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Questioning America Again

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Chang Sei-jin. *Sangsangdoen America: 1945 nyŏn 8wol ihu Hangukui neisŏn seosanŭn ōtteoke mandŭleogŏtnŭnga* 상상된 아메리카: 1945년 8월 이후 한국의 네이션 서사는 어떻게 만들어졌는가 [Imagined America: How national narratives of Korea have been constructed since August 1945]. Seoul: Purŭn Yeoksa, 2012.

In his analysis of the meaning and impact of America in postwar Japan, Shunya Yoshimi proposed an interpretive framework of “America as desire and violence,” demonstrating the dual role of the United States as object of desire and agent of violence in the Americanization of postwar Japan. This research framework is also useful when investigating what America represented to East Asia’s anti-Communist countries in general. Accordingly, in order to understand the political, economic, and cultural developments in South Korea since 1945, one cannot overlook the complex role of the United States in these processes.

From the perspective of anti-Communist countries in East Asia, the United States has had many faces; it has been a “guardian,” an aggressor, and a tempter. If we can grasp the spectrum of these many faces, we might be able to construct “America” as a multidimensional entity. Its complex multifaceted nature was witnessed in South Korea, where responses to the United States have also been diverse. In order to comprehend both the real and imaginary relationships between South Korea and the United States, we must look at a wide range of paradoxical reactions.

To this end, we need to evaluate several aspects of the multilayered relationship between these two countries. First, there is a fundamental structural relationship between the United States and South Korea concerning the political birth of the latter as a modern nation. After the collapse of Japanese imperialism, America intensified its influence worldwide and played an essential role in the identity formation of a number of new nations, including South Korea. With the establishment of the Cold War system on the international political scene, East Asia was restructured. In the context of this new political environment, South Korea

came to regard recognition and involvement by the United States as a necessary and inevitable condition of its existence as a nation.

Second, we must consider the economic relationship between the two countries. American economic aid to South Korea began when the United States set up its military administration in 1945. South Korea, which reached the verge of collapse after the Korean War (1950–1953), was able to plan and carry out postwar reconstruction and recovery projects with U.S. assistance. For the United States, foreign aid was an important means of exporting American influence and ideology internationally. As Park Myung Lim rightly points out, economic and military aid was an effective strategy for protecting and expanding the “boundaries of the United States.” Questions were soon raised by intellectuals in South Korea concerning the direction of American economic aid. By the late 1950s, the amount of aid was reduced and eventually changed to credit assistance; however, it is undeniable that economic aid from the United States was vital to South Korea’s establishment and maintenance as a nation.

After overcoming the sociopolitical turmoil following the devastation of war and liberation, South Korea was able to survive as an independent entity only in the political and economic milieu created by the United States. In this system of dependence on the United States, it was inevitable that South Korean culture would become intertwined with U.S. culture on some level, either directly or indirectly. If we investigate the category of culture—ideology, systems of representation, and quotidian and popular culture—we notice that South Korean cultural responses to the United States were divergent. Indeed, when we consider the agent of cultural formation and practice, we must consider whether “America” presented only a single problem.

Research on U.S.–South Korean relations has continued steadily over the decades, especially in the fields of history and literature, resulting in many notable studies. However, the general tendency of this scholarship has been to introduce and analyze the United States as a discrete entity. While this perspective is useful in some regards, it is also necessary to investigate how this entity was felt, perceived, and constructed by those on the receiving end. By shifting the focus from “what America was in South Korea” to “how America was imagined in South Korea,” Sei-Jin Chang’s *Imagined America: How National Narratives of Korea Have Been Constructed since August 1945* provides an insightful approach to this issue of complexity.

By employing the expression “imagined,” Chang changes the syntax of the question and, more importantly, the problematic itself, enabling her to map out the convoluted relationships between South Korea and the United States. The expression “imagined” reveals that the focus of her research is not the United States as a bounded entity, but rather the United States as a construct created by responding agents. This perspective is especially useful when probing relations between South Korea and the United States at the level of culture—more specifically, when examining not the nature of their relations but the kind of imaginary actions that came forth as a *result of* their relations. In this sense, Chang’s perspective diverges from that of histories of influence or exchange.

Analysts often use the expression “Americanization” to refer to America’s effects on regions outside the United States. The past several years have seen the publication of a number of studies that adopt the concept of “Americanization” to study the question of U.S. cultural influence on South Korea. “Americanization” is, however, an idea that already presumes its conclusion. Much like “pro-American” or “anti-American” discourse, the expression risks a linear (and one-way) interpretation of the situation. Furthermore, while the identification of “Americanization” may come easily, what is meant by “being Americanized” often remains ambiguous. Questions like “Was South Korea Americanized?” and “If so, what would be the opposite of being Americanized?” are not easy to answer because of the complexity of the issue. Just as theories of cultural imperialism were criticized and rejected because of their unilateral and linear approaches, “Americanization” as a conclusive characterization appears oversimplified.

Imagined America departs from this oversimplification and analyzes the situation more fully. The shift of perspective enables Chang to successfully expound the movements of cultural conservatism—exemplified, for instance, in theory on Oriental and Korean national studies, which were products of ideologues who opposed the incursion of American material culture and spirit. When we look at the ideological tracks of South Korean intellectuals and cultural professionals, we notice that the history of creating and promoting Oriental, traditional, or nationalistic ideas was much longer than it may seem. The development of this kind of conservative self-consciousness dates back to the colonial period, and hence it was not a totally new phenomenon. However, since 1945, America has been identified by cultural conservatives as the clear antagonist to such self-consciousness. These critics have voiced their worries about various issues, such as freedom, democracy, materialism, moral decadence, and the collapse of community. In response to this adversarial dynamic, the

problematization of imagined anti-Americanism in light of an imagined America is one of the valuable contributions Chang makes in her new book.

The counterdiscourse of the conservatives was an enduring project; although its advocates changed over time, the discourse itself persisted. In addition to clearly illustrating the anti-American imaginations of cultural conservatives, Chang pays particular attention to the ideological reactions of those who shared America's political and economic views. The works of cultural conservatives and aestheticists, compared to their sense of reality, may seem romantic and naïve. What was the direction taken by these opponents of conservatism who claimed to possess a clear sense of reality?

Chang's interpretations of the rediscovery of the Pacific, the theory of Asian backwardness, and the related discussion of modernization offer an insightful answer to this question. According to her analysis, the rediscovery of the Pacific shows the viewpoint of South Korean intellectuals who recognized the Cold War world order. During the era of imperialism, the Pacific Ocean became defiled by the war started by Japan against the United States. Japan's defeat in 1945 liberated the image of the Pacific from the imperialist world order, and the Pacific was reimagined as a symbol of new life. In this changed historical context, the ocean was reenvisioned and, after a series of signifying processes, the Pacific came to represent South Korea's intimate relationship with the United States, the ocean of life that enabled South Korea to survive the Cold War era.

If the Pacific's image making was linked to political and military realism, the discussion of Asian identity was intertwined with economic realism. A great number of contemporary South Korean intellectuals believed that communization and poverty were correlated. Communization was seen as a kind of viral infection—a malignant disease for which there was no cure—and it was thought that the only way to stop the spread of the disease was through the promotion of social stability rooted in economic development. It would not, therefore, be wrong to think of the theories of economic development and modernization during the Cold War era as an economic version of the anti-Communist agenda. Chang's analysis of key discourses in the 1950s, including the theory of Asian backwardness and the critiques of Confucian culture, takes this historical context into account.

In addition, the author touches on the problem of America as occupier. She explores violent crimes by the U.S. military in South Korea and the tragedies of military base towns. Discourse on American violence intensified in the late 1950s. As discussed earlier, cultural conservatives adopted the strategy of overdifferentiation to further distance themselves from

the United States and eventually departed from the contemporary political and cultural scene. In contrast, the realists took the path of *overidentification* with America—which, in their minds, was the most forward-looking plan—and thrust themselves into the contemporary scene. Yet were there really no alternative paths that presented different perspectives from these two extremes? An answer to this question is presented in Chang’s discussion of the perception of America as occupier. She calls texts that reveal the consciousness of America as occupier “narrative[s] of rupture.”

It is not an easy task to explain why the violence of the U.S. military in South Korea, which occurred frequently, became a topic of public discussion, particularly in the late 1950s. Chang does not clearly elucidate how it was possible for people to see America’s hidden faces. However, this situation suggests that, although different from the personified America that entered the sphere of daily life or the image of America as a system, the military base as a special area was an entity that continuously created either direct clashes or agitation. This grim reality was generally captured in literary texts. While we have seen many studies on military base literature, most of them presuppose America as a unified entity. In light of Chang’s approach, the significance of these texts should be reexamined within the overall topography presented in *Imagined America*.

Imagined America considers a broad range of sources in order to show America as a multifaceted entity, and it does so without inclining to one side or ending in narrow-minded reduction. By superimposing the collected data, Chang reveals the imagined America, as well as the South Korea that imagined America, like a mosaic. In the book, arguments from different perspectives are presented in combination, and as a result, the ideological boundaries, which can be more easily brought to light if we consider discursive activities, are presented in a rather confusing manner. This kind of confusion, however, might be due not solely to Chang’s methodology, for what the discursive map as a whole shows is that, to South Korea, America was an ambiguous and multilayered entity. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that such factual complexity was not sacrificed in the interest of interpretive economy and appearance.

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