

Challenging New Conservative Regimes in South Korea and Taiwan

Comparison of the Anti-American Beef Protests

ABSTRACT

This article compares anti-American beef politics in South Korea (2008) and Taiwan (2009) to solve the puzzle of why two similar social protests resulted in dissimilar outcomes. Given the highly comparable political contexts of conservative ascendancy, we argue that cultural factors determined the movement trajectories. The presence of anti-Americanism and the centrality of beef in the national diet produced a strong anti-government movement in Korea but not in Taiwan.

KEYWORDS: American beef, South Korea, Taiwan, social movement

INTRODUCTION

In May-July 2008, South Korean citizens staged large-scale candlelight vigils in major cities to oppose the decision to lift the import ban on American beef. Mass fear of beef contaminated with mad cow disease motivated these protest actions, but as a *New York Times* reporter pointed out, they evolved into a full-blown nationalistic movement.¹ President Lee Myung-bak, who triumphantly rode into the Blue House barely four months earlier, issued a humiliating public apology and subsequently reshuffled his cabinet.

In October 2009, a similar official decision triggered protest waves in Taiwan without generating comparable political reverberations. Taiwanese movement activists framed the controversy as purely a health risk issue; their actions did not escalate into an anti-government protest. Against the visible

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1. "An Anger in Korea over More Than Beef," *New York Times*, June 12, 2008, p. A6.

public anxiety, President Ma Ying-jeou only made a cautiously worded response that fell short of a formal public apology. Five months later, as the incident gradually calmed down, National Security Council Secretary-General Su Chi, one of Ma's most trusted advisors, stepped down to assume political responsibility. Facing the same threat from American beef, why did Korean and Taiwanese protests provoke different outcomes?

A closer look reveals many similarities behind the beef politics in both countries. First, both Lee Myung-bak and Ma Ying-jeou assumed the presidency amid voter dissatisfaction with their liberal predecessors. Lee and Ma vowed to revitalize the economy by restoring the growth-first policy orientation that had been shunted aside by the previous incumbents' excessive "politicking." During the Taiwanese presidential campaign, Lee's uplifting slogan "747" (7% annual growth rate, per capita income of US\$40,000, and the 7th largest economy in the world) found an echo in Ma's "633" (6% annual growth rate, unemployment rate less than 3%, and per capita income of US\$30,000). Once in office, both presidents sought to promote free trade with the U.S. In order to neutralize American congressional opposition to the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (FTA), Lee promised then-U.S. President George W. Bush that Korea would repeal the 2003 import restriction on American beef. Likewise, eager to secure a Trade and Investment Framework Agreement with the U.S., Taiwan's government was willing to concede on the beef issue.

Second, both Lee and Ma enjoyed the advantage of strong parliamentary support that had been denied to the previous administrations. Lee's Grand National Party held the largest majority since South Korea democratized in 1987, taking 153 out of 299 seats in the Parliament.² Similarly, when Ma was inaugurated, his Kuomintang (Nationalist Party) and its pan-Blue allies secured 81 of 113 seats in the Legislative Yuan.³ Both conservative regimes were blessed with unusually large room for political maneuver. With their political rivals routed and dismayed, the potentially explosive American beef issue should have been politically manageable.

Finally, the comeback of two conservative regimes coincided with the re-orientation of foreign policy. Lee sought to strengthen Korea's diplomatic ties with the U.S., which had been damaged by Roh Moo Myun's pro-North

2. Chung-in Moon, "South Korea in 2008: From Crisis to Crisis," *Asian Survey* 49:1 (January/February 2009), pp. 120–21.

3. Thomas B. Gold, "Taiwan in 2008: My Kingdom for a Horse," *ibid.*, p. 89.

Korea orientation. Similarly, in Taiwan, Chen Shui-bian's political overtures toward de jure independence from China estranged his erstwhile American friends. In both countries, the resumption of beef trade was a critical step toward "normalizing" the relationship with the U.S.

Social movement scholars use the concept of "political opportunity structure" to understand how political context facilitates and constrains collective action.⁴ Here, the largely similar political opportunity structure in both polities cannot explain why the Korean protest escalated into a regime crisis whereas its Taiwanese counterpart failed to do so. Popular discontent forced Lee to renegotiate with American trade officials, but the Ma government only responded with a revision of domestic law.

Existing studies of the Korean protest against American beef have emphasized the revolutionary role of the Internet. One highly visible feature was the use by technology-savvy teenagers of online channels to spread instant information.⁵ The major candlelight vigil on May 2, 2008, in Seoul was made possible by the discussion on Agora, a popular Internet forum. Protestors were digitally mobile; they used the Google map service to chart the demonstration route and instant webcams to broadcast their mass rally. Korean officials' clumsy efforts to dismiss the Internet as a cesspool of groundless rumors led commentators to speak of the technological gap between "analog government and digital citizens."⁶

Without denying the significance of the Internet, we argue that the availability of a certain technology alone could not spur a protest event with more than half a million participants. South Korea and Taiwan both possessed strong information industries and were among the world's leaders in high-speed Internet coverage. It was not surprising that Taiwanese movement activists as well relied on the Internet to mobilize their challenges to the conservative government. In November 2008, Taiwanese students mobilized an islandwide protest against the Ma government's aggressive policing during

4. Sidney Tarrow, *Democracy and Disorder: Protest and Politics in Italy, 1965–1975* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Doug McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930–1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

5. Yong Cheol Kim and June Woo Kim, "South Korean Democracy in the Digital Age: The Candlelight Protests and the Internet," *Korea Observer* 40:1 (Spring 2009), pp. 53–83; Whasun Jho, "The Transformation of Cyberactivism and Democratic Governance in Korea: The Role of Technology, Civil Society, and Institutions," *ibid.*, 40:2 (Summer 2009), pp. 337–68.

6. Kyung Bae Min, "Analog Government, Digital Citizens," *Global Asia* 3:3 (Fall 2008), pp. 94–103.

the visit to Taiwan of Chinese envoys. The so-called Wild Strawberry Movement⁷ originated from an online forum and was no less heavily dependent on the use of many state-of-the-art information technologies. Even though the student protest lasted more than one month, it failed to elicit a public apology from the authorities.

To explain the different contours of beef politics in both countries, we shift the research focus from structural to cultural factors. Social movement researchers have discovered that grievances are not an objective precondition that unfailingly leads to protest. Rather, they are a constructed result of activists' interpretation and communication actions, a meaning-generating process called "framing."⁸ A movement frame functions as a perspective that makes sense of the world; it succeeds insofar as it can produce resonance among its audience. In other words, activists need to establish a meaningful link between the protest issue and supporters' everyday world. The stronger this link is, the more participants it can mobilize.

Based on framing theory, we argue that the risk from American beef resonates more with Koreans than with Taiwanese, for two reasons. First, nationalism and perceived threats to it differ in the two countries. South Korea has witnessed the recent rise of anti-Americanism in which the U.S. is seen less as a welcome protector from communism than as a selfish superpower that perpetuates national division. In Taiwan, democratization proceeds with cultural indigenization and a growing sense of Taiwanese identity. The image of China has become less "ancestral land" and more bellicose threat. Thus, the claim that allowing the import of American beef "betrays" the national interest found a more sympathetic audience in South Korea than in Taiwan.

Second, the cultural politics of food matters considerably. South Koreans consume more beef than Taiwanese on the average. Because the local product (*hanwoo*) is expensive, imports make up a great portion of the national diet. In contrast, American beef is a high-end ingredient in Taiwan. Luxury dining

7. Students activists named their protest "Wild Strawberry" for two reasons. First, it was intended as a homage, albeit with a satirical twist, to the 1991 Wild Lily Movement initiated by students. Second, because persons who were born in the 1980s were negatively referred to as "the strawberry generation" for being too weak to bear pressure, adding the adjective "wild" signified their defiance against that pejorative label.

8. David A. Snow and Robert D. Benford, "Ideology, Frame Resonance, and Participant Mobilization," in *From Structure to Action: Comparing Social Movement Research across Cultures*, eds. Bert Klandermans, Hanspeter Kriesi, and Sidney Tarrow (Greenwich, Conn.: JAI Press, 1988), pp. 197–218.

establishments often feature their exclusive use of Angus beef. In addition, there are sizable numbers of Taiwanese meat eaters who do not consume beef, for religious and moral reasons. Therefore, Korean consumers are more likely to perceive American beef as a threat than are Taiwanese consumers. This also explains why the Korean protest at first was spontaneously organized, i.e., without the involvement of professional social movement organizations, whereas the Taiwanese effort was sponsored by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and failed to spark grassroots participation.

By focusing on two cultural explanations of nationalism and culinary style, we follow the methodological principle of “conjunctural causation,” as often seen in the writings of historical sociologists.⁹ Conjuncture refers to the “coming together of separately determined sequences.” Two or more previously independent factors can intersect at a particular moment and give rise to an enduring trajectory. Hence, how Koreans and Taiwanese perceive American hegemony and whether they place a cultural premium on beef-eating are unrelated and contingent, but their fateful encounter at the lifting of the U.S. beef ban produces unforeseeable consequences for the two conservative regimes. In other words, nationalism and culinary custom do not have a logical connection between themselves: neither is a necessary or sufficient condition for the different results.

In the following analysis, we first describe the trajectory of the social movements before and after the conservative political ascendancy in order to better locate two episodes of beef protests. We then explain how different nationalisms and food cultures, respectively, affect the resonance of the threat of mad cow disease.

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND THE NEW CONSERVATIVE REGIMES

In both South Korea and Taiwan, social movements and political oppositions grew and supported each other in their joint challenge to authoritarian regimes. Mass street protests spearheaded by students in June 1987 forced Roh Tae Woo to accept the opposition’s demand to hold a presidential election at the end of that year. In Taiwan, the Kuomintang’s decision to lift 38 years of martial law in July 1987 triggered a wave of social protests. Toward the end of the 1980s, both conservative regimes were battling simultaneously on two

9. James Mahoney, “Path Dependency in Historical Sociology,” *Theory and Society* 29:4 (August 2000), pp. 527–28.

fronts. They needed to win increasingly competitive elections to ward off the challenge of opposition parties while at the same time they had to contain the political impact of social discontent.

In both cases, structural strain resulted from postwar rapid industrialization, giving impetus to social movements. The main protagonists were a combination of workers weary of exploitation, farmers threatened by agricultural imports, and residents contending with growing pollution levels. However, the political significance of these movements differed. Korean social movements appeared to be more ideologically radical and organizationally detached from opposition parties than their Taiwanese counterparts. Since the 1970s, Korean dissidents had been constructing a *minjung* (literally, people or mass) discourse to articulate their opposition to military dictatorship. *Minjung* was simultaneously a class-based movement¹⁰ and a nationalistic movement¹¹ that challenged the American-imposed Cold War order.

In contrast, there was no ideological equivalent in Taiwan. Many social protests in the 1980s were primarily motivated by “victim consciousness” that merely sought government redress for their suffering via labor exploitation and environmental degradation.¹² Although Taiwanese nationalism represented a growing force that questioned the Kuomintang’s minority rule, it was primarily promoted by the political opposition and after 1986, by the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP).¹³ Some social movement activists were ardent supporters of Taiwan independence, but their nationalism was less closely bound with their movement activism, as compared to the Korean *minjung* ideology.

In the late 1980s, Korea’s *minjung* radicalism gave way to “new social movements.” In spite of the moderate turn, social movements continued their claim to represent broadly based constituencies. The Citizens’ Coalition for Economic Justice (CCEJ) founded in 1989 was mainly led by middle-class

10. Hagen Koo, “The State, Minjung, and the Working Class in South Korea,” in *State and Society in Contemporary Korea*, ed. Hagen Koo (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 145.

11. Man’gil Kang, “Contemporary Nationalist Movements and the Minjung,” in *South Korea’s Minjung Movement: The Culture and Politics of Dissidence*, ed. Kenneth M. Wells (Honolulu, Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 1995), pp. 31–38.

12. Hsin-huang Michael Hsiao, “The Rise of Social Movements and Civil Protests,” in *Political Change in Taiwan*, eds. Tun-jen Cheng and Stephan Haggard (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1992), p. 70.

13. J. Bruce Jacobs, “‘Taiwanization’ in Taiwan’s Politics,” in *Cultural, Ethnic, and Political Nationalism in Contemporary Taiwan: Bentubua*, eds. John Makeham and A-chin Hsiao (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 22–39.

professionals. Adopting a reformist approach to the issue of wealth redistribution, the CCEJ grew to become one of the most influential organizations in the 1990s. The phenomenal success of the 2000 “Blacklisting Campaign against Corrupt Politicians” best illustrated how Korean social movements assumed their independence vis-à-vis political parties. More than 400 NGOs participated in this effort; the result was that 59 of the 86 candidates accused of human rights violations or corruption failed in the election.¹⁴

Taiwan’s social movement activists faced different political terrain. Rather than Korean personality-based parties, the DPP appeared to be more programmatic and succeeded in absorbing movement issues into its agenda. Throughout the 1990s, Taiwanese movement activists achieved some legislative successes in their alliance with DPP politicians. To name a few, the 1994 Teacher Education Law (liberalizing teacher training), the 1994 Environmental Impact Assessment Law, and the 1996 revision of the Labor Standard Law to cover white-collar workers were all concrete fruits of their collaboration. However, as DPP leaders embraced a more centrist course to become more “electable,” the erstwhile cordial comradeship turned sour. Some movements became so dependent on the DPP to realize their goals that they had difficulties in broadening their appeal to non-DPP supporters.¹⁵

Despite the different movement-party configurations, there were similar developments in both countries after the opposition assumed national power. In 1998, Kim Dae Jung won the presidential election, and his progressive regime carried out a series of political and economic reforms. In 2003, he was succeeded by Roh Moo Hyun, whose “participatory government” incorporated many movement activists into office. Likewise in Taiwan, as Chen Shui-bian led the DPP to gain the presidency in 2000, he sought to replicate his previous experience in collaborating with movement activists during his Taipei City mayoral tenure (1995–98). Thus, a visible trend of integrating movement demands into the official agenda emerged under both Korea’s progressive regime (1998–2007) and Taiwan’s DPP government (2000–08).

In both countries, former movement activists became government officials en masse. The Kim Dae Jung and the Roh Moo Hyun administrations,

14. Sunhyuk Kim, “Democratization and Social Movements in South Korea: A Civil Society Perspective,” in *East Asian Social Movements: Power, Protest, and Change in a Dynamic Region*, eds. J. Broadbent and V. Brockman (New York: Springer, 2011), pp. 141–56.

15. Ming-sho Ho, “The Politics of Anti-nuclear Protest in Taiwan: A Case of Party-dependent Movement (1980–2000),” *Modern Asian Studies* 37:3 (July 2003), pp. 701–06.

respectively, employed as officials 73 and 98 activists who had worked for the People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy (PSPD)—a citizen movement organization that led the 2000 Blacklisting Campaign against corruption. The CCEJ had 55 members who assumed official positions in two successive progressive governments.¹⁶ There are no such available statistics in Taiwan. Nevertheless, some veteran social movement leaders became ministers for official agencies such as the Environmental Protection Administration, the Ministry of Education, the Labor Affairs Council, and so on. Less conspicuously, younger activists obtained the opportunity to work as aides in administrative echelons.¹⁷

There is no denying that the involvement of social movement activists facilitated a number of progressive reforms; however, their marriage with the politicians turned out to be contentious. Korean NGOs suffered a decline in public credibility because of their overly cordial relationship with government. According to surveys between 2005 and 2007 in the newspaper *JoongAng Daily*, leading Korean NGOs such as the PSPD and the CCEJ steadily lost public trust.¹⁸ In Taiwan, social movement organizations grew disenchanted over the DPP's drift toward a more conservative course. As Chen began to embrace the growth-first policy, his promises for labor, environment, and welfare reform were gradually shelved. Overall, the evidence indicates that the Korean social movement maintained a close relationship with liberal incumbents to an extent that its Taiwanese counterpart did not. Thus, during Roh's impeachment crisis in 2004, Korean NGOs largely stood behind the besieged president. In contrast, when financial scandals involving Chen and his family erupted in 2006, Taiwan social movement organizations did not come to his rescue; in fact, a number of activists publicly called for his resignation. True, Roh's and Chen's crises were of distinct categories, but the responses from the social movements demonstrated their different relationships with the liberals in power.

The power transfer in 2008 again changed movement-government relations drastically. The resurgent conservatives in the two countries saw their landslide victories as a mandate to restore the status quo ante, hence the previous

16. Yeonho Lee and Taeyong Park, "Civil Participation in the Making of a New Regulatory State in Korea: 1998–2008," *Korea Observer* 40:3 (Autumn 2009), pp. 461–93.

17. Ming-sho Ho, "Taiwan's State and Social Movements under the DPP Government, 2000–2004," *Journal of East Asian Studies* 5:3 (September 2005), pp. 401–25.

18. Euiyoung Kim, "The Limits of NGO-Government Relations in South Korea," *Asian Survey* 49:5 (September/October 2009), pp. 873–94.

periods were stigmatized as “the lost 10 years” (Korea) and “the lost eight years” (Taiwan). While Lee’s government pursued a policy of “Anything but Roh,” Ma’s officials were said to take the course to “oppose everything related to Chen Shui-bian.” The attempt to scrap the reforms achieved under the incumbents’ predecessors was bound to arouse a renewed wave of resistance from social movements.

However, timing affected the significance of U.S. beef politics. Two months into his presidency, Lee’s abrupt reauthorization of beef imports instantly became a lightning rod that energized his opponents. Thus, the beef issue turned out to be the first critical test of Lee’s governing capacity as well as the first-round confrontation between conservative politicians and social movements.

In Taiwan, Ma’s government cruised for 17 months before encountering beef politics. Prior to that, social movement organizations had launched several rounds of offensives. In addition to the aforementioned Wild Strawberry Movement, a number of groups became the new faces in the social movement rank-and-file: furloughed workers, victims of 2009’s Typhoon Morakot, offshore islanders in Penghu who launched a successful campaign to defeat the legalization of casinos promoted by Kuomintang politicians, and supporters of Public Television Service who took to the street to protest the government’s politicking over its high-ranking personnel.¹⁹ Public confidence in Ma dropped because of a series of perceived managerial blunders. The botched response to melamine-contaminated milk from China in 2008 (discussed below) and the universally perceived government failure in Typhoon Morakot relief sent Ma’s approval rate plummeting.²⁰ One might argue that preexisting social protests and mass disillusionment with a range of issues defused the explosiveness of the U.S. beef issue in Taiwan, making it less threatening to the Kuomintang incumbent.

Still, these structural preconditions in no way determined the evolution of beef politics. In terms of the party-social movement relationship, Taiwan’s NGOs are weaker and more divided by partisan allegiances, thereby constraining the degree of popular mobilization. It would appear that the respective organizational strength of NGOs in both countries could explain the different impact of U.S. beef politics. However, this is not necessarily

19. Ming-sho Ho, “Understanding the Trajectory of Social Movements in Taiwan (1980–2010),” *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 39:3 (November 2010), p. 17.

20. Frank Muyard, “Mid-Term Analysis of the Ma Ying-jeou Administration: The Difficulty of Delivering the (Right) Goods,” *China Perspectives* 83:3 (2010), p. 13.

so in the Korean case because the anti-U.S. beef protest was spontaneously initiated through the Internet before NGOs took over the movement leadership around July 2008. Therefore, the strength of the Korean NGOs vis-à-vis political parties does not play a significant role here. To explain the national variations, we will discuss the cultural dimensions of nationalism and food.

IMAGINED COMMUNITIES AND THEIR THREATS

Although American beef might taste the same to Taiwanese and Korean palates, it assumed different meanings for each national psyche. Korean protesters perceived the incident as a “U.S. invasion” on national sovereignty to an extent that would be unthinkable for the Taiwanese. During the Korean candlelight vigil protests, a frequently seen poster nicely captured the nationalistic framing. A tearful and helpless Korean housewife confronted a shipload of menacing American bulls marked with a toxic warning sign. The slogan read “Our Home Opposes U.S. Beef Imports.” Here the classic image of American imperialism as a gunboat found a new look, with the implication that poisonous meat was no less threatening than lethal weapons. That this poster appeared across Korea indicated its potency among protestors.

In contrast, anti-Americanism was conspicuously absent in Taiwan. Opponents of beef imports also sought to emphasize the danger of the potentially contaminated food, but their responses highlighted the implied harm to public health rather than the source of the risk. It is highly significant that the Consumers’ Foundation, which had a nonpartisan, professional reputation in Taiwan’s social movement sphere, led the protest. Rather than staging a mass rally, the Consumers’ Foundation launched a campaign to collect signatures to initiate a legal process of referendum with the emphasis not to oppose the government but to improve food safety regulations. The Foundation cited three reasons for this: (1) prion, the pathogen for mad cow disease, was clearly harmful to the human body and the environment; (2) by violating administrative safety procedures, the Taipei government had shown itself incapable of properly screening imports; and (3) the government had failed to consult consumer and public-interest organizations as required by law. Beyond this moderate course adopted by the Consumers’ Foundation, Ph.D. student-activist Zhu Zhengqi singlehandedly captured Taiwan’s attention with his theatrics. He ate a hamburger with freshly collected cow dung in front of the Presidential House and then received a tattoo saying “No American Beef” in

front of the Legislative Yuan. Regardless, in Taiwan, whether in policy debates or through performance art, the theme of anti-American nationalism never appeared. Koreans, for their part, framed the issue through the lens of nationalism to make sense of beef politics. The Taiwanese activists, by contrast, used a public health strategy but failed to stimulate wide popular participation, eliciting a comparatively mild political response.

As a cultural construct, nationalism is sustained by a shared sense of who we are. And a common identity is often reinforced by an external threat. In fact, the existence of a hostile Other helps to bridge internal disunity. Here, growing anti-Americanism in South Korea and its absence in Taiwan explain the different protest frames. Korean anti-Americanism was a relatively recent concomitant in the transition away from authoritarianism.²¹ Under postwar American hegemony, South Korea was shielded from the communist threat and given the opportunity to pursue rapid economic development. The price that Korean people had to pay was the loss of political freedom and violations of human rights while the U.S. government persistently backed Korean military dictatorship. The fact that the 1980 Kwangju massacre took place because the U.S. military authority approved the deployment of Korean soldiers had long alienated democratic movement participants and liberal citizens from the U.S. Among the intellectuals, there was growing mistrust of the U.S. as well as a belief that Korean nation-building should be done without American intervention. On the other hand, the end of the Cold War brought about a new assessment of North Korea. The North was now perceived as being less threatening to the South than the U.S. claimed.

In the transition from authoritarianism, conservatives retained their pro-American and anti-communist ideology while progressives emerged to adopt a polarized outlook.²² After the 1997 presidential election, the progressives' coming-to-power necessitated a shift in foreign policy. The Sunshine Policy toward the North embraced by Kim Dae Jung's government aimed to replace hostilities with engagement by economic exchange and intergovernmental dialogue. Kim Dae Jung's 2000 historical meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong-il represented the climax of the Sunshine Policy; a new national confidence that inter-Korean politics could be managed without the meddling Americans was clearly on the rise. Moreover, the de-escalation of

21. Chang Hun Oh and Celeste Arrington, "Democratization and Changing Anti-American Sentiments in South Korea," *Asian Survey* 47:2 (March/April 2007), pp. 327–50.

22. Sook-Jong Lee, "Democratization and Polarization in Korean Society," *Asian Perspective* 29:3 (2005), p. 104.

tension in the Korean Peninsula coincided with the ascendancy of American neoconservatives. In 2002, when George W. Bush included North Korea in what he called the “axis of evil” that sponsored international terrorism and sought weapons of mass destruction, national sentiment in South Korea was visibly hurt. A public opinion poll revealed many South Koreans found the charge unjustified and thought the U.S. government had failed to take regional security into consideration. Hence, during Bush’s visit to South Korea, radical students occupied the American Chamber of Commerce in protest.²³

In addition, one’s generational cohort affected how the U.S. was perceived in Korean society. Senior citizens who had personally experienced the Korean War and other incidents of military confrontation in the Cold War era tended to express a grateful attitude toward the U.S. And they were more likely to place a premium on social stability in order to facilitate economic growth. Koreans born in the 1960s or later were more inclined to embrace liberal social values. For the latter, the U.S. was viewed less as a beneficial protector. This generation gap was confirmed in a survey of attitudes toward the United States Forces Korea (USFK) conducted by the newspaper *Chungang Ilbo* (Central Daily) in January 2003. On the one hand, only 29.5% of people in their twenties approved of the current size of USFK, while 51.5% of those in their fifties and older saw this level as necessary. On the other hand, 15.4% of people in their twenties favored a full withdrawal or large-scale reduction of American forces, while only 8% of those fifty and older favored this option.²⁴ Clearly, anti-Americanism was a growing trend among the younger generation.

Anti-American sentiment took an abrupt and aggressive turn when two Korean schoolgirls were killed in a vehicular accident by American military personnel in 2002. That perpetrators were tried in the American military court and given an innocent verdict was a moral shock to the Korean national psyche. The accident spurred a candlelight vigil with more than 10,000 participants in Seoul, marking the advent of this particular nationalistic protest repertoire. For the younger generation, the contrasting image of irresponsible American soldiers and victimized Korean girls aptly epitomized the unequal and humiliating U.S.-Korea relationship. Because the progressive camp adopted a visibly more nationalistic attitude than the conservatives, it soon won the hearts of younger

23. Seung-Hwan Kim, “Anti-Americanism in Korea,” *Washington Quarterly* 26:1 (2002), p. 111.

24. Jinwung Kim, “Ambivalent Allies: Recent South Korean Perceptions of the United States Forces Korea (USFK),” *Asian Affairs* 30:4 (Winter 2004), p. 273.

citizens. In a Korea Society Opinion Institute public survey taken in November 2006, 68.9% of respondents in their twenties called themselves “progressives,” significantly higher than the national average of 44.6%.²⁵

A critical qualification should be added here. Korean youth identification with anti-Americanism and the progressive camp is nuanced. A 2007 Gallup Korea poll showed that both progressives and conservatives supported the military alliance and opposed the immediate withdrawal of American troops.²⁶ Even after the tragic killing of the two schoolgirls, a 2003 survey by the newspaper *JoongAng Ilbo* produced a surprising result. More Koreans in their twenties (11.3%) than in their thirties (6.2%) chose the U.S. as their favorite nation.²⁷

Moreover, the intensity of anti-Americanism sentiment constantly fluctuated over the years, largely reflecting the checkered evolution of the inter-Korean relationship.²⁸ Pertinent to our argument, during the U.S. beef episode, North Korea assumed a less menacing posture by scrapping parts of its controversial nuclear complex and allowing international inspection. South Korea in turn enjoyed a greater sense of security—a factor that contributed to the militant anti-Americanism in the beef protest. Since 2009 North Korea has reverted to the confrontational course by reactivating the nuclear program and initiating several rounds of military skirmishes. Consequently, South Koreans’ favorable attitudes toward the U.S. have grown significantly, according to a survey by the Pew Research Center.²⁹ Timing played a crucial role here. If Lee Myung-bak had resumed beef imports in 2009 rather than 2008, the perceivable military threat would have given his opponents less leeway to express anti-American sentiment.

Granted the ebb-and-flow character of Korean anti-Americanism, Lee’s hurried decision to resume beef imports was easily understood within a

25. Sunhyuk Kim and Wonhyuk Lim, “How to Deal with South Korea,” *Washington Quarterly* 30:2 (2007), p. 75.

26. Haesook Chae and Steven Kim, “Conservatives and Progressives in South Korea,” *ibid.*, 31:4 (2008), p. 86.

27. Derek J. Mitchell, ed., *Strategy and Sentiment: South Korean Views of the United States and the U.S.-ROK Alliance* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2004), p. 133.

28. Heon Joo Jung, “The Rise and Fall of Anti-American Sentiment in South Korea: Deconstructing Hegemonic Ideas and Threat Perception,” *Asian Survey* 50:5 (September/October 2010), pp. 946–64.

29. Pew Research Center, “Obama More Popular Abroad Than at Home, Global Image of U.S. Continues to Benefit: 22-Nation Pew Global Attitudes Survey,” June 17, 2010, <<http://pewglobal.org/files/pdf/Pew-Global-Attitudes-Spring-2010-Report.pdf>>, accessed August 10, 2011.

nationalist frame. The whole incident resonated with the stereotypical charge that conservatives were willing to sacrifice the well-being of Koreans in order to please the Americans. Evidently, the unprecedented scale of mobilization for the candlelight vigil as well as the participation level among high school students testified to the broad appeal of anti-American sentiment. The intensified protest pressured Lee to make a humiliating public apology and reshuffle his cabinet.

Similarly, in postwar Taiwan, anti-communism and pro-Americanism began as key parts of the official ideology. However, the decline of anti-communism did not parallel the rise of anti-Americanism. The reason had to do with the secular rise of Taiwanese identity that gradually challenged the hegemony of Chinese nationalism propagandized by the Kuomintang. Postwar Taiwanese nationalism was simultaneously an ethnic movement by native Taiwanese who opposed the Mainlanders' minority rule and discrimination, and a political movement that pursued independence from China. Initially, Taiwanese identity had been a radical doctrine among overseas exiles and was severely repressed by the government. Over the years, it became more mainstream owing to a number of factors. First, the Kuomintang regime faced a legitimacy crisis when its claim to represent China was rejected by major countries around the world in the 1970s. Global ostracism forced incumbent politicians to recruit more native Taiwanese into government, thus setting the trend of indigenization that became a dominant theme in the democratization process. Second, economic prosperity boosted the confidence of Taiwanese so that the denial of international recognition became more unbearable. Finally, post-reform China emerged as a regional superpower that posed a clear military threat to Taiwan. The more the People's Republic of China (PRC) advanced to squeeze Taiwan's international status, the stronger Taiwanese identity grew as a reaction. As a result, on the island Taiwanese identity grew at the expense of Chinese identity. A 2008 study discovered the following pattern: 48.4% of respondents self-identified as Taiwanese and 4% as Chinese, while 43.1% chose the category of "both Chinese and Taiwanese."³⁰

Although the U.S. government also ignored human rights violations by the authoritarian Kuomintang, it was not perceived as a threat in the minds of

30. See Election Study Center, National Chengchi University, "Important Political Attitude Trend Distribution," <<http://esc.nccu.edu.tw/english/modules/tinyd2/content/TaiwanChineseID.htm>>, accessed August 24, 2011.

Taiwanese nationalists. It was a geopolitical commonsense that Taiwan's effort to obtain a normal statehood challenged China's territorial claim and thus needed to proceed under U.S. hegemony. On the other hand, even for the Chinese nationalists who supported unification with the PRC, the U.S. was not perceived as a menacing hindrance. Washington had ceased to maintain its military presence in Taiwan in 1979. And the recent official policy of the American government was to maintain cross-Strait stability by encouraging economic and political interaction between Taiwan and China, a strategically calculated gesture that basically frowned upon any radical change of the status quo.

Therefore, neither pro-independence nor pro-unification camps could blame their failures upon the U.S. With pro-Americanism firmly established as a Taiwanese political consensus, it would have appeared out of tune if the opponents of American beef imports had tried to frame the issue nationally. To argue that the tainted meat was in fact the latest incidence of American imperialism was not a theme that would find a congenial audience. Hence, beef import opponents had no choice but to concentrate on the public health impact.

Because of the incongruity between the source of unsafe food and the threat to Taiwanese nationalism, both the scale and the political impact of anti-American beef protests were relatively weak. But this did not mean that such a political-culinary scenario was inconceivable in Taiwan. In fact, the presence of melamine-contaminated milk from China in 2008 provides a contrasting example.

In September 2008, there was mass panic among Taiwan's consumers over the import of poisonous milk products from China. The incident occurred because China's biggest milk producer and exporter, the Sanlu Group, was revealed to have adulterated melamine into milk in order to raise the protein content. Melamine is an industrial chemical, primarily used in plastic manufacturing, and its illegal addition to baby milk had produced kidney stones in Chinese children. Following the sensational revelations in China, Ma Ying-jeou's government announced on September 15 that Taiwan was banning imports from the Sanlu Group; the Department of Health was instructed to inspect every dairy product from China.

The quick response by the government could have quelled consumers' worries, but the botched handling of safety standards sparked further public outcry. At first, the government announced that any food showing melamine concentrations of more than 0 parts per million (ppm) should

be removed from the grocery shelves. Yet on September 25, the Department of Health raised the standard to 2.5 ppm for adults and 1 ppm for infants. The abrupt about-face was justified on the technical ground that the government's machines could not detect lower levels of melamine. A public uproar followed this change. DPP politicians put forward a nationalistic explanation that Ma's Kuomintang had "compromised" on food safety because he dared not confront the Beijing government. According to a media poll, 77% of respondents were dissatisfied with the government's crisis management, and only 8% thought the response was good enough. Four months into his presidency, as many as 57% of those surveyed expressed doubt about Ma's capacity to govern.³¹ To prevent further political damage, Health Minister Lin Fang-yue resigned to take political responsibility for the incident.

Compared with the beef controversy one year later, the incident of adulterated milk in Taiwan did not spur an organized mobilization by civil society. However, the political impact of the milk incident was greater even without the involvement of social movement organizations. This was a clear indication of the political sensitivity when food sources coincide with external threats. In fact, a poll conducted by Taiwan's Mainland and Affairs Council in October showed that 52.4% of people thought China should apologize for the milk crisis before Taiwan took part in the first official cross-Strait meeting since Ma took office.

In Korea, if we view the U.S. beef fracas as an unexpected tsunami that shattered the Lee government's honeymoon, the Chinese milk incident seemed more like an imperceptible earthquake. On September 25, the Korea Food and Drug Administration (KFDA) announced the discovery of poisoned snacks containing harmful levels of melamine. An order was issued to recall the snacks and to investigate dairy products from China.³² The next day, President Lee visited the KFDA to demonstrate his commitment to protect Korean consumers from the melamine-contaminated food from China.³³

For the general public, Korean officials ostensibly accomplished a creditable job of safeguarding consumer health. Yet compared to Taiwan, the

31. "A Poll Survey of Contaminated Milk Powder Incident," September 25, 2008, TVBS poll center, <http://www.tvbs.com.tw/FILE_DB/DL_DB/doshouldo/200809/doshouldo-20080926145419.pdf>, accessed March 7, 2011.

32. "Toxic Substance Found in Chinese-Made Korean Snacks," *Chosun Ilbo* [Chosun Daily News], September 25, 2008.

33. "Chinese Toxic Food Fears Spread Quickly," *Korea JoongAng Daily*, September 27, 2008.

Korean government took two weeks after the outbreak of the Chinese food scandal to monitor the melamine content. The tardier response was not interpreted as official negligence. There was a demonstration on September 29 to demand a tighter food inspection system; however, protesters did not view the crisis as an instance of government failure.³⁴ Although the opposition party tried to pinpoint the political responsibility on key officials, KFDA Commissioner Yun Yeo-pyo retained his office nonetheless. Compared to Taiwan, the melamine-contaminated milk was nearly a “non-event” in Korean society, both in terms of public perception and political consequence.

Apparently, Taiwanese consumers identified Chinese milk as riskier than American beef because the former came from an unfriendly country. For Korean consumers, the perception was the other way around. Hence, when the Chinese milk debacle occurred five months after the beef controversy in South Korea, it failed to produce a mass movement with significant political impact. One commentator asked rhetorically, “Where are all the candlelight vigils, the stroller moms protesting that their children are in danger of being poisoned by melamine?”³⁵ The difficulty of applying a nationalistic frame here constrained the level of mobilization as well as its political reverberations.

THE SYMBOLIC POLITICS OF BEEF

In addition to nationalism, the position of beef in the two national diets affected how the general public perceived the controversy. Apparently, the more beef a nation consumed, the more likely its people would be galvanized into action when a threat of contamination broke out. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, in 2008 every South Korean consumed 11.08 kilograms on the average, whereas the figure for Taiwanese was 4.8 kilograms. In carnivorous terms, the Taiwanese preferred pork to beef by a wide margin. Beef accounted for only 2%–3% of meat intake, while pork was roughly 40%.³⁶ In contrast, 20%–30% of Korean meat consumption went to beef.³⁷ Therefore, Korean consumers were understandably more likely to be

34. “Consumers Shun Made-in-China Food Products,” *Korea Times*, September 29, 2008.

35. Michael Stevens, “Where Are All the Protesters?” *ibid.*, October 15, 2008.

36. Jane Lu Hsu, “Gradual Structural Changes of Meat Consumption in Taiwan,” *Journal of International Food and Agribusiness Marketing* 11:4 (2001), pp. 34–35.

37. Korea Meat Trade Association, *Consumption*, <<http://www.kmta.or.kr/eng/sub4-1.html?scode=6&kej=eng>>, accessed April 7, 2011.

alarmed by the food risk than the Taiwanese. Nonetheless, the quantitative data did not entirely reveal the symbolic meanings of food. The status of beef in the national food culture, the strength of domestic beef producers, and the association of vegetarianism with health were the three factors that had an undeniable effect on consumers' risk perception.

First, the culinary uses of beef differ considerably in the two cultures. Beef has long been valued for its rich protein content in traditional Korean cuisine. For example, *miyeokguk* (seaweed soup with ground beef) is often used as a nutritional supplement for mothers after childbirth as well as for their children. Because of its association with childbirth, *miyeokguk* became a popular dish for Korean youth to celebrate their birthdays. *Bulgogi* (marinated beef barbecue) is also a famous national dish in Korea. In recent years, the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism selected *bulgogi* as a key national image, together with kimchi, the martial art Taekwondo, and the Korean alphabet, Hangeul.³⁸

In contrast, the Taiwanese attached no special symbolic significance to beef. To provide nutrition for women after childbirth, *mayouji* (chicken soup broiled with sesame oil and rice wine) is the traditional choice. *Mayouji* is believed to be a necessary energy-booster during the month-long postpartum convalescence. None of the traditional Taiwanese cuisine featured beef as the main ingredient. While there have been recent efforts to promote beef noodles (*niuroumian*), the claim that the dish is authentically Taiwanese remains tenuous because it was more or less an "invented tradition" in the postwar era. The Kuomintang's demobilized soldiers, mainly from Sichuan Province, introduced beef noodles into the popular menu in the 1950s, earning a living peddling their hometown dishes. Over the years, beef noodles diffused over ethnic boundaries, arguably initiating increased consumption of beef in Taiwan.

During the agricultural years, cows were a valuable source of animal power to plow rice paddies, and there was a widespread taboo against eating beef. In fact, there was a popular belief that beef eaters would suffer inevitable punishment in hell. Even today, some Taiwanese have made an ethical choice to refrain from consuming beef and passed this lesson on to their children.

By contrast, that beef claimed such a salient status in Korean food culture helps us make sense of the phenomenon during the anti-American beef

38. Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism, *Images of Korea*, <<http://www.mct.go.kr/html/symbolimg/eng/bulgogi/sec01.html>>, accessed April 2, 2011.

protest known as “Baby Stroller Brigades” At that time, a sizable group of young Korean mothers carrying their babies took to the streets once a week to dramatize their opposition to beef imports.³⁹ This highly stylized dramatization of motherhood conveyed the unmistakable message of the intimate association between beef and family nourishment. For Korean housewives, it was precisely the reckless decision-making among political leaders that jeopardized their health and the well-being of their infants. Lacking a similar beef-eating custom and its rich cultural connotations, Taiwanese women might have found such protests incomprehensible.

Second, both preexisting cultural values of eating local food and the economic position of local producers had a bearing on the beef politics. Since 1989, a *shintobul-i* (unity of body and soil) movement had emerged promoting the idea that Koreans should eat made-in-Korea food. This arose under the sponsorship of agricultural producers seeking to counter the impact of trade liberalization. Initially a defensive protectionist strategy, the *shintobul-i* idea grew to become an integral dimension of national identity. In addition to food, Koreans were encouraged to be proud patrons of a wide variety of their national products.⁴⁰ Apparently, the premium placed upon eating locally also helped to elevate the market value of South Korean beef. Known as *hanwoo* (Korean beef), it is a pricey delicacy, almost six times as expensive as American beef, and Koreans manifest a nationalist sentiment toward it. Within the Korean beef market, the American product was considered to be low-grade meat, an unhealthy but cheap substitute for mass consumers. But its end use carried political significance: American imported beef was very likely to end up in less expensive eateries and public school cafeterias, elevating it as a threat in the public mind. Faced with this daily culinary presence, many Korean teenagers were motivated to take part in the protest movement.

Taiwan’s domestic producers held only a small proportion of the beef market share, so the issue was unrelated to national identity. Politically, “eating Taiwanese rice without loving Taiwan” (*chi Taiwanmi bu ai Taiwan*) was a frequently heard expression used to accuse someone who was not patriotic enough, but it would be utterly unintelligible to substitute “beef” for “rice.”

39. Suhong Chae and Soojin Kim, “The Candlelight Protest and the Politics of the Baby Stroller Brigades,” *Korea Journal* 50:3 (Autumn 2010), pp. 71–99.

40. Hong Sik Cho, “Globalization and National Identity: Shintobul-i, a Case of Cultural Representation of Economic Nationalism,” *Journal of International and Area Studies* 15:1 (June 2008), pp. 17–35.

Since 1985, imported beef, primarily from Australia, has accounted for 90% of market share. Moreover, American beef has been viewed as “high-grade,” whereas the local product was only of “normal grade” quality.⁴¹ Partly because of its weak competitiveness, the government did not adopt a proactive policy to foster the domestic beef industry. Without a comparable nation-branding effort, it was very difficult for Taiwanese beef producers to argue that their own survival played a vital role in creating national identity. At the same time, the high-grade status of American beef and its consequent smaller market share meant that its import would affect fewer persons, thus significantly constraining the appeal of the public health frame that activists sought to broadcast. Taiwanese consumers felt the beef issue was only distantly related to national security or national identity.

In South Korea, however, the stronger position of domestic industry lent itself to the anti-American beef protest. While the candlelight vigil participants were mainly alarmed consumers, the domestic beef producers acted as an auxiliary force that jointly pressured Lee’s government. On May 23, 8,000 cattle farmers launched a protest in Seoul’s Yeouido Park against American beef imports.⁴² Farmers also opposed the FTA with the U.S. and demanded that Lee’s government provide the agricultural subsidies he promised during the electoral campaign. Once the event was over, a majority of the farmers voluntarily joined the candlelight vigil held in Cheonggye Plaza. Thus, there was visible cooperation between consumers and producers, a mixture of food safety and livelihood protection in the Korean protest, which certainly raised its political impact. Taiwan’s protest did not witness this pattern of confluence because of the weaker position of domestic beef producers. There was a protest by cattle farmers to oppose the lifting of the import ban on December 14, 2009. That event was actually sponsored by a DPP local executive; it failed to establish a united front with the NGO-led movement that focused on the issue of consumer safety.

Finally, the popularity of vegetarianism as a healthy lifestyle in Taiwan further constrained the appeal of the public health frame. Previously, vegetarianism was associated with religious piety and was largely limited to less-educated seniors. But in what Richard Madsen called a “religious renaissance” in recent

41. Hui-Shung Christie Chang and Chung-Jen Hsia, “Beef Import Market Shares in Taiwan: Implications for Australia,” *Australian Journal of Agricultural and Resource Economics* 44:2 (2000), pp. 220–21.

42. “Farmers in Massive Protests against FTA with U.S.,” *Chosun Ilbo*, May 23, 2008.

decades,⁴³ major Buddhist organizations have successfully modernized their outlook, and, in particular, vegetarianism was recast as an environmentally conscious anti-global-warming practice. In fact, the slogan “Vegetarianism, Environmental Protection, and Saving the Earth” has become ubiquitous because of these groups’ sponsorship. There was evidence that mainstream non-religious environmental activists also adopted this practice personally.⁴⁴ Because large numbers of health-conscious Taiwanese had chosen to become vegans, the argument that a particular kind of beef was toxic and should be kept away from domestic consumers could only appeal to a much reduced target population. For them, American beef was no more dangerous than other meats. For example, the Homemakers’ Union, the first and largest feminist environmental movement organization in Taiwan, co-sponsored the anti-American beef campaign; the Union’s successful food cooperatives were thought to be a valuable asset in mobilizing supporters. However, the effort produced less than 40,000 signatures, roughly 12% of its original target. As a result, after the initial public outcry over the Kuomintang government’s hasty decision to lift the import ban, opponents collected less than 140,000 signatures, failing to initiate a referendum. The Taiwanese movement finally receded without making a significant political impact.

CONCLUSION

For many observers, the 2008 candlelight protest against American beef was an unprecedentedly transformative event that reshaped the contour of South Korean society. How a seemingly soft and “apolitical” issue triggered large-scale anti-government mobilization and forced new President Lee Myung-bak into a humiliating apology remains an intriguing question that has challenged social analysis. A great number of bold theories and explanations have been suggested, with attention paid to novel features such as participation by teenage girls and housewives as well as the intensive use of the Internet.

In this paper, we sought to provide a more balanced treatment by adding the less well known case of beef in Taiwan for comparison. We were skeptical

43. Richard Madsen, *Democracy's Dharma: Religious Renaissance and Political Development in Taiwan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

44. The first author of this article attended a fundraising dinner party by the Green Party candidates for Taipei City Council in November 2010. The event organizers provided only vegetarian food, although this arrangement was not mentioned in the invitation letter. Obviously, vegetarianism has been firmly established as a taken-for-granted consensus among environmental activists in Taiwan.

about the attempt to explain the great Korean movement by some single variable (e.g., generation or Internet) or some idiosyncratic feature of Korean society. Here, we put forward a contextually and culturally sensitive analysis to understand why an objectively similar decision to resume the import of American beef could generate such dissimilar political consequences in two countries.

First, beef politics must be understood in the light of movement/government dynamics over the past two decades in both countries. The conservative regimes under Lee Myung-bak and Ma Ying-jeou pursued a largely restorative agenda to overturn the reforms achieved in previous governments, thus embarking on a collision course with the social movement sectors. In the attempt to “normalize” relations with the U.S., both governments decided to relax the ban on American beef in exchange for an FTA. The timing of the beef controversy, nevertheless, affected the explosiveness of the reaction. Two months into his presidency, the unexpected protest caught Lee off guard: he had no choice but to apologize, reshuffle his cabinet, and renegotiate with the U.S. However, for Ma and his opponents, many protests had taken place before the American beef issue appeared in Taiwan in the seventeenth month of his incumbency. Thus, the beef issue was comparatively less salient and less likely to function as a lightning rod for social movement activists.

Second, how American beef fit into the cultural imagination of nationalism affected the public perception of risk. Both Taiwan and South Korea had developed stronger, more assertive national identities following economic success and political democratization. However, South Korea witnessed a secular and generational rise of anti-Americanism that was nearly absent in Taiwan. Hence, it was easier for the Korean dissidents to apply a nationalistic frame and mobilize large-scale demonstrations to fight what could be presented as an “imperialistic” violation of national sovereignty. Deprived of this option, Taiwanese activists could only rely on a public health frame by focusing on the scientific and professional evidence. As a result, there were no exhilarating crowd scenes comparable to candlelight vigils but only a low-key campaign to collect signatures for a referendum, which failed to meet the required threshold in the end.

Finally, in both locations food consumption was more than a dietary practice, indeed possessing a rich variety of cultural connotations. With beef solidly established in the Korean national cuisine as well as being intimately linked with family nourishment, its possible contamination struck a sensitive

chord among Koreans. On the other hand, widespread vegetarianism and its appeal among health-conscious, environmentally aware Taiwanese limited the reach of the public health frame used by the opposition movement.

In sum, the extremely divergent evolution of beef politics in the two countries highlights the need to pay more attention to the less tangible cultural dimensions of politics. In deciding to resume American beef imports, conservative incumbents in both countries were equally entrenched and aimed for similar diplomatic goals. However, the respective constellations of nationalism and food culture determined the different political price they had to pay.