Americanism in South Korea has been an extension of the inveterate tradition of turning eyes away from America as a foreign nation. America was too close an object for Koreans to examine closely. For that reason, the word *chinmi* (pro-Americanism) was invented only after *banmi* (anti-Americanism), emerging suddenly after the mid-1980s. In any event, intellectually balanced perceptions of America were forestalled by emotionally prefixed images of America. The American political system became the modernized model for South Korean political institutions because America was not just a foreign country but the very embodiment of modernity. Even the uniquely American outlook, i.e., denying a demarcation between America and the world, greatly influenced the way South Koreans viewed the world. Indeed, Koreans considered America as nothing less than the world itself. The American value system was taken for granted and admired as an advanced and universal moral system. American evangelical missionaries were welcomed and respected as the disciples of enlightenment and modernization. The influx of American culture and products paved the way for American hegemony in South Korean popular culture. For many, America was the only entrance to the West. Such simplified worldview, mistaking "American" for "Universal," eventually blinded South Korean intellectuals to the political and historical distinctiveness of this country. They unconsciously adopted the perspective of American intellectuals as their own. This lends insight as to why there has been a mysterious absence of American experts among South Korean political scientists in the Cold War era, in contrast to an abundance of Soviet and Chinese specialists.² These are the reasons that South Koreans' view of America was initially dominated by "mythologization."

Another process by which the images of America were constructed in South Korea is that of assimilation. Assimilation implies that

2. The Soviet Union and communist China were the most important subjects for American area studies during the Cold War, while South Korea had no diplomatic relations with these countries until the late 1980s.

South Koreans accepted almost everything American without due deliberation, and that America was loved or hated primarily in accordance with its policies toward Korean domestic political and economic developments. In a word, South Koreans absorbed “the American” into their own identity. And the absorption of “the American” unwittingly led Koreans to harbor unquestioned aspirations for American wealth and freedom. They envisioned the future of their nation as the embodiment of American affluence and liberalism, without trying to appreciate America for its unique political civilization. As in the process of mythologization, so too a blind sense of affection for America was fostered in the process of assimilation. And it often numbed South Korean leading intellectuals to such a degree that they could not even recognize their ignorance of American civilization or American ideology, so that they mistook their shallow acquaintance with America for an objective understanding. Therefore, the social elite of South Korea educated in American institutions did not consider America as their most urgent and relevant research subject. Instead they observed American cities, landscapes, and shopping malls. Most of their knowledge about America was nothing more than a collection of miscellaneous information or a set of passing impressions. The elite’s superficial and biased understanding of America, together with their adoring attitude towards the country as their singular, honest patron, drove them to paint a rosy portrait of America. Since then, envy, jealousy, and admiration have defined the main characteristics of South Koreans’ perception of America, while observation, analysis, and estimation have been largely omitted.

This is the hidden story of *chinmi*, or pro-Americanism in South Korea. To summarize, *chinmi* is not based on a spontaneous and positive estimation of American civilization. It is the extension of a collective impulse of South Koreans to feel gratitude and amity towards America. It is also combined with an adoring fantasy that the people of America have reciprocal concerns. Therefore, pro-Americanism in South Korea is merely an illusion, and the rise and spread of anti-American sentiment since the mid-1980s cannot be construed simply as the sign of the transition from pro-Americanism

to anti-Americanism.

What, then, is the true nature of hate for America today? Those who hate the United States are provoked by a dislike of American culture, values, institutions, and society, as well as by the country's enormous influence in the world. As one noted scholar has said, "when we look at anti-Americanism today, we must first distinguish between those who attack the United States for what it does, or fails to do, and those who attack it for what it is."³ Because anti-Americanism in South Korea belongs to the former category, and because, as we shall see shortly, the origin of the hate for America in South Korea can be traced to the grievances South Korean people have harbored due to chronic submissiveness of Korean authoritarian regimes to America, anti-Americanism in South Korea is to be distinguished from the religious or cultural anti-Americanism in other parts of the world, especially in the Middle East and France.

In the Middle East, virulent anti-Americanism grew mainly⁴ out of a deep political animosity toward America's pro-Israeli Middle East policy, and has evolved into the fanatic and religious hatred toward America. In the case of French anti-Americanism, America is viewed as an inferior culture aspiring to dominate the soul of the West and the world with naked power and greed. But anti-American sentiment in South Korea originated neither from the hostilities toward the foreign policies of the U.S. nor from a haughty air of disdain for American culture as snobbism. That is, the "ugly America" in South Korea is neither the "country responsible for the evils of the rest of the world," nor "a menace to itself and to mankind,"⁵ nor an empire made of complex web of sociopolitical forces.⁶ Unlike France or the Middle East, the anti-Americanism found in South Korea is characterized by its reaction to specific actions. The American haters in South Korea hold America responsible for the division of their nation in

3. "Why don't they like us? How America has become the object of much of the planet's genuine grievances and displaced discontents" (Hoffmann 2001, 18).

4. Refer to Doran (2002, 177-190).

5. Refer to Harris (2002/2003).

6. Negri and Hardt (2000).

1945, the bloody suppression of the Gwangju Uprising in 1980, and the civilian deaths caused by the misdeeds or criminal offenses of American soldiers in South Korea. They view America as an arrogant and imperial power, which despises and exploits their nation. They believe that America should be more respectful for the sovereignty and dignity of the Korean nation. These beliefs constitute the perceptual basis of South Korean antipathy to America.

The Anti-American movement in South Korea arose out of desperate attempts to denounce the shameful history of modern South Korea, in which any suspicion of or any criticism against America was thoroughly suppressed. And antipathy to America (which was originally instigated by America's connivance with the South Korean government's brutal suppression of Gwangju Pro-democracy Movement of 18 May 1980) was suddenly amplified by being combined with the South Korean people's preexisting abhorrence of the authoritarian and pro-American military regimes.⁷

To identify the unique sociopolitical implications of anti- and pro-Americanism in South Korea, it must be kept in mind that since the presidential election in December 2002, South Korean society has undergone a generational split into a tendentiously pro-American (*chinmi*) conservative and the emotionally anti-American (*banmi*) camps. Following a U.S. military court acquittal of two American soldiers whose armored vehicle ran over two schoolgirls in 2002, large candlelit rallies were held every night in the heart of Seoul as well as in some of the largest cities in South Korea demanding an apology from the U.S. government for the girls' deaths and the acquittal of the soldiers. People were protesting the unfairness of the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) between Korea and the United States and criticizing Washington for being slow to resume negotiations on an amending this agreement. Clearly, the outbreak of mass rallies in a country considered one of the most pro-American in the world was an occa-

7. Gweon (2003a, 31).

sion remarkable enough for observers in Seoul to depict the rallies as just another outburst of anti-Americanism found elsewhere in the world. And, not surprisingly, it aroused grave concerns among South Koreans who, denouncing such radical demands as the withdrawal of American troops from South Korea, insisted that the South Korean-American alliance and a mutual sense of commitment should not be threatened or weakened. Thus, rising anti-American sentiment and the ensuing concerns about it naturally went hand-in-hand with the competition between the two major election candidates representing the two different camps. For this reason, the South Korean presidential election in December 2002 unexpectedly assumed the appearance of a showdown between the conservative pro-American generation and a reformist, anti-American one. Moreover, after the election of the new president Roh Moo-hyun, who echoed the desires of a majority of young voters by not hesitating to make bluntly critical remarks about the U.S., the issue of anti-Americanism emerged not only as a disturbing issue for Korean-American relations but also as one of the most complicated agendas in post-election South Korean politics.

All this reveals that the two conflicting perceptions of America pitted against each other are not the end of the story. Rather, it reveals that South Koreans' feelings towards the U.S. are closely correlated with the extent to which their political stance is conservative or reformist. In other words, people's attitudes toward America are in functional relation with their political stance. And it is the uniqueness of South Korean people's love or hate for America that a specific political standpoint has been annexed to it. However, few scholars or journalists on either side of the Pacific have hitherto inquired into the unique and specific nature of the South Korean people's way of viewing America, something that the present essay undertakes.

The Four Tracks of Perceptual Transformation

I have suggested that the South Korean blind sense of amity to America (*chinmi*) during the Cold War was generated by the two perceptual traps, i.e., mythologization and absorption. If this is indeed so, the logical prerequisite for the rise of antipathy towards America is a demythologization and dissimilation of America.

The process of demythologization and dissimilation has proceeded in four distinct but interrelated tracks. The first was laid down in May 1980. As mentioned previously, anti-American sentiment in South Korea did not originally grow out of a professed anti-American ideology that outspokenly blamed America and denounced everything American. Instead it grew out of disappointment and disillusionment with America when the Korean people realized that the U.S. government, contrary to their expectations, supported singularly repressive dictators for its strategic stakes in South Korea. In fact, as early as the late 1970s, the repressive regimes' chronic submissiveness to America began to stir up a strong antipathy towards America among opposition intellectuals in South Korea. But a pivotal event occurred at a time when no serious signs of anti-American sentiment were yet evident among the general population. Amidst violent protest against General Chun Doo-hwan's new military regime in May 1980, both the citizens of Gwangju and opposition intellectuals expected that the U.S. government would actively intervene to enforce justice and bring about an end to his ruthless rule. That expectation reflected Korean's perception of America as savior, an image they had cherished since their liberation from Japan. U.S. authorities were well aware that if they colluded with ruthless General Chun, they would risk fanning the flames of anti-American sentiment in South Korea. But they chose not to intervene, and even approved the use of South Korean forces under their command to suppress the uprising.⁸ Though there has been intense controversy

8. In a declassified cable sent to the State Department, the U.S. ambassador to South Korea, William Gleysteen, described the U.S. posture toward the demonstrations

over the degree of approval or involvement of America in the draconian quelling of this uprising, many Koreans began to harbor suspicions about the United States' hidden role. Various accusations of U.S. complicity in the massacre have been raised, the most common and plausible contention among them being that the United States was in a position to deter Chun Doo-hwan and his subordinates from deploying the lethal Special Forces in Gwangju City, a position granted it in the 1978 Combined Forces Command coordination agreement between the ROK and the U.S.⁹ Believing that America had approved Chun's seizure of power in December 1979 and the subsequent bloodshed in May 1980, many South Koreans became disillusioned with America. They realized that America had betrayed the democratic and humanistic values it so passionately espoused to the nations of the world. Certainly, Koreans' ideological disappointment in the actions of the American government (or lack thereof) during the crisis of Gwangju lies at the root of the ongoing anti-American attitude among South Koreans today. Ever since, the issue of democratization has become inseparable from the issues of "de-Americanization" in South Korea. For this reason, the militant student movements in

thus: ". . . [South Korean] First Marine Division is op-con to CFC (Combined Forces Command) and U.S. approval would be required for movement. There has been no request for such approval yet. But CINGUNC (Commander in General of the United Nations Command in South Korea) would agree if asked" (From Gleysteen to Secretary of State, 070906Z, 7 May 1980). And in a cable sent to the American Embassy in Seoul, Secretary of State alluded that the U.S. "shall not oppose ROK [Republic of Korea] contingency plans to maintain law and order . . ." (From Secretary of State to Gleysteen, 082057Z, 8 May 1980). Though the U.S. has persistently denied the possibility of American involvement, anti-American sentiment in South Korea grew out of the probable assumption that the U.S. approved General Chun's plan to use military forces against the citizens of Gwangju. "Kwangju [Gwangju] is also a rallying cry for growing anti-American sentiment, particularly among students. Many Koreans hold the United States Commander of the Combined U.S.-R.O.K forces, General John Wickham, approved General Chun's withdrawal of troops from the North Korean border to deploy them against the citizens of Kwangju. Few accept the United States' explanation that it had no authority to prohibit the reassignment of the troops" (Asia Watch Committee 1986, viii).

9. Fowler (1999, 265-288).

South Korea from the early 1980s equated the struggle against authoritarianism with that of liberating South Korea from the imperial domination of America.

In any event, the U.S. connivance at General Chun's brutal handling of the Gwangju Uprising marked a decisive turning point in the history of South Korean's perception of America. To be sure, it was the first fanning of anti-American sentiment among South Koreans. Thereafter, the ideological stance towards America has gradually become a yardstick to measure people's political ideology, with pro-Americanism being the trademark of the conservative right, and anti-Americanism being a symbol of the radical oppositionists.

The second track of perceptual transformation can be found in the economy and trade issues. The patron-client relationship between the American and South Korean economies, which had lasted for decades, began to radically change in the mid-1980s. By the late 1970s, South Korea was no longer an underdeveloped economy dependent on America's aid. It was no more a docile recipient than America was a generous donor. As South Korea's economy grew rapidly to become one of the leading economies among the NICs (newly industrializing countries), the U.S. government and Congress felt that the rapid growth of South Korean export to America was one of the main factors that aggravated the balance of trade with Asia. America began to view South Korea as an economic competitor rather than as an economic subordinate, causing tension in the bilateral trade relations between the two countries. In addition, outright trade pressures on South Korea unilaterally exercised by the USTR (United States Trade Representatives) and the U.S. Congress from the 1980s, such as the random applications of "Super 301," provided South Korean citizens with seemingly clear evidence that America had ceased to be its most devoted patron. Hardly had their first experience of disillusionment with America died away before the South Korean people again soberly realized the vanity of their wishfully affectionate perception of America. Moreover, the pressures on the South Korean economy generated by the "Uruguay Round" and WTO negotiations provided another source of demythologization in Kore-

ans' view of America. The United States' deplorable international financial policy record dealing with the South Korean financial crisis in 1997 provided a critical occasion for Koreans to detach America from their identities. During this crisis, people in South Korea had to painfully witness American-dominated institutions such as the International Monetary Fund dictate financial policies that would bring disaster to their lives. Thereafter, the persistent myth of America as an affluent and generous patron for South Korea finally collapsed.

The third track of transformation originated in the issues concerning American troops in South Korea. The SOFA agreement between South Korea and the U.S., which goes back as far as 1966, did not provide Korean judicial authorities with the right to take charge in investigating and indicting American soldiers who commit crimes against South Korean civilians. In the past, successive South Korean military regimes, being leery of publicizing any incidents that might hurt the "mutual friendship" between the two countries, placed strict taboos on news coverage of even the gravest offenses committed by American soldiers. This way, most of the criminal offenses by American soldiers stationed in South Korea went almost unnoticed. But with the end of the Cold War, as well as the concurrent democratization movement, South Koreans belatedly awakened to the unfairness of the customary practice of turning a blind eye to the crimes committed by foreign soldiers. Denouncing a chronic deference to America, the people of a newly democratizing South Korean society began to protest the inequality between the two nations. The more they became concerned about a national impotency and Korea's right to prosecute crimes committed by U.S. soldiers, the less the chances that offenses against South Korean civilians by American forces went unnoticed. As the frequency of news coverage on American forces in South Korea increased, emotional appeals to the necessity of close friendship between the two nations gradually lost its ground. Instead, the question of national self-respect took up the center of gravity in South Korean discourse on its relationship with America.

The final and the most significant track was the transformation of the perception itself. As they started to detach their self-identity from America, people of South Korea were finally able to escape the perceptual cave in which their love or hate for America was deduced directly from America's policy toward South Korea. They were liberated from the narrow perspective that had induced them to confine their sight to American policy toward South Korea, and began to see international affairs in a wider perspective. Koreans began to perceive America as just one, though still the most intimate, of foreign countries in the world. Consequently, an overall antipathy to post-Cold War American foreign policy began to arise, whereas in the past, major grievances against America focused mainly on America's support for South Korean authoritarianism or its unilateral attitude toward South Korea on economic and military issues. Attempts were therefore made for the first time to make an overall evaluation of U.S. foreign policy, especially by South Korean students and intellectuals. Today, Koreans are very sensitive to the fact that after the 9/11 terrorist attacks there has been a sharp break in American foreign policy from the past, which confined the use of American force to defending the vital interests of America. And many people worry about the Bush Doctrine pursuing something like an empire, not just because it affects the fate of the Korean peninsula but because Koreans are concerned over the contradiction between the Bush Doctrine and the common interests of the world.¹⁰

The demythologization of and psychological detachment from America in various areas has been followed by shifts in the way Koreans view other parts of the world. Some of the South Korean press from the mid-1990s began to express their views on world affairs, and tried to stop seeing the world through an American lens. For instance, South Korean press commentary on the Middle East began to change. As the demythologization of America proceeded in South Korea, the traditional South Korean view of Israel as a small country surrounded by hostile and aggressive Muslim states was

10. See Chace (2002, 1-19).

replaced by the more balanced view that she was responsible for the killings of powerless Palestinians by the American army or by sanctioned assassination squads. It is interesting to note that South Korean people, who used to maintain a groundless affinity for Israel during the Arab-Israeli wars in the 1960s and 1970s for the sole reason that Israel was the only trustworthy ally of America in the Middle East, eventually began to take a different line of reasoning in regards to Middle East politics, paying due attention to the plight of the Palestinian people. It was this transformed image of the Middle East that drove Koreans to organize their first massive anti-war protest against the war called "Operation Iraqi Freedom" in the spring of 2003, an operation initiated by pro-Israeli neoconservatives in the Bush administration. Furthermore, Bush's attempt to undermine South Korean president Kim Dae-jung's "sunshine policy," designed to further the goal of reunification of Korea, as well as his hawkish, unilateral stance in the most recent North Korean nuclear crisis also accelerated the process of the perceptual transformation. Many South Koreans now agree with Michael Marti when he asserts that America fears a unified Korea that would not easily come under the influence of the U.S.:

With economic and political ties to China, a unified Korea could be drawn into a yuan-dominated regional market to counter Japan's economic and potential military influence. Even more important, however, the rationale for United Nations and American troops in Korea would be gone, furthering China's goals of becoming a regional hegemony and pushing the United States out of Asia.¹¹

The implication of the above passage is that the true interest of America in the Korean peninsula is not to support Koreans' efforts to establish peace in the peninsula, but to maintain the 37,000 U.S. troops in South Korea as a linchpin of the U.S. military presence in East Asia. As Koreans have awakened to the stark realities of interna-

11. Marti (2001, 4).

tional politics, the traditional idea of a strong and natural bond between South Korea and America has been weakened, whereas Cold War hostility between North and South Korea wanes. This is the final phase of demythologization and dissimilation of America in South Korea, in which America's tough stances against North Korea, unlike in the Cold War era, are not hailed by South Korea but are feared for their potential to instigate a second Korean War.

The Historical Inevitability of the Transformation

If the recent rise of anti-American sentiment is not to be construed as a result of the linear transition of South Korean people from one of America's closest friends to a bitter enemy, then how can we explain or define it? The first thing to keep in mind in trying to answer this question is that anti-Americanism in South Korea is not to be understood in the same way that anti-Americanism in other parts of the world is. The nature of anti-Americanism in South Korea needs to be seen against the backdrop of the modern political history of South Korea, rather than in terms of the evolution of South Korean perception of America. The mythologization of America in South Korea was made feasible by the historical reality of modern South Korea, which until the late-1980s has been under the rule of determined anticommunist and unabashedly pro-American dictators such as Park Chung-hee in the 1960s and Chun Doo-hwan in the 1980s. In those years people were suffocated under relentlessly anticommunist governments, and few could look askew at America, the godfather of the anticommunist "Free World." Anti-Americanism was unthinkable because even the slightest expression of it could have been read as an indisputable sign of treason. Most people in those years viewed America as a permanent blood-ally sharing militant anticommunism. In short, "*chinmi*" was identical with anticommunism (*ban-gong* 反共), and since there was no room for anti-Americanism (*banmi*), there was similarly no need for the word "*chinmi*." Furthermore, the South Korean economy and security was too dependent on the Unit-

ed States to make it possible to observe it detachedly. As long as South Koreans regarded America as an object of feeling rather than a mere subject of study, a blind and unilateral sense of affinity to America was taken for granted. Nurtured and encouraged unwittingly by successive pro-American regimes, a chronic and blind sense of amity to America evolved into a South Korean national pathos: a pro-American pathos which has always gone hand in hand with suppression of democracy in South Korea. For this reason, struggles against authoritarian rule since the mid-1980s were tinged with self-aborrent reflections on the habitual and unilateral sense of amity to America. Besides, the realization that the U.S. was merely a self-interested power with its own strategic interests in Northeast Asia must have been preceded by attenuation of the chronic tensions between the West and the communist powers. South Korean people's perception of America was transformed in the course of the interrelated and historically inevitable courses of development, namely the democratization of South Korea and the end of the Cold War.

The rise of anti-Americanism is unquestionably a concomitant result of the political democratization process in South Korea. A pro-American posture was, however unwittingly, nurtured and encouraged by Korea's authoritarian leaders, because they suspected and denounced even the slightest sign of anti-Americanism as an act of agitation backed by communist North Korea. In this way, pro-Americanism, or "counter anti-Americanism" was embedded in the perception of South Koreans for several decades. Keeping this in mind, then, the recent anti-American protests in South Korea should first be analyzed based on South Koreans' reflections on the history of their view of America. Most importantly, it must be noted that recent anti-Americanism originally grew out of Korean's struggle against repressive dictators from the late 1970s to the mid-1980s. In other words, it was born of an introspective emotion that did not start from a outright hatred of America, but consisted of a compound of grievances and disappointment with America which, contrary to its professed democratic ideals, was willing to stand by the authoritarian regimes of South Korea. In the final analysis, what motivated anti-American

sentiment from the outset was the democratic opposition movement that was preoccupied with the task of democratization. South Korea became disillusioned with America for betraying its own expressed democratic ideals and for supporting South Korea's anti-democratic governments. What continued to fuel anti-American sentiment was South Koreans' antipathy towards their repressive regimes which were politically oppressive, socioeconomically unjust, ideological coercive, and most importantly, chronically and habitually subservient to America. Therefore, a popular demand for democracy and a strong antipathy towards the government's chronic subservience to America naturally coalesced into an awakening to a sense of national autonomy and self-respect.

As South Korea's self-confidence rapidly increased with the rise of its international reputation from the mid-1980s, and as its persistent obsession with close ties with America gradually weakened with advent of the end of the Cold War, anti-Americanism (*banmi*), which grew out of an introspective anger at the nation's political misery came to represent nationalist and reformist causes. The cause of *banmi* became the moral foundation upon which radical reformists denounced their fractured history and expressed the desire to retake control of their nation's fate. Anti-Americanism became the emotional premise for achieving the cause of national sovereignty in the face of the overwhelming presence of American power in South Korea. Democratization, therefore, marked the birth of anti-American sentiment in South Korea. In this way, Korea's introspective anger at its own fate was transformed into explicit expressions of anti-American sentiment.

Another factor explaining this transformation was a structural shift in world politics marked by the breakdown of the Soviet bloc, and followed by the sudden end of the Cold War. These changes completely transformed the way South Koreans viewed America. In South Korea, the reform of Gorbachev's Russia and the subsequent breakdown of the Cold War system paved the way for the "Northern Policy" initiated by president Roh Tae-woo from the late 1980s. This policy ambitiously turned the largely pro-American diplomacy that

had determined the relationship between the two countries over the previous four decades into an “free-for-all” diplomacy, extending the South Korean government’s formal relations to communist China and Russia. Beginning with the initiation of diplomatic relations with Hungary in February 1989, the South Korean government quickly normalized diplomatic relations with former communist countries in Eastern Europe, such as Poland (Nov. 1989), Yugoslavia (Dec. 1989), Bulgaria (Feb. 1990), Czechoslovakia, Romania (Mar. 1990), and Albania (Aug. 1991). The establishment of diplomatic relations with these Eastern European countries meant that the traditional worldview of the South Korean people, which had been based on the premise that only relations with the West were worthwhile finally began to collapse. Most of all, since the initiation of formal relations with communist Russia (Sept. 1990) and communist China (Aug. 1992), the world proved to no longer be a battleground between the “Free World” led by America and an “Evil Empire” driven by communist expansionism. Thus, the breakdown of the traditional global outlook, intertwined with the rise of a more balanced and sober perception of America, gave the final blow to the South Korean people’s hackneyed conception of America as an eternal ally.

What accelerated the demythologization of and dissimulation from America was the rise of a mood of detente between North and South Korea. To be sure, the improving relations between the two Koreas since the late 1990s has irreversibly changed the perception of America among ordinary South Korean citizens. The decisive impetus for the change was the engagement policy (“sunshine policy”) toward North Korea initiated by President Kim Dae-jung in 1998.¹² Once the engagement policy set out to change the image of North Korea from that of “devil” into the other half of the a single-yet-divided Korean nation that shared a common goal of reunification, the sentimental identification with America, which had been bred from the belief that communist North Korea was their common enemy,

12. For a comprehensive understanding of the background to the engagement policy and for detailed policy suggestions to the U.S., see Harrison (2002).

began to loosen.

To reiterate, anti-Americanism in South Korea was not born as a indigenous anti-American ideology. Rather, it is the natural outcome of the transformation of South Korean people's perception of the world including the United States and North Korea, a change instigated by historical developments both in South Korea and around the world.

Pro-Americanism vs. Anti-Americanism: Some Misconceptions

What scholars on both sides of the Pacific have called mutual perceptions between South Korea and America are actually nothing more than South Koreans' unilateral love and hate for America, because in general, American citizens harbor no impression of or interest in South Korea, let alone feelings for the country. In sharp contrast to South Korean's traditional view of America as their closest ally, most American people have little if any interest in the country. The only association that the United States makes regarding South Korea is that it sacrificed tens of thousands American soldiers in the Korean War. Otherwise, South Korea is no more than a poor country thirsting for American dollars and a subservient ally that depends on America's military assistance. A true mutuality has been absent in these "mutual relations."

A severe disparity between perceptions has been accompanied by a unilateral sense of bondage towards America, a bondage that has been cherished by South Korea. In other words, the customary pro-American sentiment of South Koreans, be it real or imagined, was built on the naive assumption that America cared about Korea to the same extent that Koreans felt close to America. This deep disparity in mutual perception went unnoticed or ignored, and scholars often overlooked the hidden nature of South Koreans' unreasonably unilateral sense of affinity for America. Importantly, a unilateral sense of amity to America, which is not reciprocated by America, should not be regarded as a genuine pro-Americanism. Therefore, the

widespread conception that pro-Americanism and anti-Americanism are in conflict in South Korean political circles, or that one is to be supplanted by the other, is ultimately based on superficial and misleading observations. And, as long as “genuine” pro-Americanism has never existed in South Korea, there can be no ground for referring to a rise of anti-American sentiment, or to an overall transition of a South Korean perception of America.

This is not to underestimate the meaning or significance of the recent outburst of anti-American sentiment caused by the unilateral policies of George W. Bush against Iraq and North Korea. But as the arguments above have elucidated, anti-Americanism in South Korea is an extension of Koreans’ collective recognition of national dignity that had been denied by first Japanese rule, then by forced division, and lastly by Korea’s undemocratic regimes that were unreservedly subservient to America. In other words, anti-Americanism arose from the nationalistic antipathy to a unilateral and blind sense of affection to America. Today, therefore, *chinmi* is readily associated with *sadae* (serving the great 事大) and political conservatism, whereas *banmi* is believed to connote *jaju* (national autonomy 自主) and a reformist stance. Hence, anti-Americanism in South Korea should be understood in relation to the increasingly apparent fact that Koreans are asserting their sense of national self-esteem.¹³

If the recent rise of anti-American sentiment is an extension of rising national self-consciousness to which South Korean people were belatedly awakened by the historical forces of democratization and the post-Cold War reconstitution of world politics, aspirations for the realization of national self-esteem must underlie the anti-American pathos. These aspirations demand, above all, a duly equivalent amount of respect from America. They also include the desire to end the hostile confrontation between the two Koreas and to achieve reunification of the Korean peninsula. Strictly speaking, this is “counter pro-American” sentiment. So the outburst, temporary or not, of anti-American sentiment in recent South Korea is nothing but

13. Gweon (2003b, 169-186).

an inevitable corollary of the normalization of South Korea's view of the world and itself. With the exception of the outright hostile, anti-American motivation of some radical activists, anti-American sentiment in contemporary South Korea mainly stems from the country's awakening to the nationalist imperative of completing the belated modernization of the nation, and establishing a unified nation with democratic institutions. Therefore, the candlelight rallies that took place in the fall 2002 and the ensuing demands for the withdrawal of American forces from South Korea should not be construed as a direct expression of anti-American belief or ideology. Rather, they are an extension of the long standing aspiration of Korean nationalism to exalt national sovereignty and dignity, which Koreans feel has been denied them altogether by the exigencies of the Cold War.

It must be kept in mind that the term *chinmi* was invented only after *banmi* emerged as a catchword for the radical intellectual movements in the 1980s. What *banmi* disdainfully named *chinmi* was nothing more than a routinized and blind sense of amity to America that went hand in hand with a paradoxical absence of inquisitiveness about the United States. Therefore, though the rise of *banmi* in South Korea can be discussed, the overall transition of *chinmi* to *banmi* in South Korea is a misconception, since *chinmi* and *banmi* never grew out of the same perceptual soil, nor did they exist on the same perceptual spectrum.

Concluding Remarks

For the past two decades, South Koreans have transformed their way of perceiving America and the world at large. This transformation should be distinguished from a simple change in attitude toward America. Still, despite the rise of *banmi*, the majority of South Korean population believes that "We can criticize the United States if it makes a policy that we feel is wrong, but that criticism should not lead to anti-Americanism. The presence of U.S. forces serves our national interests." The prescription for curbing the further rise of

anti-Americanism in South Korea is as follows: "What the authorities in both Seoul and Washington should bear in mind at this volatile juncture is that they must try to look into the real causes of anti-American demonstrations. They must review whether they have provided unnecessary ammunition for public outrage by failing to respond sincerely and promptly to reasonable complaints."¹⁴

However, these attempts can be effective only if both parties make serious effort to rectify the situation. First, America should understand the unique process that has generated anti-American sentiment in South Korea. To do so, America must modify its flawed understanding of Third World nationalism in general, as has been well testified not only in its record of Cold War foreign policy but also in the present quagmire in Iraq. Though South Korea in the Cold War era persistently emulated America and tried to identify itself with the West, South Korean nationalism belongs to Third World nationalism in the two senses that Korea has experienced colonization, and also in that it has not yet reached the final phase of nation-building, i.e. the political unification of the nation. If American policymakers examine the anti-American mood in South Korea from a more historically-informed perspective, they will be able to identify a historical continuity between South Korea's opposition to Japan in the 1960s and its antipathy to America in the 2000s. But the United States has so far seemed to make no distinction between South Korea and other countries in its perception of anti-Americanism. And America has paid no attention to the fact that South Koreans' protests unwittingly reflect the long standing aspiration of the nation to obtain substantial autonomy and due respect from the big powers around the Korean peninsula. Rather, in its policies and diplomatic postures even after the end of the Cold War, the U.S. has inadvertently revealed its presumptions that South Korea will remain dependent to the U.S. in a faithful alliance. For instance, after the second North Korean nuclear crisis broke out in October 2002, the U.S. policy toward North Korea was stubborn and consistent in demanding the

14. Quoted in Lee (2000).

unconditional abandonment of its nuclear program before taking into consideration ways to guarantee North Korea's security. But in showing its firm stance against North Korea, especially in making repeated insinuations that the United States was considering preemptive strikes against North Korean nuclear facilities, America seemed to care nothing about the probability of a desperate counterattack from North Korea. Consequently, the people of South Korea feel that the U.S. is willing to risk a second Korean war without regard to the fate of the Korean nation. This provided the emotional ground upon which the Korean people denounced the U.S. invasion of Iraq in spring 2003. Furthermore, the request for dispatch of South Korean troops to Iraq to offset American casualties continues to cause anger among most of the South Korean population, which feels that America still perceives Korea as a subordinate ally and expects the latter to stand by it, irrespective of the morality and legitimacy of its policy. This is the prime reason why most Koreans today, while admiring American technology, American ideas of democracy, and the American market economy, do not hesitate in making strong protests against its policies and consider it an arrogant empire. In order to halt a further escalation of anti-American sentiment in South Korea, the U.S. should pay more attention to the necessary condition on which South Korean people's amity to America is to be sustained, which is showing due respect for the dignity of the South Korean nation as a sovereign partner.

Corresponding efforts should also be made on the part of South Korean people. Above all, they should recognize that their views on America have been ambivalent and too emotional. It is undeniable that South Korean perception of the United States has been dominated overwhelmingly by love or hate, and that emotional blindness has provided a perennial ground on which the South Korean people's perception of America has been constructed. Emotions—love or hate—have always forestalled reasoning not only in Korea's perception of America but in their actual dealings with America. This is partly due to the fact that for the past several decades there have been few intellectual movements worthy of attention in South Korea that inquire

into the essence and nature of American civilization. In other words, there has been paradoxically few, if any, efforts on the part of South Korean intellectuals to regard their closest nation as a principal subject in area studies. So it is no wonder that no groundwork has been laid on which a more practical and less emotional perception of America could be cultivated in South Korea.

The replacement of emotion with reason and knowledge is the most urgent requirement for the South Korean people to redress the chronic love/hate dichotomy that has dominated their perception of America. Though some scholars in South Korea who criticize the love/hate paradigm have suggested a more practical stance towards America,¹⁵ many Koreans still believe that America is either good or bad. And the obsession with taking sides in a presupposed mood of love or hate is the main obstacle to redressing Koreans' way of viewing America and the world. So the transition of South Koreans' perception of America should not be the only issue under discussion. It is crucial to examine the course of future transformations of the way South Korea and America view each other. And it would be most productive to inquire into the mutual perceptions between the two countries.

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15. "Yongmi" (用美) refers to guarding against an excessively emotive stance towards America, and making use of American power for the benefit of South Korea.

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