

Cheju Island and Hawaii in the Asian-Pacific Region

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1. Introduction

An exotic island off an industrialized continent is generally regarded as the last frontier of development, or at best the last "resort" of rest and recreation for the tired souls of industrial entrepreneurs. It is especially true when the island is richly endowed with rare natural amenities and exotic human ecology like Cheju and Hawaii.

Exoticity and rarity is of course in the eyes of beholders, namely, the mainlanders who may want to come to develop or rest. To the industrial mainlanders such a small island would be either just another piece of land only the cost of access has so far left out or a rarity that has to be preserved for the sake of rareness.

Today both Hawaii and Cheju are certainly not of primitive culture, nor preindustrial communities. They have long since been as much a part of industrial societies as any other regions of the respective nations. Some aspects of their culture such as level of education of the populations are even more advanced than those of the national averages in terms of sophistication and cosmopolitanization.

Undeniably, however, both Cheju and Hawaii occupy special places in the horizons of national development processes. In the case of the Province of

Cheju, such a special status has even been officially sanctioned since 1966 when the national government took its first step for development of the island by designating it as "Special Region." Such a special treatment is no doubt in consideration of uniqueness of their history and indigenous culture as well as ecological exoticity.

The uniqueness of Hawaii and Cheju is of course of the Pacific ecology as seen by the eyes of the mainlanders of Asian continental origin and of the Atlantic-European culture. Casual visitors might even find that the islands of Hawaii and that of Cheju share more in common at least in their flora and fauna than between U.S. and Korea mainlands. The landscapes of both places had been molded by volcanic activities and because of such a similarities of geological origin, the two indeed share a great deal in common in natural ecology.

However, physical novelty alone would not have been perceived so special by the mainlanders if not for the uniqueness of their historical and cultural identities. Although the Province of Cheju had lost its own statehood a long time ago during Koryo dynasty around 1100 A.D., its linkage with the mainland Korea was more official than cultural until the turn of the century. Even in this century until very recently, the mainlanders influence on the island has been limited mostly to economic fields and the island's cultural identity of its own has little been tainted. Though on the basis of a very superfluous knowledge of the Hawaiian native culture, this seems to be true of the Hawaiian islands as well.

Insofar as the mainland Korea and Cheju island are concerned, the two cultures have not really met for a meaningful dialogue. Korea has never really been a Pacific nation but has long been a continentally oriented society. Physically it is a peninsula jutting out into the Pacific. Yet culturally and politically it has never been a seafaring nation. Its root in the Chinese continent to the north has been so deep that the three seas surrounding the peninsula have always been regarded more as enclosure than open horizon to the Pacific. Throughout the history, our people and government have regarded the seas as

open fields for infiltration by hostile neighbors and alien barbarism. As the country was so strongly continent-bound, the island of Cheju used to be seen merely as a far away place where only horses and political exiles were to be sent.

Thanks, however, to such a historically isolated status, the island has been able to preserve a great deal of its own cultural and ecological identity, which is very much oceanic and Pacific. And now with rising expectations for a Pacific era, such a unique Pacific culture and ecology of Cheju should be welcome by Korea as a whole as her new face and gateway toward the Pacific community and so should be the Hawaiian archipelago for the United States. That is to say, the islands of Cheju and Hawaii should be given a new meaning as the opening stages for Korea and the United States to enter the emerging Pacific theatre.

2. Temptations of Tourism

In this day and age of mass consumption, exoticity and uniqueness is becoming more and more highly valued quality of goods; and among the consuming mass "tourists" are today a new breed of people voraciously in search of novelties and exotic places. As there is such an exploding market, it is only very natural that temptations for tourism development are so strong in the minds of many who have interests in the development potentials of such islands as Hawaii and Cheju.

Indeed the main thrust of the Korean government's "Special Region" planning for the Province of Cheju has been to explore the possibilities of international as well as domestic tourists industries. More willing investors could also be found in the private sector for tourists industries of the island than for any other development projects. This must have been the case with the Hawaiian islands as well.

However, the islands of Cheju and Hawaii alike are too small and too precious to be left entirely at the mercy of greedy consumers and entrepreneurs of tourism. For today's greedy consumers and developers of tourism, such a

small island is only a "piece of cake", which most of the native islanders are usually excluded from sharing. All kinds of people from far and abroad will come in flocks for pleasure and exploitation. And therefore, catering merely to the tastes of tourists and tourists industries may very easily deprive the islands of their ecological uniqueness and cultural identity.

If indeed both Cheju and Hawaii should be seen in new perspectives toward the emerging Pacific era, the islands must be treated as precious little stepping stones toward the Pacific community for Korea and the United States. The importance of such a stepping stone to the Pacific community is especially great for Korea, whose cultural identity as seen by ourselves and others alike is predominantly continental and therefore, needs much more cross-fertilization with the Pacific community if ever to be a full-fledged member of the community.

Since the bifurcation of the country, Korea's gateway to the world in all meaningful senses is open only southward and to the Pacific ocean. But physical openness alone does not warrant membership into the Pacific community. Cultural, political and economic linkages must first be built before we can claim a place in it. Our economic and political linkages have widely been expanded over the Pacific community in recent past. And yet, our cultural inclination is still very much continental.

In recent years Koreans have indeed been traveling all over the globe, working with many different peoples and trading with so many nations. Our share of world trade is now more than 1%, having grown from almost zero only a couple of decades ago and the total amount of our exports and imports with the world makes up 80% of GNP. For the size of the country and its age of industrialized economy, this is quite a remarkable achievement toward openness of the nation. Almost a million travelers are now coming in and out from abroad every year for business as well as pleasure. It is certainly no longer a "hermit" nation.

Yet these recent trend of internationalization have been mostly for immediate needs of trade and diplomacy and thus, of rather makeshift, opportunistic approaches. Culturally as well as psychologically, we are still unfamiliar with

the Pacific community. The historical root of our tradition and culture in the northeastern Asian continent may never be forgotten and perhaps, should never be severed. However, there is little doubt that our future is now opening toward the Pacific. And in this new direction the Province of Cheju is our first stepping stone, not the last frontier.

Such a long term national commitment must first be made before any large scale development planning begin for the island. Though little I know about the Hawaiian native culture and their aspirations, the State of Hawaii in the nationhood of the United States must also not simply be the last frontier of westward migration from the past and the Atlantic coast but a new stage of Pacific culture toward the future of Pacific era.

The point to make here is, however, not that tourism should be completely ruled out in the development processes of both Hawaii and Cheju. Tourists industries are already the most prosperous sector of industry in both islands; and furthermore, tourism in today's world is after all the most effective and efficient medium of cultural interaction and exchanges. It is certainly one of the most viable and profitable alternatives of development for Cheju and Hawaii to become the cultural centers of the emerging Pacific community. But the point is that the tourists industries as they are today should not be invited into at any cost merely to build hotels and to sell beaches and scenic beauty.

3. Strategy of Mutual Adaptation

In this era of supersonic travel and global telecommunications, to open such a small island as that of Cheju to the world at large and at the same time protecting it from indiscriminate destruction of its native culture and ecology is a very delicate venture. The most important consideration ought to be "mutual adaptation" between the native population and the outsiders in any development process if and where external intervention of any significance is to be introduced. And the most effective strategy of mutual adaptation is to first develop and make use of the potentials of the native population and indigenous resources to the fullest extent. Thus, they must be brought into the development

process as the most active participants so that their way of life, their resources and social organization lay the groundwork of the socio-economic environment of the new community to be created. If such an active participation of the native population is not going to be generated, the final outcome of development will very likely be nothing much better than colonization of the island by outside forces.

At the prospect of such a possibility, some people argue for preservation in the strictest sense of the old culture and the natural habitat, letting natives live as farmers and fishermen as they used to be for centuries. For curious and casual visitors from outside, the island of Cheju as it used to be would be much more interesting, and this way it may eventually attract more visitors to enrich the natives. But this is not the way things usually develop in today's tourists haven. Eventually the people who have to live there will find themselves being squeezed out of their old habitats, not even understanding the purpose of preservation. After all, neither Cheju nor the Hawaiian archipelago is a little island of aborigines isolated from modern civilization. Cheju is a Province of half a million population and they deserve all the modern amenities of life as much as anybody in the world. And therefore, preservation for the sake of preservation is not a viable alternative, nor is it any better than colonization by outsiders.

In order to facilitate mutual adaptation in the development process, staging and priority of development programs are very important factors. For instance, a large scale project too soon for tourists industry will alienate most of the native population and indigenous resources from the development process. I can not speak for the Hawaiian native population, but most of the native population of Cheju as they are today can not simply afford such an expensive and large scale venture on their own, nor do they have the entrepreneurial ability and socio-economic organizations to mobilize resources even from outside to meet the needs. Their planning and managerial ability and know-hows are yet to be developed to meet with today's sophisticated and demanding requirements of internationalizing tourists industries.

Their economic and managerial ability, organizations, resources and know-hows must first be developed and improved in order for them to become active partners of the development process and thereby, help develop the island uniquely Cheju-like. The top priority, then, of the development planning should be to strengthen and modernize the tertiary and quaternary sectors of the community. Currently in the Province of Cheju a little less than 30% of the population are working in the tertiary sector, about 60% in the primary sector of agriculture and fishery, and a negligible few are employed in the secondary sector of manufacturing industries.

To expand the modernize the tertiary and quaternary sectors can best be done by diversifying and improving the quality of opportunities of economic, cultural and educational activities of the existing urban centers. However, contrary to the needs and expectation of the native population, large scale investments, especially from outside of both public and private sources, have shown the tendency to avoid the existing urban areas and to develop new places removed as far as possible from the old cities centers. Waikiki district in Honolulu and Choong-Moon Estate of Cheju are two revealing examples. Justifiable excuses are always submitted in terms of economic feasibility of the project on the basis of such factors as availability of vacant land, environmental amenities of the alternative sites, business profits and so forth. But the point is that these locational decisions should have been preceded by a broader consideration of impacts on and linkages with the existing communities, especially so if it is supported by public planning intervention.

At any rate, without serious efforts first to upgrade the quality of urban environment of the existing cities and thereby, providing diverse and better opportunities for improvement of indigenous managerial, business and cultural activities and know-hows of the native population, massive inflows of capital and manpower may only result in "selling out" of Cheju in pieces to anybody who is willing and able to pay for. And if it is indeed only to sell pieces of land for scenic beauty and ocean breeze, why should it be of Cheju and Hawaii? There should be a lot of other places to look for along the southern and western

coastlines of the mainlands of Korea as well as the United States.

As we value the history of Pacific culture and the uniqueness of their ecology for opening stages of the Pacific era and as gateways to the Pacific community, we need mutual adaptation of the developmental perspectives for these islands. And for this purpose the native population must first be helped in their efforts for urbanization and internationalization before the islands are to be completely open to the world.

The Province of Cheju and the State of Hawaii alike have already been exposed to the outside world to a considerable degree and a substantial amount of vested interests of outsiders have been accumulated in the islands. Under the circumstances a complete moratorium on the business interests of outsiders till the time ripe for a full partnership with the indigenous entrepreneurship and resources is obviously more idealistic than realistic. But even at this stage, if the long term prospect era would be more seriously recognized than as a lip service by all the parties concerned, measures can be found to operate the development programs in the spirit of "mutual adaptation." And thereby, the process will eventually result in the common benefits for all concerned.

4. Conclusion

Pacific era may still be very much a futuristic conjecture. One can not really be sure at this point if the Pacific theatre will indeed be the nucleus of international trades and culture. Nonetheless, in view of the growing economic and political weights of the nations around the Pacific rim including the United States, Japan, China, Korea, Australia and the ASEA countries, there can be not much doubt that the Pacific theatre will soon be a center of global significance.

Entering into this newly emerging Pacific theatre, Cheju island for Korea and the Hawaiian archipelago for the United States of America are precious cultural links to the Pacific community. As noted earlier, such cultural links are particularly important for the two countries because of their past rooted in the continental and the Atlantic culture. These islands are their new "Pacific connections" for the future. And through the process of mutual adaptation in each

country's developmental efforts for the islands, the cultural links to the Pacific community will be strengthened and thus, the Pacific era will open for Pax Pacifica.