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Americanization in Korea and the Contemporary Korean Nationalism

Introduction

Americanization in Korea seems not a widely discussed topic, perhaps because it touches the sensitive point of national pride and self-identity. On the other hand, volumes of Korean-American relations are quite numerous and Korean scholars very eagerly highlight the ‘closeness’ between the two countries. Only in this year (2008) a volume of Americanization-related articles, edited by Kim Deok Ho and Won Yong Jin, has been published in Korea, and it describes the phenomenon in various fields, including history, political culture, mass culture, social relations, Korean feminism etcetera.¹ The topic is very broad, thus I decided to sketch the most important features of Americanization of Korean, along with its relation to the Korean contemporary society and nationalism. Since the days of democratization Korean relations with the outer world has changed much and the society seems to be in a constant mental transition due to the free inflow of foreign ideas. However, the United States continue to be the main authority to be looked upon both in politics and social life, and almost everything ‘Western’ has American flavor. Consequently, Westernization and globalization are not far enough from the phenomenon of Americanization and are often difficult to differentiate one from another. Korean nationalism, on the other hand, otherwise very strongly drawing the line between “the Korean” and “the Foreign”, does not seem to have a clear response to what for a foreigner is very much visible: that “the Foreign” in Korea more than often means “American”.

¹ 아메리카니제이션. 해방 이후 한국에서의 미국화, 김덕호, 원용지 요꿈, 2008, 푸른역사

1. Westernization and Americanization, Modernization and Globalization - subjects interrelated.

Modernization in the Third World countries, whether including Westernization or not, was intended to improve the international position and bring both material and social benefits to its recipients. “Non-Western” modernizations were the result of inner initiatives, like changes in law systems, broader education and enlightenment for the society, life condition improvement for the lower social classes, military and economical strengthening. Within the recent centuries those initiatives became mainly a response to the abrupt appearance of the Westerners who presented a new view of the world and proved the superiority of their civilization by turning vast lands in Asia and Africa into their colonies. Modernization via Westernization, that is assuming the Western model of economic and social development, was either enforced or chosen, and the models of Westernization also varied, according to the direction of political-cum-cultural influence. British heritage in India, French in Vietnam, American influence in Japan, Philippines and South Korea, even the communist model of modernization brought by the Soviet Army, all promised the improvement of life and bright new future in exchange for the traditional local socio-economic systems. Elites in several Third World countries eagerly followed the new models in hope for prosperity and with the intention to preserve their social status, especially as Western countries provided sources and instruments for obtaining welfare and gaining new symbols of the social standing. In South Korea this was the case for American presence: after 1945 modernization was conducted under the U.S. patronage and instruction, intended as a solid protection from the North Korean communism and its’ counter-propose of non-capitalist development. The driving force of modernization in the Republic of Korea was the will of intellectuals and the politicians who backed up their position in the society with education taken from American universities and who were the first beneficiaries of American financial help for the Korean ally.

Americanization, like modernization and globalization and other contemporary phenomena, has several fields of influence. It relates to politics, economy and culture, and all minor elements of social life. In the modernization process in the Third World countries the matter of culture was always of less importance than maintaining economic growth and political order. The last stage of Westernization has been completed by globalization in the form of mass culture. Many Third World societies have been left in a cultural limbo: they want to

protect and develop their traditions, and yet in this rapid change and clash with the Western ideas the natural process of cultural transformation has been diluted in the mainstream of mass culture. Globalization does not mean only a rapid exchange of cultural information thanks to the era of communication; it includes domination of those who take the most of the modern technologies and are able to convince the rest of the world of their right to influence it. Globalization is about inequality, because it reflects unbalanced relations within societies and countries, and because the influence of one party is always bigger than the other.

In the case of Korea, Americanization has been showing its negative features already, and there is no doubt that the state and the society is relying strongly on the U.S. assistance. However, Korea has already astonished the world with its rapid development, merging capitalism and Confucian values, like its high respect for education, social unity in obtaining goals and loyalty to the state. The new question on Korean development can be, for example, whether it is able to go beyond the borders of Westernization (Americanization) and exhibit a new feature of “Asian exceptionalism”.²

2. Americanization and Nationalism.

In the case of Korean nationalism, in its attitude toward the foreignization, it seems to reveal contradictions, showing various features within Korean society. The Republic of Korea has been known as a very consequent and loyal ally of the U.S. in the Asia-Pacific region. Since the presidency of Syngman Rhee South Korea leaders made a good use of the American support in strengthening their own position (which was a dilemma for the American leaders), and the Korean society was but slightly ambiguous about the presence of the U.S. in the Peninsula, but even the recent protests against the import of American beef were rather a display of dissatisfaction with the policy of the president.

The history of Korean anti-Americanism shows displays of dissatisfaction about this American patronage. After war anti-American attitudes were evoked by the decision to divide Korea into occupation zones in 1945. During the presidencies of Syngman Rhee and Pak Jeong Hee the U.S. was criticized for the hand-in-glove support for Korean authoritarianism and considered responsible for the suppression of democratic movements. Moreover, it was

² Thornton, William H., Korea and East Asian Exceptionalism[in:] 100 Years of Modernization in Korea: toward the 21st Century, 1996, Selected Papers of the 9th International Conference on Korean Studies

believed that because of the American protection of the military rule in Korea, as well as the intense pursue of economic development, Korean nationalism had been suffocated and pushed into shadow.³ These were the greatest accusations towards the American ally that was labeled an imperialist exploiting its quasi-colonies. However, those anti-American tendencies have not been strong enough to turn the society against the U.S; rather, it merged into resistance against the regime. The military dictatorship was very successful in both enhancing the “patriotic training” of the Korean citizens under the Cold War circumstances, as well as creating a model of state-servile nationalism in which the society was expected to concentrate on the economical growth and identify itself with the *raison d'état*.

On the other hand, the United States and the ‘American dream’ have been ceaselessly very popular in Korea, and throngs of Korean immigrants went to the U.S. in search for education or workplaces. Through capitalist economy, Protestantism and Korean graduates from the American Universities, Americanization took a very strong hold of the society. Again, a private success translated itself into the family success, and the success of the nation. Welfare, even the one brought from abroad, became a duty toward the family and society. Nobody would be accused of a non-patriotic behavior on the base of emigration to a more advanced country in order to support their family or obtain education, which has a very high standing among traditional Korean values. The pursuit of welfare, perhaps only in some part under the influence of the Protestant ethics, has not been pronounced harmful, although the Americanization itself has long been accused of all negative phenomena in the society. Is then the phenomenon of Americanization a remote-control missile aimed at the helpless Third World societies or maybe the immune systems of those societies lack strength and cohesion, in a situation in which the foreign influence is being accepted indiscriminately? Gerald E. Caiden pointed out very rightly: “Modernization is a moral quest”.⁴

As Kim Yeong-myeong indicates in his presentation of the problem of globalization in Korea, Korean nationalism seems a strong and flamboyant force only in its surface. Actually, the policy toward the society by the authoritarian regime has been described by him as an “anti-nationalist statism”(反民族主義 國家主義).⁵ The regime served the nation a ready-made and even flattering image of an anti-communist, ultra-capitalist, hard-working society,

³ 장달중, 1987, 反美運動의 政治的 構造, 現代社會研究所, 서울, 現代社會研究所報告, pp. 3-4

⁴ Modernization of Korea and the Impact of the West, 1981, Ed. by Changsoo Lee, University of Southern California, p.19

⁵ 김영명, 2004, 우리 눈으로 본 세계화와 민족주의, 오름, pp. 68-73

for which the welfare of the state was to become the welfare of the nation. Therefore the national thought was denied all ‘natural’ process of development – the regime took on itself the burden of responding to the situation in the world and all outer influence. Actually, the only influence that was admitted was the American assistance, American education, and American church missionaries. When in the 80’s the society protested against the domestic policy and demanded democracy, it questioned all slogan of the government’s policy. The arson attack on the U.S. embassy in 1982 was the proof that the civic nationalism claims its right to speak and function along with the state nationalism. At the beginning of 90’s the international situation changed drastically: the Cold War system collapsed and the state also changed its foreign policy pattern. The society learned the joys and sorrows of democratization, as well as had to adjust itself to the new vision of the world. Especially that democratization and open-door policy was paired with a new world phenomenon – globalization. The self-consciousness of the Korean society is still in need of adjusting it to the present circumstances. The infiltrated multi-lateral inflow of information from beyond the Korean borders and the changing international position of the United States came as a sort of shock to the Korean society.

3. Stages of Americanization in the Life of Korean Society.

The United State as an international power and embodiment of the very characteristic, “Western” set of values evokes both positive and negative emotions throughout the world. Statistic showed that until the 1990s almost half of the Korean society showed a friendly attitude toward the U.S., some 19 per cent was hostile, and about 33 per cent was neutral.⁶ These statistics have not changed much until present, I suppose, although could not find exact data as far.

If we look at the phenomenon from a perspective of over 60 year after liberation, we can notice certain stages in the presence of American influence in the country. I will refer here to the division suggested by Professor Kim Yeon Jin:

1) 1945 until the end of 1950s: modernization through Americanization, the strongest idealization of the U.S.A.

⁶ 김연진, ‘친미’와 ‘반미’ 사이에서. 한국언론을 통해 본 미국의 이미지와 미국화 담론[in:]아메리카 나이지케이션. 해방 이후 한국에서의 미국화, 김덕호, 원용진 엮음, 2008, 푸른역사, p. 263

2) 1960s and 1970s: de-idealization (탈-이상화) of the U.S. and the claim for a true picture of the American ally

3) 1980s and 1990s: rejection of Americanization as “enforcement” by the Korean political leadership.

Kim Deok Ho proposes a slightly different periodization, from rather a social perspective, namely as the “stage of enthusiasm” indicates years between liberalization and the end of 1960s, then 1961-1985 as the relations with the Korean authoritarian regime became uncomfortable for the American leaders, also the worship for America became more discriminative, plus the ethos of economic growth made the Korean society more concentrated on its own achievements. Then since the end of 1980s until present makes a post-democratization period paired with a wave of consumerism.⁷

In the 1945-1960 the Korean society was filling the hunger for goods and for welfare, as well as the need for success in a country that experienced the humiliation of occupation and then became a helpless object of the new post-war order. The United States were considered to be a rich, wise country to be followed in both the domestic and foreign policy. It has been the first source of a foreign aid to the impoverished country, and Koreans eagerly took use of it. It has been called a “give-me-chocolate” ethos, where the U.S. was treated like a “Santa Claus” lavishly pouring material goods into the Korean market.⁸ This was the first step into the world of mass consumption for the South Korean society. Also, in spite of the criticism of American policy as effecting in the division of the Peninsula, Americans were hailed as the liberators of Korea, which image lasted at least until the end of 1960s, when several voices claimed that the Republic of Korea had been treated instrumentally by its ally.⁹

After Pak Jeong Hee’s military coup d’état, the slogan of authorities became the modernization and industrialization of the country. Welfare was supposed to be an answer to the North Korean threat. No doubt that the American support had evoked fierce criticism of the communist North on the ground that the South was “exchanging its patriotism” for the material goods and treated the American ally with a servile attitude. The North Korea, on the other hand, was doing her best to show to the world her self-dependence. The South Korea of 1960s, however, was not so critical about the ideological offer of America. The over-

⁷ 김덕호, 한국에서의 일상생활과 소비의 미국화 문제[in:] 아메리카나이지제이션. 해방 이후 한국에서의 미국화, 김덕호, 원용진 엮음, 2008, 푸른역사, pp. 122-160

⁸ 김덕호, *ibidem*, pp. 126-135

⁹ 김연진, ‘친미’와 ‘반미’ 사이에서. 한국언론을 통해 본 미국의 이미지와 미국화 담론, *ibidem*, p. 275

idealization of the United States came to some balance, however, during the hottest fight for democracy in the 1970s.

In the early 80's in the resistance against the authoritarian regime, the society began showing hostility toward the U.S. and the arson attack on the U.S. embassy in Pusan in 1982 was an 'open demonstration of hostility toward the United States'.¹⁰ In a sense, those manifestations of hostility were symptoms of inclination toward liberalism from the society; moreover, anti-American protests have been often linked to the resistance to the domestic policies of the Korean governments.¹¹

At the end of the 1980s South Korean reached the long-dreamed economical success, and a period of "consumer revolution" began. People were able to afford luxury items at a broader scale, and the hunt for social status took a new turn. The new Korean middle class was "more catholic than the Pope" in following the Western lifestyle, and paired it with a "consumer nationalism"¹², which claimed the need of boosting the national economy through intensive working-earning-spending ethos. In a response to the consumers' growing appetites for a modern lifestyle and luxury items, popular American brands were mushrooming throughout the country. The crowning of the process in 2000 was the opening of the COEX, Korea's biggest shopping mall, which was famously branded "The Mall of America". Nobody could doubt, walking in the Korean streets, that the wide-spread consumption gave a spur to the Korean economy. The most recent phenomenon has become, perhaps, the craze for English language cram schools, a must for those who aspire to "keep up with the Joneses". Of all American influences in Korea, presently the American lifestyle and pattern of consumption seems to be the strongest one.

4. Conclusion: Patron-Client Relationship or Partnership – the Dilemmas of Nationalism versus American-styled Modernization.

In his article¹³ on the recent anti-American protests, John Huer, presents an opinion that,

¹⁰ 김연진, '친미'와 '반미' 사이에서. 한국언론을 통해 본 미국의 이미지와 미국화 담론[in:]아메리카나이제이션. 해방 이후 한국에서의 미국화, 김덕호, 원용진 엮음, 2008, 푸른역사, p. 280

¹¹ 오승구, 2005, 한미동맹의 미래와 한국의 선택, 삼성경제연구소

¹² 김덕호, 한국에서의 일상생활과 소비의 미국화 문제, *ibidem*, p. 152

¹³ Huer, John, Beef and Anti-Americanism, *The Korea Times*, 2008/5/25,

http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/opinion/2008/05/162_24696.html

first, the import of the American beef issue revealed very strong anti-American sentiments in the Korean society, secondly, the issue is just a trifle in comparison with the influx of American culture and the total Americanization of lifestyle in Korea. That seems true; however, there is another dimension of this contemporary Americanization stage.

The after-democratization peak of consumerism is covering and preserving old divisions in the society, and the America-educated elite clutches to the Korean traditional social patterns and continues supporting the inflexible education system which puts emphasis rather on social ties and school reputation than individual effort and talents. Namely, the U.S.-originated rationalism and mode of teaching social sciences, for instant, have been trickling into the Korean handbooks rather slowly in comparison with the numbers of U.S.-educated Korean scholars. It almost resembles the situation with English language education and its disproportions between the number of language institutes, foreign teachers and the number of hours spent on learning English, and the level of English language proficiency of the Korean students. The character of Americanization in Korea is superficial in the field of real mental change of the society, for which a Foreign still means American and American means a chance for social advancement. The invasion of American mass culture presented by John Huer may not be as dangerous as the way the Americanization tunneled certain undesired social behaviors.

First, such an attitude of putting and following clichés on the outer world, as well as the hunt for symbols of social status, do not encourage social solidarity and social dialogue. Even if the society needs a new self-identity, differing from the one of a poor relative seeking a life chance among richer and more successful societies, the intelligentsia is not very much supporting due to the same pattern of dependency. In the recent protests on the American beef import, the academic circles remained silent and were rather eager to hush the stir. It is now wonder, actually, if the Korean modern higher education took its roots in the American universities.¹⁴ Korean society hardly knows how to meet the constant American culture radiation, neither how to treat non-American foreigners and their cultures, as they have proved to be of ‘little use’ in comparison with the U.S. Koreans too often a time apply a hierarchy of importance on the world societies, in dependence on how close a country/a society has moved toward the American model. There is, as well, little discussion within the society on how the nation should function in the future, and what shape is the national

¹⁴ 정일중, 한국사회과학 페러다임의 미국화. 근대화론의 한국전파와 한국에서의 수용[in:] 아메리카나이제이션. 해방 이후 한국에서의 미국화, 김덕호, 원용진 엮음, 2008, 푸른역사, pp. 336-376

thought bound to take in the future. A dialogue on the national condition is most needed in the era of globalization. As far as now the “Korean wave” has been nothing but a sort of advertizing Korea in the international markets and the marketing is desirable but not sufficient, especially for the Koreans themselves.

Secondly, Americanization in Korea seems more of hybridization than anything else; the Korean society has been treating the American symbols of success in an instrumental way, being very careful of preserving the old social order and hierarchy of importance, regard, and social status. Even if Korean people flatter themselves to be protecting their country traditions, the economic welfare has kept social inequalities and poor interaction within social classes in more or less the same state since the rapid development period and the second “stage of Americanization” in Korea. The same pattern functions both in the foreign policy and in the common beliefs of an average Korean citizen: the U.S. is on the top of the hierarchy of importance. This one-sided foreign cultural influx, the naïve and indiscriminative acceptance of American popular culture and lifestyle as tokens of success, as well as overly stereotypical notions concerning the outer world, all of this is rather perilous to a healthy development of the Korean society.

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