



The Women's Side of Jeju Identity - "Women Centredness"

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Abstract:

This paper analyzes the current intellectual discourse on Jeju identity and its implications on the position of Jeju women. Debates on Jeju identity may be grouped roughly into three schools. Each of these schools has quite different implications for Jeju women's position, implicitly or explicitly argued by each school. When the influence of China and Neo-Confucianism is emphasized in defining Jeju identity, women's position is necessarily subordinate to that of men. When the culture of Jeju is presented as a culture of "compromise" between Jeju reality and Neo-Confucianism, the women's position is inevitably raised and strengthened, since Jeju women, especially women divers, are at the forefront of coping with the harsh nature of the island along with men. Such a society cannot survive without women or men. When Jeju identity is presented as a "women centredness", again women's position is raised or the main axis (or the essence) of the island society is presented as women. The author proposes to take these debates one step further by synthesizing them and substantiating some crucial gaps in them, through fieldwork planned.

key words : Jeju identity, culture of compromise, women centredness, Neo-Confucianism ,

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Preface

This paper is a summary of my research project in Jeju, presented at Jeju National University (JNU) in October, 2015. It is based on three summer lectures (2011-13) delivered at JNU. My gratitude goes to Prof. Chang-Hoon, Ko (at Jeju National University). He offered me an opportunity to lecture in Jeju to a total stranger. This led me to my initiation to Jeju studies and eventually to the preparation of the research project.

With the financial support of the Barbier-Muller Cultural Foundation (in Geneva)², fieldwork will be conducted in 2016 (spring and autumn) and a more substantial manuscript will be prepared, following this fieldwork. The title of my research project, as it was submitted, to the funding organization was "Intangible Cultural Heritage of Jeju Island (Korea): Disappearing Women Divers (*Jamnyo*) and their world". This organization specializes in funding research on "disappearing people and culture".

Context and issues

One often hears desperate cries of scholars and Jeju lovers about the "disappearing Jeju *jamnyo* (diving women)" population. The same voices of alarm are also heard about an increasing number of shamanic shrines, abandoned on Jeju. Diving women and shamanic shrines, according to Jeju people, represent symbols of Jeju's island identity. In my view, apart from their form, the essence of these symbols is "women centredness" (Chun, Kyung-Soo, 2010) on Jeju, which is often ignored and undermined. Shamanic shrines are frequented mainly by and for women. In other words, when diving women or shrines disappear, the backbone of the "women centredness" of Jeju goes with them. And with them would disappear the women's side of Jeju identity, claimed by Jeju population as Jeju's unique "identity".

Talking about "disappearing" women divers or shrines necessarily leads us to talk about the central place of women in Jeju society, slowly being transformed, not just Jeju identity. They are intrinsically linked, although this link is not explicitly acknowledged by many Jeju scholars. I emphasize in this paper the

¹ This article has benefitted tremendously the encouragement and comments of Prof. Eric Schwimmer (a retired anthropology Professor from Laval University, Quebec) and my husband. Without his encouragement, this article and my research project would not have seen a light

² www.fondation.culturelle.barbier-muller.org My gratitude goes to Roselyne Segalen, a dear colleague, who discovered this Foundation and recommended me to apply for a funding.

concept of “women centredness” of Jeju, which is Jeju’s spirit and essence, instead of “disappearing women divers” or shrines, which are forms. We are as free to choose our choice of focus as to shape our future. As a Jeju born anthropologist put it: “Life is shaped by people and starts from ideas of living people” (Chun, Kyung-Soo, 2010, p. 54). If the disappearance of women divers cannot be stopped, the essence of divers’ tradition - “women centredness” or “female centredness” (Cho, Haejoang 1979, p.261) could and should be maintained.



Photo left: Jeju Haenyo (2014), credit: Larry Johnson - CC By 2.0

Photo above: A shamanic ritual, credit: Kim, Ki-sam, Bulhwigong 2009 Spring

It is a fact that women divers are disappearing in Jeju. In 2012, only 4702 divers remained and the majority of them (90%) were over 50 years old, while 40 years earlier (1969), the divers population was 20,832. The prediction is that there will be no divers left in 50 years. Thus the burning question among the Jeju population, including the government and intellectuals is how to conserve the women divers’ tradition and culture. To that end, Museums and a divers’ school are built. Books have been published on divers’ culture and community life. Yet, it is probably not possible to reverse the trend of the divers’ population fading away, when the divers themselves do not wish their daughters to take over their profession and accompanying hardships. However, what is possible and essential for Jeju is to maintain and revive the women divers’ spirit and their value system, with women’s economic autonomy side by side with men’s, and egalitarian, communal social organization principles. Such a society model is close

to what United Nations is promoting with its gender equality policy ³ among its member countries (195 nations as of 2015). Since Jeju is already endowed with such a “desired” model, long before UN or any other international commitment was announced, Jeju people should recognize and cherish/ maintain this gem in their society, which is a way of conserving the spirit of women divers and their value system, even after the diver population has faded away. It is astonishing to find such a society model in Korea, which is deeply entrenched in Confucian ideology and known as a staunch patriarchal society.

I am a stranger to Jeju and Jeju studies. My specialized area is Indonesia (West Sumatra). When I started reading about Jeju in preparation of lectures, striking similarities between these two island societies were noted, namely the central position of women, where women know that they are valued, where women know who they are, and where they carry an air of dignity stemming from their confidence.

In the case of the Minangkabau people of West Sumatra, this aspect is so striking that some feminist anthropologists (e.g. Blackwood 2000) described West Sumatra as a “women dominated society”. My interpretation of the Minangkabau differs from this view. I agree that women of West Sumatra have a central position in their society, hence we may call it a “women centred society”, compared to most other societies where men are dominant and women are delegated to the periphery. However, I would not call the Minangkabau a “women dominated society”. Among the Minangkabau, both women and men hold a central position, and “neither of them are dominant” or each of them is dominant in different spheres of their society (Pak, Ok-Kyung, 2007). In traditional Minangkabau social structure, women control economy (ricefields) and men carry the “prestige” (lineage title), both of which are two pillars defining the status of a lineage and its members. I have published a number of articles in professional anthropological journals on this point, in addition to my doctoral thesis (Pak, Ok-Kyung, 1968).

In the case of Jeju, different views exist on the social position of women divers and Jeju women as a whole. These views may be summarized in three groups: (1) women have been oppressed, subordinated to men. and excluded from writing history (Jeju women’s History, 2011), and women divers are labourers and lower class citizens, looked down upon by people (Gwon, Gui-Sook, 2005); (2) Jeju women are autonomous, tenacious and active economic agents, according to many studies on women divers (An,

³ One example of UN gender equality policies by different UN departments is that of the UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissions. Its policy objectives are : (a) Universality (of human rights between women and men); (b) Indivisibility, Interdependence and Interrelatedness; (c) Participation and Inclusion; (d) Equality and non-Discrimination. Such a statement of an office of the UN is translated by one of its member countries as follows. e.g. Canada’s gender equality policy objectives states (1999):

- To advance women’s equal participation with men as decision makers in shaping the sustainable development of their societies;
- To support women and girls in the realization of their full human rights; and
- To reduce gender inequalities in access to and control over the resources and benefits of development.

Mi-Jeong, 2008). This view is supported by analysis of many Jeju mythologies (Yang, Young-Soo, 2011); (3) “Neither (women nor men) are dominant”; “female dominant reality” and “male superiority ideology” co-exist and constantly interplay and counterbalance the power within the two groups” (Cho, Hae-joang, 1979).

All of the above interpretations brings out different realities of the position of Jeju women. However, in my view it is not too far fetched to say that there exists a “woman centred society” model, as seen in Jeju mythology and divers’ value system suggested by a number of Jeju scholars (Chun, 2010, Chae et al. 2008) particularly among the divers’ community. Some Jeju people even use a term “matriarchal society” in alluding to the central position of women in their society. Some mythologists say that Jeju has two cultures: women’s culture in shamanism and men’s culture in Confucianism (Chun, Eun-Ja, 2010). So my question is : what does Jeju “matirarchal society” or “women-centred society look like?

Objetctive of my research project:

The aim of this paper and eventually my research project is to find an answer to the above question : what does Jeju “matirarchal society” or “women-centred’ society look like? This will be done by consolidating and synthesizing the published work of many Jeju scholars on the Jeju giant goddess creation myth, the shrine myth, shamanic rituals, oral literature, women divers’ culture, and the Jeju family system. The analysis of existing data will be substantiated by data which will be collected during my fieldwork in 2016.

While the idea of “women centredness” of Jeju is not new to Jeju scholars and circulating among Jeju people, there has been no systematic study done to support this concept. Nor has it become rooted as a central and representative essence of Jeju identity. For instance, an international symposium held in Jeju in October 2015 (the 4th International Symposium for Jeju Studies) did not think of including this very topic - Jeju’s women centred society model- while touching on many other cultural resources of Jeju⁴. The objective of the conference was to discuss cultural resources of Jeju through Jeju area studies and enhance Jeju identity locally and internationally. Unfortunately, this conference did not think of including this very topic - the “women centredness” of Jeju. What other cultural resource of Jeju could be more important than the existing society model it already has - valuing the place of women in society and egalitarian social principles?

⁴ Cultural Resources and Area Studies, the 4th International Academic Symposium for Jeju Studies, published by Jeju Development Research Centre, 2015. Some of the topics presented at this bi-annual conference are Jeju mythology, Jeju language, Influence of Mongol invasion on Jeju culture, management of fishing villages in Jeju since the Yi dynasty, Jeju traditional architecture, establishing local identity in Jeju’s old downtown, cultural tourism resources in Jeju.

Jeju Identity in Jeju Intellectual Discourse:

One of the most heated debates among Jeju intellectuals is about “Jeju identity”. This preoccupation stems from Jeju’s geographical and political position vis-à-vis the mainland, Jeju being at the periphery of the mainland- the centre.⁵ Being an island, Jeju is isolated and marginal to all political decisions made at the centre. Jeju is obsessed with the desire to overcome its marginality, its suffering from outside invasions and oppression throughout history, and the relatively recent mass massacre of Jeju population (called the April third event) occurred at the dawn of the Korean War (1950-53).

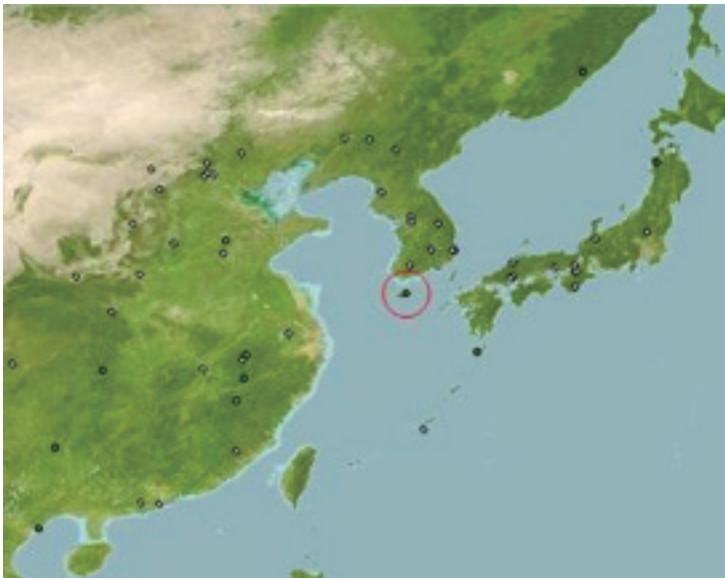


Photo : Strategic position of Jeju in Northeast Asia, credit: UNESCO

Debates on Jeju identity may be grouped roughly into three schools. Each of these schools has quite different implications for Jeju women’s position, implicitly or explicitly argued by each school. When the influence of China and Neo-Confucianism is emphasized in defining Jeju identity, women’s position is necessarily subordinate to that of men. When the culture of Jeju is presented as a culture of “compromise” between Jeju reality and Neo-Confucianism, the women’s position is inevitably raised and strengthened, since Jeju women, especially women divers, are at the forefront of coping with the harsh nature of the island along with men. Such a society cannot survive without women or men. When Jeju identity is presented as a “women centredness”, again women’s position is raised or the main axis (or the essence) of the island society is presented as women, as we will see below.

⁵ The Island of Jeju lies about 100km southwest of the Korean peninsula. The land surface of the Island is 2,263 sq. km, about 1/50th of the mainland surface (99,900 sq. km.). The population size of Jeju was about one half million (550,000) in 2010, while that of the mainland was 100 times larger (48 million).

According to the first school, the root of Jeju culture is China (Kim, In-Hoo, 1998). Neo-Confucianism is deeply impregnated in Jeju culture (Nemeth, D.J., 1986). Some scholars also evoke the influence of Southeast Asia from the south (Jin, Sung-Gi 2011). An American geographer Nemeth's book is most systematic in describing the influence of Confucian ideology on some part of Jeju island. The degree of Confucian influence is different for different parts of the island. Neo-Confucian landscape was strongest on flat inland area (plains) which practiced a stable, labor-intensive subsistence agricultural economy, like the mainland. Village life in the plains was characterized by patrilineal extended families and hierarchy like on the mainland. For Nemeth, the coastal villages and women divers seem less significant in Jeju landscape. Nemeth simply mentions that somebody else studied the coastal area of Jeju, and he has nothing much to say Nemeth 1986, (p.62). In consequence, Nemeth's work on Jeju remains incomplete, although the Neo-Confucian influence he described is important. Jeju women occupied an inferior position in the society in the prism of Neo-Confucianism, but Nemeth does not refer to it.

During the Yi Dynasty (1392-1910), the plains-dwelling villagers were principally subsistence farmers hewing to the Neo-Confucian dogma propagated by the Yi state and its local representatives. The peasant landscape they created under this state-supported male-dominant, Neo-Confucian system was an extension of peninsular Yi dynasty environmental planning into Jeju's rather different physical and cultural milieu. The Neo-Confucian ideology never fully expanded into the ancient coastal settlements, where women divers wielded economic power. Although Neo-Confucianism is a philosophy of agnation, it regards the union between man and woman as the root of all human relations. In cosmological terms, heaven (yang) dominates earth (yin); and male has precedence over female. The clear hierarchical order between the sexes is thus cosmologically sanctioned and is imperative for the proper functioning of the human and social order. In the Neo-Confucian view, the law of nature accorded woman an inferior position. She had to obey her superiors: when unmarried, follow her father's orders; when married, those of her husband; when widowed, those of her son. This Neo-Confucian view did not change when it came to Jeju.

According to the second school, Jeju has its own indigenous culture of "woman centredness". Chun, Kyung-Su (2010) is a proponent of this school. According to Chun, the Giant Goddess (Seolmundae Halmang⁶) in Jeju creation myth represents the essence of Jeju indigenous identity and this myth is Jeju's feminist theory or Jeju's "women centred society" theory. (ibid.p.45)

Skeptical of the government's approach to Jeju development focusing mainly on economic area, Chun argues that Jeju identity cannot be found with money alone. It can only be found in the consciousness of

⁶ Jeju people call their mythical goddesses "grandmother".

the population. Jeju people must recognize the importance of “Seolmundae Halmang theory”, as well as the fact that this theory is the Jeju theory of “women centredness”. By “women centredness”, he says he does not mean to let women rule the world, but he is pleading not to exclude women in the social life of Jeju (ibid. p.54) . Interestingly his vision is rather close to the United Nations’ vision of a society with gender equality.

According to Chun’s interpretation of Jeju ancient history, there was a period of the goddess’ reign in the paleolithic period of Jeju and the Giant Goddess myth is about that period. This goddess did not have one single daughter, but 500 sons and so her reign was transmitted to her sons, putting an end to the period of Goddess reign. This transition is told in the Jeju foundation myth of Eulra ,where three demigod brothers divide and occupy the land. So Chun’s question is how to rediscover “women centredness” which existed once in Jeju. He concludes that it is people who shape their lives and that shaping starts with people’s thinking. So if Jeju people wish to rediscover the women centred society and shape Jeju according to that theory, they need to be conscious of its importance and work on it.

Joining to this school of thought are many Jeju mythologists, although they do not use the word, “women centredness”. Their work consists of collection and analysis of Jeju myth, especially goddess myth (eg. Cho, Hyun-Seol, 2011; Yang, Young-Soo, 2011), village shrine myth (Kim, Heon-Seon, 1999), Shamanic myth (eg. Mun, Mu-Byung, 2008), shamanic painting (eg. Chun, Eun-Ja, 2010), shamanic rituals (eg. Mun, Mu-Byung 2009). Some of the repeating themes emerging from mythologists’ work are women’s (goddess) central place and role in their community. For instance, women are the moral axis in the situation of conflict between men and women in Jeju goddess myth (Cho, Hyun-Seoul, 2011). One of the moral principles appearing in Jeju shamanic myth is “equality between women and men” and “have and have -nots” (Kang, Bong-Soo, 2003). Women’s autonomy and active attitude in seeking a man to marry or divorce are seen in many shrine myths (Hyun, Yong-Joon, 1967; Yang, Young-Soo, 2011). One of the important shamanic rituals in Jeju (called Chil-meo-ri Yeong-Deong Gut) is the ritual for wind goddess (proposed to UN in 2009 for designation as the World’s intangible cultural heritage). The wind goddess arrives on Jeju from Siberia at the coldest time of the year with her daughter or daughter-in-law. She spreads seeds on the land and the sea for abundant harvests (Mun, Mu-Byung, 2009). This ritual is mainly for and by women, since women are the population that works on the land and in the sea as divers.

Village shrines are also for and by women. Village people who visit shrines are only women and most of village shamans are women. There are 346 (or 270, depending on authors) shrines in jeju- 68% of them are for worship of goddesses- When jeju people go to shrine, they say they go to the shrine of Halmang (grandmother). In shamanic epics, the “gods of village shrines” are the first families of the jeju people

and the first settlers of villages. These gods are revered as ancestors and village people are their descendants. Therefore the places where these deities dwell are called “the original villages (*ponhyang*) and are marked as sacred shrines (*tang*). The shamanic shrine (*tang*) has been the central institutions in village society. The gods of the village shrine are masters of the village land, water, mountain, trees, and manage and help village people’s records of birth, death, occupation. The ancestor-descendant relationship between the shrine deities and the villagers embodies the territorial bond of supernatural nationhood centred on the shrine. The personal identity of the village people stemming from this supernatural nationhood does not change even when a villager goes abroad or move to another village. The mythical time of the shrine’s establishment approximates the historical time of the initial formation of a village. Whenever the shaman recites the original village history (*ponhyang ponpuri*) at the collective ceremony, the history of the village and people who erected the shrine is recounted and transmitted (Kim, Heon-Seon, 1999, p.133).

In a village, there are usually two shrines, but people usually have more than four goddesses. Married women bring their own goddesses and worship three times a year. Women go to the village shrine (*Bonhyang Dang*) to worship and visit (female) ancestors - recompose family history and justify the history (Kim, Chang-Min, 1992, p.106). The village shrine is the place where an individual’s continuing identity is clearly expressed and reproduced, inherited from mother to daughter or daughter-in-law. People who worship same gods meet at the same place (shrine) and thus...the village identity (and Jeju identity) is woven through women of individuals, families and the jeju region. It would not be exaggerated to say that the female line of genealogy is inherited and reproduced orally in village shrines through women, while the male lines are inherited and reproduced through official written birth registration and Confucian ancestor worship ritual. This aspect is described by some Jeju mythologists (Mun, Mu-Byung, 2008; Chun, Eun-Ja, 2010) as Jeju traditional culture with two basic perspectives - female cent redness in shamanism and male cent redness in Confucianism.

Another important group of work in this school is the collection and analysis of women divers’ life, culture and their value system. (e.g. Chae, Hae-Jeong et al., 2006-08). Their principal preoccupation is preservation of diver’s cultural heritage. According to these authors, the essence underlying diver’s cultural heritage is their value system - “women - mother centredness”, which is the true identity of Jeju.

According to the third school, Jeju culture is a “compromise “between the Neo-Confucian ideology from the north (China and the mainland) and the “lived life” of the island reality - harsh environment of wind, sea, volcanic stone, scarce drinking water, scarce land. Jeju people envied Neo-Confucian culture, but their island condition did not allow them to accept it fully. Thus they are caught between their “real (lived)

culture” and “ideal culture” (the envied Neo-Confucian culture). Some examples of Jeju culture as a compromise are seen in the analysis of funeral and ancestor worship ritual (Yu, Chul-In 1984; Kim, Chang-Min, 1992), Jeju kinship system (Kim, Chang-Min 1992, 2011) and inheritance pattern (Han, Sam-in, 1998).

For instance, according to Kim, Chang-Min(1992, 2011), the kinship system of Jeju is very different from that of the mainland dominated by Neo-Confucian ideology. First of all, respect for generation is transgressed in Jeju marriage. “double marriage” (giving women more than once to the same family) or repeated exchange of women between two families were practiced. This is to strengthen the relationship between families who give and receive women. Marriages between families with the same family name - consanguineous marriage (“*dongsung-dongbon*”) was practiced until the beginning of the 18th C. Also Village endogamy was practiced. The Jeju system includes all male and female relatives, agnates as well as uterines and affines, thus far more extended, while the mainland system only includes male ego’s patrilineal relatives. The reason for this extensive Jeju kinship system is to allow access to a wider network of labour whenever needed (Kim, Chang-Min, 1992, p.105). In the rugged island of Jeju with scarcity of land and water, labour is more important than land. One could say that this particularity of Jeju island nature forced Jeju people to compromise, rather than to follow the systems of Confucian culture. Such a practice of kinship in Jeju allowed women space to set up an autonomous role of their own in the politics of kin relations and social responsibilities comparable to those of men.

Cho’s analysis of Jeju being a society with “equality of both sexes” falls under the second school, although she does not use the term “compromise”. Cho summarizes Jeju gender relations as follows : “...‘female dominant reality’ (resulting from the island reality) and ‘male superiority ideology’ (resulting from Confucian ideology) co-exist and constantly interplay and counterbalance the allocated power between the two groups...” (Cho, Haejoang, 1979, p.261)

Cho explains “women dominant reality” as follows: Women are the “social adults” supporting their families and dominating the socio-economic sphere of village life. They are competent and dedicated social actors full of self-respect. Mutual assistance among women is the basic form of village collaboration. Women’s enhanced collaboration, in reality, even bring about modifications to the ideal of patriarchal society at the institutional and behavioural level (p.267). Compared with these hard-working women, their husbands suffer from work-deprivation. An important socio-religious activity delegated to men in Confucian culture - *chesa* (ancestor worship ritual)- has been created but it seems unsatisfactory. On the other hand, the diluted Neo-Confucian ideology (or compromise), according to Cho, is as follows: “Confucian ethics and norms are generally ignored and violated by the villagers. Deferential behaviour toward older people was not noted. Young men smoke and drink in front of village elders. A Confucian rule of conduct - deferential

rule of conduct between male and female rarely observed. Social interactions are basically guided under the egalitarian principle rather than the hierarchical one. The lineage solidarity was not strong. Some collaboration is supposed to be made within the lineage for the occasion such as “si-chesa” (husband’s family ancestor worship ritual). However, the ceremony ended up with severe disagreement & fights among men of the same lineage. The fights were settled by the intervention of wives of the men involved. A young man commented: This is nothing unusual. It is an annual ritual” (p.263)”

Conclusion:

The above is a brief summary of Jeju intellectual discourses on Jeju identity as an island, Jeju people’s preoccupation (preservation of disappearing indigenous culture and nature), and their efforts in collecting material and immaterial data for preservation. As one scholar noted (Kim, Young-Sook, 2002), a limit has been reached in data collection (in this case, Jeju shrine and shamanic myth). What is required now is a synthesis of these data. I would take this statement further and say that it’s about time to put these folkloristic data (not only myth, but also data on shamanic songs and rituals, women divers, etc.) through a sieve of a meta theory. As an anthropologist, the tool I have is an anthropological theory. What I hope to do is to verify and substantiate the concept of “Women centredness” of Jeju. This is not to say that the male component of Jeju will be ignored. Anthropological model usually covers both sexes and the whole society. As I have shown briefly in this paper, abundant data exists, but there is a certain gap. I hope to fill this gap through my fieldwork planned in Jeju in 2016, focussing on kinship relations practiced and shamanic rituals⁷.

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⁷ My approach to kinship study was inspired by two books: Christina Toren and Simone Pauwels (eds), (2015), *Living Kinship in the Pacific*; and Sahlins, M. (2013), *What kinship is...And is not*.

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