

## Jeju meets Hawaii

*Esther Koohan Paik*

*The author is a peace activist and filmmaker who lives in Kauai, Hawaii. This summer she journeyed to Gangjeong village on the beautiful island of Jeju in the Korea Strait, where a new naval base is being built to accommodate ships carrying AEGIS missiles, the sea-based component of the United States ballistic missile defence system. Gangjeong is surrounded by three UNESCO World Natural Heritage sites and nine UNESCO Geo-Parks on an island that is designated a Global Biosphere Reserve. Construction accelerates daily with dredging of the island's sea-bed and its coral communities under way. There is strong resistance from the local community and more widely.*

### **Epicurus would approve**

The philosopher and food critic, Epicurus, once said that the city of Siracusa, in Sicily, had the best food in all the world. But Epicurus had not visited Gangjeong Village, on Jeju Island, Korea.

Surprisingly, Gangjeong and Siracusa have much in common. They share the latitude of 37 degrees, a Mediterranean climate, and rich volcanic soil. As a result, the fruits and vegetables that grow in these places burst with flavours unknown in more northerly climes. Both Jeju and Sicily are surrounded by waters abundant with a diversity of marine flora and fauna. And both have been home to dedicated farmers perfecting cultivar propagation and livestock breeding techniques since prehistory.

Interesting side fact: many stocky dark ponies grazing on the rolling hills are actually descendents of horses brought by Genghis Khan. Jeju was where the Mongolians trained their steeds. *I mean, how ancient can you get?*

In Gangjeong gardens, you find a hodgepodge of fruit trees crammed into veritable food 'jungles': peach trees, pomegranate bushes, fig trees, grapefruit trees, with grape vines tangled throughout. It is still early in the season, so nothing is ripe yet. The Concord grapes are still hard green marbles and the peaches look like green pussy willows. Give them three months, and it'll all be going off. As for vegetables, it seems that every home has dedicated some patch of earth to growing a variety of greens, peppers, sesame, corn, and, of course, garlic, an essential kimchi ingredient that is also central to shamanist

Korea's millennia-old creation myth.

Much of the charm of Gangjeong lies in its human scale and utter lack of straight lines. The sides of houses cant slightly in random directions, always topped by a gaily painted, curved Asian roof, often of corrugated tin. Paths and roads follow the sway of the terrain. Rock walls enclose fields just large enough for a small family to farm without getting overwhelmed. A walk through the village connects you with the poetry of daily life here: a year's supply of garlic spread out on the front porch to dry; a wife and husband busily scooping out the soft, flavourful innards from a gunny sack load of sea urchins; the sweet-jam smells wafting from a multitude of strawberry hothouses; the startled flutter of a striking Chinese ring-necked pheasant who, with his dull-coloured wife, make their home in a fallow, grassy field that I pass every day on my way to the activist *shiktang*, or dining area.

Yesterday I ate my first *hallabong*. *Oh My God, that thing was delicious.* It's a jumbo tangerine with a flavour that is positively incandescent; there are no seeds, the fruit is super juicy, yet the peels and sections separate cleanly. There's a little nodule on top like a tangelo, which is why they call it *hallabong*. The nodule is supposed to represent Mount Halla, the sacred dormant volcano that gave birth to this island. Anyway, I later learned they sell for \$8-10 apiece.

The *hallabong* was given to me as a gift, after having been interviewed for a live-stream internet programme. It was conducted by a film director whose name I know only as Mr Yul. He was keen to hear my thoughts on a recent, much talked about quote by Park Geun-hye, a current presidential candidate and daughter of former dictator and assassination victim, Park Chung-Hee. Ms Park has extolled the controversial US Navy base that will be built here in Gangjeong, because it will turn Jeju into another Hawaii, she says. Now, some people in Jeju are thrilled. Former sceptics have become new supporters of the Aegis missile base. After all, who doesn't want to be Hawaii, right? Paradise!

The internet interview was conducted on the top floor of the mayor's office, that has more the feel of a clubhouse or community centre than a bureaucrat's office. Another floor is used to house young people who have travelled to Gangjeong to support the resistance movement. Currently, there are three teenage boys from an alternative school called 'Gandhi School' bunking up here with an American college student studying in Seoul and making a documentary about the struggle.

Recently, Kyle Kajihiro of Honolulu wrote an incisive response to Ms. Park's ignorant statement, setting her straight. Because I have lived in

Hawaii for some two decades, the activists here asked me to elaborate on what Kyle said for their internet programme.

With the windows letting in the perfect breezes of early summer, we began the interview. Yak-geul, a young musician and cetacean devotee, translated.

I addressed the video camera. Most people know very little about the real story of Hawaii, such as the illegal military occupation, or how the continual release of carcinogens and radioactive waste into the water and land has made much of the islands uninhabitable, or that Pearl Harbor can support no life. Or that much of Kauai was sprayed with Agent Orange. Or that the Big Island is riddled with depleted uranium.

I explained that the islands were once sustainable, just as Gangjeong is. I explained how native farmers were kicked off their land in Hawaii to make way for a new way of life, a new way of making money, just like what is now happening in Gangjeong. I explained that the bases in Hawaii have irreversibly contaminated resources, and that the contamination continues to flow, as long as the base functions. I explained that Hawaii isn't Paradise, and they should not want to follow in its footsteps.

I explained that if there were some sort of fuel crisis so that the Matson boat stopped coming to Hawaii, there would be no food after only three days. Hawaii has become supermarket-dependent. I contrasted that to Jeju Island: what if the supply boat stopped coming to Jeju?

Of course, people in Jeju would survive on the island's vast resources if food were to stop arriving at the port tomorrow. Especially in Gangjeong, which is known as having the most fertile soil on Jeju, if not in all of Korea. In fact, Gangjeong village is a model of sustainability for the world. Ironically, everyday life in Gangjeong is the sort of unattainable ideal that government officials *in Hawaii* set as a goal by 2050 (a year suitably distant in the future so as not to interfere with any political aspirations).

I explain that it is Hawaii that should be like Gangjeong, not the other way around.

Afterwards, many people told me they were shocked to hear that Hawaii was contaminated. And they were worried, too. The Navy has already blasted the coastline and contaminated both the freshwater springs and marine ecosystems with silt. After hearing the real story of Hawaii, they are starting to see that this is only the beginning. Once the base starts operating, the trichloroethylene, the PCBs, the radioactive waste, and all the other chemicals and solvents will flow into their once pristine sea and groundwater. They also just learned that more village and farmland is being seized to build housing for 600 military personnel and their families,

who will outnumber the Gangjeong villagers. They are starting to extrapolate that night clubs, video parlours and shopping malls will go up to service these newcomers. Big box stores will replace the quirky village lanes. Parking lots will replace farms. Prostitution will replace Jeju's storied women free divers. The Chinese ring-necked pheasants in the grassy field will perish.

But the villagers and activists are ready for the long haul. They say they expect to fight this base for at least five years, maybe ten, maybe more. They are already organizing a petition against construction of the military housing. A team of young people have just about completed their training in SCUBA, a course they have been taking in order to mobilize aquatically to block four-story caissons from being dropped on the reef. Gradually, more and more activists from the outside world are joining them to help preserve not only one of the planet's most precious spots of sustainability, but also a trigger point for large-scale war.

After the interview, I was hanging out at the Peace Centre with some young activists, most of whom come from Seoul. A sun-creased farmer pulled his lorry up to the activists' Peace Centre and trotted in proudly with a crate brimming with bulbous, brightly coloured tomatoes. He bowed graciously as we 'ooh-ed' and 'ah-ed' at his generous gift. This is a community that truly supports one another. The once suspicious villagers now appreciate the solidarity they've found in the Seoul city slickers who've committed themselves to the resistance movement.

By the way, I had one of those tomatoes for breakfast. Spectacular. Epicurus would approve.

*The author's new film, 'The "Pacific pivot" and the Kauai-Jeju connection', is available online ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=IJMTuaZF1QU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IJMTuaZF1QU))*

[www.savejeju.org](http://www.savejeju.org)

[www.space4peace.org](http://www.space4peace.org)