

THIS BEAUTIFUL EARTH: PHOTO ESSAY BY SGI PRESIDENT IKEDA 'RAINBOW OVER CHEJU ISLAND'

This is a place for poets. That was the feeling that enveloped me as I arrived on the Korean island of Cheju.

We drove through the lush countryside, each tree a vivid velvety green. Horses and cows grazed peacefully in the grassy fields, and many stones lined the road. Seeing the rock walls that had been built to block the wind, I pictured the rough, worn hands of the people who labored to lay each stone, hands that had seen much effort and toil.

I looked toward Mount Halla, a mysterious peak. It seemed as though the spirits of all living beings in the universe had gathered to form it. Holding a quiet dialogue with the heavens, this mountain, like a great loving mother, seemed to embrace all the immense joys of life, as well as all the anguished cries that have slipped through jaws clenched tightly in grief.

This is surely an island for poets, but also a place where politicians and businessmen should come to forget concerns of immediate profit and loss and talk about peace. Here they could calmly discuss and ponder the nature and meaning of true happiness. Here they could rediscover the poet within, and amicably and openly share fresh visions of the future.

This is a most fitting place for such discussions, because this island has suffered most tragically at the hands of politicians, and under an economy of exploitation. It is an island utterly tired of human conflict.

Cheju is a volcanic island. Although the volcano is now extinct, the island was formed of accumulated volcanic ash from repeated eruptions. The soil is sparse and thin. Bedrock of hardened lava lies merely a foot beneath the island surface.

Because the ground was not very fertile, many women made their living by diving for abalone, while many of the men left the island to find work in the cities. A good number went to work in Japan. Despite their longing for their homeland, too many, for reasons beyond their control, could never return. Even on learning of their parent's death, for all the tears they shed, they could not go home.

I am sure that in their hearts, and at night in their dreams, the winds and warm sunlight of their beloved home called to them. Their hearts filled with memories: playing in the fields with calves; standing at the cape in a strong wind gazing out at the deep blue sea; fields abounding with yellow flowers; foothills arrayed in elegant autumn attire; a snow-capped Mount Halla floating in blue skies; gorgeous springs and summers; breath-taking autumns and winters.

Many were the mothers and fathers who spoke with a far-off gleam in their eye about their beloved homeland to sons and daughters who had grown up knowing only Japan. They passed on still longing to see their home.

Both mainland Korea and Japan discriminated against the people of this island; but through it all, these noble mothers and fathers lived with pride. Brothers and sisters kept their heads held high regardless of how unjustly they were humiliated or insulted, enduring one abuse after another.

Mount Halla must surely have known the hearts of these people. As if in reply, I can almost hear the mountain saying: "I understand! I know all of your struggles, for you are all my precious children!"

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Because of their dire circumstances, the people of the island lived by helping one another. Someone reminiscing about life here recalled how dinner for a whole family fit onto one plate. Children competed to fill their mouths. Their mother would tell them again and again: “Eat!...Have some more!” while only taking a few bites for herself. “Eat!...Have some more!”—these words surpass any eloquent poem or lofty theory. They are beautiful poetry of the human spirit, the poetry of love and affection.

The people of this island are pure-hearted and honest. Wars always came from across the sea. Under occupation by the Japanese military, Mount Halla was turned into a fortress. Cheju Island became a shield to protect Japan from U.S. forces. Japan’s strategy was to sacrifice the island and its people to the enemy. The residents were forced to dig trenches in their beloved mountain with their own hands.

After the war, just as peace returned to the island, Mount Halla was to witness another extreme tragedy. That was the “April 3 Incident ” of 1948. Some on the island protested the division of North and South Korea. As punishment, the entire island was laid to waste. Most of the inhabitants were unaware of what was going on, but the government accused many of being traitors who supported the North, and killed them without any proof. At the same time, guerrilla forces aligned with the North killed innocent people, accusing them of cooperating with the government. It is still unknown how many people died during this ordeal. Some say it was 30,000, while others suggest as many as 80,000. And still, after this massacre, the rest of Korea viewed the people of Cheju Island as criminals, though they were the victims and had suffered the most.

What is ideology? Should it not be to give life to the people? It certainly should not exist to give people reasons to kill. At that time, however, people around the world were poisoned with Cold War insanity. Those who sacrificed the most to this insanity were the people of Cheju.

The elderly who survived these torturous times might have given up and died were it not for thoughts of their young grandchildren. With no more tears left to cry, they worked their small fields with wrinkled hands. Mothers who had lost husbands carried their babies in baskets into the fields, where they labored while quaking with anger at the injustices they had suffered. Amid the extreme summer heat, babies wailed in restless discomfort. When these children grew older, their families could not afford even to send them to school....

Their suffering was inexpressible in words. Any attempt to describe it would have brought uncontrollable sobbing, and so they remained silent. Gritting their teeth, they buried their sorrows deep, deep within their souls. Because they remained silent, those sorrows turned to stone. It is said that one should never raise one’s voice or shout while on Mount Halla, because doing so will cause those stone-like sorrows to come forth and drift about as dense fog.

Still, the people of this island have lived on. Day and night they have survived, revering the mountain. They have endured and advanced through the most violent storms of life, constantly reaching and grasping for hope. Their unyielding spirit is the heart of Cheju Island.

The two Chinese characters that form the name of Mount Halla respectively mean “river” and “to grasp.” The first character is also used in Japan to describe the Milky Way. This mountain does indeed seem to be reaching to grasp that hope-filled river of stars glittering in the heavens. The mountain peak resembles the palm of a hand open upward toward a sky of dreams.

On departing the island, Dr. Moon-Boo Cho, the president of Cheju University,

graciously accompanied me to the airport to send me off. Beaming, he told me, “That was a beautiful rainbow this morning!” In Dr. Cho’s resounding voice, I sensed a strong conviction for Cheju Island’s bright future, which made me very happy. I believe that Cheju Island will develop from here on to become the Hawaii of the East—an island of peace that will bring Korea, China, and Japan closer together. It will be a focal point for the future maritime era, a port of free trade. Its dreams are ever expanding.

Just as Mount Halla underwent repeated transformation through volcanic eruption to arrive at its present beauty, this island whose people have suffered the most, must become a paradise of happiness to surpass all others.

Those who have passed on can no longer speak of their own sufferings. That is why those living today must speak out for justice. To the extent that their mothers and fathers suffered and struggled, this generation and the next should achieve a state of indomitable happiness.

I beheld the rainbow that appeared on the day of my departure as a bridge linking us to that new era. I can only pray that such a rainbow of peace will protect Cheju Island for all eternity!

Twenty in a series