

Final Testimony of Choi Sung-hee

Case: 2011 고단 /Kodan 318 Obstruction of Business (2011 Kodan 511, Combined)

The Accused: Choi Sung-hee

Your Honor,

I, Choi Sung-hee, am a visual artist. I have been drawn to the beauty of Jeju Island, the pearl of Korea, and to the beautiful ecological preservation of Gangjeong village, which has been called the diamond of Jeju Island. I have also been drawn to the friendly spirit of the Gangjeong villagers who live peacefully with nature. Their will to protect and love the natural environment has moved me deeply, and I have been very inspired by their independent historical consciousness to realize peace for the greater people of Jeju Island through their preservation and protection of their village. I believe that their admirable spirit deserves the support and respect of all the Korean people as well as the people of the world. It is for this reason that I demonstrated my support for their non-violent and peaceful resistance against building the naval base. Every time I placed myself beneath the wheels of construction trucks in an effort to protest the illegal, cunning, and manipulative measures to carry out the construction of naval base, I reminded myself of two important mottos, which were articulated by the older generation of colleagues. The first is “Unless you come forward, who will speak for that coral, fish, and shells that cannot speak?” The second is “This land we are living on is on lease from the next generation of people.”

The construction area that I endeavored to protect is home to endangered species like the red-footed crab and the narrow-mouthed toad, which are recognized by the Ministry of the Environment. On March 15, 2011, the Jeju Provincial Assembly rescinded the motion to nullify the “absolute preservation area” designation, thereby reestablishing the legal grounds for the protection of the Jungdeok coastline. Several legal actions by local residents are also underway, including an appeal to rescind permission to use this area for national defense and as a military facility, an appeal to affirm the “absolute preservation area” designation, and an appeal to ensure the public right to fair surface water use. In addition, the project for preservation of cultural assets is still in progress yet what has been assessed through this project has not been

properly conveyed to the local residents. In light of the ongoing status of these legal actions and the cultural assets assessment, I cannot but arrive at the conclusion that the move to forcefully continue with construction without checking into or conforming to proper procedures is illegal. In the case of the Saemangum area, construction was brought to a standstill because of a legal dispute. Why then is construction at Jeju Island being enforced without accountability or conformity to legal safeguards? Construction companies contend that the suspension of work harms business, but companies, which employ a lot of subcontractors, foster the conditions that themselves generate problems.

Construction companies, the Navy, prosecutors, and the police charged me with twenty counts of obstructing business, but what I did was to obstruct their illegal actions. In fact, what I did was meant to halt the manipulation of the law, which exploits people in order to advance the narrow interests of power. Siding with the haves in society, all branches of authority, i.e., legislative, executive, and judicial, exercise absolute power and wield illegal violence in their attempt to shrink any space for disobedience and dissent. Insofar as my actions were undertaken as a last resort to legally assert self-defense, I am not guilty.

I object to the charges related to the events of May 19. On that day, the Seogwipo Police and the Jeju prosecutor arrested me on the spot as a criminal who had been obstructing business, yet the situation was as follows: construction workers and police were carrying out the demolition of neighboring facilities through “execution by proxy” without ensuring that proper legal steps were taken. At that point, seven villagers and civil rights activists had already been arrested so I, along with other women, raised a banner in silence: “Touch not even one stone, touch not one flower.” I do not remember if the police read me my Miranda rights; all that I remember is that they said, “Ms. Choi Sung-hee, we hereby arrest you as a criminal.” After this, five or six policewomen, dressed in civilian clothes, forced me into a police car, and, the police and Jeju prosecutor rendered me into custody on the charge of obstructing business.

They say I obstructed business on May 19, but how does expressing protest by silently holding a banner constitute an illegal act tantamount to damaging the property of construction companies? Moreover, they inserted a clause indicating that I placed myself under the wheel of construction truck in order to justify their “arrest” of May 19 and “detention” of May 21, only to remove this clause along with the word “criminal-in-the-act” from arraignment

after I protested. They “arrested” me first with a “false indictment” in order to “detain” me in custody. I cannot help but suspect that the whole rigmarole was designed for my “detention.” The Gangjeong village association and peace advocacy group that I am affiliated with accordingly released a public statement on May 23 to criticize the police and the prosecutor, which indicated that “the prosecutor, in conducting an investigation to determine the validity of the arrest warrant for Choi Sung-hee falsified additional information for the purpose of indictment” and that “the prosecutor indicted Choi Sung-hee on false charges that she obstructed business.”

I feel it is important to ceaselessly expose abuses of power and to highlight the need to curb such abuses on the part of the Seogwipo police department and the Jeju prosecutor’s office whose officials are paid by the islanders’ tax money. I speak out against the abuse of power because I fear that there will be more victims like myself if I remain quiet. Recently, the police and the prosecutor’s office have been badgering the residents of Gangjeong with a barrage of citations and demands for compensation for the damages the residents supposedly caused to the tune of about \$280,000. This is nothing more than an oppressive tactic aimed at creating tension among the residents who in turn will blame peace activists for provoking the officials to behave badly, thereby driving a wedge between the activists and the residents.

I detect in the oppressive attitude in the officials the same sort of attitude responsible for the horrific 4.3 massacre. The history of Jeju Island is one of endless struggle against outside forces and this time, it faces the might of the central government and the Korean Navy. The Jeju prosecutors and Seogwipo police, instead of acting on behalf of the islanders, are committing treachery in collusion with the central government. A survey indicates that 44% of the residents of Gangjeong Village suffer from severe depression, and 34.7% of them have attempted suicide. On June 17, a villager was reported to have attempted suicide by consuming herbicide. On June 20, Navy personnel resorted to violent means to disband a group of peaceful demonstrators. Former Assemblywoman Hyun Ae-ja made a statement, “It’s a crime for the military to treat civilians with violence, even in wartime.” However, the central government, against the wishes of the villagers, quietly watched the Navy ruin the shoreline of the rare coral reef, which had been designated as a natural treasure. Korea’s Constitution guarantees all of its citizens’ human respect and the right to pursue happiness. Sadly, this is not the case in Gangjeong today. Your Honor, I believe that you can hear the voice of conscience founded in the Constitution.

Many people voiced their concern that Jeju Island and its future generations will become vulnerable to attack because its naval base is associated with the missile defense system of the United States. It is my duty and right to enact a peaceful non-violent demonstration against a base which is certain to invite war. I am told that about one thousand people have telephoned the Korean Embassy in Washington D.C. to voice their opposition to the naval base construction in Gangjeong. The danger of building a naval base in Jeju has become a concern for not only Koreans but also the international community. I understand that a Korean Embassy worker told callers that they should contact the U.S. government because it is pushing the naval base project rather than the Korean government.

Your Honor, why is the naval base problem developing into the second 4.3? One of the main reasons is because both the 4.3 massacre and the naval base conflict stemmed from the contravention of rights by outside forces (such as the U.S.) and their threat to the islanders' right to peaceful existence. That is the reason why Jeju residents (who more than anyone had resisted outside powers) and the citizens of the Korean peninsula must recognize the fact that the major international powers have designs on the Jeju Island as a geostrategic location. They must realize that their home could become a battleground for the major powers and put a stop to the naval base.

Recent tensions between the U.S. and China justify our concern for the peace of Jeju. At a U.S.-Japan conference on June 21, the importance of forming alliances to isolate China was emphasized, suggesting the participation of the U.S., Australia, Japan, India and Korea. In this conference, the sale of Standard Missile 3 (developed by Raytheon of the U.S. and Mitsubishi of Japan) to Korea surfaced as a strong possibility. On July 9, the U.S., Japan, and Australia held a joint military exercise near Brunei in Indonesia. On that same day, the U.S. nuclear submarine USS Texas entered Korea's waters and docked. Korea and the U.S. plan to hold training sessions for airborne fueling procedures every six months in preparation for possible actions against China, according to the experts. U.S. fuel-supply airplanes are said to operate out of its airbase in Okinawa. On August 4, the former chief of staff for the Korean Air Force was reported to have revealed military secrets to Lockheed Martin, the U.S. maker of fighter airplanes as well as destroyers that might dock in the Jeju naval base. Was there American pressure to build the naval base on Jeju Island? I hear the clicking of the champagne glasses in the halls of weapons manufacturers like Lockheed Martin, Boeing, and Raytheon amidst the moaning sounds by the

Gangjeong villagers. What region and country can revitalize the trade in U.S. weapons, their number-one export following their economic difficulties due to their wars in Iraq and Afghanistan? It is Jeju Island in the Republic of Korea. The island of peace is facing a crisis.

Your Honor, there is another important item I would like to bring up. It is the matter of environmental protection. Jeju Governor Woo Geun-min has failed to represent the people who elected him to look after their interests. He has neglected his duties in protecting Jeju's unique environment and failed to abide by the rules and regulations set forth by UNESCO with respect to the management of the geological park.

According to the Jeju Daily on July 12, the third clause of UNESCO rules calls for continuous efforts by the governor in order for Jeju to retain its UNESCO designation as a natural treasure; the fourth clause calls for the islanders' cooperation in the upkeep of the natural treasure. Assemblyman Yoo Won-il points out that the naval base site is only 1.5 km. from the UNESCO biological protection area; construction of the naval base will certainly cause UNESCO to retract its designation.

Instead of providing protection for the area, Governor Woo Geun-min is colluding with the Navy to ruin it. He is also trying to bring commercial tourism into the area. He recently stated that the Department of Defense promised him help promote tourism. Samsung, one of the firms involved in the naval base construction, has already begun advertising for tourism. When we examine all of these factors, we can conclude only one thing: the government, the military, and the corporations are colluding to destroy the environment, against the wishes of the islanders.

Your Honor, I ask that no more peace activists and Gangjeong residents stand here victimized as I am. I have faith in your conscience. Is it just for me to stand here because of my non-violent demonstration to preserve the island of peace? Or, shouldn't the governor who sold Jeju out to the central government, military, and capital stand here? How about Prime Minister Kim Hwang-sik and Minister of Defense who turned over the island to the outside powers against the will of the people? People pay for their salary and yet they are oppressing weak people like me.

According to Howard Zinn, a well-known American peace activist, "Civil disobedience is not our problem. Our problem is civil obedience. Our problem is

the number of people all over the world who have obeyed the dictates of the leaders of their government and have gone to war, and millions have been killed because of this obedience.... Our problem is that people are obedient all over the world, in the face of poverty and starvation and stupidity, and war and cruelty. Our problem is that people are obedient while the jails are full of petty thieves, and all the while the grand thieves are running the country. That's our problem."

It is my hope that building the island of peace is actually realizable, not merely in language. Many people speak of building a peace park and a UN peace school instead of the naval base. Don't you feel warm thinking about a world in which our young people and their children—free of pressure from draft and school tuitions—realize their dreams and work together to build a peaceful world? That hope keeps alive my passion for justice and gives me courage.

Thank you.

Choi Sung-hee
August 5, 2011
Jeju Courthouse