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What Hawaii Can Learn From South Korea's Jeju Island

There are common circumstances and questions we might ask of our sister state beyond exchanges of educators and government leaders.

By [Jim Shon](#)

November 22, 2024 · 9 min read





Courtesy Jim Shon

I'm a fan of my second hometown, Jeju City, which has a sister-state relationship with Hawaii.



Lt. Gov. Sylvia Luke visited Jeju Island — South Korea's largest island — in August of this year **with a delegation** that included Jimmy Tokioka, the director of the state Department of Business, Economic Development and Tourism, and executives from Hawaii Tourism Authority and the travel industry.

The primary goal of the tourism mission, according to Luke's office, was to strengthen relationships and create opportunities for collaboration between Hawaii and the Republic of Korea, including Jeju, fostering cooperation in tourism and promoting mutual goodwill under the theme of "Island Connections: Reimagining Tourism."

I am interested in the future of the island, how it plans and copes with carrying capacity, and want to share my experiences with Jeju. I believe in the importance of international cross-cultural knowledge, and strongly support Hawaii's sister-state programs.

The **Sister-State Program** was created in order to advise the governor and the Legislature on matters relating to sister-state or province relations and relations, in general, between the state and the states or provinces of foreign countries.

Hawaii lists 20 sister-state or provincial relationships. There are many activities associated with sister states that are ongoing, but not necessarily well-known or frequently reported in the media. We are much more international than many would suspect.



Recreation of Joseon Dynasty military warrior training for tourists and residents on Jeju Island. (Courtesy Jim Shon)

I was a Peace Corps volunteer in Jeju in the 1970s, and this year I visited again. The island is so massively changed and developed with hotels and tall condos and new business districts that it is almost unrecognizable from that time.

There is a fairly new high-tech research and education hub with a hotel and four independent elite international high schools as part of the complex. Environmentalists are not so happy with the extensive land-use development. Others see it as a new education and technology niche for Jeju's future.

A tourist-oriented tea farm draws rave reviews. Windmills dot the coastline. Well-developed hiking trails and beaches connect visitors with Jeju's natural beauty, along with high-end hotels and other amenities says: Jeju has arrived.

A Bit Of Jeju History

Jeju Island, about the same size as Maui, is off the southern coast of the Korean mainland, and with its moderate climate and beaches is sometimes referred to as the Hawaii of the East.

(Note: Earlier Romanization systems spelled the Island Cheju. This was later changed by Korean linguists to Jeju.)

For many hundreds of years Jeju was the independent kingdom of Tamna. Over the centuries, traditional Korean kingdoms took control, including during the time when the Mongols briefly colonized Korea and used the island to raise horses.

At one point Dutch sailors were stranded, and their maps called the island Quelpart. During the Joseon or Yi Dynasty (1392-1910), losers in Seoul competing power faction conflicts were often exiles to Jeju. Japan occupied all of Korea from 1910 to 1945. Sixty-eight years ago Jeju was given independent provincial status by the Korean national government.

My host family during my Peace Corps days in the early '70s (1970-mid 1973) was exiled to Jeju about the year 1500, so had been on the island for 500 years. There was thus a constant mixture of indigenous residents, stranded navigators, Northern Chinese, pirates from Japan and later holdovers from when Japan colonized Korea for 35 years (1910-1945), and families from various sections of the Korean mainland including North Korea.

Following World War II, violent conflicts erupted pitting locals versus Seoul armies that resulted in over 30,000 deaths and destruction of many rural villages. A prominent Buddhist temple was the site of major battles.

Demographic Changes

Like all of Korea and much of Asia, the birth rate is declining. The Korean government has just created a special working unit to examine so-called "depopulation."

In 2021, the population of Jeju ages zero to 9 was 58,901. Within a year this had shrunk to 55,536, or a reduction of 3,365. This decrease presumably reflected fewer births. We see a similar decrease in the 20-29 age group from 86,681 to 84,016.

While other age groups increased, especially seniors, Jeju's population is aging. The number of young families having children and birth rates are going down. Japan is also very



Author Jim Shon outside Jeju's old city ancient government headquarters. (Courtesy Jim Shon)

concerned about this imbalance in population age groups.

Before the pandemic, the years 2016 and 2017 saw the most overall tourists (15,852,980 in 2016) as well as foreign tourists (3,603,021). Of special note were the over 3 million from China (85% of all foreign visitors) who were also investing heavily in casinos (there are

eight on the island) and hotels.

As you drive around the island, many of the road and street signs are not only in Korean but include the Chinese characters, or hanja. This reflects the importance of the economic impacts of visitors from China at that time. However, in 2022 this influx had shrunk to less than 10,000 per year, representing only 11.4%.

Thus, Jeju has experienced dramatic fluctuations in both numbers and sources of visitors and outside investment. These wide swings must have had parallel impacts in foreign investment and expenditure on the island's economy.

Immediately following the signing of a sister-state pact with Jeju in the 1980s, Jeju Korean and Hawaii leaders facilitated a series of significant meetings in Hawaii and Jeju with conferences focusing on promoting Jeju as an island of peace, general globalization, energy, urban and island planning, ocean affairs, education and tourism. Below is a photo of panelists and honored guests in a 1995 Globalization Conference. Three were former Peace Corps volunteers.



From a 1995 conference in Jeju on globalization. Three of the panelists were former Peace Corps volunteers, including Shon, first row, third from left. (Courtesy Jim Shon)

Why Hawaii Should Care

There are obvious common circumstances and questions we might ask as to why we should care about sister-state relationships beyond exchanges of educators and government leaders.

The earliest common threads for many of our sister states include our common challenges and government strategies to cope with the impacts of climate change.

Jeju found its coastal roads were located too close to the shoreline. Additional wave barriers are being installed along the coast. An iconic lava rock formation known as Dragon Head Rock, a favorite with tourists, was decapitated following a strong storm. This year Korean temperatures were higher than normal, and this negatively impacted the growth of some vegetables, whose prices rose.

All share a heavy economic dependence on tourism and an initial kind of one-sided Big Brother source of support from the U.S. for those that were much poorer and welcomed advice on economic development.

Clearly, the enjoyment and value of getting to know the homelands and cultures of Hawaii's immigrant roots stimulated interests. Hawaii's post World War II political establishment was driven by generations of immigrants from Japan.

Many were created before the power of the internet and expansion of jet travel to learn more about the world, especially Asian and Pacific nations.

In Hawaii we could see a broader educational benefit of getting to know the world beyond our shores. Today, the University of Hawaii no longer requires any history courses to graduate.

Important Questions For Hawaii

Given the enormous expansion of tourism, economic development, and internet information, is tourism development still a relevant or needed topic of interest? Do we or others such as Jeju really want more than 10 or 15 million visitors? Or is it about adding to a deeper, more sustainable and climate responsible future?

We have a lot to learn from our Asian neighbors.

Does Hawaii still aspire to some form of technological or economic leadership among island nations in Asia and the Pacific? Perhaps this is as much a role for the University of Hawaii and the East-West Center as the tourist bureau.

Rather than being the source of support for others, are there innovations and programs of our sister states that we could learn and benefit from? Major investments in Jeju from the private sector could be of interest.

Do the historical developments and megatrends of our sister states offer objective indicators of where Hawaii may be headed and should we pay attention to these trends in creating our own policies and programs?

An Informal Snapshot Of Jeju Today

Jeju is increasingly proud of its premodern history, and has refurbished a number of ancient traditional structures in the central part of Jeju City, where there are regular performances of Yi Dynasty military rites and local oral dramas geared to tourists.

Compared to the 1980s, Jeju has developed a wide range of tourist related attractions, well-maintained, clean, and very much oriented toward those who want to experience nature. Beaches



Jeju has emphasized historical temples and other historical buildings for education and tourism. (Courtesy Jim Shon)

rent surf boards, there are hiking trails, and so forth. Public facilities are generally better maintained and cleaner than those on Oahu.

I have been in contact with local officials about what Hawaii can learn from Jeju.

“Moving forward, we hope that Jeju and Hawaii will continue to collaborate in both tourism and

environmental areas, identifying effective policies and outcomes for our shared prosperity,” Kim Hee Chan, director of the Tourism Exchange Bureau for Jeju Special Self-Governing Province, wrote in a letter to me this month.

As one Hawaii state senator recently noted, “We have a lot to catch up with in terms of the cleanliness and upkeep of public facilities. Your comments match those of many who have pointed out that Japanese train stations and other Asian economies seem to take better care of their facilities and transportation infrastructure than we do in Hawaii ...”

Those points are well-taken! We have a lot to learn from our Asian neighbors.

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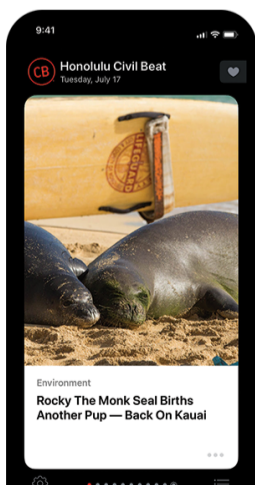
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About the Author

Jim Shon



Jim Shon was a Peace Corps Volunteer on Jeju Island from 1970–1973. He taught English to 280 middle school students each day for two years, and then worked at the Jeju Board of Education conducting workshops. Shon later studied Korean history at the University of Hawaii. And as a Hawaii state legislator, he initiated Hawaii's Sister-State Relationship with Jeju.



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