

The Star-Spangled Taegukgi: Investigating the Use of the Flag of the United States within Citizen Demonstrations in South Korea

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In the midst of the alleged corruption scandal surrounding the recently appointed Minister of Justice of Korea Cho Kuk, the partisan and ideological rifts within the South Korean public have since been made explicit as protestors pile onto the streets of Seoul, firmly split between the liberal and conservative camps.¹ One who wades through each faction would likely find recurrent partisan-specific symbols toted by the demonstrators, of which are emblematic of the aesthetic culture in South Korean demonstrations. The symbols of the yellow ribbon and the lit candle have become synonymous with political dissent,² and the symbols of national flags, even ones not of the Korean state, have become typical of protest imagery on the side of the conservative.³ Amidst the flurry of placards and *Taegukgi*, the South Korean national flag, a rather curious sight is that of South Korean protestors waving the star-spangled banner. Flying the U.S. flag along with the South Korea flag within a demonstration regarding corruption allegations and prosecution reform presents an intriguing depiction of the meaning of the United States, its flag, and its significance to South Korean demonstrations. This paper will strive to investigate the use of the U.S. flag in South Korean citizen demonstrations and explore new paradigms of relevance and relation of the U.S. to South Korea.

¹ "Scandal over justice minister galvanises South Koreans at protests," 2019, accessed 19 October, 2019, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/scandal-over-justice-minister-galvanises-south-koreans-at-protests>.

² Liora Sarfati and Bora Chung, "Affective Protest Symbols: Public Dissent in the Mass Commemoration of the Sewöl Ferry's Victims in Seoul," *Asian Studies Review* 42, no. 4 (2018): 578, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2018.1516732>.

³ "Why Is The American Flag Flying At Rallies For South Korea's Impeached President?," Daily Caller News Foundation, 2017, accessed 19 October, 2019, <https://dailycaller.com/2017/03/01/why-is-the-american-flag-flying-at-rallies-for-south-koreas-impeached-president/>.

South Korean Protest Symbolism and its Pertinence



Kim, Hyejin. "Photograph of the United States Flag at Protests against Cho Kuk." Seoul, South Korea. 2019.

It is firstly important to note the salience of partisan symbolism in South Korean demonstrations. Jang touches upon this by their exploration of how the *Taegukgi* has historically been exploited by the 1961-1979 Park Chung-hee administration to advance its rightist political stance.⁴ Progressive movements, in comparison, have been described to regularly use candlelight protests and commemorative yellow ribbons in their strikes.⁵ These iconographies have manifested and asserted themselves most prominently in the 2016 Park Geun-hye impeachment demonstrations, where pro-impeachment demonstrators historically gathered numbers of 17 million and took part in a candlelight demonstration in major cities of the country,⁶ and anti-impeachment demonstrators have famously become to be known as *Taegukgi* brigades (*Taegukgibudae*) for their donning of the South Korean national flag in their rallies. These partisan distinctions of protest iconography have maintained their salience even in the contemporary demonstrations regarding Cho Kuk, with advocates for prosecution reform partaking in candlelit protests and advocates

⁴As cited in Joonseong Lee and Katherine E. Brown, "'Make Korea with America Great Again': An Articulation and Assemblage of South Korean Extreme Right Practices," *Communication Culture & Critique* 11, no. 1 (2018): 57, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ccc/ctx004>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ W. Kang, "Determinants of Unaffiliated Citizen Protests: The Korean Candlelight Protests of 2016-2017," *KOREA JOURNAL* 59, no. 1 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.25024/kj.2019.59.1.46>.

for the ouster of Cho Kuk and its implied rejection of the Moon administration partaking in protest that featured national flags of South Korea and the U.S.A.⁷

The South Korean Extreme Right and the American Influence

Lee and Brown look into the South Korean extreme right in seeking to answer the question of why demonstrators would wield the national flags of the U.S. alongside that of South Korea, exploring also the use of political figures such as Trump and Park Chung-hee within the narrative of the extreme right.⁸ They explore and posit a type of tripartite relation of conservatism, perceptions of the United States, and Park Chung-hee's calculated manipulation of state narratives; working together to create an image of the U.S., and by extension, its national flag, as a legitimizing icon for the South Korean extreme right.

Firstly, the contemporary conservative narrative appears to have been prescribed and cemented since the ceasefire of the Korean War in 1953. Consolidated military alliances and the ideological rift across the Korean peninsula had the image of the United States to the South largely come to signify staunch anti-communism and as 'saviours' liberating South Korea from the invasion of the communist North.⁹ Accordingly, the U.S. flag has been used by conservatives as a way of validating their movement, and "as a symbol of the longstanding anti-communist alliance."¹⁰ This is undoubtedly meaningful to the Korean extreme right, whose identity has been centred around being firmly against leftist ideology and policy by virtue of deliberate politics.

Park Chung-hee's regime was characterised by "a combination of ruthlessness and prudence" in strong state politics of a military dictatorship as the answer to development, but remained one that stood "in sharp relief against the uncompromisingly heavy-handed version in the North."¹¹ Park's politics emphasised modernisation defined solely as economic prosperity, which served as the hallmark of rightist ideology.¹² This was further accentuated with Park's utilisation of Cold War acrimonies and the communist threat of the North to justify his authoritarian regime.¹³ Park's politics fell perfectly within rightist ideologies, rendering his enduring cult of personality to the extreme right to this day perhaps unsurprising.

⁷ The Straits Times, "Scandal over justice minister galvanises South Koreans at protests."

⁸ Lee and Brown, "'Make Korea with America Great Again': An Articulation and Assemblage of South Korean Extreme Right Practices," 53-54.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Stein Ringen, *The Korean state and social policy: how South Korea lifted itself from poverty and dictatorship to affluence and democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 3.

¹² *Ibid.*, 9.

¹³ *Ibid.*

Extreme right narratives have also been described to utilise a Korean brand of McCarthyism in the propagation of its dogma. Nationalism, to the extreme right, is considered and portrayed to be equivalent to anti-communism.¹⁴ This is most pertinently expressed by how right-wing parties try to deflect criticism by reducing critics to being “unpatriotic, ‘Reds,’ or North Korean spies.”¹⁵ As a result, the United States’ role as not only as an icon of anti-communism but one as a victor of the Cold War and a champion of neo-liberal capitalism once again becomes convenient and crucial to extreme right-wing messaging. The South Korean extreme right, in their reverence for American conservatism, have sought to emulate the American conservative’s language of being anti-establishment as well as its image of modernity to advance its political ends; and this remains evident in its adopted symbols within citizen protests.¹⁶

Beyond the facet of the military, the American alliance has influenced the ever-changing South Korean identity by means including the institutionalization of specific identities, the wilful suppression of perspectives and events that may be to antagonistic to the United States, and most importantly, the creation of the American image as benevolent liberator of South Korea.¹⁷ The deliberate manipulation of political outcomes in South Korea by the United States post-1945, beginning with military governance,¹⁸ set up the precedent for the deeply entrenched linkages between South Korea and the United States. Similarly to the mode of politics utilized in Vietnam, American powers sought to resist Soviet resistance by its deep involvement in South Korean politics. This included the formation of the Korean Democratic Party in 1945 and the sourcing of potential leaders, considered based on their expected loyalty and sympathy to the American capitalist ideology.¹⁹

Lee and Brown have provided a compelling analysis of the South Korean extreme right’s motivations for using the U.S. flag alongside their South Korea’s own national flag, that this is but part of the deliberate programme to regulate the narrative of patriotism to ultimately serve rightist politics. While these conditions provide a comprehensive look into the historical imperatives of South Korea and their interaction with politics, the conditions seem to lack a decisive force that explains the persistent relevance of anti-communist belief, especially in the modern context; where the threat of communism and the North appears to be very much diminished. In essence, it is questionable if Park

¹⁴ Lee and Brown, ““Make Korea with America Great Again”: An Articulation and Assemblage of South Korean Extreme Right Practices,” 63.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ J. J. Suh, Peter J. Katzenstein, and Allen Carlson, *Rethinking security in East Asia: identity, power, and efficiency* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2004), 113-115.

¹⁸ Bruce Cumings, *Korea's place in the sun: a modern history*, Updat ed. (London;New York;: W. W. Norton, 2005), 185.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 194-197.

Chung-hee's cult of personality should have as resounding an influence to the Korean right wing as it does today. In the inquiry into the relations between the South Korea and the United States, one less-considered area especially within the context of citizen demonstrations, is perhaps that of the role of religion and evangelism.

Religion and the Construction of Identities of the Extreme Right

The perennial and complex relation between the South Korea and the United States was not only guided by the political, military, and economic nexus but also that of religion.²⁰ In fact, the religious affiliation between South Korea and the United States seems to be a result of the setting and climate created by the political, military and economic foundations of the relation. The legacy of the Second World War has had South Korea and the United States be "enmeshed in a neo-colonial relationship," one that proved especially beckoning to the older Korean generation.²¹ By extension, older evangelicals admired the United States for their supposed role in building the Korean State, and in particular, aspired to the white American Protestant's evangelisms.²² The South Korean reverence for the United States, from the basis of religion, is the view of the United States as "the 'great nation,' the powerful 'modern Rome.'"²³

Lee evaluates the success of South Korean evangelism to have been attributed to the coalescence of religion with anti-communism and nationalism.²⁴ The unity of evangelism and nationalism was described to be particularly pertinent within the 1919 March 1st Independence Movement; Lee raises that almost half of the leaders of the movement were, in fact, evangelists and that the networks of the nation and that of the church played important roles in the effective communication both leading up to the movement as well as within the movement.²⁵ The 1950s and the advent of the Korean War solidified evangelism as being at odds with communism, despite ambiguous relations in the earlier decades.²⁶ Consistent with Marxist-Leninist communism, religion was rephended by Korean communists. Evangelism was also conceived to both be politically conservative as well as a symbol of imperialism, due to the inextricable ties between the Korean and American evangelism.²⁷ At this point,

²⁰ Rebecca Y. Kim, "Korean Missionaries in America," (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 9.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

²² *Ibid.*, 7.

²³ *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁴ Timothy S. Lee, "A Crucial Factor in Evangelicalism's Success in (South) Korea: Coalescence with Nationalism and Anticommunism," *Religion Compass* 5, no. 11 (2011): 646, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8171.2011.00312.x>.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 650.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 651-652.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 652.

communism and evangelism solidified its adversarial relationship, and the ensuing violent ideological conflicts rendered this relationship irreparable.

The role of religion in the South Korean state did not restrict itself only to historical phenomena. Even after the South Korean independence, political actors often actively invoked religious discourse within the public sphere. This begun with Syngman Rhee's reign, which was described to have "institutionalised [Christianity], albeit unofficially, as a modern equivalent to the religion of the powerful."²⁸ Park Chung-hee's reign brought similar conceptions of Christianity to South Korea. His proclivity towards industrialization and economic development, as well as his criticisms of traditional religions, had the South Korean political culture equate secular successes to Christianity.²⁹ To Park, the traditional religions were thought to be "incompatible with a changing world."³⁰ Perhaps the most apparent expression of religious discourse within the public discourse was that of the Lee Myung-bak administration, where in his mayoral inauguration of 2004 had said 'I declare that the City of Seoul is a holy place governed by God; the citizens in Seoul are God's people,' and was accused of religious favouritism in the choosing of his cabinet as well as changing the maps of Seoul with the deliberate omission of Buddhist temples.³¹

Religion is also deeply implicated within partisan splits within South Korea. The Protestant church significantly leads rightist efforts in South Korea,³² cognising the fusion of Protestantism with party affiliations. Protestantism was described to have entered a "post-hypermasculine developmentalism" when faced with declining growth in the early 2000s, and it is at this point where the church has deliberately tried to access mainstream society by its organization into political and social agendas;³³ these included "biblical literalism, the verbal inspiration theory of the Bible, anti-communism, anti-North Korea-ism, and pro-Americanism."³⁴ The advent of modernity and increased political liberalism in South Korea also drove the older generation to consider Protestantism as "the last bastion of genuine Korean-ness."³⁵ The true power of the involvement of the church in politics is its equation of political,

²⁸ William Silcott and Jens Kreinath, "Transformations of a 'religious' nation in a global world: Politics, Protestantism and ethnic identity in South Korea," *Culture and Religion* 14, no. 2 (2013): 231, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14755610.2012.758645>.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Lee 2008, As cited in *ibid.*, 232.

³² Kang In-Cheol, "Protestant church and Wolnamin: An explanation of Protestant conservatism in South Korea," *Korea Journal* 44, no. 4 (2004).

³³ Nami Kim, *The Gendered Politics of the Korean Protestant Right: Hegemonic Masculinity* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2016), 4.

³⁴ Kyuhoon Cho, "Another Christian right? The politicization of Korean Protestantism in contemporary global society," *Social Compass* 61, no. 3 (2014): 319, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0037768614535699>.

³⁵ Ibid.

ideological divergences into religious, moral disagreements.³⁶ Ideological beliefs within the religious-political agent then become an element that seems, in some way, coerced or at least obliged to be the ones corresponding to that of the churches.

The fundamental factor relates to the culmination of these variables, anti-communism, deliberate politics, conservatism and religion, into differentiated meanings of a South Korean identity. With the intricate tie of religion with politics in South Korea not only within civil society but also in the upper echelons of political power, it is an undeniable variable influencing the socialization of national identity. The Protestant church draws a new link between South Korea and the United States, and its close links with conservatism both in South Korea and the United States creates a new facet of the South Korean identity; that of the religious conservative South Korean with an adamant disdain for communism. The alleged representations of the individuals of the *Taegukgi* brigades seem to fit this profile; anti-impeachment protesters, mostly from the older generation, have likened impeachment to communism and have expressed a reminiscence of Park Chung-hee's time.³⁷ One of the alleged protestors, Mr. Yoon, was described to comment:

*The country has come down to this because our national identity is a mess. [...] It's a matter of supporting a liberal democracy or communism. There's no left or right. Just think of the leftists as people close to the North, and the rightists as people close to the U.S.*³⁸

Implicitly, the identity politics of South Korea indicate the understanding of ideological beliefs being associated to different regimes and different nations, particularly to the conservative right. Narratives of the South Korean extreme right asserts this dichotomy, associating all leftist discourse with North-sympathising discourse. This explains the impetus for the utilization of the imagery of the United States in lending legitimacy, particularly as a world superpower, to extreme right messaging. This is further compounded by religious discourse, which not only subtly directs political leanings but is embedded within the age-old involvement of the United States in South Korean state affairs.

The sensitivity around the Cho Kuk controversy in contemporary South Korean politics is, in a big part, due to his association with the incumbent left-leaning President, Moon Jae-in. Firstly, the appointment of Cho Kuk as the Justice Minister by Moon Jae-in to spearhead prosecution reform was met with vehement objections by the opposition.³⁹ Cho Kuk's appointment regardless,

³⁶ Kim, *The Gendered Politics of the Korean Protestant Right: Hegemonic Masculinity*, 7.

³⁷ "Impeach the Impeachment: Older Conservatives "Defend Democracy", " 2017, accessed 3 November, 2019, <https://www.koreaexpose.com/taegukgi-rally-conservatives-defend-democracy/>.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ "South Korean justice minister Cho Kuk resigns amid protests; President Moon Jae-in apologises," 2019, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east->

became analogous to the Moon administration and came to represent the cogency of the left in directing South Korean politics. With the eruption of the controversy, the same sort of generalisation within the extreme right that has equated the South Korean right to the United States and the left to the North seemed to equate Cho Kuk to the left, and by extension, opponents of Cho Kuk to the right. The resurgence of the U.S. flag and related imagery, particularly on the protestors opposing Cho Kuk, represents the threatened worldview of the extreme right and their resentment of leftist politics in South Korea. The role of religion is the fortification of these pre-existing partisan rifts, providing the furtive impetus for the firm adherence to an ideological affiliation; one that is ultimately undoubtedly rooted in historical United States involvement. Hence, there is reason to be certain that the right's continued appeal to the U.S. flag would likely endure even when faced with the growing obsolescence of the communist or Northern threat.

In conclusion, the pertinence of identity in South Korean politics is rather unique. Attempts at understanding the use of the U.S. flag in protests by the South Korean extreme right will inevitably have to look into the construction of different identities in South Korea. The legacy of the United States enduring from the time of South Korean 'independence' manifests itself in various contexts, the political, ideological and religious, of South Korean modernity. Politically, the continued military alliance means that the United States will likely retain its significance within South Korea in practical terms. The future of the cultural legacy of the United States remains relatively more vague, but the factor of religion seems to produce an indelible linkage between the South Korean and American right. While the role of the church in the creation and influence of conservative discourse in South Korea is apparent, additional research would be required in ascertaining the prevalence and perhaps degree of devout religiosity within the South Korean extreme right to find a more direct connection between the religious right and general reverence for the United States. This would add clarity to this facet of understanding not only South Korean society but also provide clues to the true, composite effects of American influence, past or present.

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