

Oppose this Base!

**Oliver Stone
visits Jeju Island**

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The author is a long-time activist and member of Veterans For Peace. These excerpts from a longer account were chosen by Nicole Morris. After Jeju, Oliver Stone travelled to Hiroshima and Nagasaki to participate in the World Conference Against Atomic and Hydrogen Bombs.

Oliver Stone is discussing film with the renowned Korean Film Critic Yang Yoon Mo. Professor Yang mentions *Salvador*, and the powerful effect Stone's film had on his generation during the violent, brutal military dictatorships of that era.

'We loved it. It was a big inspiration to people all over the world. We obtained bootleg copies of it and watched it. It inspired a whole generation of young Korean filmmakers – for the courage and clarity of its vision. It was a model for us of what ethical and political cinema could be.'

Stone reciprocates with his appreciation of current Korean Cinema – cinema that he himself may have had a hand in shaping – as he mentions *The President's Last Bang*: a wry, understated morality tale about the assassination of the dictator Park Chung Hee, during a dinner party-cum-orgy procured by his own intelligence services.

The rapport between the two is warm and genuine, and they talk as if they are old friends, old film buffs. It's almost possible to forget for a moment that this conversation is taking place inside a prison on Jeju Island in the Korea Strait, where Professor Yang has been sentenced to 18 months as a political prisoner; that he has been 70 days on hunger strike; and that there are six of us crammed into a closet-sized visiting room: Oliver Stone, Father Moon [a Catholic priest], several activists, and a violent-looking police officer, whose every gesture intimates a furious desire to pound us into submission. On the other side, behind dual-paned Plexiglas, the gentle Professor Yang is with another police officer, who furiously transcribes every word that is exchanged.

Professor Yang is being held in this gaol together with dozens of others for their non-violent protests against the construction of a deep water US Naval Base in Gangjeong village on Jeju Island. He has now been imprisoned four times.

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Jeju Island is a stunning subtropical island 60 miles south of the Korean Peninsula, an ecological jewel that is home to UNESCO World Heritage sites and biosphere reserves. The shoreline of Gangjeong village, where the base is being built, is an absolute conservation area harbouring many rare and endangered species, and home to two thousand subsistence farmers and divers. The area called Gureombi is a site that is considered sacred to the villagers; a living, breathing landscape of tide pools, lava rock formations and stunning volcanic coastline, irrigated with crystal clear springs. Unfortunately, the Jeju base is one of the centrepieces of Obama's militaristic 'Pivot to Asia': within easy striking distance – 120 seconds as the missile flies – of Shanghai, Beijing, Tokyo, Taiwan, Vladivostok, it menaces all the major cities of East Asia.

For seven years, every single day, in one of the most disciplined non-violent struggles ever seen in Korea, the villagers have been protesting against the construction of this base with marches, prayers, petitions, art, masses, and non-violent resistance. To date, 700 protestors have been arrested. Yang and other prominent intellectuals, civic and religious leaders, members of parliament, Buddhist nuns, and the Mayor of the village have all been 'dragged like animals and beaten unconscious', arrested, fined, sued, and harassed by police, marines, and hired thugs. They have received death threats. They have also been branded as Communists, opening them up to potential prosecution for sedition under Korea's draconian national security laws. It's widely suspected that Yang was singled out by the Korean National Intelligence Agency (the re-branded Korean CIA) in retaliation for drawing international attention to the issue. He is the longest serving prisoner to date.

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Oliver Stone asks the police chief about the conditions that prisoners like Yang are kept in; he asks whether they are able to exercise and read, receive and write letters. The police chief, ever the congenial diplomat, answers that he is extremely attentive to the health and well-being of his inmates, and that they are allowed all manner of comfort and recreation. He comments that he is concerned about the hunger strike, and states with a worldly flourish that 'esteemed director Stone will find that the

conditions of prisons in Korea are not that different from conditions in American prisons'. Esteemed director Stone does not seem assured and, without missing a beat, points out that

'the conditions of US prisons are, according to the United Nations Rapporteur on Human Rights, some of the worst in the world. The systematic and routine use of prolonged isolation has been found tantamount to torture.'

The police chief accedes then that perhaps there are differences.

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Ninety minutes earlier, Stone had flown in from Barcelona. He wiped clear his schedule to travel to Jeju, but as his exit from customs is delayed, the greeting team of local activists at the airport has become anxious that he will simply be denied entry to the country. The Korean government has already denied entry to several international peace activists at the airport – most notably, Elliot Adams, Tarak Kauff and Mike Hastie of Veterans for Peace – and it is not inconceivable that they would do the same again. Finally, when Oliver Stone is released from transit purgatory, all of us breathe a sigh of relief, although for some reason his luggage has gone AWOL. Over the next 48 hours, the luggage will be repeatedly located but it is somehow unrecoverable. Claim documents will not be filed, others improvised, leading activists to wonder if this is part of the harassment: an attempt to undermine morale by disrupting logistics, separating the 'enemy' from his clothes, toiletries, medicines, and a colourfully subversive collection of bandannas.

We submit to the mandarin ceremonies of power which permit us the short visit to Professor Yang. Then, as Oliver Stone and the professor are talking shop, Stone mentions his new series, *The Untold History of the US*, unmasking and chronicling the rise of US imperialism. Professor Yang seems intrigued, and although he has been incarcerated too long to have heard of it, he promises that he will try to find a way to see it. Oliver expresses concern for his well-being, and inquires as to the depth of his support among other artists. Then, all too quickly, visiting time is over, and we are reduced to silent gestures of good will and hope across the Plexiglas. Professor Yang touches his palm to the glass, Oliver touches it, and then he slowly bows to each of the visiting team, hands together in traditional blessing. Professor Yang seems to have been deeply moved by the visit; for us, it's hard to avoid the sense of abandoning a comrade in prison.

The Jeju heat is sweltering close to 100 F, the humidity is in the 80s. Although a march for peace against the military base is happening – an

epic two-day march that will circle all the way around the island, then meet up in the north and come together for a mass rally at a civic plaza, followed on the next day by a human chain around the base – we wonder if, after the harassment, delays, power plays and exhaustion, the blast furnace of summer heat is too much. We ask Oliver Stone if he is up to joining the march, as planned. Oliver is resolute. ‘Let’s do it,’ he says.

We arrive at the march – an ocean of yellow shirts and banners, youth, children, men and women, internationals – and a huge roar goes up. The tide of people surges and vibrates with energy. If, as it has been said, the true spiritual quest is not upward, or even inward, but forward, to march forward, surely this is one of its greater manifestations.

‘Haegun giji, gyolsa bandae!’

A thousand banners flutter in the wind, and the crowd is abuzz with excitement and passion. Chants thunder through the streets, like an unstoppable heartbeat. Like the huge people’s marches that toppled the previous dictatorship, the winds of history, the breath of solidarity, the tide of inevitability seem to propel the marchers upwards, onwards, forwards.

‘Haegun giji, gyolsa bandae!’

Every dimension of human aspiration is present and alive.

Drenched in sweat, Oliver puts on a yellow T-shirt over his blue shirt and is invited to join the march at the front. He modestly declines to walk ‘point’, and falls into the ranks. Fabled director, Hollywood icon, decorated war veteran becomes just another marcher in a sea of protestors, a forest of banners, marching, this time, against the *imperium*.

‘Haegun giji, gyolsa bandae!’

‘Oppose to the Death, this Naval Base!’

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Afterwards, we head out to the docks to take a boat tour of the coastline. Our tour guide is a Jeju local; a shaman, meditation teacher and also, incidentally, the founder of the first and only battered women’s shelter on the island. ‘Domestic violence is inseparable from state violence,’ she tells me. ‘Militarism and military violence filter down into the smallest recesses of family life. We can’t struggle against domestic violence without challenging this base.’

She tells us about the origin myths of the island – the goddess resting her head at the peak of Mt. Halla, the volcanic peak of the island, with her

feet pointing up to become the island. The creation myths of Jeju Island are all goddess myths; what powers lie within and around this island are nourished and channelled from the energies of the feminine.

Basalt columns appear on the island we are passing. This is *Beom Seom*, ‘Tiger Island’, a Unesco Reserve, and at close range you can see the entire island is formed from hexagonal basalt columns, like a dark, chiselled, striated jewel in the ocean. The tops of the high cliffs are covered with pine trees, and there are wave-carved tunnels and archways around the island, an exalted, mystical architecture. Whether or not you believe the myth of the goddess’s feet poking out of the dark sea or some other supernatural explanation, you know that you are at the conjunction of extraordinary forces of nature.

Turning the corner of the island, we witness full on the devastation of the base construction. We stop the boat. From the ocean, we can see the entire scale of the violation. It is monstrous. Seven-storey, 10,000-ton, steel-bladed caissons have been sunk into the soft coral below, exposing themselves above the waterline like the bared fangs of a mad predator. Construction has blasted, pulverized, and befouled the sacred *Gureombi*, the living kidneys of the island, paving it over with concrete. Pile drivers, bulldozers, cranes and high explosives have gashed the womb of the Goddess of Mt. Halla, leaving concrete and steel maggots writhing out of the innards, and bleeding dark silt and slurry into the pristine ocean.

Around the crime scene, there is a sanitary cordon of buoys and construction curtains. Oliver gets up on the edge of the boat. He points to the shoreline and launches into a full blown soliloquy:

‘This base will host US destroyers, aircraft carriers, Aegis missile batteries, nuclear submarines. It’s part of Obama’s pacific pivot, a chain of offensive bases from Myanmar, Philippines, Thailand, Korea, Okinawa – a necklace of bases to choke off the Pacific. It’s being put in place to threaten China. Even as we speak, war materiel is being shifted from Iraq, Afghanistan, to the Pacific.

We have to stop this. All this is leading up to a war, and I’ve *seen war* in Asia.’ His voice trembles. ‘I do not want another war here. I’ve seen war in Asia, and we cannot have another war here. We have to stop this thing.’

He turns to the shaman, invites her to put a hex on the base, to invoke Gods higher than those of empire, profit and militarism. Oliver then gestures himself, hurling passion, heart, grief, onto the shoreline. We all scatter our prayers, curses, tears, to the waves and the setting sun.

Everyone is silent as we head back to the shore.

‘It is a given that those who would struggle for peace, must first know the meaning of devastation.’