

The Candlelight Protest and the Politics of the Baby Stroller Brigades

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Abstract

This article is an ethnographic study of the “baby stroller brigades” (BSB) that represents one of the many Internet-based communities that attracted public attention in Korea during the candlelight protest of 2008. In this article, we raise several heuristic questions. First, why and how did the BSB produce such sensationalist public attention? Second, who led the BSB and who were the active members in the BSB? Third, what were the specific strategies and types of political mobilizations the BSB engaged in during the candlelight protest? Finally, what are the BSB members doing now? In answering these questions, this article argues that the sociocultural ideas about married middle-aged women, called ajumma, in Korean society are closely associated with the huge debates on the BSB members’ activities despite their relatively minor role in the protest. Despite the limitation, most BSB members expanded their political view to include larger social issues. However, their efforts are continuously confined within the sociocultural constraints that they have as ajumma.

Keywords: mad cow disease, risk society, candlelight protest, baby stroller brigades, middle-class women, maternity, patriarchy, everyday life politics, subjectivity, sociocultural constraints, social movement

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Introduction

The Baby Stroller Brigades (BSB) represent one of the many Internet-based communities that attracted public attention in Korea during the candlelight protest of 2008. The BSB's political mobilizations became the focus of intense debate not only during the protest but also long after. They have continued to inspire debate about the proper behavior of women in politics over the past two years. The participation of these middle-class women has been disputed in the courts as well as within Korea's academic circles (Eun 2009; Y. Kim 2009).

One of the prime reasons why the BSB drew such ire from significant portions of Korean society is that they used their babies—many of whom were infants—as part of their dramatic political demonstrations. Once their performances made it to the Internet, some Internet users claimed that the BSB took advantage of their children for political purposes which sparked intense political and ethical debates. Some Koreans seized upon the dramatic images of baby strollers in the middle of a protest movement to effectively move the political debate about maternity to the ethical issues involved in using young children for political purposes. Despite some opposition, a sizeable number of Koreans supported the BSB as they viewed the children as fundamental to informing the public about the hazards in beef imported from the United States.

The BSB also provoked many questions about the characteristics of the 2008 candlelight protest. Numerous scholars struggled to understand the reasons why women were the most active participants in the protest. But many scholars remain confused about the sociocultural motivations that led many women to the protests let alone the lasting effects of their protest on the broader political spectrum. The increased role of women has led to a debate on whether the candlelight protest represents a new kind of social movement (K. Cho 2008; Y. Park 2008; Choi 2009; Y. Kim 2009). However, most of such analyses have not been based on rigorous empirical research.

In contrast, this article approaches these questions with thorough ethnographic descriptions of BSB activities. In this way, we hope to

raise several heuristic questions. First, why and how did the BSB produce such sensationalist public attention? Compared to other women Internet-based communities, the BSB was relatively small. Furthermore, many other Internet-based communities struggled more vigorously against the government and conservative media elites. Second, who led the BSB and who were its active members? To date, no relevant study (that we know of) examines the political consciousness and experiences of these female activists before and after their participation in the candlelight protest. As mentioned above, most of the scholarly debate has not been based on empirical data that analyzed the women's socioeconomic positions or gender politics. Third, what were the specific strategies and types of political mobilizations the BSB engaged in during the candlelight protest? Such performances clearly drew from the members' political experiences and were shaped by the specific nature of the Korean nation-state, capitalism, and patriarchy. We will analyze how these experiences informed their political subjectivities under both politico-economic and socio-cultural constraints. Finally, what are the BSB members doing today? Some have gone back to the normal routines of life with very little change in their political consciousness. Others have developed more progressive political views through their experiences, but have hesitated to act on their new political consciousness because of the constraints of their everyday lives. Other members emerged from the protests with substantive changes in their political view on the world and government practices.

This article also explores the sociocultural contexts that caused BSB activities to be seen as more remarkable and controversial than other participating groups. In the process, we also delve into the various social and political motivations that motivated some middle-class women to actively join the BSB, while describing the experiences of BSB members and analyzing their changing subjectivities during the candlelight protest. Finally, we investigate how participation in the candlelight protest changed the political consciousness and practices of BSB members.

In answering the questions, this article argues that the sociocul-

tural ideas that construct Korean understanding of married middle-aged women, referred to as *ajumma* in Korean, framed the ensuing debates about the BSB and its membership's activities despite their relatively minor role in the protest. We believe that the BSB used the cultural idea of *ajumma* to legitimize their participation. This strategy—relying upon the social and cultural position of middle-class *ajumma*—was effective but also resulted in confining the range of their activities to the narrowly circumscribed role of *ajumma*. Despite these limitations, most BSB members expanded their political views to include larger social issues with much liberal political consciousness. However, their efforts to substantiate their political consciousness in everyday life are continuously confined within the sociocultural constraints imposed upon *ajumma*.

Theoretical Background

At the heart of the candlelight protest was fear of the danger of U.S.-imported beef. This problem was not new at the time. In the 1980s and 1990s, Europe was wracked with scandals and social protests associated with bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), better known as mad cow disease. Following these protests in Europe, Western academics grew interested in the types of social responses to the representations of issues of food safety and public health. For the most part, these studies focused on the type of problem that Ulrich Beck conceived with his concept of “risk society” (Beck 1992, 2007). For Beck, risk society refers to the way societies are systematically organized in order to deal with the hazards and insecurities produced by modernity.

Accordingly, most studies focus on the risk factors of mad cow disease as a phenomenon of post-capitalism and the globalizing political economy. The political economy of mad cow disease entails an urgent demand to locate the actors and agencies that are to be blamed for the sociocultural and political problems. To explore such aspects, many studies highlight the representation of the disease in

the media and among politicians. For instance, Abell (2002) and Washer (2006) attempted to determine how mad cow disease was discursively described. Moreover, they directed attention to who (or what) was said to be at risk and who was to be blamed in the United Kingdom. Unfortunately, these studies did not distinguish between collective experiences on the one hand and how British citizens have engaged these problems differently according to their own sociocultural contexts on the other hand. Most of the studies on public interpretation and response to the disease, including Abell's and Washer's studies, tend to focus on social and psychological aspects rather than sociocultural ones; they ask who feared the disease more among people of different backgrounds in intelligence, gender, and class, who people would blame, and who was more willing to select safe foods (Hansen et al. 2003; Raude et al. 2005; Leikas et al. 2007).

Another significant gap in the literature appears regarding the question of public resistance against debatable food policies with potential risk factors on public health. In fact, food scandals and related fears for public safety have rarely caused long-term nationwide protests as was seen in the 2008 Korean candlelight protest. In the Korean case, the unique characteristics of the candlelight protest were related to the political economic conditions and sociocultural context.

In attempts to describe and analyze the features of the candlelight protest, Korean scholars have tended to interpret the event mostly in terms of the national history, especially the democratization movement and the political struggles between the progressive and the conservative forces in Korean society. Within such a limited historical context, these academics have been especially consumed by debates about the political role and characteristics of the women who participated in the protest. The arguments generally fall into two categories. Some researchers stress the positive characteristics of the candlelight protest, some even arguing that female participation represents the emergence of a "new" type of politics and subjectivity associated with everyday life (K. Cho 2008; Jeong 2008; H. Choi 2009; Y. Kim 2009). This argument is tenuously connected to "new social movement theories" (Johnston et al. 1994; Kurzman 2008) in

Western academia.

However, some scholars argue that the meanings and effects of female participation in the candlelight protest are over-interpreted and largely exaggerated (S. Park 2008). In a dismissive tone, this line of argument asserts that the protests were little more than a performance reflecting the embedded sociocultural order. In other words, this kind of protest was motivated by women's emotional fear and egoistic intentions of protecting their children and families. Further, the actions of these women would hardly bring fundamental changes to the existing political economic structure (D. Kim 2008; Lee 2008; Y. Park 2008). This group of scholars continues to argue that the largely female participation in the protest does not imply the formation of a new force to lead social movements in a new, progressive direction. They are rather suspicious that some researchers intended to divert people's attention away from class struggle and critics of capitalism by emphasizing new social movements and the emergence of new political subjects concerning everyday life and personal values and desires (D. Kim 2008; Y. Park 2008).

This article critically examines the relevance of both arguments. We believe that both arguments are based upon dichotomous evaluation of the effects of the protests and the subjectivity of the candlelight protest participants. A participant's consciousness is not always consistent with one's practices at the individual level. In turn, the participant's consciousness and practices at the individual level are not always consistent with ideologies and practices at the organizational level. Furthermore, the consciousness and practices at both individual and organizational level do not always bring about changes at the structural level. Instead, we find that the dichotomous evaluation of a social movement such as the candlelight protest stems from the fact that Korean scholars have discussed the political implications of protests or social movements without tapping into relevant theoretical models such as the four different modes of power outlined by Eric Wolf (1990, 586-587). According to Wolf, one mode of power is "the attribute of the person," which emerges as a "capability." The second type of power can be understood "as the ability of

an ego to impose its will on an alter in interpersonal relations.” The third is “tactical and organizational power” that “controls the settings.” The fourth mode structures “the possible field of action of others” (Foucault 1984, 428) or “the political economy” (Wolf 1990, 587). This model can help us understand the candlelight protests and better describe the manner in which BSB members gathered, participated, and eventually left the protests. By discerning these differential modes of power, we can avoid dichotomous evaluation of the activities of BSB members and thereby reveal the contradictory and ironic processes found in their motivation, practices, and the results or effects of their activities.

Research Process and Method

In collecting the empirical data on female participation in the candlelight protest, we began with three Internet-based communities: Antimb, 82 Cook, and BSB. We examined the message boards to understand the process of the women’s mobilization, as well as their various activities and lives during and after the protests. While all three Internet-based communities shared concerns regarding the main issues related to the protest, they had numerous differences in terms of their political intentions. Moreover, there was an important difference in the social and class make-up of the membership of the three groups.

The BSB is quite different from Antimb and 82 Cook in a crucial way. Unlike the other communities, the BSB was launched in the middle of the protest with the explicit purpose of mobilizing residents to oppose the import of U.S. beef. This community was relatively small with a membership of 1,700. Most of the members were *ajumma* and mothers who ranged between their mid-30s and early 40s. BSB members, in many ways, are much less vigorous in their activities when compared to Antimb and 82 Cook members. While the members of Antimb and 82 Cook continue to actively participate in political activities, the BSB has been largely dormant since the cessa-

tion of the protest. Despite their smaller size and more sporadic activities, the BSB stole the spotlight and was featured in the media portrayals of the protest. Most importantly, it is the BSB that was by far the most controversial. For these reasons, we began to concentrate on uncovering the reasons why this community became such a lightning rod for the politically charged debate over the issue.

As we began conducting our fieldwork, we tried to contact the main leaders of the BSB. After many unsuccessful attempts, in March 2007 we finally reached a BSB leader whose username in the community is "Open-mom."¹ Since she was residing abroad, we communicated with her by video chat and phone a number of times. Open-mom explained the history and central figures of the BSB and became a key informant, introducing us to many important BSB activists. As a result of her help, we eventually met and interviewed ten members. Unfortunately, we were unable to make contact with three figures who were crucial to the founding and development of the community: Uni-mom, Smile-mom, and Blue-mom. To make up for this shortfall, we traced their personal writings on the boards of the BSB, 82 Cook, and Antimb. Moreover, we indirectly acquired information on their activities from other members who had maintained a close relationship with the three moms.

Our interviews focused on the history of the group's activities. But more specifically we sought to understand the motivations and convictions that brought these individuals to actively participate in the candlelight protest. In this way, we were able to analyze the main discourses and issues that they sought to raise in their web-communities and the general public during the protest. In addition, we collected each interviewee's life history to evaluate her changing political consciousness and practices before and after her participation in the protest. We complimented the ethnographic material with an exhaustive search of the media reports that depicted the protest. Lastly, our personal participation in the 2008 protest helped us better understand the whole process and implications of the protest.

1. In this article, we use pseudonyms for all.

Candlelight Protest and the Appearance of Baby Stroller Brigades

In 2003, with the reporting of mad cow disease in North America, the Korean government began banning beef imports from the United States. On April 18, 2008, the Korean and U.S. governments agreed to loosen the quarantine of U.S. beef and resume importation. When this happened, many commentators pointed to the apparent coincidence between the easing of import restrictions and the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) negotiations between the two governments, conjecturing that the Korean government might have lifted the ban to help ease FTA talks.

The resumption of U.S. beef imports resulted in a backlash from the Korean public. Criticism of the government exploded in cyber space as Internet-based communities harshly judged the government's simple evaluation of the problem in purely political and economic terms. A large number of Koreans asserted that the decision to remove the quarantine was based on an unfair agreement that benefited American exports at the expense of Korea's best interest while also damaging national pride. Simultaneously, President Lee Myung-bak fomented additional controversy when he stated that the agreement was positive because it allowed Koreans to buy quality beef at low prices (*Kyunghyang Shinmun*, April 22, 2008). Without a doubt, the president's statement did not sit well with the general public. His miscalculated statement only kindled public anger. Many Internet-based communities with anti-government sentiments quickly spread Lee's statement and in a short time, more than one million citizens joined a petition-signing campaign that sought to impeach the president.

The more the government tried to highlight the safety of U.S. beef, the greater the public became enraged. In the middle of this turmoil, on April 27, the president tried to extricate the government from responsibility by stating that the issue "depends on the Korean consumers whether they chose U.S. beef or not" (*Hankyoreh*, April 28, 2008). To make matters worse, the government simply dismissed

the public's suspicion and fear about the dangers of mad cow disease as a "spooky story" (*goedam*) based on unscientific theories and fictional accounts. The government also blamed the left and anti-government political factions with malicious political intention for the spread of these ghost stories (*Money Today*, May 2, 2008). To the public, the government statement and reactions to the situation appeared to ignore the public's concern of health issues, which many viewed as one of the basic rights of citizenship.

In this atmosphere, an April 29 airing of *PD Notebook*, a popular TV program dealing with current affairs, presented many uncertainties about the safety of U.S. beef. They questioned the quarantine system of the beef industry in the United States regarding BSE, and reported on what they called a few probable cases of human BSE, that is, Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (CJD). As the public began paying greater attention to the horrible scenes of wobbling cows, the truth game revolving around scientific facts began to be overwhelmed by nationwide fears and anti-governmental sentiments.

On May 2, three days after this episode of *PD Notebook* was aired, the first candlelight protest took place, as the fury moved from the virtual world of cyberspace to the real world. Over the following three months, hundreds of thousands of Koreans with candlesticks stood on the streets almost nightly to urge the government to renegotiate the U.S. beef deal. By the middle of May, these peaceful assemblies were being held under the name of the "Candlelight Culture Festival."

As the protests went on, President Lee officially apologized on May 22, saying that his administration had not made sufficient efforts to listen to public opinion before signing the beef deal. Despite the apology, the public continued to believe that the government was unwilling to take action to renegotiate the deal and was only providing rhetoric to calm public sentiments and defuse the protests. Accordingly, the protesters moved out of the square and began to march on the streets on May 24, where they were met by riot police with water cannons and police wagons. Many citizens were arrested in this mayhem (*Mediaus*, May 25, 2008).

As the candlelight protest led to physical confrontations between

the protesters and the police, two concerns came to the foreground of the debate. The first was the question of whether the protest was the result of “pure” concern over public health or whether it was fabricated for political means. The second was how to sustain the nonviolent and peaceful spirit of the candlelight protest. Many participants understood that if the protest turned violent, the government would have a convenient excuse to revert to overt suppression. The online community Antimb’s message board was the most prominent venue for these debates.

As a solution to these two related problems, the activist known as Blue-mom drew the attention of people in the Antimb community when she suggested that marching with baby strollers would be safe in terms of staving off violence of the government and effective in publicizing the group’s concerns about food safety. Many community members agreed with her idea and saw marching with baby strollers as a way to provide legitimacy to the movement in the name of family protection. As her suggestion became a sensation in Antimb, Blue-mom made an effort to organize a protest group specifically composed of mothers with babies in their strollers. After several days of discussion and preparation, she and her followers dubbed the group “the Baby Stroller Brigade” and planned to take action on May 31.²

Before her plan could be fully carried out, four mothers with baby strollers accidentally appeared on national television two days before the BSB’s planned protest. On May 29, in response to a report that the government was about to announce the resumption of U.S. beef imports, many citizens rushed to the streets in anger. Despite the original plans for initial action on May 31, the four mothers rashly joined the protests, and soon more than a hundred people followed their cue. The sudden appearance of baby strollers at the protest captured the media spotlight. It seems that the media and many protesters found significant meaning behind their appearance, just as Blue-mom and her followers intended. Their marching was broadcasted on

2. At that time, there were various types of “brigades” like high-heel brigades of young ladies and tie brigades of white-collar males in candlelight protest.

the Internet where they were introduced as a baby stroller brigade, dozens of mothers with babies joined this vanguard. As a result, the four mothers, especially Smile-mom who was interviewed on an Internet-based broadcast, became famous.

After her initial plan of launching the group of “baby stroller brigades” unraveled unexpectedly, Blue-mom took another step to open an Internet-based community named BSB, becoming a manger of the community on May 30. Her new plan was so successful that community membership grew to nearly 1,000 mothers in only a few days. These new members had heard of the “baby stroller brigade” in the media and other Internet communities. The four mothers who accidentally launched this media spectacle also joined the BSB.

Despite this success, the inauguration of the BSB’s emergence had conflict. Blue-mom blamed Smile-mom for not only spoiling her “pure” plan but also for unfairly acquiring fame. Many members dismissed Blue-mom’s suspicion as inconsistent with the “pure” motives and non-political principles of the BSB. Amid rising opposition, Blue-mom unsuccessfully raised her grievance on the message board of Antimb and then shortly abandoned the BSB.

Blue-mom’s departure left the BSB with the urgent need for a new leader. In another unforeseeable twist, Open-mom—one of the four mothers who unwittingly started this frenzy—became the group leader. With new leadership, the BSB began its efforts in earnest. From early June to mid-August, active members participated in the candlelight protest at least once a week. As both mothers and housewives, they invented additional ideas to carry out a more effective struggle. They prepared yellow balloons to present slogans to citizens and to alert other protesters that this group had brought their babies to the rallies. Some even put up banners with slogans attacking U.S. beef on their home verandas. They also actively shared ideas with each other on how to best mobilize against the sellers of U.S. beef. They even carried out a boycott campaign by calling advertisers and requesting them to stop placing their advertisements in the conservative newspapers that they believed distorted the meaning of the candlelight protest. However, the reason why the BSB drew much public

attention was not because of these actions. Instead, it stemmed from their “taking advantage of” their babies as a central part of their protest activities. Thus, they created a unique situation where babies were involved in the protest, stirring up heated controversy.

Maternity, Child Abuse, and Patriarchy

Few would doubt the assumption that maternal instinct was a fundamental reason why many women, especially *ajumma*, joined the candlelight protest. In fact, throughout the protests, many *ajumma* were preoccupied with the fear that they could unknowingly poison their children with lethal foods. The government tried to allay public fears, especially those of women, about the threat of mad cow disease. On May 6, a lawmaker representing the ruling party argued that the probability of getting mad cow disease was one in 4.5 billion, lower than the probability of being hit by lightening (*Kyunghyang Shinmun*, May 6, 2008).

Such an objective presentation of numbers failed to soothe the growing fears. One member of the BSB explained the futile nature of the comment:

Joy-mom: It is so funny to mention the probability of mad cow disease infection. I do not care about such figures. No one can guarantee that it will never happen to me. If it happens anyway, the probability will be one 100 percent to me and my family.

As mothers and housewives, they believed that they had the right and obligation to provide good and nutritious food to their families, and therefore their abhorrence and fear of the danger of mad cow disease was greater than others. In spite of the recognition of maternity and female roles in ensuring the safety of food, how could the concept of maternity set off heated disputes in the process of BSB activities? While *ajumma* used the notion of maternity to lend authority to their struggle, it also made them targets for those who opposed the BSB. The conservative media spearheaded the attack as

they raised ethical questions about bringing babies to dangerous protests. They openly criticized the BSB for opportunistically using their babies as a “shield” to protect themselves from attacks of the protests (*Herald Media*, June 10, 2008).

Refuting the criticism, the BSB *ajumma* claimed that it was government policies that endangered their children. They also argued that the babies in strollers would remain safe if the police allowed the marches to unfold peacefully. In fact, in the early stage of the candlelight protest in May, most of the BSB members believed that the protest sites were not necessarily dangerous or violent. On the BSB web message board, some members often compared the protest spots to picnic places for babies or the streets where fans gathered to cheer the World Cup team in 2002. Under these circumstances, BSB members believed that the presence of mothers with babies symbolically represented peace and that they were playing an important role in preventing a clash between the protesters and the riot police.

Responding to the argument by members, the conservative media and Internet communities expanded the discourse of the “shield” into the issue of child abuse. They argued that it was inhumane for mothers to expose their children to the rigors of protest. They presented children at protests as suffering an ordeal that was both physically and spiritually damaging. This image of suffering children was captured by a prominent conservative Internet user who asserted that the experience of marching in the protests was “soul harassment” which he argued was worse than sexual harassment (*CNB News*, June 11, 2008). Accordingly, some conservative Internet community members denounced the BSB protest with baby strollers as an act of “torturing” babies and raised suspicion that BSB members might not be the babies’ biological mothers. Most of the BSB mothers we spoke with were not convinced by such commentary, which they dismissed as slander. One informant pointed out that the protests were no more a harassment of the soul than most places that are deemed appropriate for kids: “Hey, playgrounds and theme parks are much noisier than the protest spots” (from a board of BSB).

The criticism of the BSB did not only come from politically

motivated conservatives, but also from the BSB members' husbands. Though most of their husbands were sympathetic to the cause of the candlelight protest—some even participated—often, they were reluctant to let their wives, let alone their babies, participate in the protests. Some of the BSB members believed that their husbands' worry stemmed from the potential for violence in the protests which might harm their children, but many suspected that the husbands still adhered to the belief that the public and political spheres are best left to the control of men.

This conflict with their spouses was such a dominant theme that many members of the BSB exchanged information on the website about strategies to avoid conflict with their husbands. Most of these posts expressed the need to retain positive relations with their husbands in order to sustain their activism. Instead of directly challenging their husbands' patriarchal ideas, most of the posts suggested compromise as the best strategy. Joy-mom provided an example:

Joy-mom: As you know, they had to go back home anyway to prepare supper for their family and do some housekeeping stuff. They made a kind of nickname for themselves. They said that they were like Cinderella who has to go back home at midnight. They also had a curfew. One had to go back at seven, so she was named *childerella* (*chil* is the number "seven" in Korean). There were also *palderella* (*pal* means "eight") and *guderella* (*gu* means "nine").

Homes were not the only place where *ajumma* were confronted by patriarchal ideas and assumptions. At the protests, many mothers found themselves continuously arguing with other protesters who they characterized as the "paternalism" of the progressive male activists. On the board of websites, they endured ridicule from men who teased and degraded them as *ajumma*:

Soul-mom: He boasted of his position in the group and the important role of the group in the candlelight protest. . . . [He said that] all the things that women could do for the protests are just to provide monetary support . . . [He said] just do what we will guide . . .

So I quarreled with him . . . [She said that] this protest is the movement of all citizens. Who can order whom to do what?

Open-mom: I went to the protests to make a better world for my children . . . and for all of us. [But some men laughed at her, saying] what a noisy *ajumma!* Look at yourself. Why don't you behave like a normal *ajumma!*

To avoid such various constraints in and out of the protests and to sustain the pure image of motherhood, BSB members often discussed behavioral rules. The rules included where they should gather, when they should return home, how to discern safe and dangerous places, and how to organize the march to minimize the possibility of meeting unexpected situations. However, some members complained and saw these ideas as passive. They agreed on the fact that the priority of the BSB should be the safety of the mothers and babies. However, they believed that if the BSB was overly concerned about safety, they might not achieve their original goals. As a result, the debates can be generalized into two parties, i.e. hardliner and soft-liner, within the BSB and these debates grew increasingly intensified. Some mothers insisted that they had to sustain the pure image of motherhood regardless of changing situations. Others sought for more active ways to resist the government's aggressive measures. As a consequence, the BSB met its first moment of internal conflict and division.

Nonpolitical Political Struggle

As time passed, physically violent scenes at the protests were more highlighted than peaceful ones. But the protesters seized the opportunity to relate their struggle with the government to one of the most revered days in the history of the Korean democratization movement, the June Uprising of 1987.³ Their efforts succeeded in widening the

3. On June 10, 2008, over one million citizens were gathered nationwide. It was the biggest number during the protests.

appeal of the candlelight protests. Facing a growing opposition, the government resorted to more repressive tactics and the riot police sought to gain some control over the protesters.

Increasing violence gave way to the emergence of several factions within the BSB ranks. Indeed, a small group of members left the BSB on account of the principle of nonviolence. Amid the discord, Open-mom consolidated ideological control in terms of the nonpolitical image of *ajumma*. She opposed the growing belief, represented by Uni-mom, that the BSB should form alliances with other political groups. Open-mom said:

Open-mom: If you support any specific politicians or political parties, you are political. The BSB was not political since we took actions not to support any specific political faction. I don't agree with the idea that there must be any connection between one's political inclination and the antigovernment sentiment. Once realizing how absurd the government's policies are, you have a right to criticize them regardless of political faction you support. It is just normal not to support President Lee if you have reasonable value and morality, isn't it?

Obviously, the BSB was political. However, Open-mom adopted a strategy of still taking political actions while remaining within the confines of Korean patriarchy. By holding the values of motherhood and its consequent maternal duties to protect their children from harmful food, the BSB was able to dodge a certain amount of political scrutiny. Without such a tactic, the BSB would have been a much easier target. Instead, they countered growing criticism from conservatives with claims that they participated in the candlelight demonstrations with "pure" motives deriving from maternal instinct and duties. Thus said, it is unclear whether the members consciously kept their distance from politics or if they aimed to maximize the political effects of their activities by the strategy of de-politicization. They might take advantage of publically acceptable normative rules—a politician with integrity is not so political—in a political game to pragmatically maximize the political effects of their actions (Bailey

1969, 1-7).

Despite all the efforts they made to be “nonpolitical,” at the end of June, the violence spiked and the perceptions of the BSB became increasingly polemical. Two events highlight this problem for the BSB. On June 26, when the government announced that they would publish sanitary conditions for U.S. beef in the official gazette, one depiction of the standoff in the media showed a mother using her baby in a stroller to block the way of a water cannon truck at midnight.⁴ On top of that, a few days later a more disturbing image of the police shooting a fire extinguisher at a baby stroller emerged.

It is important to understand that despite the controversy evoked by these images, the BSB resolved to remain “nonpolitically” strengthened.⁵ In addition to their increased sense of vulnerability, they endured more conflict from their families. They used the mantra of being “nonpolitical” to shield themselves from criticism by their families as well as the police and other adversaries. Throughout the protest, emphasizing the power of motherhood, the majority of the community clearly expressed a strong antagonism against governmental policies. However, this did not always mean that they had a will strong enough to accomplish the goals of the resistance at any costs. In essence, they were afraid to threaten their own political economic security by overtly challenging the patriarchal order.

4. Newspapers reported that she was a member of BSB just because she was pulling a baby stroller. It was revealed later that she was not a member of BSB (*Hankyoreh*, June 26, 2008).

5. There were two categories of people from which BSB members tried to keep distance. One was *alba* (a part-time worker) which represented the side of the conservatives. The other was *jeonmun siwikkun* (a professional instigator) which represented the side of the radical progressives. Both categories were considered as *jeongchikkun* (a professional political actor) who was “political” from the perspective of BSB members.

The Resistance of “Learned Moms” and “Well-Off Moms”

By the end of June, the number of BSB members marching on the streets had drastically declined. Crowds that were once in the hundreds were now less than thirty. The decline in participation stemmed from several issues. First, many members began to believe that the police had started to probe the BSB members’ personal information. Many feared that their activism was beginning to harm their husbands’ job security. Indeed when BSB activities were creating a sensation in the media, some of their husbands were being advised by their bosses or colleagues to “watch over” their wives. For those who had government jobs, the scrutiny was greater. Others who owned businesses also feared that the government could seek reprisals by auditing their tax returns. It was relatively easier for *ajumma* whose husbands were self-employed in small-sized businesses to constantly participate in the protests.

Second, as mentioned before, the increased violence led many to leave the movement at the request of their husbands and families. As a result, the remaining *ajumma* were either those whose husbands understood their activities in the BSB or those who could afford to ignore such an opposition. In any case, time and money became an obstacle for many *ajumma*. Taking babies to protests and related events was time consuming. Moreover, bringing baby strollers meant they had to use taxis as their main mode of transportation. For many, the transportation costs alone reached upwards of 600,000 won per month. Few *ajumma* could withstand this financial burden for very long.

In the face of these obstacles, it became clear that *ajumma* who remained actively involved after July were at the intersection of learned women who had their sights on social issues and well-off women who could afford to bear the financial burdens of the protests (Y. Kim 2009, 27). As a result, Open-mom’s political line gained the support of relatively wealthier members and dominated the decision-making process as well as the legitimacy to represent the identity of the BSB. Moreover, this leadership believed that reinforcing the

image of well-off women was a good strategy in confronting the government who tried to dismiss the BSB as being “idle or homeless” (*Newscham*, June 4, 2008). Accordingly, they sought to fortify their “pure” maternal motive with the “classy-chassy” image. One member explained the importance of this upper-class image to the success of the broader movement:

Open-mom: I believed that our community was necessary for the candlelight protest to say, “Even these (well-off) people are here!”. . . The government needed to know that the candlelight protest encompassed a variety of social classes to resist its false policies which infringed upon citizens’ basic rights. . . . I thought what I should do was to satisfy such an expectation to our community, keeping our image “classy-chassy.”

Despite this dominant view of the leaders, the “classy-chassy” image was not accepted by some of the remaining *ajumma*. Some mothers, with a more eclectic social perspective, believed this image distorted their cause by putting image ahead of resistance. According to Soul-mom, the BSB’s image of being comprised of “learned” and “well-off” women was more of an accident than a proper representation. In addition, she thought that this image of being well-off was a double-edged sword. It was the source of uneasy relations with opponents as well as other protesters.

Nevertheless, this internal division about the “classy-chassy” imagery never developed into overt conflict. Instead, BSB *ajumma*, regardless of the subtle differences in opinion on how to represent the group’s identity, agreed on the primary need to fashion proper protest methods that was suitable to their social and cultural positions as young middle or upper class mothers.

Returning to Daily Life

The official gatherings of the candlelight protest almost ended in the middle of August. Shortly after, a scandal involving Chinese milk

came to light when melamine-tainted milk from China shook Korean society in September 2008. Despite the food danger, protesters did not rush back to the squares. In the face of this clear threat to the health of Korea's youth, the lack of action met with a voice that ridiculed the protesters:

Now, your true color has been finally revealed. You pretended to be concerned about food safety but it was only an excuse to protest. Your hidden purpose was to damage the government. Why don't you hold up a candlestick again? (From the 82 Cook message board)

In a sense, this opponent's criticism struck home. The melamine scandal appeared to prove that the candlelight protest had an ulterior motive that merely used food safety opportunistically. Coincidentally, about this time, the candlelight movement almost came to an end and many of the BSB *ajumma* had returned to their normal lives. The number of uploads on the BSB's message board had declined. Most of the telling, meaningful debate had concluded. However, their return home did not necessarily mean the complete breakup of the community. The core members of the BSB maintained their social relationships both online and offline. Currently, the BSB exists as a rather ordinary and small Internet community.

Despite this downturn in political engagement, most of the *ajumma* felt that the experience of the candlelight vigils had changed their political views. Our interviewees and participants in the message boards expressed pride in shedding light on social issues that affect Korean society. It is clear that many of the *ajumma* became aware of the effects of such issues like the Four-River Restoration Project,⁶ the

6. The government launched the Four-River Restoration Project with aims to clean up and revive the major rivers, spurring regional and national development in 2008. But civic groups conducted joint monitoring of the environmental destruction caused by the project's construction process and concluded that the project would definitely lead to sediment pollution, water extraction and filtration problems, and ecological destruction around the areas. As many Koreans affected by this monitoring have continued to oppose the project, conflict between the opponents and the Lee administration has escalated.

privatization of medical services,⁷ and the suppression of the press and public opinion.

Accordingly, some *ajumma* have attempted to put this sense of heightened political consciousness into action once again. For example, it is rumored that Uni-mom, who has explicit political goals, is currently working for a progressive party. Big-mom may be another representative case of one who was transformed into an activist. Like most BSB *ajumma*, she claims not to have had any political inclination and experiences in activism before participating in the protests. However, after taking part in the candlelight protest, Big-mom “opened her eyes” to what she claimed were the irrationalities of society, especially the unfairness of the media that reported the social issues lopsidedly. Hence, she joined an NGO dealing with media issues immediately after the protests concluded. In addition, there are also some BSB *ajumma* who have joined various events such as press interviews, academic conferences, and seminars held by civil rights groups to share their experiences with people.

The majority of the BSB *ajumma* were relieved that their actions did not cause long-term problems for their husbands and other family members, being content to safely return to their homes as “normal” housewives. However, even these “normal” housewives continued to look for proper ways to shape social issues in ways they deemed necessary. At present, the most common practice among BSB *ajumma* is related to the consumption campaign of organic and safe foods. In fact, most of them have joined the activities of consumers’ coopera-

7. For more on this, refer to an article titled “Privatization of Medical Services an Issue for Candlelight Protestors,” dated June 18, 2008 for the online version of the newspaper *Hankyoreh*: “During the Korean presidential election held last year [in 2007], the Korean Medical Association requested the abolishment of a medical system in which the government can appoint a hospital as a health insurance applied hospital. Some experts criticized the KMA’s request as an unstable factor in the framework of health insurance. But, at that time, then-presidential candidate Lee Myung-bak replied that he would review the health insurance system thoroughly, planting a seed of unrest,” http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/293922.html (accessed June 28, 2010).

tives.⁸ For example, Soul-mom, who maintained a compromisory position during the protests, became a member of a consumer cooperative and now depends on the co-op for most of her family's food. In addition, she is a member of a school meals monitoring committee for her children. Reflecting her energetic practices, Soul-mom consistently showed the most overt criticism on various social issues among our interviewees and also a sense of frustration on the narrow and limited scope of *ajumma* action.

Soul-mom: I think of the horror film series *Chucky* whenever I think of the government and other things that are not clearly resolved yet, like the beef issue. . . . However, I think that the candlelight protest will never die out as long as housewives consider how to consume safe food. The candlelight protest had us realize the fact that politics had always been around us. Politics is on my dining table. . . . What should I do with this realization? All I can do is to say something about safer food for our children at school. At any rate, I am working hard because it is mostly the only thing that I can do now.

Like Soul-mom, most interviewees attempted to engage in the appropriate activities depending on the degree of their interest, political economic conditions, and sociocultural constraints. Joining consumers' cooperatives is the kind of activity fitted for almost all BSB *ajumma*. However, it is clear that they are conventionally clinging to their political economic and social cultural positions so that their so-called "everyday practices or resistance" (Scott 1985) have fundamental limitations in leading any radical changes in society.

8. According to articles and media reports on consumers' cooperatives, the members of the cooperatives have remarkably increased since the candlelight protest. As for ICOOP, one of the biggest cooperatives, the membership increased around 40 percent for both 2009 and 2010 (*Money Today*, March 11, 2010; W. Cho 2010).

Summary and Conclusion

Throughout the candlelight protest, the BSB drew a remarkable amount of attention. BSB members participated in the protest process whereas many sectors of Korean society competed only to interpret and define the food crisis. These political debates transcended scientific debates about the dangers of mad cow disease. Weaving a variety of sociocultural experiences and cultural norms, BSB *ajumma* consistently tried to look for an appropriate place for themselves in the protests by representing motherhood and “pure” motives as their core symbols.

In this process, BSB *ajumma*—knowingly and unknowingly—presented an image of themselves as vulnerable mothers with babies to produce an image of sincerity that was nonpolitical and nonviolent. Most BSB *ajumma* seemed to believe that it was easier and safer for them to take advantage of such cultural norms attached to motherhood. These constraints are illustrated by their refusal to create problems with their husbands who negatively responded to the outdoor activities and to maintain passive attitudes or methods of resistance against the government. Due to these efforts, commentators often praised them, saying that “peace demonstration was led by the BSB” (*Kyunghyang Shinmun*, July 9, 2008; Y. Kim 2009, 15).

However, this strategy also had negative consequences and made the *ajumma* realize the vulnerability of their symbolic concept of motherhood and pure motives. It consequently confined the scope of BSB activities and concerns into food issues. In addition, they found themselves to be absorbed in confirming their cultural identity rather than effectively developing their political vision. As a result, the members who were not satisfied with the less conflictive modes of engagement became marginalized and the BSB became increasingly dominated by middle-class *ajumma* who wanted to underline a “classy-chassy” image.

In spite of the limitations revealed in the middle-class *ajumma* activities, many *ajumma* actually experienced changes in their political consciousness and practices. In fact, various activities conducted

by BSB *ajumma* after the protests prove that they came to “penetrate or partially penetrate” (Willis 1981) the problems of capitalism based on their experiences. However, researchers are skeptical as to whether it means, as some scholars argue, *ajumma* really emerged as a new subjectivity of resistance.

Such skepticism can be explained by the concepts of four modes of powers argued by Wolf (1990). During and after BSB activities, *ajumma* individually experienced the growth of political consciousness and influenced each other to take action based on it. In that manner, researchers believed that BSB *ajumma* were empowered in terms of the first and the second modes of power. However, the changes of BSB *ajumma* consciousness and practices were not great enough to form an organizational power and thus could not lead to a structural change in society based on organizational practices. Based on our analysis of BSB *ajumma* discourses and activities, BSB *ajumma* as well as many of the other participants in the candlelight protest were not converted into resistant subjectivity in terms of the third and the fourth modes of power.

Researchers agree with the idea that female participation in the protest exemplified a type of everyday life politics as an alternative social movement. However, to substantiate the argument, we need to know how the concepts of everyday life politics as an alternative movement are embodied in concrete contexts. Based on our research, one of the most common types of everyday life politics is to join consumer cooperatives.

An important point here is that this practice is one of a few options open to *ajumma* within their sociocultural constraints. In this sense, while joining the cooperatives is expected to lead to alternative patterns of food consumption and enlighten the participants on various issues such as environmental problems and agricultural marketing system in capitalism, this practice could have significance basically within the existing—both political economic and sociocultural—structures of society.

Despite the limitations of BSB *ajumma* activities, we do not agree with some scholarly perspectives that appraise female participation in

the candlelight protest merely as a transient and fragmented movement based on selfishness of the middle class. This kind of pessimistic and negative evaluation of BSB activities tends to underestimate the significance of BSB *ajumma*'s changes in consciousness and practices and their future activities. We believe that it is also true that the candlelight protest and BSB activities have provided *ajumma* with at least an opportunity to become aware of the various social and political problems surrounding them and thereby to forge a different subjectivity from the way they thought before the candlelight protests.

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