

An island's dignity in struggle: Jeju Island and Hong Kong in dialogue—Part 1

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A Taiwan-born activist in Jeju Island's anti-military movement reflects on the challenges of international solidarity.

Date of interview: Nov. 14, 2019

Place of interview: Gangjeong Village, Jeju Island, South Korea

Interviewee: Born in Taiwan and taking up residence on Jeju Island since 2011, Emily has participated in the anti-naval base construction movement and continues to reflect on issues related to anti-militarism and imperialism in the Asia Pacific.

This is Part 1 of a two-part interview. This article has been edited for clarity and precision.

Interviewer's note

As we build international solidarity with the anti-extradition bill movement, is there room to remember Jeju Island, when all that remains of our global struggles are news headlines and solidarity rallies across the world's major cities?

For many of us, Jeju Island is probably associated with volcanoes, silver grass, seafood and duty-free shops. But sitting on this piece of land is also a place known as Gangjeong Village, where a group of civic-minded and politically engaged people has lived and organized tirelessly for over a decade. With a collective dedication that almost approximates religious doctrine and practice, they have marched, labored, struggled and coordinated the use of public space together, day after day, year after year. Their bright, spacious organizing space is plastered with Korean newspaper clippings and political ephemera from the anti-naval base construction movement. But the room holds space for even more: draped across a chair are banners and signs made in support of Hong Kong.

These activists' care for and connection with Hong Kong extend far beyond moments of occasional sympathy upon reading about the anti-extradition bill movement in the headlines. Though not speaking Cantonese themselves, these activists have brought Hong Kong into their grassroots movement and invited participants to unpack the complex situation in Hong Kong during their assemblies.

This solidarity stems from a faith in the region as a political community as well as a critique of the ideology of nationalism. These activists' support of the anti-extradition bill movement is not based on a distant allyship for "others," but rather on a shared subjectivity and commitment to collective praxis (共同实践). This political awareness would not have been cultivated in the first place without the anti-naval base construction movement in Gangjeong Village. It is crucial to remind ourselves that Hong Kong is not the only place suffering from political, economic, and militarist displacement amidst the new Cold War between China and the US. Jeju Island, for instance, is one such site—there are many others. After all, the spatial politics of power under authoritarianism, capitalism, and nationalism—seen through the spreading of wars and even viruses—reaches far

beyond “the state” as a geographical category. In these trying times and in the face of ever-escalating threats, it is all the more important to remember that we could just as easily be inhabitants of Jeju island—that is to say, we are part of a larger community of kindred spirits in pursuit of alternative visions of love, safety, politics, and economy.

We thank Emily for sparing time during the busy harvest season to share her thoughts on this communal form of organizing. While confining ourselves within our local political movement may provide us with a fleeting sense of security, we risk losing valuable allies. What we present here is a conversation between two islands—a dialogue between two “small” places. The minor doesn’t necessarily have to follow the lead of the major; in fact, the convergences of the minor might yield more power than we could ever imagine.

From opposing the naval base to challenging regional military expansion

Reignite: Can you tell us about how you became motivated to [oppose the construction of the Jeju Island naval base](#), with an eye toward resisting military expansion in South Korea and the Asia-Pacific region?

Emily: We already have so much military infrastructure due to base construction, expansion, and weapons production that it feels almost too late to talk about demilitarization. When South Korea or any other country undergoes military expansion, other countries would of course want to take preemptive measures to counter the threat. Only by maintaining the current status quo and not letting militarism escalate even further can there be space and energy to even begin to discuss demilitarization. Under these conditions, opposition to the naval base comes naturally to us.

In the age of Sino-American rivalry, the rise of China is deemed a threat. The Obama-era “[Pivot to Asia](#)” had already redirected significant military force to the Asia-Pacific region, but Trump’s “[Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy](#)” is even more aggressive. This is how naval bases like Jeju Island’s came into being. On the one hand, the US has expressed an intention to return its military bases on the Korean peninsula to the Korean government. On the other hand, American troops stationed in South Korea have become [concentrated in Pyeongtaek](#), making it the largest American land-based station in Asia. This military adjustment used to be made with North Korea in mind, but now it has turned its focus onto the problem of China. In turn, even a small strategic shift in this context would bring new problems to civil society. For one thing, people will be deprived of their land. This is painful, and people’s resistance to this has been vigorous.

There have also been [similar developments in Japan](#). Apart from building bases on Okinawa, Japan has recently stationed troops on the outlying island of Yonaguni, from which one can see Taiwan with only the naked eye. The same is happening on the Ishigaki and Miyako islands. And while activists in Miyako continue to put up a respectable fight, it will only be a matter of time before base-building there wraps up as well. So Jeju Island is not the only place being confronted by militarization. All of these islands, including Okinawa, have been undergoing similar struggles, with significant ramifications for each community.

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And then there’s the Philippines. It managed to kick the US army out before, but the government is now letting the army be stationed there again in the name of “visiting,” which is essentially the same thing [via different means](#). This has a huge impact on local communities in the Philippines. Further afield are Guam and Tinian, one of the Mariana Islands. These archipelagos have endured semi-

colonial conditions under the US for a long time. For example, Guam is a US territory where people have no right to vote for the president, yet are allowed to enlist in the army. I think that is ridiculous. Many islands became independent after World War II, but are still dependent on the US militarily. That today's military system remains unchanged is damage enough for local communities on these islands, but an ongoing indifference to the everyday effects of US militarism would make this damage irreversible. That's why I think we have done too little, having focused only on East Asia. Why do these Pacific islands have to be sacrificed in the crossfires of US-China conflict, and become military bases for no reason? We have not been able to connect with all the local communities I mentioned, but I can imagine the scale of destruction and dispossession they have experienced.

Under the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy, US-China rivalry has steadily escalated, threatening local communities everywhere that are already struggling to be heard. Take mainland China for instance. So much has been invested in the military, but how does that impact people's lives? When we talk about Jeju Island, we tend to focus on the American context and overlook the Chinese one. (This is in part because of the challenges of building a movement network in the mainland.) Naval base construction on Jeju Island is part of a global arms race, one that has led China to insist on building military as well as economic power—it has to measure up to Europe and America in every single way. This is why China has begun to secure military outposts abroad. In recent years, China has built [artificial islands](#) in the South China Sea and realized territorial expansion in that way. This has made certain people nervous and pushed them towards allying with the US. Meanwhile, ASEAN has been doing military drills with China one year and with the US the next, [sandwiching itself](#) between the two. As a matter of course, local communities and ecologies have borne the brunt of these devastating displays of power. Even if military activities are kept at their current level, even if all they do is training and drills, it would still be a tremendous drain on the earth's resources.

Of course, China's military deployment overseas is relatively small in size compared to that of the US, but it is more than conceivable that it yearns to be on par with the US, which according to the game of geopolitics can only be achieved through an arms race. This will not only cause more escalation but a downward spiral for all caught in the fray. Moreover, as we have already seen with Gangjeong Village, the environmental impact of base construction is irreparable—imagine that level of damage replicated elsewhere. The construction of these military bases and the belligerent turn to militarization strip away any illusion of security. The base at Gangjeong may seem like a small addition, but if we zoom out to the bigger picture, we see it is in fact a major move.

The strategic location of South Korea and the responsibility of 'small states'

Reignite: How do you see the connection between South Korea's military expansion and that of the US?

Emily: The naval base on Jeju Island was built in the name of the South Korean army, in order to become a South Korean military base. But due to South Korea's and Japan's allied status, ultimate control of their military bases is ultimately vested in the US. Overseas deployments have always been expensive for the US: it is quite a heavy burden, hence the US' hesitation to build anything too conspicuous, fearing it would provoke nationalist ire. Nowadays, the US tends to ask the host country to build its own military bases. That way, the bases get less anti-US resistance from local communities, while still being accessible to the US at will. The US deployment in the Philippines, as another example, is stationed there in the name of "visits," but it is still effectively a US military base and can be used as such per international treaty. This kind of arrangement also alleviates the financial burden of building bases for the US. The same goes for Japan's self-defense military base—all these countries adopt the same strategies when it comes to the US due to shared interests among allied states.

I don't see eye to eye with expressions of nationalism. The US has cynically used nationalist sentiments in East Asian countries to pit them against one another, constantly on the lookout for the myriad ways in which these countries are mired in geopolitical conflict and how that can be leveraged to advance US interests. With the project of military expansion in mind, the US has taken note of East Asian countries' eagerness to strengthen national security in the face of territorial disputes. Countries see a need to build military bases because they see their national security in terms of military strength. But this also feeds into the US' global geopolitical strategy, to the benefit of arms dealers and the military-industrial complex as a whole. We must break with this understanding of security and ask ourselves: who does the national security paradigm actually benefit? Only when we think outside of it can we see that we don't want, or need, this kind of naval base.

At the same time, we can see that insecurity has actually been created through the sheer number of military bases each country has under its control. Peace movements must cross borders and move beyond the framework of nation-state interests. This will take many years, but it must be done. The top priority will be to address the divisions in East Asia—between China and Taiwan, North and South Korea, Japan and the rest of Asia, etc. For example, let's consider the divisions between North and South Korea. From a nation-state perspective, Korea sees itself as divided; attempts to mend the split often appeal to the nation or country as a working unit. The arbiters for nation-state conflicts are usually national leaders. But this mode of thinking cannot transcend borders, precisely because it posits all of us as "nationals," at which point the possibility of simultaneous participation in "global citizenship" becomes all but lost. So what we need is a new form of international solidarity where we are not simply empowering ourselves at the expense of or in spite of others, but stepping up and defending our rights and entitlements as global citizens. The issue of the two Koreas concerns not only North and South Korea, but all of us. As global citizens, we must remember that we have a stake in and a responsibility to work towards ending the Korean War.

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Reignite: I think on the level of the country and its citizenry, a lot of people have no idea how they can be kept safe or how the economy can develop without the state as an entity. They understand theoretically why we shouldn't have military bases or why we shouldn't kill each other, but in practice they find it hard to imagine what kind of things we would want to build instead, or what the new world order should look like. As an example, there are PLA forces stationed in Hong Kong and its port, but people struggle to see it as any more than a "concession" to China or what the port means in an international context. People feel like international politics is being dealt with by those at the top, and that individuals have no part to play apart from shaking their fists and waving their respective flags. Unable to imagine a world without geopolitical rivalry or armed forces, they accept that they need the protection of an army. They see themselves as insignificant, small—not knowing that many people share the same feelings.

Many African countries are tempted to play ball with China through the Belt and Road Initiative, likely because partnerships with the US in the past have ended badly. It may seem like China is only focused on economic growth now, but there is no telling when these nodes of transportation and infrastructural and logistical development might one day become strategic points in armed conflict. The harm that China inflicts on those inside the country is well-known, but the level of harm it causes the rest of the world has arguably yet to catch up with that inflicted by the US. So it is understandable why countries would want to work with China on the Belt and Road Initiative—it makes historical and logical sense. For its part, China is also using the Belt and Road Initiative to invoke Third World solidarity. It is not that we do not believe in this solidarity—we truly do—but

what does it look like and has this particular instantiation lost its revolutionary potential?

Emily: I think it's necessary to talk about these big things, although it can be really frustrating. In the end I always try to bring it back to ourselves, our own political practice: I hope that we can pave the way for new imaginaries. A few days ago I took part in an action organized by the peace movement network, in which some participants asked how South Korea could de-escalate and disarm under current conditions. I felt bored by the question. I want to challenge Korean society's focused pursuit of a means of survival between the great powers of China and the US. On the one hand, this is par for the course, similar to the way Taiwan is obsessed with lobbying the US Congress and participating in the US' political games. On the other hand, I am sick and tired of this supposed "way of life" for small countries and minor sites. Are we doomed to such a wretched existence?

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I'm sick of Taiwanese people who only care about Taiwanese politics, and Koreans who only care about Korean politics. What about what's happening in the rest of the world? When we leave international politics to the powers that be, what ends up happening, for one, is that the US will have a controlling interest in shaping Taiwan's international relations—which would be absurd. People often make critiques along the lines of "power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely," but might a better question to ask be whether they are giving up their own power? I may have no military power, but when I see unjust situations unfold, can't I at least take a stand? I don't mean advocating for the US to pursue a [Taiwan Relations Act](#), a Hong Kong Relations Act, or anything like that. Naturally, nation-states engage and interact within the international circuit. But we are not simply "nationals"—we are also global citizens. Why should we give up our right to participate and speak up about the same global issues? If we have something to say, we should say it, rather than waiting for some state government to swoop in and say it for us. We have a voice, and we should use it well. If we care about cross-strait issues and believe in peace, can we perhaps organize a citizens' declaration? This could be the first step in an ongoing experiment in international collaboration.

A few years ago, I signed on to a collective statement of refusal to perform military service. Nationality is only one of many forms of identity in the world, and while I am on this land, I can choose how I identify myself. As such, I felt that I could sign on to this statement, regardless of whether I was a citizen. Many nation-states in East Asia remain locked in the prison of nationalism. In fact, this nationalism has become atmospheric, constitutive of a general climate. Many Koreans say they desire "national liberation." I think that "national liberation" is a term borne of the strictures of nationalist ideology, an aftereffect of [colonial trauma](#) that is part and parcel of a postcolonial national character. But this land is not just for the Korean people to live in. International marriages and migrant workers exist, the latter of whom should not be forced to feel like they are automatically silenced because they are newcomers. Without their voices, it would be difficult to build a pluralistic society. I dream of a world where people can speak and be heard, wherever they go.

How our suffering is interconnected

Reignite: Nationalist sentiments have suppressed the capacity of many individuals and groups for empathy and understanding. It seems that before saying anything, you must first indicate who you are or who you support. National identity smothers voices and diminishes the power of discourse. This reminds me of how a lot of people ask if cisgender straight people can support queer and non-binary comrades, as if assuming cis-heteronormativity inherently prevents solidarity. I think that

frameworks of gender and sexual orientation also concern straight people. If you are aware of your positionality and the relations of power at work within this discourse, you shouldn't worry about voicing support for gay liberation as an ally. Things are not that complicated. Many people also use the lens of "human rights" to advocate for gay rights: I am a human being, so I will offer my support. Realistically I know that's easier said than done. Many people cannot fathom, let alone empathize with, the amount of gender-based violence queer folks have to deal with. It is a huge abyss of the imagination.

I often don't know how to help people push the physical and geographical boundaries of their imagination and empathy, though this has been fairly simple in my own experience. For example, as a Hongkonger, I have often had to suppress my Chineseness in Taiwan and Hong Kong. In China, I have had to make my "Hongkongness" and "Taiwanness" less perceivable for fear of unwelcome attention. In a similar vein, modern Korean language had to shed many "impurities" as a result of Chinese and Japanese influence before it came into its own alongside the rise of South Korean modernity. But language often remains muddled—its interactions and transformations precede the interactions of nation-states. I think that starting with things like language, culture, history, lifestyle would make it easier for people to understand how to break up geographical divisions in a way that is more productive than invoking our "common humanity."

I was thinking just now: How would I go about becoming a "Jeju Islander" or "Tinian Islander"? How do we read our entangled histories together in a way that doesn't just reaffirm the need for national belonging?

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Emily: This reminds me of the struggles on Tinian in the Mariana Islands. The protesters there once came to Jeju Island. We took them to visit the 4·3 Peace Museum, where we saw photos of the nuclear explosions in Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of WWII. On one photo, they commented lightly, "This plane [took off](#) from Tinian Island." This made my heart burst with emotion. When people talk about Hiroshima and Nagasaki, they think only of Japan and the US, and the disputes between these two countries, just as the Nanjing Massacre is often only discussed in terms of the Sino-Japanese conflict. Once these binaries are set in stone, people are forced to take sides, after which fierce quarrels are likely to ensue. But who would think that Tinian Island would also be part of the story? That Korea was involved, too?

This really struck a chord with me, and made me think of another thing. There is an Alddreu Airfield on southern Jeju Island, which was established during the Japanese colonial period and served both the Imperial Japanese Navy Air Service and the US Air Force. As Japanese imperialism expanded, so did Alddreu Airfield. The so-called "devil's planes" of the Nanjing Massacre airstrikes took off from Alddreu on Jeju Island. This belongs in our past, but the past, present and future are more connected than we know. The potential for community building in each region may be ignited by uncovering these histories and narratives: for example, how did the military expansion of Jeju Island play a role in the Nanjing Massacre? On this basis, we can easily see how the newly constructed naval base is going to be used for warfare. How will it be used in the future? To what will it lead?

We don't want Jeju Island to become militarily fortified. We also want different activists to come here, mix it up a bit, and introduce new ways of thinking and organizing. On Jeju Island, many anti-US military base movements have developed longstanding working relationships with their counterparts in Okinawa, given that both islands host US military bases and experience the same kind of duress under China and the US. But I really want to make a breakthrough. I want to have a better understanding of China and build a common front of resistance and solidarity around China-

related issues.

Reignite: How do we help people realize that these issues are relevant to everyone and things that everyone should take action on? That's extremely important, yet extremely difficult. That's also why I felt that coming to Jeju Island and Okinawa was crucial. Here, I have been able to learn about the conflict directly through experiencing everyday life on the island, while making connections between different struggles. For instance, knowing that this base could be used by the US army to various ends made me think of how this single site could potentially impact people living elsewhere. Being on this land brought with it an unparalleled sense of tactility, intimacy, and emotional investment. I think all these feelings are necessary in order to evoke a shared sense of collective responsibility, which is the starting point of all action.

I also think this is a problem of worldview. How can we form a sense of responsibility for a place we have never been to, and don't know anything about? When Okinawans tell us that they don't want US military bases on their land, it feels like a localized issue. But when France, for instance, experienced a terrorist attack, many non-French people were able to partake in a common sense of outrage and horror, simply because they had been to France or may have been exposed to a lot of information about it. Even when a place is seen and known, there is still the issue of power. Hong Kong people see Filipinos every day, but that doesn't make them any more willing to learn about Philippine politics, not to mention connecting with Filipinos when they seek [international solidarity](#). People still subscribe to an imagined hierarchy of civilizations. Sometimes I also doubt myself. Is it necessary to see something in person, like the construction of a naval base, right before your very eyes, in order to think of it as a personally relevant matter? What does it take for someone to realize that what oppresses them is also oppressing others, and vice versa?

Emily: Looking at the Taiwan I know as an example, even if an American military base were to be built there, Taiwanese people would still support it, which is devastating. Both President Tsai Ying-wen and South Korea have been talking about building up their own national defense capacities, and Taiwan's spending on this has indeed been increasing. Taiwan hopes to join the global military-industrial complex because of the impressive profit margins. In reality, the defense industry is a part of the international arms system, within which profit generation and accumulation can only occur if there is sustained need for military exports and warfare. In recent years, Tsai has hosted some seemingly informal forums, which are actually official channels for discussing how Taiwan can become a qualified arms supplier for the US. Caught in the middle of China and the US, Taiwan has had no choice but to purchase from the American military, so now it wants to make this money by itself. To develop Taiwan's "national defense capabilities" would mean partaking in the military supply chain or, in other words, to facilitate economic development by promoting war.

The reason why no one thinks this is strange is because growing militarism has long been packaged in terms of "national defense," and subsequently become utterly normalized. A while back, an American Navy research vessel [docked](#) in Kaohsiung Harbor. The US had ostensibly planned on removing its naval forces earlier, but it is now clearly trying to further arm East Asia, planning joint military exercises and such. All the mediaspeak about how great the US is at standing with Taiwan has made the rounds—but will the US stand with Taiwan all the way to independence? The answer is no. This is just a game, and Taiwan is just a bargaining chip—one of many tricks up the sleeve of the US in the ongoing US-China trade war. Whenever the US lifts a pinky to support Taiwan, the country jumps for joy. This truly annoys me.

To be continued.

