

Tokto or Takeshima Island Dispute – Its True Significance

**By
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The dispute between Korea (both north and south) and Japan over the geographically and economically insignificant island of Tokto or Takeshima is an enigma to most “outsiders.” Being a foreigner, I qualify as an outsider. Despite decades of studying, living and working in Korea and Japan, this dispute impressed me as being irrational. After all, numerous other issues such as North Korea’s quest for a nuclear arsenal, Pyongyang’s ballistic missile threat, etc. would seem to override the bilateral tensions occasionally sparked by this tiny pile of rocks mid-point in the ocean between the Korean Peninsula and Japan.

Nevertheless, the dispute persists. At a critical juncture during the first Korean nuclear crisis during the 1990s, the Japanese and South Korean governments were more intent on clashing over Tokto Island than cooperating to end North Korea’s nuclear weapons program. That preference continues. A decade later the dispute again exploded in April 2006 to the point that the two sides almost exchanged gun fire between their naval ships dispatched to the tiny island.

But I have come to learn from my students, both Japanese and Korean, the dispute’s true significance. They convinced me that the island is not the problem, but instead it is the island’s symbolism. I added to this an even more profound problem – the highly centralized nature of Japan’s education system. My students agreed that Tokto symbolizes “Japan.” For the Japanese students, the island is sovereign Japanese territory. Why? Because that is what they have been taught. The Korean students saw Japan’s claim as being rooted in Japan’s imperial past. Why? Because that is what they had been taught.

Being a teacher, I naively concluded the solution was academic research aimed at uncovering the facts. But then I realized that historical facts are of secondary importance when it comes to Japan’s historical disputes with its neighbors. Tokto/Takeshima, the Rape of Nanking, the “Comfort Woman,” and “Sea of Japan” disputes, plus others, all emanate from a single historical event – the rise of imperial Japan.

The continuing dispute between the people of Okinawa and their government in Tokyo provides compelling evidence of this. Former Prime Minister Abe in 2006 ordered the Ministry of Education to issue a guideline that caused text book publishers to alter a single sentence. Thereafter all grammar and secondary school text books in Japan would cease teaching that the imperial Japanese army ordered the people of Okinawa to commit suicide rather than be taken captive by Americans when they invaded the island near the end of World War II. (Great Pacific War). The people of Okinawa were outraged. Many had survived the US invasion and refused to obey the imperial army’s orders. They

recalled the truth and demanded that their government respect it. Eventually their protests, including enormous rallies, compelled the Ministry of Education in 2008 to restore the more accurate account to text books, but only after Abe had resigned.

For me, this unraveled the enigma of Tokto/Takeshima Island. The problem is indicative of the lingering aftermath of Japan's imperial past and its "right wing" politicians who refuse to accept the fact that the Japanese empire ceased to exist in 1945. For reasons still baffling to many, these politicians reject historical accuracy as revealed by their refusal to admit the excesses of Japan's imperial past, whether it is the ownership of Tokto Island, the brutality of the "rape of Nanking" or exploitation of "comfort women."

Unfortunately, such politicians' occasional ascendancy to political power enables them to manipulate Japan's Ministry of Education for their political purposes. They cause guidelines to be issued that require teachers to perpetuate distortions about Japan's imperial past. Japan's educators are forced to either conform to these guidelines to retain their jobs or to chose not to teach Japan's modern history. This process does not benefit Japan's diplomats who are intent upon maintaining good relations with Japan's neighbors, or Japan's teachers who are intent upon educating Japan's youth nor the young people of Japan who are being denied a version of history rooted in facts rather than politics.

Fortunately for all Koreans and Japanese, the majority of people in both nations are rational and eager to work together to build a more secure and prosperous East Asia. Eventually the youth of Korea and Japan will assume responsibility for their fate. Inevitably, they will put behind them the distortions of the past to ensure a peaceful and prosperous future for themselves and their children.

As for Tokto Island, one of the most admired Americans in Japan, Supreme Commander of Allies in the Pacific (SCAP) and ruler of Japan during its American occupation after World War II, General Douglas Macarthur, signed a directive shortly after Japan's surrender in 1945. His directive clearly stated that Tokto Island is part of Korea.