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A Proposal for Historical Reconciliation: The “Dokdo Movement” of Korean Americans in the Washington Area

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What role can outside actors play in territorial disputes?

How do generational differences in identity impact third-country policies?

Introduction

Watching the daily lives of Korean Americans, one thing stands out: the way they live. Korean Americans are distinct, from the wrapping paper they use at dry cleaners, their supermarkets, their senior citizens associations, Korean restaurants, or even the inside of their cars. The reason for Korean Americans' distinction is Dokdo, a small group of islets between Korea and Japan. Wherever there are Korean Americans you will find objects or people related to Dokdo. That does not mean, however, that Korean Americans are obsessed with it. They become one people through the medium of Dokdo; otherwise, they simply lead normal lives. Unlike first generation Korean Americans and the 1.5 generation, in the case of second generation Korean Americans, they may have heard of the Dokdo dispute with Japan, but they are not particularly interested in this issue.

The conflict between Korea and Japan over Dokdo was peaceful for a while, until Japan recently resumed its provocation over the issue. The Japanese government has continued to have territorial disputes not only with Korea over Dokdo, but also with other major countries in Northeast Asia over the Senkaku Islands (China) and Kuril Islands (Russia). There have been times when it seemed like a resolution to these territorial disputes was imminent but politics have repeatedly gotten in the way and left both parties mutual antagonists once again. Will China, Korea, and Japan stay in this vicious cycle of conflict in relation to territory in Northeast Asia? Understanding the Dokdo movement of Korean Americans in Washington, DC will provide a clue as how to end this seemingly unending vicious cycle. In doing so, we will be able to show how to facilitate reconciliation between these three major countries.

Korean Identity and the Dokdo Issue

Studies on Korean Americans began with early Korean immigrants to the United States. In early studies there was an inclination toward using assimilation theory to understand their incorporation into American society. As Korean scholars joined Korean Americans in those studies, they adopted a multicultural methodology that recognized immigrants' differences with mainstream society. Recently, the concept, and attendant research methodology, of “diaspora” was introduced to Korean-American studies. It not only considered variables that weakened the concept of “motherland,” but also stressed independence/identity of individuals.¹

Thus, generational differences are an important measure in differentiating Korean American identity. Koreans who first come to the U.S. after the age of 17 are called first generation; Koreans who come with their parents before age 17 are the 1.5 generation; and those born in the U.S. are the second generation.² According to the 2000 U.S. census, first generation Korean Americans constitute 49.6 percent, the 1.5 generation make up 15.1 percent, and the second generation is 35.3 percent of the total Korean American population. In terms of language and culture, the first generation shows a strong affinity to Korea, the second generation is the reverse, and the 1.5 generation, despite individual differences, has a good command of both languages and cultures. As such, the 1.5 generation has the greatest chance of resolving the Dokdo issue.

In general, there are several elements that make up Korean identity. According to Professor Yoon In-Jin, the elements are ethnic knowledge, ethnic identification, and social interaction. Ethnic knowledge can consist of many fragmentary memories and experiences in relation to Korea and; ethnic identification is based on ethnicity and culture as ethnic identification; social interaction consists of self-recognition through experiences in American society.³ Among these three components, ethnic knowledge and ethnic identification relate to Korea. In the case of Korean Americans, their identity was formed through churches, Korean societies, and voluntary activities; the Dokdo movement goes along with this process of identity formation. For Koreans, Dokdo belongs in the collective memory, which is a “good” source of “Korean nationalism.” Early Japanese Americans, similar to Korean Americans, built their identity through their own culture, religious organizations, and communities. More recently, Chinese Americans attempted to share their own identity by sharing their collective memory through such media as the Nanjing Massacre website.⁴

For Koreans, Dokdo is often an isle that is known not by specific information, but by the song “Dokdo is our land”:

*Eighty kilometers away East-South from Woolreungdo,
There is a lonely isle for sea birds.
Even if whoever persists it is their land,
Dokdo is our land.*

For many Korean Americans, knowledge about Dokdo was no more than this song. After immigration to the United States, however, their knowledge about Dokdo was fortified both by the domestic and international situations, and developed a structure of discourse different from that in Korea. Nevertheless, Koreans both in Korea and the U.S. share an anti-Japan sentiment: rejection of Japan up to the level of hatred to understanding the irrational arguments and provocation from Japan.

The Dokdo issue began in 1947, when Japan reinvaded Dokdo two years after the Korean peninsula was liberated from Japanese colonial rule; one gun shot in Dokdo provoked all of Korea. Furthermore, the accidental Dokdo bombing in 1948 and further incidents instigated by the Japanese government in 1951 drew more Koreans’ attention. As a result of these incidents, a sea line called the “Syngman Rhee Line” was demarcated in the 1950s by Korea to show its ownership. Nonetheless, the Japanese government’s relentless attempt to land and send ships to Dokdo led to diplomatic conflict between the two governments in 1965, which seemed to be reconciled temporarily after several oral statements. Yet the Dokdo issue again took center stage during the 1970s negotiations for an exclusive economic zone and fisheries agreement. Japan’s distortion of history in its school textbooks in 1982 led Koreans to be suspicious of the Japanese historical view of itself and its intention for Dokdo. The Dokdo issue resurfaced in the process of determining the middle zone during the Korean-Japanese Fisheries Agreement in 1996 after Japan unilaterally terminated the old agreement. Moreover, Koreans were further exasperated by a strong insistence in 2005 on preemptive rights by Shimane Prefecture in Japan and the inclusion by the Japanese government of disputed facts related to Dokdo in new guidelines for Japanese education.⁵

It might seem that there have been periodical conflicts between Korea and Japan concerning Dokdo. However, Japan was not preoccupied with Dokdo other than to issue some vehement words in the 2000s. By contrast, Japan has been in steady conflict with Russia over the Kuril Islands, which are taught in Japan as being part of Japanese territory—despite belonging to Russia. After limited recognition, the Dokdo issue’s prominence grew at the end of the twentieth century, as it became the field of acquisition of economic concessions. The “Fusosha textbooks,” supported by the right wing in Japan, insist on Japan’s claim to Dokdo (and promote Japan’s justification for “comfort women”). Moreover, the Japanese right wing’s attempts at revisionism would bring about serious consequences for the relationship between Korea and Japan.

The response in Korea is different. Many Koreans were angry with the Japanese government’s game of ping-pong. The tranquil mornings of Koreans were often disturbed by the provocative words from the Japanese government such as “We will resolve the issue regarding ‘comfort women’ with 1 Yen” or “We are not willing to apologize for the annexation of Chosun” or “We will pray for the war

criminals at Yasukuni Shrine where Koreans who were forcefully drafted were buried.” They further incite Koreans once again by saying, “By the way, Dokdo is our land.”

Surprisingly, the most passionate person about the protection of Dokdo’s sovereignty in Korea is Kim Jang-hoon, a singer. This kind of thing happens in Korea because of the uniqueness of the Dokdo movement in Korea. The Korean government’s policy on the Dokdo movement is basically one of quiet diplomacy. Since the issue of territory is related to nation-state and nationalism, some young and/or progressive historians are cautious about getting involved in this issue. And for the same reason, some progressive movement organizations are concerned about the Dokdo issue—although Dokdo often gets left behind in other issues such as citizens’ campaigns, democracy, gender equality, or human rights, even though the Dokdo issue is a very sensitive and touchy matter in Korea.

The Development of the Dokdo Movement in Washington, DC

The Dokdo protection movement in Washington, DC is different from that in Korea in several respects. First, the DC movement is different in context from the Korean due to differing national identities. Second, the 1.5 generation of Korean Americans is especially active, providing leadership in different organizations that are involved in many issues, including Dokdo is one of them. Yet all of these issues have to do with some unresolved problems arising from the San Francisco Peace Treaty with Japan in 1951. Third, the Washington, DC-based movement looks beyond the basic issues of the nation-state such as territory and sovereignty; it goes further by reaching out to universal issues such as democracy, human rights, and co-prosperity of humankind. The Dokdo movement can be explained and understood in this context.

The Dokdo movement in Washington, DC, which has been in its golden age since 2007, can be categorized as follows: 1. two major organizations; 2. the cultural activities of four big Korean communities (in Virginia, metropolitan areas of Maryland, Baltimore, and Washington); 3. the indirect cultural activities of the Korean embassy; 4. cultural activities of the Korea Heritage Foundation; and 5. the cultural activities of some church leaders. These activities make for a subtle but substantial difference from those of the former generation. I will elaborate upon those activities in terms of self-identification of the immigrants (ethnic knowledge, ethnic identification, and social interaction).

Some of these organizations are led by first generation Korean Americans: the Dokdo guardians-USA,⁶ the Korea Heritage Foundation,⁷ some churches, and some individual activities.⁸ They depend upon Korean mass media such as the *Washington Joongang Ilbo*, *Hankook Ilbo*, and others in acquiring information about Dokdo. Most first generation Korean Americans were educated in Korea, and retain bad memories of Japanese colonial rule. Their activities include distribution of promotional materials, holding symposiums, and promoting old maps, and chronic antagonism toward Japan remains. For them, “Japanese imperialism is unforgivable.”

Some of these first generation Koreans have “independentistas” in their families who fought against Japanese colonial rule.⁹ Therefore, their activities related to Dokdo were influenced by the trend of Korean media and the response from the Korean government. For example, Peter Shin, the leader of the Dokdo guardians-USA is now an overseas advisor to the Dokdo Research Institute at the Northeast Asian History Foundation in Korea, and his activities with Korea—one of which is to hold an International Conference on Dokdo in Korea—dominate the movement. Even though these immigrants are influenced by the trend of mass media and policies in the U.S., which might change their tactics, they still share Koreans’ strong beliefs in the defense of Dokdo. They use general cultural events as a way to affect Korea-U.S.-Japan relations as a whole, although countering the Japanese over Dokdo is their real goal. Churches, however, are reluctant for their whole denominations to fully participate in the Dokdo movement because of church-state relations, but many individuals are nonetheless enraged by Japan’s atrocious acts.¹⁰

The 1.5 generation leads the Washington Special Committee on Dokdo¹¹ and some Korean American communities where a shift in generations is under way. In the case of the Korean American

Association of Virginia, the age group in leadership is mostly 30 to 50 year olds and the 1.5 generation constitutes a majority. Most are bilingual, well educated, and involved in mainstream society.¹² The 1.5 generation leadership still has a lot in common with the first generation regarding knowledge and emotions about Dokdo, but they are taking a major step forward in terms of social interaction.¹³ They are sensitive to the major media outlets in the U.S., especially the trends in the political world, and do not hesitate to express collective rights for their own interests. While the first generation targeted people in the U.S. and the world in general, the 1.5 generation leadership focuses on U.S. politics.

In this context, one of the best accomplishments by the 1.5 generation leadership was the “Dokdo forum,” held in English with foreign scholars. They were supported financially by the Dokdo Research Institute of Northeast Asian History Foundation in Korea, but it was Dr. Pilkyu Kim, Professor of Politics at the University of Maryland, who took the initiative in terms of building the structure and making personal connections for the project. What and how this advanced 1.5 generation has been involved with the Dokdo protection movement and what they are proposing as an alternative lays a foundation for historical reconciliation in Korea-Japan relations.

The Contribution of the 1.5 generation of Korean Americans on Dokdo: Pursuing Universal Values
The aforementioned organizations were established in 2007 and the Dokdo protection movement was reinforced as a result of specific Japanese actions. The statements of Naoyuki Agawa, a Third Secretary in the Japanese embassy in the U.S., using the terminology of “Sea of Japan” and “Takeshima” (Dokdo) exasperated many Koreans.¹⁴ In the early years Korean Americans could not challenge his comments because of the ideological disparity within the Korean community. However, a political challenge soon started by gathering signatures to oppose Japan’s efforts to become a permanent member of the UN Security Council, which led the U.S. State Department to comment on Japan’s distortion of Japanese history textbooks.¹⁵

What galvanized Korean Americans to take a political stand? Japanese marking of the East Sea as the “Sea of Japan,” the U.S. House of Representatives’ passing of House Resolution 121 (the “Comfort Women” resolution), and the attempt by the U.S. Board on Geographic Names (BGN) to changing the name of the sovereign state of Dokdo, were all factors leading up to Koreans beginning to stand up to Japanese bullying. Other examples include Jin-Hyun Kim, president of the Society for the East Sea, who raised the question of Japan renaming the East Sea to the “Sea of Japan” and appealed to the world society, especially to “the free citizens in the U.S., Korea, Japan that they strive for ‘the universal values of human community.’”¹⁶

In standing up to Japan, Korean Americans chose very rational ways to accomplish their goal of denying Japanese sovereignty over Dokdo. They established NGOs, and appealed to other countries in the name of Korean communities.¹⁷ And, most importantly, they clearly defined their moral obligations to “democracy, human rights, diversity, and peace,” a distinct approach among Korean Americans.¹⁸ It is hard to generalize how Koreans in Korea respond to issues related to Japan given the variety of different generations’ opinions among them. They perceive that Japan coveted “my/our land,” rather than bringing a universal values perspective as Korean Americans, especially the 1.5 generation, do. This distinction and approach (shown also in the case of H Res 121) between Koreans and Korean Americans could also be seen in the issue of “comfort women.”

Since the early 1990s when the issue of “comfort women” became domestically and internationally known, Korean Americans in Washington have focused on this issue. The Washington Coalition for Comfort Women Issues (WCCW) was established in 1992, and on 30 July 2007, HR 121 was finally passed by the initiative of Representative Michael Honda, a third generation Japanese American. Leading up to the passage of H Res 121, the 1.5 generation of Korean Americans in Washington were thrust onto the main stage. The memoir of Il-Song Hong, a former joint chairperson of the comfort women issue, pan-national task force in support of H Res 121, shows what their goals were. Mr. Hong, who was actively involved in the Korean community and in the Washington political discourse, was motivated by more than his ethnic identity. In other words, he advocated in favor of the resolution because he saw more universal values such as democracy, human rights, and justice

being violated. The way in which they campaigned was not just to express their anger, but, more importantly, that they followed the due course of procedural democracy. There were some demonstrations but throughout the process Korean Americans wrote letters to each member of Congress and attempted to have a close interaction with the U.S. government. According to Hong, they “exercised the rights of voters.”¹⁹

The biggest effort of this current movement was the attempt by Korean Americans to change the name of the disputed islets to Dokdo and be ratified by the U.S. BGN, showing up the Korean government’s unsuccessful diplomacy. The establishment of the Washington Special Committee on Dokdo is a good example of this more assertive stand. Steve Choi, who actively participated in the previous movements, was a part of leading factions in this organization and became its chairperson, is one of the 1.5 generation Korean Americans who is considered a person who successfully entered the mainstream society in the U.S. Mr. Choi emphasized that the Dokdo effort started as “a massive grassroots citizens campaign,” and it can develop into an organized movement, not just remain an emotional response.²⁰ The Special Committee on Dokdo focused on the masses and politicians in the U.S., and the organizations were promoting their causes not only to the persons concerned in government, but also to the members of Congress. In 2009, Korean American organizations sent letters to public school principals in Montgomery County, Maryland, asking for the adoption of textbooks that include both the East Sea and the Sea of Japan; their proposal was successful in elementary schools. The Dokdo protection movement started with a series of trends that looked as if it were an expression of territorial nationalism, pursuing the preservation of territory in an intense form. But upon further review, the issue of Dokdo started a grassroots movement in which 1.5 generation Korean Americans have taken the stand against Japan.

Conclusion: The 1.5 Generation and Historical Reconciliation

As noted above, how 1.5 generation of Korean Americans construct a discourse on Dokdo and how they act for this cause is different than the first generation Korean Americans. While they continue to share the same source of information with the previous generation, they also reflect the current trends of local media and political circles in Washington. Their approach is “American.” Moreover, the way they respond to the media and political circles (not emotionally but with reason) has earned them respect as members of the American society.

The way in which the discourse on Dokdo is constructed is in accord with the standard of the American worldview, placing democracy, human rights, universality, and other values above those that different nations may value more. In that sense the reason why the 1.5 generation Korean Americans were enraged with Japan regarding the Dokdo issue is, after all, because of the loss from the rejection of universal values. In other words, what Koreans want to hear from Japan is a sincere “I’m sorry.” An apology from Japan, showing true thought and forgiveness, is what Koreans are expecting as a preliminary stage for rational and peaceful historical reconciliation. In 2000, the ratio of 1.5 generation Korean Americans constitutes 16 to 17 percent, which is around 210,000 out of 1.2 million Korean Americans, so they are numerically small, but have an important, forward-looking message.

What about the second generation Korean Americans? It is perhaps easier to expect more universal values from them. However, the issue of Dokdo may not be a good starting point for them to help build their Korean identity. Since Dokdo is an issue between Korea and Japan, it is important for the second generation Korean Americans to keep in step with Korean values that can be very overwhelming for them to actually work together.

For universal values to become a rational alternative to purely nationalistic strategies, there needs to be a group of people with versatility who can make it happen—the 1.5 generation Korean Americans. In terms of historical reconciliation between Korea and Japan, they can contribute to this cause. The 1.5 generation Korean Americans have knowledge of both Korea and the U.S. as a source of self-identification. With such knowledge they blend facts and cosmopolitan Korean sentiments seamlessly so that they might be able to suggest an alternative resolution to attaining universal values for Korea.²¹

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In this respect, the Dokdo protection movement of Korean Americans in Washington is noteworthy. The 1.5 generations Korean Americans are a limited resource that will not last forever. There is a time to work for change, and now is the time for historical reconciliation. Based on the actions of 1.5 generation Korean Americans and their potential ability to help resolve the issue of Dokdo peacefully with the help of the U.S., the ball is now in Japan's court.

NOTES

- 1 Diasporic identity means "to exist outside of time and space in a nation to live inside with difference." JunGyu Park, "The Diaspora Identity of Korean Americans: Focusing on Korean American Cultural Organizations in New York," *Korean Experience in North America*, Vol. 2 (National Institute of Korean History, 2007), 62.
- 2 In-Jin Yoon, "A General Difference in Preference of the National Identity and Preference of Korean Americans," *Studies of Koreans Abroad*, Vol. 6 (Society of Overseas Koreans, 1996), 41-42
- 3 In-Jin Yun, *The Issues and Policy Challenges of the Korean American's Society: Focusing on the Korean-American Youthhood of North America* (Society of Overseas Koreans, 2007), 73
- 4 Park, JunGyu, *Ibid*, p. 69
- 5 On the historical debate regarding the Dokdo issue, refer to: Young-Ran Hur, "The Main Dispute Point in the Issue of Sovereignty over the Dokdo Islets and the Dilemma in 'Peculiar-Land Theory'," *Ewha History Study*, Vol. 36 (2008).
- 6 LOKA-USA was established on July 21, 2008 by Peter Shin, who garnered the participation of such people, such as pastors and professors, from various circles. *KoreaDaily* (Washington, DC), 22 July 2008; 10 September 2008.
- 7 It was launched in the beginning of 1990s and, since then, has been involved in public relations for Dokdo through various cultural activities such as collecting old maps and supporting exhibitions at the Smithsonian museum.
- 8 Taekwondo activities of Bok Sung Choi.
- 9 Testimony of Bok Sung Choi.
- 10 Testimony of Bok Sung Choi.
- 11 It was founded on July 15, 2008, with Steve Choi as Chairperson. The 1.5 generation of Korean Americans is a majority group and there are 50 people in total. It has been actively involved in the Dokdo protection movement by playing such an important role that it held two symposiums on Dokdo, and managed the "Dokdo day" event from 2009 to 2010. Chun Ki Park is now the second chairperson. "Group Introduction" of Washington Coalition for Dokdo Islands.
- 12 ByungGap Min and Youngok Kim, "Advance of the next generation of mainstream and ethnic cohesion," *Korean Experience in North America*, Vol. 1 (National Institute of Korean History, 2007), 268.
- 13 Compared to other ethnicities, the affinity of 1.5 and second generation Korean Americans toward their motherland is so strong that more than 90 percent of them would support the Korean soccer team playing against the U.S. team. ByungGap Min and Youngok Kim, "Advance of the next generation of mainstream and ethnic cohesion," *Korean Experience in North America*, Vol. 1 (National Institute of Korean History, 2007), 279.
- 14 *Korea Times* (Washington, DC), 22 March 2005; 24 March 2005; 25 March 2005.
- 15 *Korea Times* (Washington, DC), 10 March 2005.
- 16 *KoreaDaily* (Washington, DC), 23 October 2009. A typical example of this is the cooperation between the Washington Coalition for Dokdo Islands and CANGO (Corean-American Non-Governmental Organization).
- 17 *KoreaDaily* (Washington, DC), 5 September 2007.
- 18 *KoreaDaily* (Washington, DC), 23 October 2009.
- 19 Testimony of Hong IL Song.
- 20 *Korea Times* (Washington, DC), 18 November 2008.
- 21 *Korea Times* (Washington, DC), 23 October 2009.

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