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Visualizing Risk in Korea

This paper is concerned with visual aspects of risk culture in Korea. It becomes an essential feature of a more ecologically tuned, technologically advanced, and mass-mediated risk society emerging in Korea to understand the ways in which risk is represented and popularly understood through mass mediation equipped with varied technologies of visualization as well as cultural codes and scientific knowledge. In 2008, mad cow disease became a site where various actors - such as medical experts, politicians, journalists and publics – meet when the current government announced its decision to open the domestic market to US beef in Korea. This decision not only sparked mad cow disease fears among Korean publics but also quickly drove the Korean society as a whole to a severe social turbulence. It appears that the mad cow disease fear arose from the unintelligibility of the virulent pathogen and there were little consensus on what people in Korea know and feel about the disease. Other related issues were also raised: public health, the governmental risk management system, the subsequent candlelight demonstration, the concern with press freedom relating to the indictment of an investigative TV program, which is often finger-pointed to trigger publics' fear on US beefs in Korea. What have been rarely discussed are the visual aspects of risk culture in rendering an account of the disease in Korea.

In order to make more sense of the way in which infectious disease like mad cow disease as a virulent pathogen in contemporary global risk society operate upon society and culture, this paper seeks to examine the visual-technological-cultural aspects of rendering an account of the mad cow disease in Korea. In doing so, it will focus on the sense-making practices in terms of the visualization and signification of the mad cow disease as a risk object. By relying upon recent theories in visual aesthetics and critical cultural studies on visual culture, this paper will analyze what kinds of visual aspects of risk culture that integrate risk objects with wider existing socio-cultural and politico-economic constellations are materialized in Korea.