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# CROSS-CURRENTS



## EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

### **Imagining Urban Community: Contested Geographies and Parallax Urban Dreams on Cheju Island, South Korea**

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#### **Abstract**

This article examines how urban space in Cheju City can be imagined as a site of experience and identity. The rapid development of Cheju City on Cheju Island, the Republic of Korea's prime resort and ecological heritage destination, has foregrounded tensions between global tourism and local identity. How people experience cities physically has an intimate connection with how they imagine and represent urban space. Cheju City, which has transformed from being the modest seat of a long-marginalized periphery into a burgeoning tourism hub, is a battleground on which differing visions of urban space as the location of culture are staged. Such debates are as much about the right to represent identity as about the right to use urban space. While urban redevelopment in Cheju City erases entire city blocks for tourist facilities and elaborate monuments to distant pasts, emergent social movements are rearticulating sites of memory to recover a sense of a Cheju-specific landscape and to redefine local identity. Using ongoing ethnographic and archival research conducted since 2012, this article demonstrates how a new urban heritage paradigm is emerging in Cheju. Heritage is no longer confined to essentialist conclusions drawn from rural folklore but now directly addresses urban experience.

Keywords: Cheju Island, South Korea, globalization, tourism, heritage, urban development, urbanization, symbolic ecology, memory, space

#### **Introduction: Dream Towers and Urban Nightmares**

Outgoing Cheju governor U Künmin ignited a public firestorm in the summer of 2014 when he approved the so-called Dream Tower, a final act guaranteed to preserve his infamy with citizens disenchanted with his tenure. Residents of the Nohyöng-tong district and the Cheju Hwan'gyöng Yönhap (Cheju Environmental Alliance) lobbied unsuccessfully against the project. Opponents argued that the tower would cause environmental damage, exacerbate gridlock on Cheju City roads, and obstruct sunlight and views of Cheju Island's central shield volcano, Hallasan. The

original plans for the project—a joint venture of the mainland Korea-based Lotte and Tonghwa corporations with the financial backing of the Chinese state-owned Shanghai Greenland Group—consisted of twin 218-meter towers at Nohyŏng Ogŏri, one of the busiest intersections of the Sin-Cheju (New Cheju City) area (Yi SN 2014). The tower project has been debated for years, with its proponents arguing that it would become Cheju City’s icon of urban achievement, just as the 63 Building has become for Seoul. Should construction go ahead, the tower would dwarf almost everything, artificial or natural, in and around Cheju City, as if to thrust a “phallogocratic element into the visual realm” in order to “convey an impression of authority” (Lefebvre 1991, 98). As of 2015, the project remains in limbo due to strong opposition.

The Dream Tower controversy is only one of the latest since the central government of South Korea (hereafter Korea) initiated the 2001 “Free International City” project. Twenty minutes to the east of Cheju City, in an area known commonly as Ku-Cheju (Old Cheju City), cranes and bulldozers descended on Cheju City’s *wŏndosim*, the historic old downtown. In 2012, the Cheju City and Cheju provincial governments put into action their ambitious urban redevelopment project, the T’amna Munhwa Kwanjang (T’amna Culture Plaza, figure 1), to stimulate a long-stagnant sector of the city. Drastic physical transformation has irreversibly altered local society as new competing discourses, objectives, and alliances emerge from rubble and ruin.



Figure 1. The T’amna Culture Plaza project billboard. Photo taken by the author, 2013.

Cheju City, one of the country's fastest-growing urban areas,<sup>1</sup> is in the midst of an identity crisis. As its role as a showcase resort and ecological heritage playground for well-to-do mainland Korean and nouveau-riche Chinese tourists expands, its urban and natural environment faces destruction or redevelopment. A contradiction has emerged, with supposedly green tourism's popularity fast becoming the primary source of environmental degradation and cultural erasure. Local residents are beginning to reassess Cheju City's old town area, once a neglected slum and quasi red-light district, as representative of Cheju's conflicted and multilayered experiences. Yet heritage practice, too, is contested. A more divisive issue in local debate is whether new symbols of a lost collective T'amna<sup>2</sup> past should be rehabilitated or reinvented even at the expense of sites of memory. Debate over the future of Cheju City's lost past is no longer confined to the island's disappearing rural traditions and has meandered into the city's winding streets between the bricks and concrete. Retrospective looks at Cheju City's *kyōngkwan* (scenery) in its post-1960s development consider its monotonous appearance as failure and as the loss of cultural autonomy made physical (Kim TI 2007).

The significance of a *wōndosim* came into currency in the past two decades in local media, government policy, public seminars, and citizens' forums. Local residents attempt to identify symbolic features of Cheju City as a means to excavate an "urban symbolic ecology" (Nas, de Groot, and Schut 2011, 7).<sup>3</sup> Debate has increasingly focused on the matter of how to define what is *Chejudaun* ("Cheju-appropriate" or "Cheju-esque") (Kim HS 2007, 241). The concept of *Chejudaun* entails a form of "visual citizenship" in which community is defined when one can "belong by the eye" (Roberts, forthcoming). On one hand, the liveliness of Cheju City's discursive field demonstrates that many have realized that the basis of a Cheju City discourse is a socially mediated practice of choosing how to perceive the city's physicality. On the other hand, Cheju City as a city remains a vague concept. Some residents still do not consider Cheju City an authentic urban environment because of its too-rapid change, regarding it instead as a bloated *sigol* (country town),<sup>4</sup> and memories of living under thatched roofs and treading beaten dirt paths remain fresh. How does one begin to identify a Cheju urban identity? In this article I argue that the right to reimagine the city is a key component in the ongoing social and political conflicts over urban regeneration. Although city image is a prominent part of government- and business-directed tourism branding, it can also become a crucial part of social identity when local residents assert ownership. In reimagining the city, different interests, associations, and

individuals attempt to create variegated visual and experiential geographies that may align, overlap, or compete with one another.

I divide my discussion into four main parts: (1) an overview of the relationship between urban image and identity and case studies of other Korean inner-city regeneration projects; (2) a brief synopsis of Cheju City's transformations amid Korea's shifting perceptions of modernity; (3) an analysis of the old city-based *Wōndosim Yet'gil T'amhōm* (Exploring the Old City Streets, hereafter *Wōndosim T'amhōm*) program, a project of Cheju Kukje Munhwa Kyoryu Hyōphoe (Cheju International Culture Exchange Association, hereafter JICEA), as a practice of visual citizenship; and (4) the conflicts among competing heritage discourses. I focus primarily on JICEA, though I have also interviewed members of Global Inner Peace and the Cheju Noksaekdang (Cheju Green Party). In addition, I have also queried unaffiliated residents who reside or work in or near the *wōndosim* in order to obtain a broader sample. Stories and data were collected in old Cheju City from summer research trips in 2012 to 2014 and a year-long fieldwork research stay under the Fulbright-DDRA starting on January 8, 2015. Official government documents archived in the public archive center and articles from Korean news sources supplement my ethnographic data. Though the entire northern half of Cheju Island was unified under the jurisdiction of Cheju City as of 2006 (Kim MH 2007), what I refer to as "Cheju City" consists of only the districts designated as *tong* in accordance with local understandings of the city's scope.

### **The City as Image**

Urban planner Kevin Lynch notes that how one experiences a city depends on its "imageability," or ability to evoke a strong image within an observer (1960, 2–9). "Imageability" is also indirectly linked to quality of life and social connectedness. Cities with a more positive image tend to influence a greater sense of connection as residents identify more strongly with their locale or find it easier to consider their relationship to the locale. Although Lynch's concept of city "imageability" has been influential in urban studies in the United States as well as in Korea, the concept of a city serving as an organized symbolic system is hardly new or confined to urban planning. Urban anthropologist Peter J. M. Nas considers resident interaction with particular features of a city—whether they are monuments or specific arrangements of objects—a system of symbols on which people create meaning (Nas, de Groot, and Schut 2011, 7).

Geographer Paul Wheatley (1969) describes early cities, particularly capitals, as being representations of the macrocosm, or *axis mundi*. Imperial Beijing translated Chinese cosmology into physical structures and spatial arrangements, with palaces arranged in accordance with geomantic principles. This function continues to persist, especially as available media and political discourse become increasingly complex and sophisticated with the passage of time. Postcolonial city building—especially for regional and national capitals—chiseled in stone a grand narrative of becoming modern. Le Corbusier’s austere modernism intermixed with local nationalist exigencies in showcase urban centers, from the Indian city of Chandigarh (Shaw 2013) to the Korean capital of Seoul (Sharon Hong 2012). Such representations of macrocosms, however, are not confined to power; the city and the image of the city can also be used for a multiplicity of other purposes, such as creating new community identities and solidarities.

Heritage is another component for understanding social constructions of urban images, though it is not always directly addressed. Heritage studies scholar Laurajane Smith explains that it is “a cultural process that engages with acts of remembering that work to create ways to understand and engage with the present.” Physical sites and remains function as “cultural tools that can facilitate, but are not necessarily vital for, this process” (2006, 44). Although Smith observes that physical sites are not necessary for heritage, heritage can become vital for physical sites. Appeals to heritage serve as a means to assert or contest city identities. In Korea, heritage served as a rallying call for the Park Chung Hee regime (1961–1979) to rehabilitate or recreate specific monuments, such as palaces and royal tombs in the city of Kyōngju, in order to “fulfill a glorious cultural past, a temporality of continuity and the actualization of potential” (Oppenheim 2008, 27–28). Making heritage is neither a conservative nor a utopian practice. Heritage can be employed as a discursive and practical weapon to assert the right to define identity, especially in urbanizing areas where varied geographies overlap and compete. In a context like Cheju City, where urban development was compressed within less than half a century, the boundaries between heritage destruction and reconstruction are blurred.

Korea’s recent *tosi chaesaeng* (urban regeneration) trends emphasize using or fostering image, identity, heritage, and other local cultural resources. While central government planners drew up more than five hundred urban improvement projects in the past forty years (Jung et al. 2015, 29–30), earlier projects focused on infrastructure, and *tosi chaesaeng* as a concept came to prominence only starting around the turn of the twenty-first century (Kim HC 2013, 3). For

nonmetropolitan cities, image and branding have become increasingly important means by which to attract attention with the hopes of drawing investment capital (Oh YJ 2014). In the better-known *wōndosim* revival cases of Kunsan's rehabilitated colonial buildings (Kim HJ 2014), Kwangju's "Hub City of Asian Culture" Project (Jung et al. 2015), and the Ch'ōnggyech'ōn restoration project in Seoul (Cho 2010), however, urban heritage was a crucial, scarce resource over which different interests clashed. Culture-led urban regeneration projects have prompted local residents to question the nature of urban identity, what constitutes heritage, and how such resources are to be employed.

Despite the vast literature regarding urban regeneration in Korea published since the turn of the twenty-first century, many works still do not sufficiently address social and cultural dimensions. The bulk of existing Korean urban regeneration scholarship is limited to architecture and planning perspectives. Given the rapidity with which urban projects unfold in Korea and the importance of more immediately identifiable results to policy research, discourse and social impact analyses in much *tosi chaesaeng* literature are minimal. As Korea's cityscapes are changing or slated for transformation, the significance of and conflicts over space among urban inhabitants beyond the planning committees or stakeholders are underexplored. Little attention is afforded to ways in which residents are redefining city space and the concept of the city itself. Aside from anthropologist Robert Oppenheim's (2008) and cultural heritage researcher Hyeon-jeong Kim's (2014) works on Kyōngju and Kunsan respectively, the dynamic relationship between heritage and urban image is also insufficiently considered. Cheju City offers a distinct case in which urban heritage and what Lynch (1960) refers to as "imageability" are not simply confined to old historic structures and specific architectural or spatial layouts. These two concerns are also a matter of how to consider the entire geography of a city itself as a part of social identity.

Academic discussion of the sociocultural consequences of Cheju City's transformation and ensuing redevelopment remains sparse. Concerns regarding urban regeneration and gentrification, especially as they pertain to the urban symbolic ecology, are becoming more pressing throughout Korea, but Cheju City has its own sociocultural particularities. Yet even within Cheju, research on the radically changed symbolic ecology is limited. Architectural scholar Kim T'aeil's edited publications (Kim 2007; Kim, Kang, and Kim 2012) are some of the few pieces of Cheju City scholarship, but these, too, are based on architecture, planning, and

policy perspectives. Few works of qualitative research on urban society have been carried out. This article is an attempt to address the limitations in the broader urban regeneration scholarship in both Korean and Cheju studies literature.

### **City of the Seven Stars**

Striking up a conversation with a Cheju City local, a newcomer may be confronted with an overt claim that Cheju is not really Korea. A self-aware sense of otherness has always been present on the island, but the growing number of mainlanders has deepened insider-outsider divisions as much as it has brought local society into the mainstream. Since 2000, waves of well-to-do mainland Koreans have retreated from metropolitan life to Cheju, ironically accelerating urban expansion there. At first cautiously welcomed as an impetus for reenergizing local society, these emigrants have come to be seen by many locals as a nuisance. Cheju natives have coined the derogatory term *Hō-ssi* (Mr. or Ms. *Hō*) in reference to the *hō* character on tourists' rental car license plates.<sup>5</sup> Resentment is also directed at islanders who sold off land to newcomers or developers for a quick profit. Adding fuel to the fire under an already-boiling cauldron are Chinese capital penetration and the increasing numbers of Chinese tourists. As of February 1, 2010, Cheju's local immigration law provisions allow noncitizens who invest more than 500,000,000 won (roughly US\$500,000) to become permanent residents (Yi CH 2010). The revision to Cheju's immigration policy has attracted great interest from wealthy Chinese, who have become the largest demographic for foreign investors ("Chinese investors" 2011). A growing sentiment is that Cheju locals are being pushed out or becoming outsiders on their own island as wealthy mainlanders and Chinese gentrify greater swaths of Cheju City.<sup>6</sup> In 2015, land prices soared at an even faster rate than in Seoul (Ha CH 2015), and thus housing and rent are increasingly beyond the reach of most islanders.

Cheju City has long been both an ancient capital and a provincial backwater. Unlike Korea's other historic centers, the contemporary heritage destinations of Kyōngju and Puyō, the city's role as a local center politically and cosmologically remained consistent for more than a millennium. Its local significance remained, though it was relegated to a low status compared to other Korean regions. By virtue of its physical and human geography, the city still functions as a small provincial town at the street level and in interpersonal relationships despite rapid growth. All actors in contests over Cheju City identity and image discourse more or less know one



another and operate in the same space, a factor that has deepened tensions as much as cooperation. The possibilities that *tosi chaesaeng* offers have generated much division and competition. Disagreement over Cheju's future has widened and created new fissures. As soon as the T'amna Culture Plaza project was finally started, Cheju City saw a multiplicity of new interest groups with competing discourses all vying for broader public, government, and private attention. One thing they all do agree on, however, is the idea that the basis of *tosi chaesaeng* must be found somewhere in the streets of Cheju City's *wōndosim*.

Any discussion of Cheju City's history prior to the 1980s is by default a discussion of its *wōndosim*. The term *wōndosim* came into currency only after 2000, but there had always been a concept of an original or core Cheju City in relation to its former city walls. In administrative and financial terms, the area consists of parts of the districts of Ildo-1-tong, Ido-1-tong, Samdo-2-tong, and Kōnip-tong. All have their own bureaucracies, but a single old city exists in residents' practice, memory, and conception of Cheju City's symbolic ecology. The old city was known either as *sōngnae* or *sōng'an*, which both mean "within the city walls."<sup>7</sup>

A brief archeological history is in order here. During the era of the indigenous T'amna kingdom, which maintained relative autonomy until its official annexation into the Korean kingdom in 1105,<sup>8</sup> Cheju City possessed a substantial ritual complex of seven sites known as Ch'ilsōngdae, which was arranged in the form of the Puktu ch'ilsōng (Seven Stars of the Northern Ladle) asterism. One altar of this complex was aligned with Samsōnghyōl, the three lava tube holes from which Cheju's demigod founders appeared, and a symbolic representation of Pukkūksōng (Polaris) (Kim, Kang, and Kim 2012, 159). Older maps noted in Kim T'aeil's scholarship as well as interpretations of governor Yi Wōnjin's 1653 *T'amnaji* and historian Kim Sōgik's 1923 *P'ahallok* historical records suggest that the early city formed in relation to these seven nodal points. Cheju City's sacred geography is noted in *Ch'ilsōng ponp'uri*, a local myth of the Ch'ilsōng (Seven Stars) snake deities, according to which seven snake spirits took up positions around the city. The significance of Ch'ilsōng was further replicated in household ritual (Mun MB 2012) and domestic architecture, in which the house itself was a map of seven points (Kim HJ 2007). Astral symbolism is conspicuous in the title of the T'amna king—the *sōngju*, literally "master of the stars"—and the name of the island's central mountain, Hallasan, "the peak that pulls down the Milky Way" (Nemeth 1987, 184).

Following annexation, the Korean Koryŏ (918–1392) and Chosŏn (1392–1910) dynasties erected their own monuments within Cheju City. Rulers of dynastic Korea did not, however, radically alter settlement patterns and local customs all at once while their official appointees to administer the island introduced outside systems. Two Buddhist temples, Haeryunsa and Mansusa, were erected on opposite sides of the old city during Koryŏ rule. The Koryŏ- and then Mongol Yuan-sponsored temples possessed megalithic Maitreya Buddha statues to which islanders still pray for fertility and protection (O Sŏng 2006). Stone mounds built as spiritual wards around the old city may have been of Mongol influence, as the Yuan Empire occupied the island for about a century following 1273.<sup>9</sup> In 1448, Chosŏn administrators established Mokkwana as the administrative center and built the ceremonial Kwandŏkjŏng pavilion beside the ancient Seven Stars complex (Kim, Kang, and Kim 2012, 137). Chosŏn governors ordered new walls to be erected around the old city. Although governors occasionally attempted to disrupt or eradicate local practices, Chosŏn Korean cosmology was adapted to island culture. Scholar-officials exiled to Cheju and local elites reinterpreted geomancy so that Cheju would be understood as a part of the energy flows that emanated from the Kunlun Mountains in continental Asia (Nemeth 1987, 276–277). Islanders maintained Ip'chun-kut (spring-welcoming rites) in the town commons before Kwandŏkjŏng despite mainland domination, and such practices continued until the Japanese colonial period (Hong SY 2013, 158–160).<sup>10</sup>

The symbolic and functional concept of the center was radically redefined in the twentieth century. As had been the case in Seoul, Japanese colonial authorities rearranged Cheju City's old main street of Ch'ilsŏng-t'ong (Seven Stars Street) as well as its two other main roads to create a straightened parallel and perpendicular layout, following urbanizing trends in Japan. The former town commons in front of Kwandŏkjŏng became part of a new main road called Wŏnjŏng-t'ong (J: Honmachidoori), and this road still exists. Most of Cheju City's walls were destroyed for urban expansion, and throughout the colonial period Japanese settlers maintained a presence around Ch'ilsŏng-t'ong (Kim, Kang, and Kim 2012, 143). A building that once served as a *ryokan* (Japanese-style inn) built to cater to colonial officials remains near Kwandŏkjŏng today.<sup>11</sup> Hyangsadang, a Chosŏn-era meeting hall dedicated to feasting and archery, was converted to a Japanese temple (Cheju Taehakgyo Pangmulgwan 1996). At the top of the old east city wall the first meteorological station, formerly known as Ch'ŭkhuso and now known as Kisangch'ŏng (Meteorological Administration), was established. Though Kwandŏkjŏng was

spared, Mokkwana and Ch'ilsŏngdae were destroyed for new administrative structures and urban development. On the other hand, the first modern elementary school, Puk Elementary School, was established due to local efforts. French Catholic missionaries left their mark with Sinsŏng Girls' High School and Chungang Cathedral in the same area. Japanese-established public schools, the first movie theater, and colonial administrative structures were also all built a short distance from Kwandŏkjŏng.<sup>12</sup>

An ironic twist to Cheju's twentieth-century history is that the most deliberate destruction of traditional imagery and collective forgetting occurred after liberation. Much of the *wŏndosim* survived the Korean government's brutal repression following the 1948 April 3rd uprising (which incidentally was related to an act of police brutality at Kwandŏkjŏng a year earlier), while the rest of the island was set ablaze, but Korean regimes continued where the Japanese colonizers had left off. The main new city area, Sin-Cheju, initially designed in the 1960s to house an emerging middle class and tourism industry, is still a work in progress, as if it were a long-running soap opera about the island's love-hate relationship with urbanization. Sin-Cheju's ascendancy as a new center, however, contributed to the *wŏndosim*'s serious economic downturn since the 1980s and 1990s. As important offices such as Cheju City Hall, the provincial government office, and health care services relocated, most of the old city fell into ruin.<sup>13</sup> The *wŏndosim* lost its centrality. The overall quality of life deteriorated further when the area's two main streams were built over in the 1970s and 1980s and its waterfront was reclaimed for the Tapdong Plaza project in the 1990s (Kim, Kang, and Kim 2012, 141).

Cheju's landscape has undergone epochal changes since the beginning of nationwide economic development programs under the Park Chung Hee (Pak Chŏnghŭi) regime (1961–1979),<sup>14</sup> but it is only since the 1980s that Cheju's urban population became the clear majority (O HS 2006, 779). The late 1980s demographics were a sharp contrast from the 1960s, when 88 percent of the population was still agricultural (Yi KU 2003, 214). Development plans detailed in the 1985–1991 and 1994 publications of the *Chejudo Chonghap Kaebal Kyehoek* (Cheju Province General Development Plans) sought to address the imbalances that resulted from previous urban development and tourism projects, but concerns focused on outdated infrastructure rather than social and cultural issues. Newer sections of Cheju City expanded at a haphazard rate with the bland white apartment complexes that characterize many other Korean cities. Until as late as 2006, when Cheju Province acquired a nominal semi-autonomous status

under the name Cheju T'ŭkpyŏl Chach'ido (Cheju Special Self-Governing Province), Cheju City developed primarily in accord with the designs of the central government and corporate investors in Seoul. The 2006 Cheju T'ŭkpyŏlbŏp (Cheju Special Law) enabled Cheju City's governing authorities to wield greater influence over island politics and development planning,<sup>15</sup> though the national government still may act whenever it deems fit.<sup>16</sup> The influence of Korean mainland corporate capital and the growing clout of Shanghai-based Chinese investors, as evidenced in the Dream Tower controversy mentioned earlier in this article, also complicate Cheju's nominal autonomy. Following the Chinese tourism influx since 2010, casinos, high-rise hotels, and Chinese signs have taken the place of former Japanese signs and sex tourism establishments.<sup>17</sup> For some local youth coming of age in this context, the lack of political autonomy and the city's contradictory urbanization make it impossible to determine what Cheju City is supposed to be and to whom the city belongs.<sup>18</sup>

Attempts to redefine the *wŏndosim* began in the late 1990s and early 2000s as the city government and affiliated development research institutes proposed an "investigation of T'amna's Ch'ilsŏngdae path" for the possibility of recreating a Ch'ilsŏngdae-themed road (Kim HH 2015d). The Ch'ilsŏngdae complex's precise locations are still uncertain, but public funding was expended to establish stylized commemorative stone signs on sites based on a 1979 interpretation (Kim, Kang, and Kim 2012, 160) (figure 2). A recent GIS survey based on extant records, however, indicates that previous speculations and the current signs' positions are likely inaccurate (Kim, Kang, and Kim 2012, 160). As interest in Cheju City's T'amna past grew, organizations such as the Chŏnt'ong Munhwa Yŏn'guso (Traditional Culture Institute) and Cheju Minyech'ong (Cheju People's Artist Federation) pushed for reviving, restoring, and reimagining Cheju City as it was prior to the twentieth century. The Mokkwana site was excavated and rebuilt in the 1990s. Reconstruction came at the expense of entire city blocks that also possessed examples of early twentieth-century architecture, a move that is still controversial.<sup>19</sup> In 1999, the Ipch'un Kut ritual was revived as the Ipch'un Kut-nori festival at Kwandŏkjŏng as a result of efforts by both Chŏnt'ong Munhwa Yŏn'guso and Minyech'ong with the Cheju City government (Hong SY 2013, 163). The Mokkwana and Ipch'un Kut revival had mixed results because Mokkwana functions primarily as a static outdoor museum. Though the 1990s efforts refocused attention on Cheju City's heritage and Kwandŏkjŏng regained significance as a city symbol, the old city neighborhoods continued to deteriorate. The situation

changed drastically with Chinese tourism and the T'amna Culture Plaza project's promotion and, ironically, with the backlash directed at both.



Figure 2. One of seven stylized commemorative stone signs at sites based on a 1979 interpretation of the location of Ch'ilsŏngdae. Photo taken by the author, 2015.

The T'amna Culture Plaza project attempts to transform a 45,845-square-meter swath of the old city (Hong CP 2013). Entire city blocks were demolished to make way for large plazas flanking the Sanjich'ŏn stream and upscale café and shop rows. Given the old city's proximity to Cheju Harbor and Cheju's recent opening to Chinese-dominated cruise ship tourism, the T'amna Culture Plaza was in part intended to accommodate these short-term mass arrivals. As a justification for the T'amna name, the Culture Plaza includes several projects intended to reconstruct (if not fabricate) pre-twentieth-century sites, including Ch'ilsŏngdae, in conjunction with open plazas and decorative features that gesture at an idealized T'amna past. The city's tumultuous twentieth-century experiences are cleared away for a vision of the future projected

backward to ancient T'amna. While the T'amna Culture Plaza project has the overt purpose of transforming Cheju City in the image of a showcase globalized city, it also is an attempt to create a Cheju City image in terms of a specific representation of T'amna identity. Following precedents set in Seoul and Kyōngju, Cheju's administrations under governors U Kūnmin, Kim T'aehwan, and Wōn Hūiryong, as well as academic experts and cultural heritage administration officials,<sup>20</sup> took custodianship of heritage to assert political legitimacy. These assertions, however, did not go unquestioned. The enormous Kim Mandōk Memorial Hall, which is a museum to an eighteenth-century female merchant-philanthropist, and the folk village-like Kim Mandōk Kaekchut'ō<sup>21</sup> (figure 3) were criticized as distorted representations of a cherished local heroine. The values of the plaza's physical imagery are specific and in tune with the larger goals of Korean developmental policy: cultural unity under the legacy of a proud civilization in the reinvented Ch'ilsōngdae, economic rationality and social harmony in the Kim Mandōk Kaekchut'ō, human perseverance over nature in the Sanjich'ōn River reconstruction, and open embrace of the global market in the broad and stylized shopping plazas. The T'amna Culture Plaza project's exaggerated T'amna-ness has aroused bemusement, derision, and ambivalence.



Figure 3. Kim Mandōk Kaekchut'ō reconstruction. Photo taken by the author, 2015.

There was no question that the *wōndosim* would eventually face redevelopment, but what that entails is a key point of contention (Kim, Kang, and Kim 2012, 94–95). In contrast to earlier decades, however, post-2000 Cheju City has seen the rise of new citizen-oriented organizations that have begun pressuring local government to take into account different ways of reimagining the city. For *wōndosim* shopkeepers who were left out of Cheju’s post-1980s tourism miracle, the T’amna Culture Plaza is a chance to escape the poverty that had gripped the neighborhood. Even those critical of the project’s larger plans do not dispute that the refocused attention on the *wōndosim* is bringing its gradual revival,<sup>22</sup> though its long-term future remains in question, especially as the 2015 MERS (Middle East Respiratory Syndrome) crisis highlighted vulnerability. A further complication to *wōndosim* redevelopment is the division among cultural and citizens’ organizations regarding how to reimagine Cheju City and define its identity. Would a *Chejudaun* city be based on a revived and reconstructed T’amna capital—authenticated via the efforts of local research organizations—or would it be based on the chaotic jumbled stones and bricks of its tumultuous modernity?

Special editorials on the *wōndosim* began to appear in local news outlets as the T’amna Culture Plaza project commenced. On July 15, 2014, journalist Chin Sōnhŭi of Cheju’s *Halla Ilbo* newspaper began a series of twenty articles exploring the multiple histories hidden in the *wōndosim* and the activities of JICEA. The editorial series was intended to publicize lesser-known histories and to inspire alternative ways of seeing and engaging old city spaces. Chin describes the *wōndosim* as a “rare place in which one can not only see natural surroundings but also traces of Cheju people’s lives from up close” (2014a). In the last article of the series, published on December 2, she concludes that continued disregard for remaining traces demonstrates an urgent need to reconsider heritage preservation criteria (Chin 2014b). Chin’s *Halla Ilbo* editorial proposes a form of visual citizenship in which shared memory and practices of seeing stories within *wōndosim* constitute a form of community building by the eyes. Chin’s concept of Cheju City’s heritage and “imageability,” to use Kevin Lynch’s term, does not privilege a distant T’amna past but instead focuses on living memory and the *wōndosim*’s distinctive features. In exposing the layered histories of the *wōndosim*, her editorial challenges the heritage discourses represented in the T’amna Culture Plaza. The practice of imagining Cheju City’s imageability involves seeing stories within the aged stone walls, the winding neighborhood alleyways, and the *wōndosim*’s multilayered physicality.

A specifically urban discourse has been emerging. As the effects of Cheju City's urbanization and internal political conflicts now influence every facet of life across the island, local identity is being framed less in terms of a forgotten idyllic rural past and more in terms of Cheju City's immediate realities. An important factor that makes the *wōndosim* such a contested area is that it continues to have cross-generational significance. Regardless of major changes across the island, Cheju City's *wōndosim* has consistently retained its compact neighborhoods and tight streets, known as *kol*. One Cheju returnee noted that the neighborhood has physically undergone little change since the 1980s and is thus one of the few reminders of Cheju City as it was.<sup>23</sup> The old *kol* visible in a 1914 Japanese land survey map of the city are still visible today (Kim, Kang, and Kim 2012, 137–138). Neglect paradoxically heightened the *wōndosim*'s significance. Because personal connections to the past are more readily retrievable, the *wōndosim* serves as a crucial site of memory, or *lieu de memoire* (Nora 1989). Physical threats to the *wōndosim* are viewed as threats to Cheju identity. All within the same period, multiple groups, including JICEA, Cheju P'orōm Ssi (Forum C), Global Inner Peace, and Cheju Noksaekdang (Green Party), emerged or became more active in addressing Cheju's urbanization. JICEA, however, was one of the first major organizations to propose new ways of seeing a Cheju-specific city and asserting community ownership over the *wōndosim*. Event flyers, online postings, and banners for JICEA's old city walking excursions always bear the following signature phrase: "Kiōk-ūi hyōnjang-esō tosi-ūi mirae poda" ("Looking at the city's future from sites of memory").

### **Critical Nostalgias and *Wōndosim* (Old Town) Excursions**

JICEA's 2012 founding beside the Sanjich'ōn River and along the old central avenue of Kwandōk-ro, only meters away from the bulldozers, was a challenge to the T'amna Culture Plaza. Led by *wōndosim* native Ko Young-lim (Ko Yōngnim), the association brought residents of different generations together to consider alternative grassroots approaches for *tosi chaesaeng* and reimagining the city. A Cheju National University (JNU) French professor, Ko studied in Strasbourg, researched the Cheju dialect in Osaka's Tsuruhashi Koreatown, and was involved in women's activism in Seoul. Ko herself returned to Cheju in 2007 after some decades abroad and was astounded by the city's rapid changes and what she saw as egregious destruction of its cultural particularities. As a fixture in debates on the old city, she is among the most vociferous



figures to critique cultural policies and urban heritage paradigms. JICEA's earliest membership included mostly friends and colleagues who were born in the late 1960s and 1970s. Though relatively small, with fifty local and ten foreign members, the association has had a profound impact on Cheju's urban discourse. JICEA's concerns regarding the old city were soon communicated across the generations as Ko's students at JNU became important members. Members and affiliates include old city natives, Cheju returnees from the mainland or abroad, academics, journalists, café owners, artists, guesthouse keepers, and university students. Activities are almost entirely *wōndosim*-based. At a glance, JICEA's activities focus primarily on introducing French culture—due in large part to Ko's own expertise—but JICEA's larger objective of drawing attention to the *wōndosim* as Cheju City's historic center of urban culture and education remains consistent. The association considers its efforts, including its French film events, as a means to restore the *wōndosim*'s historic role as a center of transnational cultural exchange. JICEA directs its efforts primarily at Cheju residents, with the hope that an example of a Cheju Islander-led international cultural exchange initiative held at reused sites of memory—as opposed to massive redevelopment privileging well-to-do Chinese tourists or mainland Koreans—might inspire more locals to engage other cultures, while considering Cheju City's own cultural and historical worth. Another purpose is to indirectly demonstrate to local Cheju society that other societies around the world have reassessed the value of their old town centers. Drawing inspiration from successful old town preservation examples in France (especially Strasbourg, where Ko spent her university years), JICEA argues for preserving the distinctive characteristics of Cheju City's *wōndosim*. Since 2012, the organization has engaged in four types of activities: (1) *wōndosim* historical survey excursion walks, known as the Wōndosim T'amhōm; (2) French film screenings and group discussions; (3) community forums regarding urban revitalization; and (4) arts exhibitions. The French Film Festival and French Film Night are made possible by public funding from cultural ministries and the French Embassy's support, but the Wōndosim T'amhōm is unique in that it operates purely on participation fees. JICEA's insistence on autonomy, however, does limit its size and the scope of its activities, and sometimes is a source of friction with former colleagues.

Wōndosim T'amhōm is JICEA's cornerstone program. It was conceived out of a sense of emergency regarding *tosi chaesaeng* and is among the first group excursions in Cheju to critically engage the city. The initial purpose of the walks was to highlight contested or

threatened sites of memory. The Wōndosim T'amhōm program called into question the T'amna Culture Plaza project's premise of fabricating a T'amna identity on the rubble of actual *lieux de memoire*. Ko herself leads many of the excursions, but the program came to include periodic guest presenters and JICEA student staff participants. Turnout varies from as few as five to as many as thirty people. Participants are typically Cheju locals, but mainlanders and non-Koreans interested in Cheju history also have joined.<sup>24</sup> For Ko, a primary measure of a T'amhōm event's success is not the number of participants but whether the content elicited much group discussion.

Several key points set the Wōndosim T'amhōm apart from other Korean historical excursions, known as *tapsa*. The former is derived from the latter, but the Wōndosim T'amhōm is explicitly referred to as *t'amhōm* (exploration). Oppenheim, in his Kyōngju case study, describes *tapsa* as a form of “serious fun” that involves “seeking out, viewing, studying, and sometimes documenting artifacts, relics, and historical sites” (2008, 83). *Tapsa* participants assume a sense of “custodianship over ancient objects” (Oppenheim 2008, 104) as they make visual confirmation and physical contact with the real traces of the past. *Tapsa* has become an increasingly important practice in Cheju—especially among Chōnt'ong Munhwa Yōn'guso, Minyech'ong, and Cheju P'orum Ssi members—for providing residents opportunities to engage with history and learn about Cheju within the framework of larger historical or anthropological narratives. From its inception, Wōndosim T'amhōm has functioned as a practice of citizen critical geography rather than citizen archeology. Memory, testimonies, and various biographical narratives are used to present different aspects of the same sites. Unlike that of a major cultural city such as Kyōngju, where distant royal pasts are more readily retrievable in the city's ubiquitous Silla royal monuments, Cheju City history is subject to dispute as it lacks monumental architecture and clear historical records that predate the twentieth century.

Successive Wōndosim T'amhōm events use similar itineraries but different narratives and details depending on the day's theme or relevant issues in Cheju City politics and society. Compared to Cheju P'orum Ssi's *tapsa*, Wōndosim T'amhōm is held more frequently and always is focused on the *wōndosim* area. The divide between experts and participants is sometimes blurred. On more than one occasion, both the guides and participants were old city natives and acquaintances. Histories mix with unrecorded personal accounts of city life amid urbanization. Long discussions between guides and participants often follow after the program's conclusion. Itineraries can change in the middle of a program, should a guide or participant have

an interest or specific recollection about a certain place or another. The May 24, 2015, excursion, for example, began with a specific itinerary concentrated in the center of the *wōndosim*, but the walk went on a long detour to the Tongjabok megalith because one participant's family temple was once located at the site. Some points of interest also are not actual physical remains but are chosen based on their importance to memory. The excursion on March 29, 2015, which commemorated the April 3rd massacre, included a designer clothing shop that occupies a space one floor below what was the headquarters of the ultra-rightwing paramilitary Northwest Youth League. Highlights consistent in all walking routes are two colonial-era houses (of the Ko and Yang families), the Cheju Puk Elementary School, the site of the Hyōndae Theater, the last remaining colonial-era *ryokan* near Kwandōkjōng, the Pak family's traditional Cheju thatched home (figure 4), and the old city's narrow alleyway streets. Another constant is the Ch'ilsōng-t'ong commercial street (figure 5), though nearly all visible traces of preceding eras have been erased in the course of successive—and often failed—attempts at one form of *tosì chaesaeng* or another. Major historic sites, such as Kwandōkjōng and remnants of Cheju City's fortress walls, are discussed in terms of their relation to twentieth-century events or recollections of personal encounters. Whereas *tapsa* serves to train participants in the visual lingua franca of larger Korean-ness (or T'amna-ness, in Cheju's case), Wōndosim T'amhōm attempts to redefine a Cheju City symbolic ecology as the starting point for understanding historical change as well as a person's individual relationship to the city.

Two central aspects of JICEA's urban identity discourse are communicated via Wōndosim T'amhōm: (1) histories and direct experience are still retrievable in the *wōndosim*'s extant sites and thus should be the basis of Cheju City identity; and (2) the *wōndosim*'s irregular shapes and tightly packed layers (figure 6) are not urban blight but rather physical testimony of the radical differences between Cheju City's historical experience and that of the Korean mainland. This perspective argues that Cheju City already has an “imageable” feature and that the issue is not that the city needs to re-create its image but rather that city residents must reassess the city's meaning. Cheju City must be evaluated in terms of its own merits. What JICEA thus attempts to achieve with Wōndosim T'amhōm is to convince participants that the *wōndosim* is not simply a decayed neighborhood but the summation of Cheju City's tumultuous experiences. Ko and JICEA members are also known to harbor strong skepticism toward pre-

twentieth-century historical reconstructions, which occasionally puts them at odds with other cultural and historical associations.



Figure 4 (left). The Pak family's traditional thatched house. Photo taken by the author, 2015.  
Figure 5 (right). Section of the Ch'ilsöng-t'ong commercial street slated for demolition. Photo taken by the author, 2012.



Figure 6. Old city neighborhood near Kwandökjöng. Photo taken by the author, 2012.

JICEA is not necessarily opposed to the authorized heritage discourse in principle but tactically uses it as a means to challenge the authorizers of said discourse. How to define a Cheju City heritage, however, is the association's primary concern. Given the paucity of support resources for cultural activities in Korea (and especially in Cheju), civic and cultural organizations rely on expertise regimes, official legitimacy, and public funding in one way or another (Lee HK 2012). Ko Young-lim (Ko Yōngnim) herself is known for her emphasis on *noblesse oblige* and argues that Cheju's elites and authorities have a responsibility to enact policies with long-term visions and posterity in mind (2015b). Tactical employment of heritage discourse has also been divisive among Cheju City's multiple and multiplying associations. JICEA's vision of the city based on *lieux de memoire* ultimately clashes with visions based on T'amna nationalism. When the Meteorological Administration first announced its decision to make much-needed facility expansions in 2014, Pak Kyōnghun of the Chōnt'ong Munhwa Yōn'guso pushed for plan revisions to allow for the reconstruction of the Chosōn-era Kongsinjōng pavilion (Yi TG 2015).<sup>25</sup> Kongsinjōng was said to have occupied a part of the east wall, which climbed up the side of a cliff overlooking the entire *wōndosim* area. Ko felt that this was ultimately at the expense of the Chungang Kamni Kyohoe, a Methodist church made of Cheju volcanic rock first built in 1928 at the same site. This debate nonetheless demonstrates how aspects of heritage discourse could be used for competing positions. Ko's and JICEA's position argued that modern heritage sites possess aesthetically unique architecture and have histories that can be directly verified in both memory and actual record, whereas buildings such as Kongsinjōng are based on estimation, if not speculation. Pak Kyōnghun's and the pro-Kongsinjōng position argued that the general agreement of extant historical records indicated that estimations were likely accurate and that the building was long a crucial part of early Cheju City because it had a view of the entire city. Age took precedence, and the Kongsinjōng site earned official designation. The church was demolished.<sup>26</sup> Disagreements regarding Cheju City's heritage assets and what constitutes a Cheju-specific city continue.

One result of JICEA's impact on local urban discourse was the Cheju National University student-organized ch.064 (Channel 64) art exhibition in May 2015. Held in a newly opened Ch'ilsōng-t'ong bookshop with a small exhibition room for emerging local artists, ch.064 featured university students' attempts to uncover and recover the Cheju City of their parents' generation. Some works recontextualize otherwise mundane objects from the *wōndosim*'s many

construction sites, such as work gloves, perhaps to highlight the reality that the city is constantly under construction and destruction. The largest exhibition piece is a slideshow projected onto a white wall. The slideshow consists of a series of images that starts with a monochrome outline of a section of the *wōndosim* and ends with an almost photographic representation of the same location in full color. Transition from the monochrome outline to the full re-representation is gradual, and with each passing moment, layers of colors appear as if reflecting the Wōndosim T'amhōm itself.

### East Side Story

How to see and define urban heritage is as significant as economic concerns over gentrification in ongoing debates about how to address the traces and spaces in old Cheju City. As a layered site of memory, Cheju City's *wōndosim* is a testament to its tumultuous experiences in the twentieth century. As had been the case in the mainland city of Kunsan, effacement of the old city is criticized as “deliberate collective amnesia, and a blatant disregard for postcolonial history inscribed in Korean memories” (Kim HJ 2014, 601). The T'amna nationalism within the T'amna Culture Plaza, as well as the various T'amna reconstruction projects, erase sources of past shame—the ruins of Korean and Japanese colonialism as well as failed urban development promises—to create images of a golden past in the present. Cheju City becomes the culmination of a logical and rationalized series of development bereft of the tumult and violence that the still-extant old city makes bare on its crumbling walls. To some, as in the case of Kongsinjōng, it is a matter of bringing back the lost legacies of a T'amna identity on which a new urban identity can be founded. Yet grand representations of progress and stability also serve economic interests in the city's and provincial government's drive to rebrand urban space for tourism and attract corporate investment capital. For JICEA, to see the old city at the street level and visually map its memories is not only to challenge grand narratives of linear progress but also to reveal the cracks in such edifices.

While a sense “that the government is taking care of everything” (Saeji 2014, 528) with regard to heritage has settled in much of Korean society, emerging urban culture associations such as JICEA push for residents to be more active in redefining urban identity and taking ownership of heritage. JICEA earned its first major success early in 2015, when its efforts led the provincial government to designate the Ko family house<sup>27</sup> and four other buildings in its vicinity

as local heritage assets (Kim HH 2015b). The area occupied by these five buildings was set to be demolished for a city square intended to celebrate Ch'ilsŏngdae. The early colonial-era Ko family house was built with imported Japanese cypress and merges both Cheju and Japanese architectural features, boasting a Cheju *ankŏri-bakŏri* dual house arrangement and Japanese shoji and tatami (figure 7).<sup>28</sup> The surrounding motel buildings and Kŭmsŏngjang represent the earlier heyday of 1960s and 1970s domestic tourism, when travelers who arrived from the nearby ferry port once lodged at the many accommodations along Sanjich'ŏn stream.



Figure 7 (left). The Ko family house near Sanjich'ŏn stream. Photo taken by the author, 2014.  
 Figure 8 (right). The Arario Museum in the Cheju City old town area. Photo taken by the author, 2015.

The conflict over the *wŏndosim*, however, is far from over. *Wŏndosim* interests still clash with one another as much as they do with the Cheju City and provincial authorities, especially as the T'amna Culture Plaza project grows more ambitious. Not long after the government's heritage designation promises, Kim Ch'ang'il, founder of the Arario Museum, ignited controversy when he suggested that he would purchase the Ko family house to transform it into a part of his larger Arario Museum complex, which is known for its signature bright red outer frames (Kim HH 2015a) (figure 8). Backlash on social media was as quick as it was fierce, especially in the local anti-overdevelopment Facebook group, "Igŏ nuge chisikkwa?" ("Whose misdeed is this?"). But future use for the Ko family house and the four surrounding buildings is still subject to debate. Despite protection promises, JICEA members and affiliates are constantly

wary of the possibility that provincial officials could easily renege on their promises and sell off more portions of the old city to the highest bidder. The year 2015 has indeed seen many scandals involving illegal sales of protected lands to wealthy investors.

By the end of 2014 combined investment from the province and central government in *tosi chaesaeng* had already approached the 10 billion won mark (Chin 2014a). The physical appearance of much of the *wōndosim* underwent radical change in 2015, with newly paved plazas and recently constructed (or reconstructed) buildings. As construction intensifies, questions linger about who will be the ultimate beneficiaries of Cheju City's redevelopment. A further concern is whether there will be any chance left for locals to participate in creating their own visions and discourses of Cheju City. Controversies over urban redevelopment under the shadow of mainland Korean corporate and Chinese investment capital have forced locals to confront an uncomfortable situation in which the right to the city is increasingly at risk. At the same time, emerging urban movements and associations such as JICEA are attempting to offer alternative ways to conceive Cheju City. Despite conflict within and among emerging urban associations, *tosi chaesaeng* and the T'amna Culture Plaza have prompted critical self-reflection and reevaluations of Cheju identity in terms of its present urban realities and future potential.

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### Notes

- 1 See <http://kosis.kr/eng/>. According to statistics from the Korea Statistical Information Service (KOSIS), Cheju Province as a whole has one of the highest net migration rates in the country. The overwhelming majority of Cheju's population resides in Cheju City.
- 2 T'amna refers to the indigenous Cheju civilization that ruled the island before it was officially annexed into the mainland Korean kingdom of Koryō in 1105.
- 3 Peter Nas (Nas, de Groot, and Schut 2011) considers an analysis of "urban symbolic ecology" to be a study of the cultural dimension of cities in which one looks at the distribution and meaning of symbols and rituals as they pertain to urban life.
- 4 Interview by the author, Nohyōng-tong, Cheju City, June 24 2015.
- 5 Rental cars also use *ha* and *hō*, as there are now too many registered rental vehicles.
- 6 Interview by the author, Nohyōng-tong, Cheju City, March 23, 2015.
- 7 Interview by the author, Ildo-1-tong, Cheju City, October 13, 2015.
- 8 See No (2005). The date of Cheju's full annexation is a contested issue.



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- 9 Hyōn (2009) theorizes that Cheju's stone culture owes much to the century of Mongol occupation.
- 10 Sunyoung Hong's 2013 dissertation also notes that, although mainland-appointed governors described the annual *Ipch'un-kut* festival, it was not clear whether they sponsored these rites.
- 11 Wōndosim Yet'gil t'amhōm tour, Samdo-2-tong, August 6, 2014.
- 12 Interview with the author, Samdo-2-tong, Cheju City, August 24, 2014.
- 13 A frequently cited example among older residents is Cheju National University Hospital, which was moved to the recently developed Ara-tong suburbs.
- 14 Sunyoung Hong (2013, 116–126) provides a concise summary of Cheju's earlier tourist development.
- 15 See Kim Minha (2007, 210–211). The Cheju Special Law unified Cheju's rural administrative districts under Cheju City and Sōgwip'o City with the intention of granting more executive planning power to the respective city mayors and provincial governor. One important purpose of the law was to streamline coordination for development that would have otherwise run into obstacles from local administrations that could stall or hinder projects.
- 16 See Kim HH (2015d). The national government's announcement of a second airport project on Cheju came as a surprise to everyone, including Cheju government officials.
- 17 Interview with the author, Nohyōng-tong, Cheju City, June 24, 2015.
- 18 Group interview with five Global Inner Peace student members, Ido-2-tong, Cheju City, February 10, 2015.
- 19 Wōndosim Yet'gil T'amhōm tour, Kōnip-tong, Cheju City, May 24, 2015.
- 20 Pai (2013) gives an overview of the national processes of heritage formation and how colonial legacies continue to shape heritage discourse in Korea.
- 21 This was a reconstruction of the alleged site of Kim Mandōk's eighteenth-century tavern. Though the site is recognized officially, the original location of Kim Mandōk's tavern is still disputed.
- 22 Interview with the author, Ildo-1-tong, Cheju City, August 23, 2014.
- 23 Interview with the author, Samdo-2-tong, Cheju City, November 6, 2015.
- 24 With the exception of 2015, due to the MERS scare, university students from Osaka City University have joined the Wōndosim T'amhōm every year as part of their summer excursion partnership with Pusan Kyōngsang University.
- 25 The site for Kongsinjōn is disputed, though reconstruction has been decided. Chosōn governors actually moved the original Kongsinjōn to a different location in 1823.
- 26 One surprising result of the issue, however, was that Meteorological Administration officials decided to turn to JICEA when they began to discuss repurposing one of the historic buildings on their campus.
- 27 The owner of this house is not a direct relation of Ko Young-lim. Ko is a common Cheju surname.
- 28 Interview with the author, Ildo-2-tong, Cheju City, August 9, 2014.

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