

# The United States' Role in the Korea Jeju April 3<sup>rd</sup> Tragedy and Its Responsibility for "Social Healing Through Justice"

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## ABSTRACT

Healing for the Jeju 4.3 survivors and families progressed significantly after the work of the 2000 National 4.3 Committee and the 2005 Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Acting on these investigatory organizations' recommendations and the expressed desires of the Jeju people, the Korean government began a healing process that included a presidential apology, a government-sponsored museum and an extensive public memorial and gravesite for known victims—albeit without individual reparations.

American and Korean scholars also point to the United States' partial responsibility for Jeju 4.3 and its lack of participation in redress efforts. Acknowledgment of the United States' historical role in Jeju 4.3 by the Korean and U.S. governments today may be one of the crucial next steps toward genuine reparatory justice for the Jeju people and for Korean society. It may also bolster U.S. legitimacy globally as a democracy *actually* (and not just professedly) committed to humanrights.

The United States grounds its global moral authority as a democracy in its stated commitment to human rights. But a genuine commitment entails acknowledging and actively repairing the damage caused by its participation in human rights atrocities—even decades ago. Its legitimacy as a democracy depends upon doing so—and after two damaging wars the United States needs to bolster its moral authority internationally. If America under President Obama, with its security pivot toward Asia, is to reclaim full legitimacy as a democracy committed to human rights, if there is to be complete social healing for the Jeju 4.3 survivors and families and for the Korean government and people—if the “han,” the deep sense of suffering from injustice, is to be lightened—then the United States needs to mutually and actively engage in the reconciliation process. *The time is now.*

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## Prologue

I am an American of Japanese ancestry, and I spent part of last April with Professors Ko Chang-Hoon and Kunihiko Yoshida and Hawai'i law student Sara Lee on Jeju Island, Korea. We talked with the Jeju 4.3 Victims Family Association, visited the moving Jeju 4.3 Museum, Memorial and vast honorary cemetery, and met with the Director of the Jeju Peace Foundation and the researchers of the Jeju 4.3 Institute. Through Professor Ko's arranging, we also visited the small village home of a woman who survived what has been called "the April Third (4.3) Grand Massacre"—she had her lower jaw shot off by the police, and her iconic image with shawl wrapped around her dignified yet disfigured face became a symbol of the mass killing of 30,000 island residents.

Our time there helped make painfully real some of the human suffering. It also underscored the importance of South Korean government social healing efforts in the past decade—both positive and unfinished—and the significance of justice advocacy by the Jeju people and their supporters. And it highlighted that we in the United States know almost nothing about the tragedy and the substantial role of the United States as the post-World War II peacetime occupying force in South Korea with control over the Korean military and national police. U.S. participation in further social healing initiatives for Jeju 4.3 is an issue that is live, real and uncertain.

## Brief History

To make this a bit more real, consider the

story of Yea Jin. She was born and educated in Seoul, Korea and is now a law student at the University of Hawai'i School of Law in the United States.

*Winds, stones, and women are "Samda" in Jeju Island. Samda in Korean means three abundances. As a young woman, my imagination laid out the romantic scene of Jeju Island. Winds blow across your brow while walking by the seashore. Gorgeous black stones populate the sea. "Haenyeo" (women divers) in black diving clothes dip into the ocean. Growing up in Seoul, Republic of Korea, a busy city, I had longed for Jeju Island as a peaceful getaway. But, I never wondered why there was an abundance women on Jeju Island. Why were women – so different from winds and stones – one of the Samda in Jeju Island?*

*Only as an adult researcher in the United States did I first discover the Jeju 4.3 tragedy. And only then did I learn that thousands of women lost their beloved husbands and sons during the Jeju 4.3 massacre (women died too). How could I have been so ignorant of this recent tragedy in my home country? I began to ask Korean people in Seoul whether they knew of the event. Most of them only faintly recalled the "incident" as the Korean government suppressing the rebellion of "the Reds" (communists) on the island. They did not realize that almost none of the Jeju people were communists and that 30,000 Jeju people were murdered by their own military and police as part of a "scorched earth policy" during the post-World War II United States occupation of South Korea and the United States super-*

*vision of the following Rhee regime. Thousands more were detained and tortured, entire villages burned.*

*Pain from the horrific Jeju 4.3 massacre persists over generations. One of my friends from Jeju Island recalled that when she was a child, her father was so upset to see hanging dolls on the wall of her room. She could not understand her father's strange reaction, yet felt his anxiety. Only later did her father reluctantly tell her his bitter story. When he was young, he witnessed "strangers" invade his town and hang his neighbors. His mind's picture of hanging men and boys has lastingly occupied his memory. He is the "first generation" of victims of Jeju 4.3 that as lived holding han in its heart. Han cannot be explained with mere words of sadness, grudge, resentment or hatred. It is a collective indescribable feeling. The more you try to bury the painful memories, the more han grows deep in your soul. Han grew in the father's heart, and it passed on to his daughter.*

*I realized the han was in me too, through the tears and sighs of my grandmother, who lost her husband during the Korean War and her son later. For me, a third generation, a little girl, it took me a while to understand why my grandmother sobbed with grief so many nights looking at the timeworn photos. Yet, even though I understood han from that experience, because I never learned of Jeju 4.3, I could not fathom the Jeju women's han reflected in the Island's Samda.*

*Han reflects the reality that Koreans despair over past injustice, and painfully realize it as*

*a seemingly inevitable part of Korean life. Indeed, the pain of injustice lasts forever ... unless it is acknowledged and the lasting damage is repaired ... unless there is social healing.*

## Social Healing Through Justice

Healing for the Jeju 4.3 survivors and families progressed significantly after the work of the 2000 National 4.3 Committee and the 2005 Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Acting on these investigatory organizations' recommendations and the expressed desires of the Jeju people, the Korean government began a healing process that included a presidential apology, a government-sponsored museum and an extensive public memorial and gravesite for known victims—albeit without individual reparations.

In recent years, particularly since President Lee's inauguration in 2007, social healing, or reconciliation, efforts have seemingly stalled and in some respects regressed. High officials have begun to broadly and wrongly recharacterize the Jeju people of 1948 as "communist insurgents." Those residents improperly tainted by that label have been excluded from the recent reconciliation process—even some of their children continue to be "black-balled" from government jobs and university admissions. A number of victim families and supporters, as well as scholars and human rights observers, now view the Korean government's overall reparatory efforts to be incomplete—a stalled work in progress.

Why the palpable perception that there's more to be done? In addition to the limitations of the national government's efforts, just mentioned, thus far, the United States has been fully absent from the reparatory justice process—missing at

all stages. Jeju residents, Korean and American scholars and even a knowledgeable former U.S. army colonel express the strong conviction that the United States played an integral role in the injustice and bears some responsibility for healing the past and persisting wounds.

Moreover, Korea's political leaders have yet to demand U.S. participation in the reparatory process—in effect, giving the United States a free pass from accountability. Unlike the Korean government's demand that Japan participate in reparatory justice for the Korean Comfort Women (Japanese military sex slaves), there has been no demand or even request that the United States engage in the extended Jeju 4.3 social healing process. Realpolitik considerations about continued U.S. military support may be a motivating factor. Yet, as the United States pivots towards the Asia region for international security, and as the South Korean government is building a naval base on Jeju Island against the protests of many Jeju residents, and with Barack Obama re-elected President, *the time may be now for re-charting a strategic approach to Jeju 4.3 reconciliation involving the Korean government, the United States and the Jeju people.*

Acknowledgment of the United States' historical role in Jeju 4.3 by the Korean and U.S. governments today may be one of the crucial next steps toward genuine reparatory justice for the Jeju people and for Korean society. It may also bolster U.S. legitimacy globally as a democracy *actually* (and not just professedly) committed to humanrights.

## Mutual Engagement in Social Healing

As the *Social Healing Through Justice* frame

work I have been developing indicates, all participants in Jeju 4.3—whether through directaction, complicity, receipt of bene fits or as members of the community—need to engage in the interactive enterprise of social healing. (Yamamoto & Obrey, 2009). It is only through “mutuality of effort” that communities lay the foundation for healing the wounds of those suffering and repair the damage to the involved societies' legitimacy as democracies professedly committed to human rights.

## U.S. Responsibility for Jeju 4.3 and for Present-Day Social Healing

Some background. In 1945 after the Japanese surrendered, Korea entered peacetime under the American occupation. Jeju islanders, like many throughout Korea, organized people's committees to build new educational and cultural institutions. The United States' occupying military government, however, called these people's committees “organizations of the Left” and a threat to its goals in Korea.

In March 1947, in response to resident dissatisfaction with the U.S. military government and perceptions of the impending election as “a unilateral attempt of the U.S. ruling government to separate a southern regime,” many Jeju residents peacefully demonstrated against government policies and to commemorate National Liberation Day. (Hee, 2010). The national police, “under control of the US military, opened fire severely injuring six and killing six.” (Kim, H., 2009: 410).

This police violence led to general strikes in Jeju. Under U.S. supervision, the United States arrested, tried, convicted and imprisoned strike organizers. Significantly, the United States also falsely characterized the strikes and resistance as

a communist uprising and classified Jeju Island a "Red Island" even though a U.S. investigation itself found very few communists among the residents and most Jeju residents to be at most "moderate leftists." Once labeled a "Red Island," however, the U.S. anticommunist policy unleashed far-reaching repression. During this peacetime American occupation, the "Americans . . . gave the South Korean army and police orders to act" with violence against South Korea's own citizens. (van der Lugt, 2004).

Amidst increasing tensions, on April 3, 1948, some residents attacked police stations and government offices to stop police violence, to protest the upcoming election and to support "the establishment of a unified Korean government." (Baik, 2007: 96). To suppress the resistance, the United States sent in additional police, military troops and "anticommunist paramilitary groups" who used "violence in favor of the right-wing leaders and the U.S. military government." (Kim, H., 2009: 409). U.S. "commanders imported hundreds of North Korean refugees who, organized as armed militias, ruthlessly suppressed the rebellion along with former Japanese-trained soldiers and police." (Katsiaficas, 2003).

During the U.S. occupation, as the May 1948 election approached, a "cycle of terror" developed. (Hee, 2010). After the Republic of Korea was established in August 1948 under Syng-man Rhee, with American military leadership supervising and overseeing Korean military and national police actions, and with American military forces still in place to support the new government, suppression of the Jeju people accelerated with a "scorched earth operation." Complete "villages were massacred and burned down" and "thousands of islanders fled." (van der Lugt, 2004). Rhee declared martial law in November

1948, and, supported by the U.S. military, the government summarily tried and executed many civilians wrongly labeled "communists or enemy sympathizers." (Baik, 2007: 97). Many were killed in the field without evidence of a link to communism or the resistance movement. By 1949, the violence left "one in every five or six islanders" dead and "more than half the villages" destroyed. (Cumings, 1998). These and ensuing attacks devastated the Jeju populace. American military leaders nevertheless continued to portray Jeju as a "threat" and the violent suppression continued. Then the history was covered up for decades. Those speaking or writing of the tragedy were imprisoned.

With this backdrop, two American scholars laid out the factual foundation for finding United States' involvement in and responsibility for Jeju 4.3. Professor Bruce Cumings at the University of Chicago concluded that the American government actively participated in the Jeju 4.3 destruction. Cumings (2010) cited "formerly classified American materials [that] document a wholesale assault on the Jeju people." (Cumings, 2010: 121). Cumings' documentary research also revealed direct American involvement in "the daily training of counterinsurgent forces, [the] interrogation of prisoners, and the use of American spotter planes." (Cumings, 2010: 127). Cumings asserted that the role of the United States in Jeju 4.3 is clear and "[i]f it should come to pass that any Koreans succeed in gaining compensation from the American Government for the events of 1945 to 1953, certainly the people of Cheju should come first." (Cumings, 1998).

Professor George Katsiaficas at Wentworth Institute of Technology contended that "[u]ntil Americans acknowledge and accept responsibility for the tragic actions of our government [like

the massacre at Jeju], many Koreans will regard us with fear, hostility and suspicion.” (Katsiaficas, 2003). Katsiaficas (2003) concluded that the United States played an active role in the violence of Jeju 4.3 when “US commanders imported hundreds of North Korean refugees who, organized as armed militias, ruthlessly suppressed the rebellion along with former Japanese-trained soldiers and police.” The United States exacerbated the human suffering by supporting the Korean military government that made it “illegal to discuss [the Jeju 4.3] events in public.” (Katsiaficas, 2003). According to Katsiaficas, Jeju is “the worst single massacre [that occurred] under the post-war U.S. military government . . . and has yet to be acknowledged by the United States.” (Katsiaficas, 2003).

Korean scholars also point to the United States’ partial responsibility for Jeju 4.3 and its lack of participation in redress efforts. Professor Ko Chang-Hoon (2004) at Jeju National University observes that,

[At a minimum, Jeju islanders] strongly [desire] help from the U.S. government to tell the truth about [the] US government role [in the] Jeju Uprising and Grand Massacre. If [the U.S. helps uncover the truth], we [will] know whether the U.S. government [has] something to apologize to Jeju islanders [for] or not.

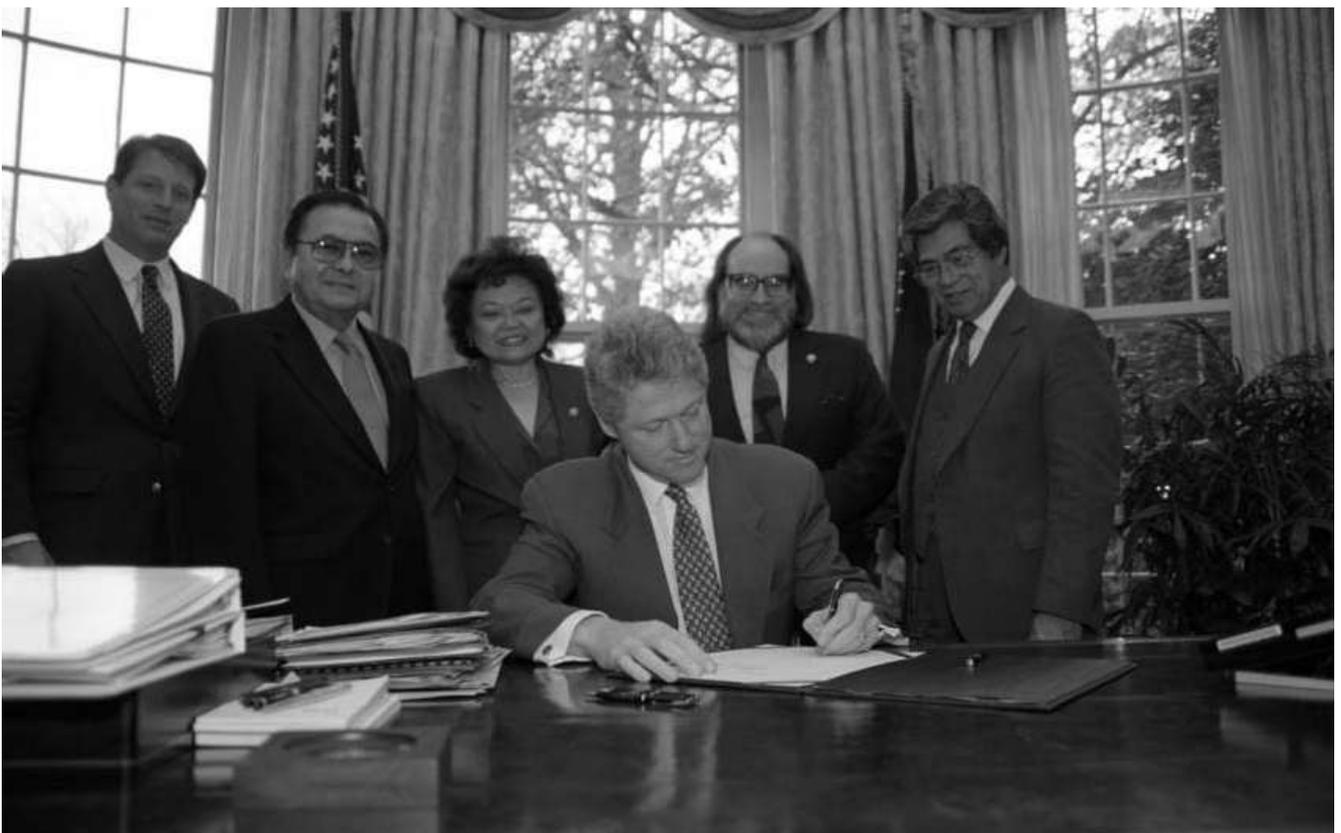
According to Professor Ko, many Jeju residents believe that the United States systematically violated the civil rights of Jeju islanders under the flag of anticommunism by “intentional[ly] and illegal[ly]” labeling Jeju Island and its people a “Red Island and People.” (Ko, 2004). Ko suggests that Jeju islanders were instead part of a “civil rights movement concerned with

peace, individual rights and little people who went up against another big powerful country like the United States.” (Ko, 2004).

Professor Tae-Ung Baik of the University of Hawai’i School of Law is an expert in human rights and Korean law. A person of courage and scholarly insight, Professor Baik (2007) observes that the U.S. military government’s “accountability for [Jeju 4.3, which included crimes against humanity and war crimes,] requires further examination.” (Baik, 2007: 99-100). Baik surmises that the United States in Korea “used its power to strengthen the rightist political factions while cracking down on leftist groups.” (Baik, 2007: 100). In Jeju specifically, the “United States declared the People’s Committee and other similar organizations to be illegal, while the rightist police and private military groups employed by the U.S. military government were granted the power to crack down on the activities of people.” (Baik, 2007: 100).

According to Baik, although the United States was a participant in Jeju 4.3, the Korean government did not request U.S. engagement in reconciliation efforts, apparently hoping to avoid straining political relationships. Baik observes that “to avoid any awkwardness in its relationship with the US or with Japan, the [Korean] government did not pursue a brand of transitional justice that traced back to Japanese colonial rule and the presence of the US in Korea.” (Baik, 2007: 106).

The National 4.3 Committee’s final report in 2003 found the United States generally involved but not directly responsible for Jeju 4.3. The government’s 2005 Truth and Reconciliation Commission further identified the United States as a perpetrator in specific and more isolated atrocities during the Korean War, but not the pervasive Jeju 4.3.



## Potential Next Steps: U.S. Participation in Jeju 4.3 Social Healing Through Justice

Collectively, research by American and Korean scholars, and my own research with Sara Lee and with Yea Jin Lee, implicates the United States indirectly, and to some extent directly, in Jeju 4.3. However, without Korean government action, and without Americans standing up to compel U.S. participation in further healing efforts, the United States is unlikely to engage. Without U.S. engagement, healing will likely remain incomplete—that deep sense of unease will persist. In two instances the United States acknowledged its gross civil and human rights abuses through an apology and steps toward reconciliation—the World War II Japanese American internment of 120,000 innocent Americans in concentration camps, and the 1893 illegal overthrow of the sovereign Hawaiian nation. What might be the United States' interest now in engaging in social healing through justice for Jeju 4.3?

The United States grounds its global moral authority as a democracy in its stated commitment to human rights. But a genuine commitment entails acknowledging and actively repairing the damage caused by its participation in human rights atrocities—even decades ago. Its legitimacy as a democracy depends upon doing so—and after two damaging wars the United States needs to bolster its moral authority internationally. If America under President Obama, with its security pivot toward Asia, is to reclaim full legitimacy as a democracy committed to human rights, if there is to be complete social healing for the Jeju 4.3 survivors and families and for the Korean government and people—if the “han,”

the deep sense of suffering from injustice, is to be lightened—then the United States needs to mutually and actively engage in the reconciliation process. *The time is now*. In the words of Professor Cummings (1998),

[Redress for] the people of Cheju should come first. For it was on the hauntingly beautiful island that the postwar world first witnessed the American capacity for unrestrained violence against indigenous peoples fighting for self-determination and social justice.

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