

Jeju: From peace island to war island 濟州島—平和の島から戦争の島へ

John Eperjesi

Between 2012 and 2014 we posted a number of articles on contemporary affairs without giving them volume and issue numbers or dates. Often the date can be determined from internal evidence in the article, but sometimes not. We have decided retrospectively to list all of them as Volume 10, Issue 54 with a date of 2012 with the understanding that all were published between 2012 and 2014.

By John Eperjesi

Originally published in the [Asia Times](#)

Korean-American writer Paul Yoon's 2009 short story collection *Once the Shore* (Sarabande), which won the prize for fiction at the 13th Asian American Literary Awards, is set on a fictionalized version of Jeju Island and deals with the devastating impact of militarism, colonialism, and the cold war on a rugged island culture.

In *Once the Shore*, Yoon gives us Oceania from below, an island multitude composed of service workers, farmers, divers, fishermen, war orphans, and various others who form strange friendships across barriers of age, gender, ethnicity, and nationality. The lead story is set in the present and opens with a sixty-something American woman at a high-end tourist resort gazing out over the ocean while thinking about her deceased husband, a Korean War veteran

who she comes to realize probably cheated on her and lied about it when he returned from the war.

She befriends a young Korean waiter who often stands behind her listening, "as if it weren't her voice at all, but one that originated from the sea." During the woman's visit, the waiter's brother, a fisherman, is killed when an American submarine on training exercises surfaces and sinks his fishing boat.

Throughout the story, the waiter fixates on the terror of drowning. Cold War past and present is fused in the widow's and waiter's discrepant memories of loved ones, their awkward, distracted friendship grounded in the ability to partially identify with the other's loss, a process of identification that appears as each gazes silently out over the ocean, beneath the glimmering surface of which submarines cruise like whales on a hunt. Yoon has commented that the initial idea for this story came from the sinking of the Ehime Maru, a Japanese fishing boat, by the *USS Greenville*, an American nuclear-powered submarine, off the coast of Oahu in 2001.

The relevance of Yoon's stories to the real Jeju Island has recently intensified as concrete has begun to pour on coral reefs to make way for an "eco-friendly" military base for South Korea's expanding blue water navy, at the head of which is the 18,000 ton assault ship symbolically named the *Dokdo*, which makes it almost as big as the island in the East Sea it is named after.

Many believe that the base may also provide "lily pad" support for the United States Navy. Leading local activists in the anti-base movement have been arrested while peace activists from all over the world have begun to lend their support, most notably feminist writer Gloria Steinem.

In a letter to friends that has circulated widely on the Internet, Steinem describes the epic volcanic beauty of Jeju Island, which is home to three United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization World Heritage Sites. Steinem concludes the letter stating, "Jeju Island means Women's Island. It stands for an ancient balance. We must save it from the cult of militarism that endangers us all, women and men." Jeju is home to both The International Peace Institute and Jeju Peace Forum. In 2005, former Korean president Roh Moo-hyun declared Jeju an "Island of World Peace."

Both Mongolia, which ruled Jeju from 1273 to 1374, and Japan, which ruled Jeju from 1910 to 1945, fought to capitalize on Jeju's strategic proximity to China, Russia, and Japan. In 1948, a multitudinous protest movement on Jeju known as the April 3 Uprising organized against the appointment of Syngman Rhee as president of Korea by the US military.

The violent crackdown on supposed communists and communist-sympathizers by the South Korean army resulted in the death of somewhere around 30,000 Jeju civilians. The April 3 Uprising has become a symbol of Jeju's independence from the mainland. As historian Bruce Cumings notes, "The people were deeply separatist and did not like mainlanders; their wish was to be left alone." This attitude is reflected in the Korean drama *Tamra: the Island*, which is set on Jeju during the 17th century and depicts tensions between the between local divers and farmers and an exploitative Confucian elite residing in Seoul.

Protesters are concerned about the cultural and environmental impacts of the base and it is estimated that as much as 90% of the people of Gangjeong, the village on the southern part of Jeju where the base is being constructed, are currently in opposition. The histories of colonialism and the cold war are still alive in the bodies and minds of the people of Jeju who fought against both Japanese colonialism and cold war authoritarianism.

The remilitarization of Jeju could pour salt water on wounds that have never fully healed. In an article in the Jeju Weekly, Dr Anne Hilty, a cultural health psychologist living on Jeju Island writes: "In a society brutalized and traumatized by the national military, the idea of a military base on the island which will house 25,000 troops is difficult for Jeju's people to accept."

The November 23, 2010 bombing, evacuation, and increased military deployment on Yeonpyeong Island located near the disputed maritime border of North and South Korea made it clear that the cold war is still hot in this part of the world. We are currently witnessing a re-cold warring of the Pacific Rim of Asia as China looks to expand control over shipping lanes in the South China Sea and the US and Korea move to contain China by expanding into the East China Sea.

When I first moved to Korea in 2005, I believed that I would see a peaceful end to the Korean War in my lifetime. But with the wreckage of militarization piling up from all directions in the Asia-Pacific region, that hope is being blown farther and farther into the future. In a recent article for Project Syndicate, former Philippines president Fidel Ramos argues that a Pax Asia-Pacific needs to replace Pax Americana in the region in order to "contain our rivalries and avoid the arms buildup that, unfortunately, now seem to be underway".

Fictional narratives like *Once the*

Shore and Tamra: the Islandwork to restore humanity to islanders, a humanity that is stripped away when islands are viewed as strategic pieces in a regional game of risk. There was no great outpouring of support in South Korea for the people of Yeonpyeong, and there have been no candlelight vigils in downtown Seoul over the basing of Jeju, perhaps because as islanders, the people of Yeonpyeong and Gangjeong are islanders on the periphery of the nation. But what about the people for whom the periphery is the center? For whom the island is the mainland?

John Eperjesi is an assistant professor of English at Kyung Hee University in Seoul and the author of *The Imperialist Imaginary: Visions of Asia and the Pacific in American Culture*, (UP New England, 2005). The author would like to thank Dr Anne Hilty and Professor Gwi Sook Gwon of Cheju National University for their contributions.

Other Asia-Pacific Journal articles on related topics include:

Andrew Yeo, [Back to the Future: Korean Anti-Base Resistance from Jeju Island to Pyeongtaek](#)

Andrew Yeo, [Anti-Base Movements in South Korea: Comparative Perspectives on the Asia-Pacific](#)

Gwisook Gwon, [Protests Challenge Naval Base Construction on Jeju Island South Korea: Hunger Strike Precipitates a National and International Movement](#)