

Refusing Empire through Care - Anti-base Dissent in Soseong-ri, South Korea

Korea has been a key site for US hegemony in the Pacific since the mid 20th century. Despite the nominal end of the Cold War, the US continues to expand its imperial grips through new technological sites, such as the THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) in the rural mountainous village of Soseong-ri, installed in 2017. While the South Korean state sanctions the site, dissent at the local level remains despite their invisibility and unpopularity in the broader public media discourse. In such a political landscape, precarious daily life in Soseong-ri in the shadow of a technological military site is framed as an uncomfortable but acceptable zone of regional sacrifice in the service of national security, which frames the US military as a constitutive element of the nation. Based on preliminary fieldwork, this paper attends to practices of relationality and mutual care by anti-base dissent communities, unsettling ideas of liberal political subjectivity and easy narratives of resistance. Ethnographic attunement to everyday lives, relations of care, and aspirations disrupted by imperial power relations and militarization extend recent efforts to understand the US empire as lived assemblages. To care is to be concerned with and to feel for something. For the base dissent community in Soseong-ri, dissent is embodied, intersubjective, and relational. These stories of seemingly unremarkable practices of everyday care shed light on the dynamic and limits of empire. Their alternative conceptions of security challenge the idea that the only path to security is through war and that fear, rather than care, are rational approaches to facing risk. People of Soseong-ri inspire a capacity for hope in the face of broader national apathy about the potential for different ways of living collectively and safely.