

# Tradition and Cultural Identity in Cheju Island, Korea\*

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This paper examines the construction of cultural identity based on a conscious model of past lifeways called tradition. Tradition is not given, rather it is created and constructed anew in contemporary situations. Furthermore, statements of group tradition create an identity that is currently meaningful to the members and to those with whom they interact (Bruner 1976 : 235, Linnekin 1983 : 241). Another purpose of this paper is to examine which stories affect the acquisition of cultural identity. I deal with an island culture as being in production among the Cheju Islanders of Korea.

Among social forces affecting the construction of identity, this paper is concerned with tourism and exploitation initiated by the outer world. Among the effects of tourism on host peoples, it is important that they try to maintain the solidarity or cohesion of their group, which reflects a strategy adaptive to the situation of stresses and

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conflicts caused by tourism(Smith 1977 : 6). The overwhelming waves of change called acculturation do stimulate the so-called peripheries in acquiring a consciousness of the degree of exploitation they are subjected to. Bianco(1980 : 153) suggests that, generally speaking, these peripheries curiously limit their claim for cultural autonomy to a condemnation of the processes of transformation and progress. For example, the search or struggle for a sense of ethnic identity is a reinvention and discovery of a vision, both ethical and future-oriented (Fischer 1986 : 196).

This paper focuses on a small set of spoken and written texts in which members of a contemporary Cheju Island society, from the sixth-grade schoolchildren to the adults, express claims about themselves, the lands on which they live, and the mainlanders as significant others. The statements that interest me, which could be supplemented by others, are the following.

1. When I realized at first that the place where I have lived is the Cheju Island as an island of Korea, I had complained why I was born in an island. However, it has dawned on my mind that living in the Cheju Island is better than in mainland in terms of the environment. .... When I heard from my teacher that the Cheju Island is called as *Samda-do*(The Island of Abundance of Three Things) very pleasant to live in, I liked the Cheju Island better than before. Furthermore, I learned that the Cheju Island is one of the most famous touristic attractions. I am even proud of being born in the Cheju Island, when as a story of past lifeways it is told that there were no theft, no beggary, and no gate of the house. And it comes into my mind that would the present were the past. [The sixth grade schoolboy, age 11. 1986]

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2. The following story was told by my elder brother, who also heard that from his teacher. When my brother told me that Cheju Islanders are wealthiest among Korean peoples, I did not understand him and asked why. He said to me, "Even though peoples in Seoul are thought to be wealthiest, most of them are nervous about discounting the price of goods. To the contrary, we, Cheju Islanders try to buy the more expensive one when they think that something is too cheap." Another story was told by my youngest aunt who married and moved into Seoul. She told me that because in Seoul the gate of the house is firmly locked owing to the safety from theft, it is unknown who moves in or dies from homicide next door, particularly at the apartment. With this story, I thought that I would live in my homeland, Cheju Island after being married in the future. [Schoolgirl, age 14, 1986]
3. I was envious of the mainland in my early days, and nowadays I am not. Rather a kind of antagonism is found in my mind. I dislike mainlanders to have the very poor perception about the Cheju Island and to be insolently proud of themselves and so on. [Schoolgirl, age 17, 1986]
4. I feel worst when mainlanders said that the Cheju Islanders are poor. The reason why they say such comes from a tour guide booklet which shows only the traditional thatch-roofed house! [Schoolgirl, age 17, 1986]
5. With the development of the Cheju Island as a touristic attraction mainlanders have moved in. Their antagonistic and exclusive behaviors and the increase of crimes cause good-hearted neighborhood here to become worse and worse. Particularly, the thoughtless action of tourists has aroused the social problems such as juvenile delinquency, and when some of mainlanders express

their superiority, I also feel antagonistic. [A man in thirties, 1984]

In order to understand the above statements, continuity and change in aspects of the relationship between the island and the mainland are considered. The Cheju Island, introduced in the name of *Quelepart* to the West at first, is famous today for its booming tourism. Located below the southernmost tip of the Korean peninsular, the Cheju Island has a long history of weak government control and periodic rebellion. The island did not come under the direct control of the central government until the end of the *Koryo* dynasty(932-1392 A.D.), maintaining, before this, a loose tribute relationship with the mainland as the independent kingdom of *Tamna*. When Korea was attacked by the Mongols during the thirteen century, the island was turned into a pasture land for raising horses under Mongol military administration. Throughout most of the *Yi* dynasty(1392-1910 A.D.), the island had remained remote from the political life of the country. The only concern of the government appears to have been to prevent the emergence of separatist tendencies. The Cheju Island had been used as a place of political exile. Its people, like those of other island, were looked down on by mainlanders and largely ignored by the government(Merrill 1980 : 139-141).

Cheju regional economy has grown rapidly with recent introduction of citrus cultivation which accompanied the inflow of external capital and the influence of external markets. The Cheju regional economy has become more dependent upon the national economy than before. Since the advent of large-scale tourism often necessitates the transfer of local control to a central government(Smith 1977 : 5), Cheju society as a touristic destination is more dependent on the national society with the national development projects on the Cheju Island. Both of tourism

and citrus cultivation cause rapid urbanization, more access to education, more exposure to mass communication, and the increase in the mobility of both Cheju Islanders and mainlanders. As a result, Cheju culture becomes more assimilated into mainland or national culture, and is dominated by the national ideology. The hegemonic discourse about the Cheju Island is about an international touristic destination, based on the national strategy for economic growth in Korea as a whole, whereas most intellectual natives on the island complain about the initiative of the central government in developing the island as a touristic destination.

The reality of everyday life contains typificatory schemes in terms of which others are apprehended and dealt with in face-to-face encounters(Berger & Luckmann 1966 : 30-31). A salient typificatory scheme in everyday life among Cheju Islanders is the distinction between natives and outsiders(Yoo 1984). Even though this distinction is found in any folk culture and in Korean society everywhere, the meaning of folk terms about the outer world is very important in understanding this distinction, and further, the identity of Cheju Islanders. Significant outer world to Cheju Islanders is expressed in the term "*Yookji*" (land) which usually means the Korean society except for the Cheju Island, and sometimes Seoul, in particular. The fact that peoples in the Korean peninsula do not have a term indicating the Korean society except for the Cheju Island shows that this category is an important cultural product based on consciousness. *Yookji* is meant to "be the antonym of 'sea' at school and to indicate regions other than the Cheju Island at home". When the term *Yookji* is mentioned in the Cheju Island, its people express implicitly their "exclusiveness and antagonism" to *Yookji*. It is interesting that in the written composition titled '*Yookji* and I', age group of 14 understood the term of *Yookji* as

the antonym of 'sea', while age group of 17 as regions other than the Cheju Island.

Generally speaking, the distinction between 'in-group' and 'out-group' is reinforced in an isolated peripheral society(Park 1977 : 632). However, the Cheju Islander's attitude toward mainland is ambivalent, that is, simultaneously envious and reluctant. Ambivalence toward mainland as an outer world is also expressed in Cheju folklore(Park 1977). Ambivalence toward an outer world is thought to be discovered in any society articulated with and dependent upon the larger society (Walter & Hassan 1977, Vidich & Bensman 1968).

*Yookji-saram*(people in the mainland) as a significant other and an outsider to Cheju Islanders is not a fixed category, even though the definition of them is based on their homeland. It is a cultural logic that makes someone to be an outsider in a society(Greenhouse 1985 : 263). Since *Yookji-saram* is defined only in the context, the connotation of this category is very important in understanding Cheju cultural identity. The connotation of *Yookji-saram* is changed over time by the way the migrants from *Yookji* has been apprehended in Cheju Island. According to a field note of 1948(Suk 1968 : 102, 188), "From the past, islanders have regarded *Yookji-saram* as a kind of beggar, and do not bear him company. With a subsistence economy, there was no theft in an island. If any, that is a kind of mischief of *Yookji-nom*(a vulgar and derogatory expression of *Yookji-saram*)." Based on their conception of limits in insularity, Cheju Islanders looked down on migrants who came before Cheju Island became industrialized with its development as a touristic destination. The tendency of regarding the thing to be wrong in an island as behaviors of *Yookji-saram* is also found in a novel on the rebellion of late Yi dynasty in the Cheju Island, written by a Cheju Islander. The fact that outsiders are owed to the things to be wrong

within a society may be thought to be the strategy or cultural logic which enables members to maintain good relationships among them in the face-to-face society, where people make a good thing of intimacy. The bad image of *Yookji-saram* is also reflected when Cheju natives speak to Cheju Islanders living in mainland as follows: "You seem to become a *Yookji-saram* almost!" The feelings implied in this statement is similar to those toward the Black who pretend to be the White in a Black society.

6. There were some ill-treated daughters-in-law because they were from *Yookji*. Cheju Islanders have been reluctant to receive *Yookji* daughters-in-law, because women in the Cheju Island are thought to be better at housekeeping and labour than those in the mainland. While the regional differences have decreased, some mothers-in-law even like *Yookji* daughters-in-law in that usually they are respectful to and live with their parents-in-law. I regret that Cheju lifeways become similar to those of *Yookji*. I wish to maintain local colour peculiar to Cheju Island. [A female undergraduate in twenties, 1984]

The above story shows that the contemporary Cheju Island is dominated by the mainland or national ideology, while migrants from the mainland act as ideological brokers(cf. Austin 1983). While one of themes in traditional Cheju culture is an adaptation to insularity, nowadays, the reaction to and adaptation to articulation of island and mainland is more important theme(Yoo 1986). An important phenomenon with regard to recent migration into the island, which may be one of indicators of increase in the degree of social articulation, is that the number of migrants in the formal sector has increased. Generally

speaking, migrants adapt to the destination. However, migrants in the formal sector think of themselves as a temporary migrant, and Cheju Islanders also regard them as a temporary stranger. This situation is similar to the situation of officials in the past kingdom who were customarily forbidden to bring their families to the island to avoid giving offense to prominent Cheju Island families by intruding too deeply into their affairs. As host peoples usually adapt to the attitudes and desires of tourists, these temporary migrants request and bring the lifeways of the place of origin which in a result Cheju Islanders somewhat adapt to.

With the perception of *Yookji-saram* in the island as ideological broker, the reaction to ideological domination is found in the emphasis on tradition, in particular, spiritual aspects. Emphasis on spirits is a part of Cheju cultural identity. For example, *Sammoo-jeongsin* (Spirits of Three Nothings: No theft, no beggary, and no gate of the house) features the Cheju Island. Such an ideal vision of the past makes an 11-year-old schoolboy to suppose that would the present were the past(cf. statement 1). From the perspective of tourists who are mainly *Yookji-saram*, traditional lifeways in the island, which are strikingly different from those in the mainland, are touristic attractions in addition to exotic landscape. As a result, tradition in Cheju Island is created by both mainlanders as tourists and islanders.

The following short review of three studies are relevant to understand the Cheju Island case. The relationship between tradition and identity is well examined in the study of Portuguese-Americans(Smith 1974). The primary point of articulation between the Portuguese and non-Portuguese is in the economic sphere. Members of both groups perceive this lack of articulation and account for it in terms of Portuguese traditionalism. However, field data of Smith(1974:83) indicate



their Americanization. Smith(1974 : 89) concluded that "The aura of traditionalism, accepted even by the Portuguese-Americans as part of their identity, is spurious but is one of the devices which shores up the total profile and insures the continuance of boundaries between Portuguese and non-Portuguese. Further it has had the effect to some extent, of a self-fulfilling prophecy, particularly in the aura of educational goals." Similarly, Linnekin(1983 : 250) suggested in his study on the Hawaiian identity that "The construction of ethnicity, always based in part on a model of the past, is perhaps the most obvious illustration of the fact that we create ourselves through our social categories." In the Toraja case(Volkman 1984), the transformations of identity have been stimulated by movements that involve new kinds of encounters with significant others such as migrants and tourists.

The stories which affect the acquisition of strong attachment to the Cheju Island are those of past lifeways emphasized in all aspects of everyday life(cf. statement 1), information on the bad aspects of other regions(cf. statement 2), and the stories of the perception of what mainlanders think about Cheju Islanders(cf. statements 3, 4, 5). Field data suggest that there seems to be a developmental sequence in acquiring the Cheju identity. Statement 1 shows that authoritative tellings of teachers in elementary school emphasize tradition in Cheju Island culture, and simultaneously transmit the dominant national hegemonic discourse about Cheju Island as a touristic destination. And then overstatements about *Yookji* appeal to youths who have rarely experienced *Yookji* and *Yookji-saram*. The contacts with *Yookji-saram* as tourists, migrants, and peoples in the mainland make Cheju Islanders react to *Yookji-saram*'s perception about the island and islanders. Even though the contacts with them are found in somewhat different situations, contemporary Cheju Islanders' perception of what *Yookji-saram*

think about islanders is based on the perspective of tourists. A woman in twenties said, "Exclusivism found in the island is a result of outsiders' attitudes toward islanders. . . . . *Yookji-saram* think of Cheju Islanders as 'primitives' and as a part of touristic attractions." However, the old proverb, "Send a horse to Cheju Island, send a man to Seoul," suggests a long history of despising islanders.

It is somewhat surprising that social phenomena regarded as problems in the island by adult and/or educated islanders are told in the written composition of an 11-year-old child: "Nowadays the land of Cheju Island is being sold out to outsiders. We must keep the land." A 14-year-old schoolgirl's statement, "There are *Yookji-saram* more than Cheju natives in Cheju Island," shows that perceived reality is a result of authoritative tellings of contemporary situation in the island, even though natives outnumber *Yookji-saram* by extraordinary degree.

My conclusion is tentative. With the overwhelming waves of change on Cheju Island as a touristic destination and with the long history of the asymmetrical relationship between the mainland and the island, Cheju Islanders' perception of what *Yookji-saram* think about Cheju Islanders operates to create the meaning and content of their cultural identity. The emphasis on tradition and cultural identity reflects islanders' reaction and adaptation to consciousness of the degree of exploitation, supposed-to-be inferiority, and insularity. The social processes in which Cheju cultural identity is created, maintained, emphasized, and acquired may consist of the contacts with *Yookji-saram*, the telling and retelling of authoritative voices within Cheju Island, and national hegemonic discourses about the island in Korea.

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[국문요약]

## 제주사회의 전통과 문화적 정체감

유 철 인

본 논문은 “문화의 생산과 습득”이라는 주제를 가지고 1987년 4월 30일부터 5월 3일까지 미국 텍사스주 산안토니오시에서 열렸던 제109차 미국민족학회에서 발표했던 것이다.

전통은 과거의 삶에 대해 현재의 입장에서 의식적으로 항상 새롭게 만들어 낸 것으로, (1) 이러한 전통을 바탕으로 제주사회에서 어떤 문화적 정체감이 형성되며, (2) 어떠한 이야기들이 문화적 정체감을 습득하는데 영향을 주는가가 본 논문의 주제이다. 자료로 사용한 텍스트는 국등학교 6학년 학생들부터 어른들에 이르기까지 자기자신에 대해서나 살고 있는 제주도와 중요한 타자인 육지사람에 대해서 이야기한 것과 글로 쓴 것들이다.

제주사회의 문화적 정체감은, 미국의 포루트갈 이민사회(Smith 1974)나 하와이 원주민 사회(Linnekin 1983)나 인도네시아 토라자 사회(Volkman 1984)와 마찬가지로, “육지”로 대표되는 산업화와 관광에 대한 반응, 즉 외부사회의 영향에 대한 적응방식으로 형성된다. 제주도에 대한 강한 애착으로 표현되는 문화적 정체감에 영향을 주는 이야기들로는 제주사람들의 모든 일상생활에서 강조되는 전통 생활양식에 대한 이야기와 다른 지역과 다른 지역사람들에 대한 부정적인 이야기, 그리고 다른 육지사람들이 제주도 사람에 대해서 어떻게 생각하는가에 대한 이야기들이다.

또한 자료에 대한 연령별 비교의 결과, 제주사회의 문화적 정체감의 습득은

### 제주사회의 전통과 문화적 정체감

성장과 더불어 이루어짐을 알 수 있었다. 국민학교 학생들은 지역사회의 주도적인 이야기인 제주문화의 전통에 대한 강조를 이야기하면서 동시에 관광지로서의 제주도라는 국가의 주도적인 이야기에 대해 다같이 자랑스럽게 쓰고 있다. 그러나 청년기에 들어오면서 육지사회나 육지사람에 대한 직접적인 접촉보다는 주위사람들의 이야기를 통해 차차 관광과 육지사람에 대한 생각과 감정의 공감대를 형성해 나가고 있다.