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Risk and Contentious Politics: American Beef and the Korean Candlelight Protest

This case study examines how the import of American beef triggered massive protests in Korea. The current Lee government decided for political reasons to accept imports to facilitate the Korea-US free trade agreement, but critiques of this decision ignited a social movement. Initially, *PD Notebook*, a renowned Korean investigative TV program, noticed that the import of American beef might cause the spread of mad cow disease because the US surveillance system regarding BSE risk is weak. The fear of mad cow disease initiated by the media has been amplified through risk communication. Over a period of several months, several hundred thousand people gathered at the center of Seoul to protest the Lee government's decision and request its withdrawal. Scientists and experts on mad cow disease were also organized to explain the risk of American beef. In response, Lee's government indicted the producers of *PD Notebook* and core members of the protest movement, leading to legal disputes. At the same time, the potential risk of mad cow disease has been hotly contested by experts. In this context, I examine how risk politics involves media, science, social movements, and legal dispute simultaneously. Theoretically, this study engages Beck's thesis on "risk society and subpolitics," on the one hand, and STS literatures on social movement and politics of science on the other hand. The official politics has been challenged by subpolitics, or the direct politics of street demonstrations, as well as by media attacks and scientific criticism. But the official politics has suppressed those challenges through various counterattacks, including physical oppression by police, legal threats, and ideological labeling. By analyzing these complex and contentious politics, I aim to show how the risk event generated several intertwined lines of conflicts among media, science, law, and social movements, how the risk was assessed and perceived in a transnational context, and how those conflicts were resolved.