

Photo Essay

Spaces of Dissent: Everyday Resistance in Gangjeong Village, Jeju Island

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From 2007 to the present, Gangjeong, a small coastal village on the southern side of Jeju Island, has been a site of resistance to the construction of a Republic of Korea (ROK) naval base. Based on participant observation conducted in Gangjeong between 2013 and 2015, this photo essay explores the spaces of contention and dissent in the everyday resistance of the anti-base movement. The essay focuses on activities in the spaces around the gates of the naval base's construction site—spaces transformed by protesters occupying, dancing, singing, and conducting mass, processions, and sit-ins. The images in the essay provide a glimpse of a consistent, long-term struggle that has been ongoing for more than twelve years. I completed my research fieldwork at the end of 2015 after spending two years conducting archival and ethnographic research in South Korea, affiliated with the Gender Institute at Seoul National University. Images from my fieldwork show how everyday resistance transformed the spaces around the construction site of the Jeju Civilian-Military Complex Port to spaces of dissent. The images are important to scholars interested in social movements in South Korea, and Asia in general, and specifically in anti-base movements.

Gangjeong village has a population of nearly two thousand. In 2012, the ROK Navy announced that once the construction project was completed, approximately three thousand military personnel, spouses, and family members would move into the village (Gwon 2013, 255). The land allocated for the project covers 490,000 square meters (5,274,316.1 square feet), and the government has invested 1.7 trillion KRW (1.4 billion dollars) (Oh 2016). The ROK Navy and the South Korean government stated that the naval base was a strategic move to protect South Korea's geopolitical interests and counterbalance China's military dominance in the region. The ROK Navy claims that the base is necessary to protect trade routes, secure maritime resources, and protect Korea's marine sovereignty (Ko 2016). However, local villagers often complained during my fieldwork about the influx of Chinese tourists, businesses, and investments on the island, and a few have sarcastically said to me, "They say they are protecting us from China, but China is here!"

The main concern for the anti-base movement was that the Jeju base, once functional, would become a U.S. military base, or at least a base used by the U.S.

military (Koh 2012). The ROK Navy has denied these claims and insists that this is a South Korean military base (Heo and An 2011). However, numerous members of the anti-base movement were active in protesting the revision of the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) between the United States and South Korean governments, which was catalyzed by the Yangju Highway incident in 2002, in which two schoolgirls, Hyosoon and Mi-seon, were killed by a U.S. Army armored vehicle. These activists are aware that, based on the SOFA, the U.S. military has the right to access and use any Korean military bases. Additionally, based on news reports and assessments of the construction specifications, there were suspicions that the naval base was constructed in such a way as to house naval weaponry that the ROK Navy did not possess, and that it was therefore likely designed to accommodate U.S. military destroyers (“Chejuhaegun’gijiga Migun’gijirago Ponŭn Iyu” 2012).

The Gangjeong anti-base movement is part of a larger anti-base coalition movement across South Korea dating back to the early 1990s. Approximately 28,500 U.S. troops and military personnel are deployed to South Korea, and there are about twenty U.S. military installations around the country, including Camp Humphreys, the largest overseas U.S. military installation in the world (Shin and Smith 2019). The United States Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK) ruled South Korea from 1945 to 1948, and a military agreement between the ROK and the United States was finalized by the Mutual Defense Treaty of 1953. Several of the activists and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) resisting the naval base in Gangjeong today were involved in other anti-base movements around the country. These activities included protesting violence against women relating to the “egregious murder of Yoon Geumi by a U.S. serviceman in October, 1992” (Moon 2009), the protests against the Kooni Firing Range in Maehyangri, which started in the 1980s and intensified in the early 2000s, the anti-base movement in Gunsan in the late 1990s, and, more recently, the anti-base movement in Pyeongtaek from 2005 to 2007 (Yeo 2010). Several members of the anti-base community in Gangjeong have also participated in the movement against the deployment of South Korean soldiers to the war in Iraq and the movement demanding the amendment of the SOFA in the late 1990s and early 2000s. These activists and NGOs see the anti-base movement in Gangjeong as a continuation of a long-term historical struggle opposing U.S. military bases in Korea.

The first major controversy about the naval base project in Gangjeong was the way the construction plan was decided and how most villagers’ voices were ignored. When the ROK Navy announced the construction plan to the Gangjeong Village Association, it did not follow the official procedure to announce such major development projects in the village. The village community was then divided between those who supported the naval base project and those who opposed it. Family conflicts and hostility among neighbors and friends affected the mood and well-being of most villagers.

The second major concern has been the environmental impact of the base’s construction and operations. In 2002, the coastal area around Gangjeong was designated as a UNESCO biosphere reserve. The coastal waters were designated as a

marine ecosystem protection zone by the Ministry of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries that same year and as a Cultural Heritage Administration natural monument protection zone in 2004 (Huh 2012). The villagers' concerns stemmed from worries about pollution—particularly the possibility of chemicals and fuels leaking into the seawater, an issue that has arisen at a number of naval bases around the world. Environmental concerns were aggravated when the navy confiscated Gureombi Rock from the villagers by force. Gureombi, a volcanic rock 1.2 kilometers (nearly three-quarters of a mile) long and more than 250 meters (820.21 feet) across, stretched along the coastline of Gangjeong. It was noted for its biodiversity and had been a place where villagers walked, gathered, and performed rituals and ceremonies. In March 2012, at the start of the construction phase, the navy blasted the volcanic rock and poured cement on top of it (Huh 2012).

In addition to the environmental and social damage that the base project has caused the village community, the anti-base movement strongly links the struggle in Gangjeong to the April 3 Incident of 1948 (“4·3,” or *Sasam* in Korean). That date marks the start of the Jeju Uprising in opposition to the scheduling of elections for May 10, 1948, in South Korea; the elections aimed to create a separate government in the South (Kim 1989, 252). The uprising was severely and violently oppressed by the police and the government; an estimate of up to eighty thousand people were killed—about 10 percent of the population of Jeju Island (Cumings 2010, 121). The incident took place under USAMGIK rule, during which a U.S. colonel was the commander of Jeju’s security forces (National Committee for the Investigation of the Truth about the Jeju April 3 Incident, Jeju 4·3 Peace Foundation 2014, 536). Victims and bereaved family members continue to demand that the U.S. government admit responsibility and apologize for the massacres (Hwang 2018). The outcome of the official investigation into the April 3 Incident was announced in 2003, by Roh Moo-hyun, then president of South Korea.¹ Based on the report’s recommendations, Roh publicly apologized on October 13 to Jeju islanders, the victims, and their families and announced Jeju as a symbol and a cornerstone of peace:

We can expand the human value of “peace and human rights” by sublimation of the lesson from the 4·3 Incident. We can put an end to all sorts of conflicts and separations with our collaboration and reconciliation and bring peace in the Korean Peninsula hence opening the path of peace in Northeast Asia and the world. Respectable People of Jeju, You have reconstructed such a beautiful peace Island, Jeju, from the ruins with your bare hands, and I extend my respect to the people of Jeju for your hard work. Jeju will mark the emblem of human rights and an island of peace from now on. Citizens of Korea, I will help the cause and make it come true. (National Committee 2014, 660)

¹ The investigation was commissioned in 2000, when then-president Kim Dae-jung enacted the Special Act for Investigation of the Jeju April 3 Incident and Recovering the Honor of Victims.

This statement was reinforced in the Jeju Special Self-Governing Province Law, and since 2004, the Jeju government has advertised and used the designation of Jeju as an Island of World Peace in its websites and promotional materials, along with establishing the Jeju International Peace Center (“Jijeong Gyeong Wi” 2019). Activists therefore further argue that the government is failing in its promise to make Jeju an Island of Peace. The anger of the anti-base movement about this issue intensified in August 2011 when, under the orders of the national police chief, water cannons, police vehicles equipped with riot gear, and about six hundred police officers were dispatched to Gangjeong from the mainland in order to quell the protest against the base (Gwon 2013, 251). Those clashes between protesters and police brought back memories of Jeju’s painful history.

From 2007 to today, the anti-base movement has transformed significantly. Between 2007 and 2011, resistance on the ground was mainly conducted by the villagers themselves, led by village mayor Kang Dong-gyun. When the villagers reached exhaustion after being imprisoned and fined for their protest in 2011, the mayor reached out for support from religious groups and social activists throughout the Korean peninsula to assist the villagers in their resistance. Several progressive and socially active religious groups—Buddhist, Catholic, and Protestant—answered the mayor’s call and began visiting the village and holding prayers, ceremonies, and protests in support of local villagers and their struggle against construction of the naval base. Also in 2011, there began to be a constant police presence around the construction site, and the movement started gaining active international attention. Many peace activists, peace organizations, and anti-base networks from around the world—including the Catholic Workers (members of the Catholic Worker Movement based in the United States) seen in this photo essay—traveled to show their solidarity with the anti-base movement. Despite these efforts, the Jeju naval base construction project was completed in February 2016. Yet, the anti-base movement continues today, even after construction has been completed and the base is functional.

Since the completion of the base project, many activists have left the village; many others do not want to resist the base anymore, even though they do not completely accept the presence of the base. However, a number of resolute villagers and a vibrant community of anti-base activists still live in Gangjeong and perform rituals of resistance on a daily basis. These rituals of resistance have moved from occupying spaces around the construction site of the naval base to occupying spaces around the gates of the naval base itself. The anti-base community believes that this base, like others that have caused problems elsewhere, will surely cause trouble at some stage and that their daily presence serves as a witness to what the navy is doing and how much the United States army is using the facilities (Heo 2017).

Even though the number of activists directly involved in the movement has decreased since the completion of construction, the movement itself has not stopped.

Daily Catholic mass, the hundred bows protest,² and protesters dancing together at the gates still take place every day (except Sunday), marking 4,598 days of struggle (as of December 19, 2019). Furthermore, the Gangjeong anti-base community is protesting in solidarity with local villagers from Seongsan, on the eastern side of the island, who are resisting the construction of a second Jeju airport to accommodate tourists whose numbers have been increasing, reaching about fifteen million tourists per year. This airport is part of a plan to accommodate approximately 45 million arrivals per year. Jeju's permanent population, by contrast, is just 660,000. Activists are also worried that the new airport will also have military facilities that will be used in conjunction with the naval base (Kim 2019).

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² The one hundred bows is an interfaith ritual that has been used in different protests. This ritual was started by Venerable Do Beop, the Buddhist head monk of Silsang Temple in Namwon who arrived in Gangjeong in 2011 to support local villagers in their struggle against the construction of the naval base. Bowing is a traditional Korean practice. Venerable Do Beop amended the Buddhist 108 prostrations to one hundred to make the ritual a multifaith practice. For more about this practice in Gangjeong, see <http://savejejunow.org/life-peace-meditation-chant-for-the-100-bow-ceremony/>.

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