

Protests Challenge Naval Base Construction on Jeju Island, South Korea: Hunger Strike Precipitates a National and International Movement 韓国濟州島での海軍基地建設への抗議 – ハンスト、国内外の運動を起こす

Gwisook Gwon

Protests Challenge Naval Base Construction on Jeju Island, South Korea: Hunger Strike Precipitates a National and International Movement Updated August 5, 2011

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August 6, 2011 **update**: Gloria Steinem, Arms Race Intrudes on a South Korean Paradise

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On July 22, the ROK national police chief came to Jeju Island. Two days later, around 100 police bearing riot shields were sent to Gangjeong to guard the entrances to Jungdeok, the intended naval base site and home of protesting villagers. In defiance of a July 15, 2011 government directive, protesters obstructed two entrances to the site, using a car blockade at one and locked arms at the other. Following verbal confrontation, the riot police left without resorting to physical violence.

On July 25, two additional Korean political opposition leaders, Democratic Party member Kim Jae Yun, who represents Seogwipo (the city that encompasses the southern half of Jeju including Gangjeong), and Korean Democratic Labor Party member Hyun Ae Ja, joined the protesters. Both issued solidarity statements at press conferences; Hyun chained herself to a tree and joined the human blockade.

Mayor Kang Dong-Kyun and Brother Song Kang-Ho have been released; however Ko Kwan Il, artist Sung-Hee Choi, and nine other activists remain imprisoned without bail, while awaiting trial. The 77 activists and civil service organizations were given one week from July 15 to leave the Jungdeok coast; however the directive has not been implemented pending judicial review by Seogwipo City.

On Aug. 2, Korean activists reported that Gangjeong villagers and their supporters have blocked all the construction entrances to the intended naval base site (and the former homes and farms of the villagers).



Gillchun Koh graffiti art, Gangjeong

The villagers have two demands: stop construction and initiate a new assessment process to determine the necessity for the base; provide a thorough environmental impact statement (EIS) in accord with Korean law.

The five ROK opposition political parties are supporting these demands. On Aug. 4, they held a joint press conference stating that the destruction of the coastline for naval construction would damage the environment and that the National Assembly should reconsider the project.

Leading Korean Catholic bishops are regularly visiting the village and holding mass on the disputed coastline. Catholic priests, nuns, and monks are among those who have been arrested during nonviolent demonstrations.

On August 6 a large protest rally is scheduled to be held on Jeju.

Meanwhile, Gangjeong landowners are

awaiting adjudication of their Supreme Court appeal challenging the legality of ROK military destruction of a national monument protection area (Jeju's southern coast received this designation from the Korean Cultural Heritage Administration in 2001). Jeju District Court dismissed their suit, finding that the landowners lacked standing to bring the case. A decision to appeal is expected within the year.

A growing number of public intellectuals worldwide, including Noam Chomsky, Richard Levins, and George Katsiaficas, have expressed support for the villagers.

See the Save Jeju Island website http://www.savejejuisland.org/Save_Jeju_Island/Welcome.html administered by Matt Hoey, an aerospace nuclear weapons analyst now in Jeju Island, which posts regular news updates.

July 16 update: ROK Police Arrest Peaceful Gangjeong Anti-Base Activists

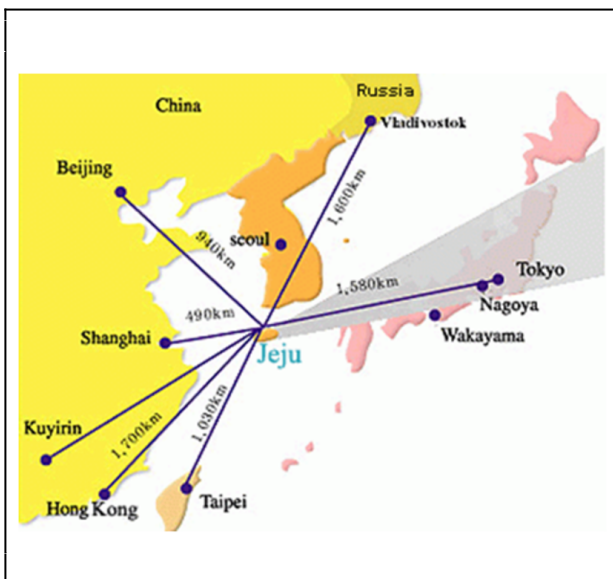
In tactics reminiscent of the darkest days of the dictatorship, ROK undercover police officers have arrested three leading activists in the anti-base movement in Jeju's Gangjeong village: Mayor Kang Dong-kyun, Brother Song Kang-ho, and base opposition leader Ko Kwon-il. The three face up to five-year sentences and heavy fines.

The arrest came in the wake of international

support for the protest movement in the form of a widely circulated letter by including a letter of support from American feminist and political activist Gloria Steinem, and the launch of an English-language website and online petition supported by over 100 peace and religious groups worldwide.

The South Korean Navy and Minister of Justice Lee Gui Nam also issued a notice warning 77 individuals and civil society organizations of dire consequences for impeding construction of the naval base.

In May 2011, 'Vimeo' and 'Youtube' posted a film interview with Korean film critic Yang Yoon-moo.¹ The interview shows why Yang has struggled against the naval base building for 4 years in Gangjeong village, Jeju Island south-west of the mainland of Korea and strategically located in relation to China, Japan, Korea and Russia.



Strategic Jeju

In addition, the film shows his forcible arrest by police on April 6, 2011. Following his arrest he maintained a hunger strike for 71 days including 57 days in prison. Why did he (and fellow residents of Gangjeong village) conclude that have no other choice than to risk their lives to prevent the construction of a base?



Yang Yoon-moo is widely recognized as Korea's most prominent film critic

The movement against construction of a naval base on Jeju Island began in 2002 when the Korean navy announced plans to pursue an 'ocean navy strategy' to build military strength at sea through deploying large warships (*Chosun.com*, May 27, 2007). Challengers

pointed out that the base would become a center for a naval arms race in the Asia-Pacific and a new phase in the ROK-US military alliance with Jeju as a focal point for monitoring and challenging China.² With both China and Japan strengthening their naval forces with the newest vessels and submarines,³ peace activists have contended that the new base could only intensify hostilities throughout the region.⁴

Yang's hunger strike triggered a movement opposing the naval base. Although Yang did not mention an arms race in the video interview the, the issue played an important role in mobilizing support nationally and internally. New participants from Seoul in a July 2 protest asserted that the naval base on Jeju Island would become a powder keg that could explode across Northeast Asia, hence the construction was a matter of urgency for the whole nation. Seven organizations of Korean residents in the United States issued a statement reiterating the problem (*Sisa Jeju*, July 5, 2011). Eventually, 101 international peace organizations voiced concern about peace in the Asia-Pacific region as well as about the plight of Gangjeong villagers (*nobasestoriesKorea.blogspot.com*, June 8, 2011).

This article analyzes the discourses among major actors that developed and changed over time. Although some civil organizations nationwide had expressed opinions about the construction, the movement was initially largely limited within Jeju. While the national media had occasionally reported on the construction, most mainlanders were unaware of the opposition movement. Outside opponents of the bases only recently came to play a major role.

In 2002, the Korean navy proposed Hwasoon village (in western Jeju), the primary location of the Japanese military during the Asia-Pacific War, as the site of the base. However, the

proposed site was switched from Hwasoon (2002-2005), to Wimi (2005-2007) and then to Gangjeong (2007-present). Along with this change of site, not only have the major actors in the movement, but also the frames or discourses of competing groups, been transformed. In order to explain Yang's struggle, I pay special attention to the discourses of opposition forces in Gangjeong village. And I show how the discourses or narratives have affected the culture of the movement such as its rituals and collective identity.

Theorists of cultural analysis in social movements define discourse as "the summation of symbolic interchange of what is being talked and written about, of the interrelations of symbols and their systematic occurrence."⁵ The analysis of discourse is an important tool for understanding the shared beliefs and experiences that were overlooked by resource mobilization approaches. Frames or discourses are also significant strategic tools for recruiting participants.⁶

I examine discourses and related narratives through the speech acts, including public statements and stories, of actors. I have observed the struggle and interviewed the oppositional parties, especially residents of Gangjeong, since 2007.

The Navy vs Jeju Residents: National Security vs The Vision of Jeju Island

When the plan to build a naval base in Hwasoon village was made public in June 2002, the major actors were the navy and Jeju society. Although Hwasoon residents and civil groups led protest, most residents of Jeju took this as a social problem of Jeju Island rather than of Hwasoon. While the navy moved to persuade the residents of Hwasoon to accept the base in the name of national security, the whole society of Jeju divided into pro and con over base construction. The protestors' discourse focused on the inconsistency with the

vision for Jeju as an Island of peace and human rights.⁷ At the end of that year the Jeju government asked the Maritime Affairs Ministry to stop the planned construction on the basis of public opinion.

The Navy & the Jeju Government vs Jeju Island: National Security & Regional Development vs the Image of ‘Island of Peace’

The conflict between the navy and anti-base residents of Jeju resumed when the navy again proposed to construct their base at Hwasoon. The new plan called for a base with a land area of about 400,000 square meters. With an investment of 8 trillion won, the base was to moor 20 sophisticated warships including 7,600-ton Aegis-equipped KDX-III destroyers.

This time the Jeju government became involved. Governor, Kim Tae-whan, who was elected in 2006, established a task force (T/F) to analyze the effects of the construction of the naval base on various fields of Jeju society.

The official justification the navy presented was national security. The base would protect the oil route near the Island and check potential threats from China or Japan. They also emphasized the economic advantages that came with the construction of the naval base in order to appeal to local residents (*Jeju Sori*, May 31, 2007). The Jeju government, by contrast emphasized the necessity to secure approval of the residents, the promotion of regional development, and compatibility with the image of ‘Island of Peace’ proclaimed by the central government in April 2005 (*Jeju Sori*, May 14, 2007).



As mentioned above, some protestors criticized the naval base in connection with its role in implementing a US missile defense system taking aim at China on the grounds that it would inflame hostilities. However, this did not develop into a major discourse because most residents lacked information to judge. Moreover, the navy strongly denied the possibility of conflict. The main subjects of conferences and the local media were those raised by the Jeju government. Jeju people again divided into roughly two groups.

While the navy had a hard time gaining the consent of the residents of Hwasoon, in August 2005 some Wimi villagers (in southeastern Jeju) asked the navy to bring the base to their area for local development. However, within months, most villagers voiced disagreement with this request. Fierce protests continued in Wimi until a survey of public opinion in May 2007 decided against Wimi as a site for the base. The residents developed their own discourses in the interaction with the navy and the local government. The alternatives they proposed were keeping peace by peaceful means, the right to live for villagers, and the agreement of villagers.

The Jeju Government vs Gangjeong Village; Regional Development vs Democratic Procedure & Breakdown of Community

After the Jeju governor outlined a roadmap for site selection based on an April 10, 2007 public opinion poll, attention on Jeju focused on the selection of the site. The construction was taken for granted, and media attention focused on the method of the survey.⁸ When about 100 villagers in Gangjeong (in southern Jeju) asked to be the third candidate during a regional development meeting on April 27, 2007,⁹ the construction of the naval base tended to become a problem for particular villages rather than of the whole society of Jeju. Before the rest of the villagers in Gangjeong had addressed the situation, the first of two surveys was done in a single week. The Governor then announced on May 14, 2007 that Gangjeong village had been selected.

Since then, the opposing residents have struggled to reverse this abrupt decision. They formed organizations such as ‘the committee on measures to oppose base construction’ and ‘the committee of Gangjeong village’. Those groups, held a plebiscite on August 20, 2007 to ascertain opinions of residents despite a boycott by pro construction villagers. The result was 36 for and 680 against the construction. Following the vote, the oppositional villagers began to speak as the leading actors.

While both the navy and the Jeju government emphasized regional development, investment in various facilities, and maximum compensation for residents rather than national defense in a classical attempt to buy off local opponents of the base,¹⁰ opposition groups built collective identity through grievances, narratives, and experiences of movement.

The collective identity of protestors was at first based on their anger toward the pro-construction villagers and former Jeju governor, Kim Tae-whan. The residents I interviewed accused those villagers of selling out their home town with its 400 year history and the governor of betraying their support in the 2006 election. At the same time, the protestors evoked a proud collective memory of the village, referring to it as the ‘number one village’.

With the solidarity of rage, the opposition residents evoked the democratic process. They criticized the undemocratic process of the construction forces and asked the local government to review the project by legitimate procedures such as a plebiscite. They also called into question numerous administrative processes that excluded the voice of residents.

To legitimate the cause, they created nonviolent rituals such as an art festival, a movement to collect signatures, a one-man relay protest, the presentation of petitions, and shaving heads.¹¹



Demanding a “Vote” for residents, June 19, 2007



Ritual of shaving heads, April 21, 2009

Especially they twice organized a ‘peace festival’ to send peace messages to everyone concerned and to energize themselves with various performances. In turn, these experiences strengthened their collective identity with a pride of custodianship of their own village as well as of advocates for democracy and peace.

In May 2008, when the national assembly proposed building a combined port for both cruise vessels and naval vessels, the residents called on the Jeju governor to reexamine the site again. This led to demands for a recall of the Island governor by vote in August 2009. The governor responded to the recall effort by arguing in favor of the national project.

Another issue raised by villagers was the problem of the breakdown of the community. Along with the division of opinions, some family members even refused to join together to offer memorial services for their ancestors, perhaps the most important ritual for family union in Jeju society. And, according to the residents, 80% of 200 informal social groups and a traditional private village fund were disrupted. Old friendships dissolved, resulting in heavy stress for almost all of the villagers in Gangjeong. The villagers called this the 2nd 4.3, alluding to the disaster that had created

extreme trauma in Jeju society in the years 1948-53. The protestors attributed this tragedy to the undemocratic administration and the dividing strategy of the power holders.



Ritual protest: three steps and one deep bow

Source: Jeju Sori, August 21, 2008

The Navy vs Gangjeong Village: Environment-friendly Construction vs Environmental Conservation

The next main issue was the environment. The navy from the outset had promised to build the base on environment-friendly principles. However, opposition residents raised another environmental issue challenging the selection of the site. They have highlighted the fact that the coast in Gangjeong village is a nationally protected coastal area and its sea is the only area in Korea where the UNESCO-designated soft corals exist. Further the red-foot crabs, a government-designated endangered species, live there in addition to the unique rock formations seen in the video on Yang Yoon-mo. They have asked why the navy needs this protected area for a naval base. Moreover, they have advanced the movement to preserve nature through re-identifying their own groups.

The environmental issue was escalating when the navy moved to the next procedure without

conducting a feasibility study of environmental effects. The Jeju government responded in December 2009 by announcing a decision to revise its designation of the area's protected status. The protestors filed lawsuits in response, but the court rejected their challenge.

During these processes the navy re-emphasized its intention to move forward with construction while stating its commitment to the environment by announcing that it would transplant the rare species to another area. Although the issue of the environment failed to stop the rush to construction, it drew attention from environmentalists.

The New Jeju Government of 2010 vs Gangjeong Village; Win-Win Solution vs Stopping Construction

After a groundbreaking ceremony in January 2010 and the arrest of approximately 50 protestors, a resident told me that “we are very frustrated and cannot trust outside parties like the media, the court and the Jeju Council. Having suffered from all kinds of accusations, fines, and arrests over 4 years, and having reached the limit of resource mobilization, they concluded that the only possible way to halt the base was to sacrifice their own bodies, as Yang said.

Woo Keun-min, the new Jeju governor elected in 2010, suggested a so-called ‘win-win project’ to solve the conflict following his inauguration in July. He Proposed a special law to support development of the region in the vicinity of the naval base on the basis of the opinions of the residents (*Seogwipo.co.kr*, November 29, 2010).

According to villagers, this policy divided the opposition into ‘hard liners’ and ‘the reasonable’, the latter being prepared to accept the incentives offered by the state. Following their failure to convince the state to reexamine the choice of the site on the basis of villager

opposition, conflicts between the groups deepened (*Jeju Sori*, December 17, 2010). Even after 75% of 106 residents voted in favor of stronger protest action, the number of protestors in the construction area decreased. The hard liners had to fight the contract companies such as Samsung C & T and Daerim Industry as well as the police and the navy. Yang Yoon-mo along with other protestors lay down under the construction trucks and he was arrested again on April 6, 2011.



Yang's arrest on April 6, 2011

The Navy vs Gangjeong Village & Peace-Makers; Continuing the Work vs Peace and Life

Since Yang's hunger strike, the frame, the system of meaning, of the protest has changed. The news about Yang spread quickly throughout the mainland of Korea, in particular, in culture and art circles through internet networks. The internet café created by Gangjeong village has become a vital center, with support of non-residents, in delivering news of Gangjeong and in collecting kinds of resources.¹² The blog for international supporters has attracted networkers and international peace organizations.¹³ Even twitter, installed on May 1, 2011, has come to play a vital role in connecting residents and sympathizers. Through all these social

networks, understanding of the situation has spread, and many anti-base and environmental activists have visited the village to help. Growing numbers of national and international organizations issued public statements of solidarity and calls to preserve peace in Northeast Asia (*Sisa Jeju*, June 3; *Oh My News*, June 8; *Jeju Sori*, July 5). On June 8, two months after Yang’s arrest, ‘National Network of Korean Civil Society for Opposing the Naval Base on Jeju Island’ was formed by 140 organizations and 440 individuals (NAPRI, June 8). This network seeks to coordinate opposition to the construction on a nationwide scale and to put pressure for the national assembly to investigate the procedure of the construction. Even overseas organizations and 101 international peace organizations issued public statements objecting to the construction as a threat to peace in the Asia-Pacific region. These new actors, have boosted the opposition movement among residents, making it possible to raise funds and mobilize other resources nationally and internationally.

On June 1, Yang Yoon-mo was sentenced to one and a half years in prison, with a stay of execution of two years. On July 2, during his physical recovery following the fast, the Gangjeong resistance and supporters organized a large-scale protest ‘to revoke the plan for the construction of the naval base on Jeju Island.’ Some 1,000 protestors from various sectors of society gathered in front of the city hall of Jeju city. Among them were well-known members of the national assembly, religious leaders, ngo representatives, members of twitter of Gangjeong, documentary directors, neighboring villagers, and 150 residents of Gangjeong. The owner of the twitter for Gangjeong, who had herself been arrested, told me “See! This is the outcome of Yang’s strike. His approach to life led to this gathering of supporters.”



**Peace march with outside supporters,
July 2, 2011**

The common values of the challengers, including residents, are preservation of the quality of life and nature, promotion of democracy, and preservation of peace through peaceful acts. The issue of potential armed conflicts has again come to the fore, and it has been widely discussed in the national internet press (*Oh My News*, June 29; *Pressian*, June 29). When civil organizations held a concert to support Gangjeong residents on May 28, the village chief declared that “this is just the beginning of peace”. This announcement illustrates the symbolic transition of the frame for the movement. The village chief again declared the victory of peace in a protest on July 2.

Throughout, the navy has continued construction despite strong protests that have continued into July. The navy and the construction companies moved the huge dredge boat from Hwasoon to Gangjeong on June 20 and continued related construction.



Protesting sea dredging, June 20, 2011

Source: The internet café of the Gangjeong village

When five opposition political parties requested that construction be halted to resolve the clash, the navy responded that this would cost about 100 million won per day and would make it impossible to complete construction by the target date of 2014 (*Jeju Sori*, April 27, 2011). The Ministry of National Defense also rejected the request to stop construction by the Jeju government (*Jeju Sori*, May 18, 2011). The navy and the construction companies have charged the protestors with disrupting business (*The Kyunghyang Sinmum*, June 21, 2011; *Sisa Jeju*, July 6, 2011).

I have attempted to explain the background to the Gangjeong struggle by analyzing frames, discourses or narratives developed by Yang and other major actors opposing base construction. The navy responded by emphasizing economic advantages to persuade the residents of Jeju Island, especially those of the relevant villages, to accept the base. The navy's weakness lies in its failure to gain the consent of the residents and in the fact that base construction is at odds with powerful images of Jeju Island.

The former Jeju government presented issues of the image of the Island of peace, invigoration

of the local economy, and the consent of residents at first, but it put these factors aside and moved to site selection on the Island, circumventing the democratic process and stoking popular opposition. Later it highlighted the economic benefits to local residents. These policy shifts had the effect of isolating Gangjeong from outside supporters of the village. Moreover, the shifts had the effect of moving the residents of Jeju farther from the original issue of peace. The current government called for a win-win solution, but its proposal for conflict resolution had the effect of intensifying opposition.

Gangjeong opposition groups faced the difficult problem of justifying their protests against all of the supporters of the plan under complex circumstances. Meanwhile, they have continued to promote their discourse of peace and to counter the claims of proponents of local development predicated on a provocative military base in a protected area. They have raised important issues of democratic procedure, community solidarity and environmental protection. With a strong collective identity, they created or revived numerous rituals of protest over four years. Recognizing in 2011 that they had to place their own bodies on the line, they reemphasized the discourse of life and peace with growing support from outside the village, Jeju Island and Korea. Yang Yoon-mo's hunger strike was pivotal in mobilizing outside support throughout Korea and internationally. Moreover, it re-ignited the issue of the peace in the Asia-Pacific region, recruiting participants with the help of social networking. Although the success of their protests is not yet clear, widely adopted master frames, as Snow and Benford conclude, have made it possible to align the experiences of sympathizers and incorporate prevalent beliefs and symbols on a scale that extends from the local community to the global.¹⁴

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Notes

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¹ This film was made by Jane Jin Kaisen and Guston Sondin-Kung. Jane is an independent Danish filmmaker. Kim Min-Su (a young Gangjeong villager) filmed the footage of Yang's arrest. The film was posted on [Vimeo](#) on May 21, and on [Youtube](#) on May 24, 2011.

² Cha, Kyoungun, "Jeju and a Naval Arms Race in Asia", *Institute of Policy Studies*, June 18, 2010; Uooksik Jung, "Oh! Peace", *Pressian*, May 17, 2011.

³ See Cha, Kyoungun, *ibid.*

⁴ Bruce Gagnon, co-coordinator and co-founder of 'the Global Network against Weapons and Nuclear power in Space', is a leading peace

activist. He started a hunger strike for solidarity with Yang Yoon-mo on May 24. See space4peace.blogspot.com.

⁵ Johnston, Hank, 1995, "A Methodology for Frame Analysis", in Hank Johnston and Bert Klandermans (eds.), *Social Movements and Culture*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 218.

⁶ Taylor, Verta and Nancy Whittier, 1995, "Analytical Approaches to Social Movement Culture", in Hank Johnston and Bert Klandermans (eds), *ibid.*

⁷ Jeju residents have pursued peace and human rights as their vision for the Island since suffering from 'the Jeju 4.3 massacre'. About 30,000, over 10% of the population, died or missing during 1948-1953, and the trauma has remained until today. See *Jeju Weekly*, March-May, 2011.

⁸ The survey was designed to poll opinions of residents living in each administrative district with which the particular village was affiliated. As a result, opinions of the affected villages were largely ignored.

⁹ The population of Gangjeong village was about 1,900, and eligible voters were about 1,400 according to resident registration as of 2007. However, the expected total number of votes was about 1, 050 since about 350 voters were not in the area at the time (*Oh My News*, November 13, 2007).

¹⁰ Previous research also noted this transition of discourse. See Cho Sung-youn, 2008, "From an Island of Suffering to an Island of Peace", *Yoksabipyong*, no. 82.

¹¹ The ritual of shaving the head is a popular act showing strong determination of protesters and a means to strengthen solidarity in Korean society.

¹² See the [internet café](#) of the Gangjeong village. See the internet café of the Gangjeong village.

¹³ This blog is owned by Choi Sung-hee, a peace

activist. She tried to block a construction truck by lying down just in front of a truck, and twice participated in a solidarity fast along with Yang after her arrest on May 20, 2011. She remains in jail at this writing.

¹⁴ Snow, David and Robert Benford, 1992, "Master Frames and Cycles of Protest", in Aldon Morris and Carol McClurg Mueller (eds.), *Frontiers in social Movement Theory*, New Haven: Yale University Press.