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ARTICLE

Assimilating Tokto: The Islets in Korean Everyday Life

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Sovereignty over the Tokto Islets is heatedly contested between South Korea and Japan. The Korean government and citizenry have responded to this dispute by inserting the islets into their national collective memory in multifarious ways in an attempt to strengthen their nation's claim to Tokto. The islets are included in the material culture and public memory of the nation in ways that make them part of everyday life for millions of Koreans. Korea's claim to Tokto is currently taught in schools, presented in museums, found in popular songs, and exploited by businesses for profit. The deeper Tokto becomes entrenched in Korean society, the less likely a compromise can be reached with Japan over the islets.

Keywords: Tokto; South Korea; Japan; memory; territorial disputes

Territorial disputes in East Asia remain a serious threat to peace in the region. China and Japan remain embroiled over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, and China and several of its neighbors are at a standoff over control of the Spratley Islands. Equally contentious is the squabble between South Korea and Japan over the Tokto Islets (독도/獨島) (commonly Romanized as Dokdo). While the islets are little more than glorified rocks of no immediate political or economic value, Koreans have responded to Japan's claims by maintaining that Tokto belongs to them and by embedding Tokto deeper into the Korean public sphere and collective memory. For Koreans, the Tokto issue is rooted in a belief that Japan's claims encroach on Korean sovereignty. As a result, Tokto has become an increasingly important part of Korea's historical narrative and national psyche. An examination of this narrative shows that Tokto's increased presence in Korean society is a manifestation of ethnic nationalism that draws heavily on historical resentment toward Japan for the injustices committed during the colonial era (1910–1945).

In the East Sea (formerly called the “Sea of Japan,” a term Koreans reject), roughly halfway between the Korean peninsula and the Japanese mainland, lie two islets: an east islet and a west islet. These islets are outcroppings of basaltic rock that cover a total area of .188 square kilometers and are called “Tokto” by Koreans, and “Takeshima” (たけしま/竹島) by the Japanese. Japan contends that Tokto is part of Shimane Prefecture and is associated with the Oki Islands, while Korea claims that Tokto is administered by Ullŭng County, North Kyŏngsang Province, and is associated with the island of Ullŭng. This essay does not analyze the validity of Japan's or Korea's territorial claims, but instead focuses on the multifarious ways that Tokto has been incorporated into South Korean public memory.

The Korean government, individual citizens, and businesses have responded to the ongoing international controversy over the islets by further integrating Tokto into Korean culture. This essay examines South Korea's wedding of Tokto to its post-colonial identity and public memory, and how that process has transformed a territorial clash into a cultural phenomenon for Korean civil society. Every Korean is aware of and passionate about Tokto. The islets are at the heart of anti-Japanese protests,

have inspired the creation of organizations and museum displays, and continue to be a source of political and cultural conflict with Japan.

Underlying this discussion is the belief that nations are “imagined communities” in the sense proposed by Cornell political scientist Benedict Anderson in his celebrated book by the same title (Anderson 1983, chapter 1). While countries have definite geographic borders, the boundaries of nations change over time. These changes entail—or are caused by—a corresponding mental shift in that country’s populace as to what geographic areas are part of the nation. Nationalism factors heavily into the way countries respond to shifts in their borders. South Koreans have always considered Tokto to be Korean land, but the fervor with which that inclusion has manifested has waxed and waned over time. Only in the past twenty years has Tokto become such an integral part of Korean nationalism.

Tokto’s place in Korea’s “imagined community” is tied to the islets’ centrality in that nation’s collective memory. In essence, Tokto provides a lens through which we can see how ideology is invented and transmitted in South Korea. Collective memory explores “how a social group ... constructs a past through a process of invention and appropriation and what it means to the relationship of power within society” (Confino 2006, 31). Studies on collective memory help to highlight the processes through which Tokto’s representation in Korean society is established and diffused as part of the larger fields of historical remembrance and political ideology (Confino 2011, 198). It is important to note that collective memory is, at its core, actually individual memory: nations do not remember. Social and political institutions can shape what is remembered and how it is memorialized, but only individual people do the remembering. It is in this vein, then, that this analysis shows that since the mid-1990s Korean officialdom and citizens alike have made a more concerted effort to mentally incorporate Tokto into their national polity.

It is worth noting again that this essay is about the presence of Tokto in Korean culture and not the validity of either Korea’s or Japan’s territorial claims. There is an

intense nationalist tone found in Korean culture related to Tokto, and the authors' conveyance of these elements should not be interpreted as acceptance of the Korean position. Additionally, the Japanese nation also asserts that the Tokto Islets are theirs, and has invested political and social resources to present its claims on both domestic and foreign fronts. These efforts are not analyzed here because the authors have not travelled throughout Japan and thus cannot adequately examine the inclusion of the islets into Japanese culture.

Historical Origins of the Dispute

The history of Korea's relationship with Japan is central to understanding the territorial dispute. Koreans are keen to point out that Tokto was the first Korean territory to be annexed by Meiji Japan, which incorporated the islets in 1905 on the premise that they were *terra nullius*, land belonging to no one. That same year, Korea became a protectorate of Japan, and in 1910 became a Japanese colony. Korean historical remembrance of this colonial era (1910–1945), a time of exploitation and national humiliation, is at the heart of Tokto's presence in everyday life.

In the decades following Korea's liberation from Japanese rule in 1945, Koreans have grown ever more confident and assertive on the world stage, particularly in relation to their former colonial overlords. Korea's economy has rapidly advanced and its industries have become major exporters of automobiles and electronics. This economic prosperity has run parallel to a growing nationalism. Koreans are prideful of their cultural heritage and feel that their historical development was corrupted by Japanese imperialism. Koreans view Japan's claims to Tokto as a renewal of Japanese aggression, and see these claims as a slight on Korean honor and a resurrection of Japanese imperialism. In response to these perceived historical injustices, Korean nationalists embed Tokto more deeply into the Korean polity.

For the Japanese, their claims to Tokto are largely about rectifying Japan's legacy. Youngshik D. Bong notes that the Tokto issue is tied to Japan's desire to redeem their nation's actions in Korea during the Meiji Era (1868–1912). Japan's effort to

reclaim Tokto is a “key step in rectifying the misdeeds and injustices” blamed on Japan following its defeat in World War II (Bong 2013, 191–3). Japanese citizens who are involved in pressing Japan’s claims wish to show that not all land acquisition was illegitimate.

Before examining Tokto’s role in Korean society, it is helpful to first detail Japan’s official claims and statements regarding the islets because the Korean incorporation of Tokto into its civic society and public memory has been in response to Japan’s assertions to ownership. The Japanese claim to Tokto Takeshima is largely handled by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (MOFA). The Ministry’s official stance on Tokto, found on its website, is that “Takeshima is an inherent part of the territory of Japan and the occupation of Takeshima by the Republic of Korea is an illegal occupation undertaken on absolutely no basis in international law. Any measures taken with regard to Takeshima by the Republic of Korea based on such an illegal occupation have no legal justification.” Accordingly, in 2008 MOFA released a document on their website (translated into 12 languages) entitled “The 10 issues of Takeshima” (www.mofa.go.jp). This document details each of the reasons why the Japanese believe that Tokto is rightfully their territory and addresses the problems they see with Korean claims. The Japanese assert that there is insufficient evidence to prove that Korea occupied Tokto previous to 1905, and that therefore Tokto was *terra nullius* when Japan claimed the islet as its own. Based on this position, Japan includes Tokto as part of its sovereign territory, defending Tokto’s inclusion in its annual defense white paper since 2005.

One of the Japanese Foreign Ministry’s main points in this document is that the San Francisco Peace Treaty of 1951 (which stripped Japan of all land acquired through imperialism) does not mention Tokto. In fact, the United States rejected Korea’s request to add Tokto to the list of territories that the Japanese were required to return. However, many scholars agree that the decision to omit Tokto from the Treaty was made by the United States for its own geopolitical considerations and does not legitimize Japanese territorial claims (Lee and Van Dyke 2010, 741–62).

The Treaty was worded vaguely in reference to a number of smaller territories and simply omitted several issues to avoid wrangling with items that the United States considered less important than those of the Cold War.

The Korean government and populace have responded to Japan's claims by publishing counterclaims¹ and by elevating Tokto to such a degree that it is hallowed ground within the nation's collective memory. The islets have become a lightning rod for unresolved historical issues between Japan and Korea. An employee of the Northeast Asian History Foundation (NEAHF), a government-funded think tank, in an interview with the authors, explained that Tokto deserved special status because it has been Korean territory for over 1,000 years. He noted that, for Koreans, it is a symbol of their nation since the islets were the "first victim of colonization in 1905" when Japan laid claim to them before the occupation of Korea.

Herein is the impetus to include Tokto in the fabric of everyday life: in the minds of Koreans, Japan's persistent claim to sovereignty over Tokto is tantamount to a refusal to return all of the land that was "stolen" during the colonial period. The South Korean government, on Cyber Tokto (<http://en.Tokto.go.kr>), argues that "Japan has forgotten the past" and that Tokto is "The Easternmost Island of Korea" despite "Japan's reckless ownership disputes." In other words, Japan's failure to recognize Tokto as Korean territory means that Japan has not properly recognized Korea's independence.

For Koreans, the Japanese claim to Tokto triggers remembrance of colonial-era oppression that is rooted deeply in Korean collective memory and nationalism. These small, craggy outcroppings have symbolic significance for the Korean people because they reflect the victimhood and historical injustices at the heart of Korean national historical consciousness (*han*) and ethnic nationalism. Japan is viewed as imperialistic and insensitive, blind to the past injustices it inflicted upon the Korean nation.

¹ It is beyond the scope of this essay to summarize and evaluate the Korean claims to Tokto. These can be found in Shin Yong Ha's *Sixteen points for understanding the truth about Tokto*. It is available in Korean, Japanese, and English.

Koreans deny having any strategic interest in the islets as a military base, or in the economic potential of the oceanic resources surrounding the islets (Kim and Cho 2011, 431–5).

Government Activities to Promote Tokto

South Korean government offices at the municipal, provincial, and national levels are active within Korean society to ensure citizens are familiar with the Tokto issue. Over the past twenty years, the Korean state has invested heavily in incorporating Tokto in public memory and the public sphere through a plethora of educational endeavors, government-funded organizations, and government-sponsored activities. The Korean state often uses the Tokto dispute to their advantage, to counter the disunity created by other political issues; the government taps into anti-Japanese nationalist fervor and the attending shared sense of national suffering as a way to draw the Korean people together.

This inculcation process begins for most Koreans with the public school curriculum that introduces students to Korea's national historical narrative, which includes Tokto. Conversations with students and teachers at Hanmin High School in P'aju indicate that Tokto is part of the mandatory curriculum; the Ministry of Education now requires all elementary, middle, and high schools to teach 10 hours of classes a year on the history and environment of Tokto. The Korean Ministry of Education, in conjunction with the NEAHF, has designated 60 schools to teach a more in-depth curriculum on the history of Tokto through the use of educational programs such as field trips to special exhibits. This sort of politics of identity is an important part of Korean nationalism.

Museums, as a cultural and ideological phenomenon, are an important part of situating Tokto in Korea's public memory. Generally speaking, museums are "used by the state to control memory and to construct visual and spatial images of the past for political and nation-building purposes" (Denton 2014, 12). This is especially true in Korea. Three such permanent, Tokto-related establishments are the Tokto Museum in Seoul, the Tokto Museum on Ullŭng Island, and the Tokto Research Institute. The Tokto Museum in the Sŏdaemun'gu neighborhood of Seoul, opened by the NEAHF in 2012,

provides a world-class memorial for the city's 10 million people. This museum claims to be "an educational site for the collection and preservation of Tokto-related materials, a scientific museum for experiencing the nature and history of Tokto, and a 3D textbook that presents information about Tokto in a three-dimensional format." This modern facility offers a 4D theater and a cyber-exhibition hall that can be accessed online. In an example of the government and civil society working in unison, the museum's collection was gathered from government offices, public and private broadcast companies, civil groups, and individual researchers.

The Tokto Museum on Ullŭng Island, founded in 1995, draws more than 125,000 annual visitors. The website for the Tokto Museum claims that one of the purposes of the museum "is to clear up Japan's fictitious insistence of 'the theory of Occupation' and 'Sea of Japan.'" This museum presents a historical narrative of the Korean people, from the Three Kingdoms Era (57BCE–668CE) to the present, citing Tokto as an important part of Korean history. The museum's three exhibition halls display historical maps and materials that support Korea's claim to the islets. Museum placards provide weighted nationalistic statements such as, "Japan's thoughtless words regarding Tokto" and "Japan's absurd territorial claims over Tokto." The museum provides a cable car that takes visitors to an observation post from which the islets are visible on a clear day. The grounds are adorned with stones and plants indigenous to Tokto in order to produce a more complete Tokto experience, and the museum itself was even constructed to resemble the shape of the islets.

There are many other museums throughout the peninsula that offer Tokto exhibits, too numerous to examine individually. As an example, Ihwa Woman's University's Natural History Museum hosts a children's corner devoted to Tokto, and the Independence Hall of Korea in Ch'ŏnan provides an interactive computer station and a short documentary film. In addition to these, an October 22, 2012, newsletter from the NEAHF noted the many other Tokto museums in Korea:

In Seoul, the Tokto Experience Museum for Children within the National Children and Youths' Library in Kangnam features the history and nature of Tokto. As for a private institution, the Tokto Promotional Hall run by the

Tokto Love Society in the city of Koyang, Kyönggi Province, exhibits old maps from the 17th to 19th centuries, and the photographs of animals and plants inhabiting Tokto, and Tokto stamps. However, the exhibitions of these institutions are incomplete, featuring either the history or the nature of Tokto, not both. By contrast, the Tokto Experience Hall for Children features both the history and the nature of Tokto on exhibition angled toward the main target of children.

The NEAHF, which opened in 2006, is one of several academic organizations that promotes the active inclusion of Tokto into public memory. The NEAHF is a government-funded think tank that purports to seek reconciliation and peace in Northeast Asia. While maintaining academic independence from the government, it is pro-Korean on historical issues, particularly in regard to Tokto. In response to Japan's MOFA's "The 10 Issues of Takeshima," the NEAHF, with the help of Japanese historian Naito Seichu, published the "Critique of the 10 Issues of Takeshima," identifying faults they found in the Japanese arguments. The official opinion of the NEAHF on Tokto and Japan-related issues was well summarized in the preface of a booklet they published in 2006. It stated:

The Republic of Korea regrets that Japan is undermining relations between the two nations by challenging Korean sovereignty over Tokto; an island that has been Korean territory for fifteen hundred years. Korean title to Tokto is indisputable. . . . Sadly, Japan's territorial claims prompt Koreans to recall painful memories of brutal Japanese colonial rule and to ask themselves whether they can cultivate genuine friendship with their island neighbor Japan's continued challenge only serves to reinforce our suspicion that the public apologies by Japanese leaders and politicians for Japan's past aggression have been nothing but hollow words and empty gestures (NEAHF 2006, 5).

The strong language used in this text, which displays hostility toward the Japanese, is typical of public and private educational institutions in Korea. In this document

the NEAHF accentuates the victimization of Tokto and, by extension, the Korean nation; it also accuses Japan of acting in bad faith in its efforts to resolve historical issues. The NEAHF website exemplifies how Koreans parlay Japan's territorial claims into an affront against Korean sovereignty and independence. It claims that "Japan's ceaseless sovereignty claims to Tokto" is no different than Japan claiming sovereign rights over the Korean peninsula, which was "occupied forcibly by Japan" and led to "Japanese imperial aggressive wars." The website then adds:

This is as much a denial of Korea's complete liberation and independence. Whenever Japan insists on sovereignty claims to Tokto, Korean people recall the infelicitous history with indescribable suffering and pains during the period of colonization by Japan's invasion.

In 2008 the NEAHF established the Tokto Research Institute as an internal department. This institute focuses on publicity activities relevant to Tokto and the naming of the East Sea. It also supports other Tokto-related organizations and promotes the dissemination of Tokto-related information within Korea and abroad. Among its many tasks, the NEAHF publishes promotional materials in foreign languages for distribution in foreign countries. It also works closely with Korean civic groups, such as the Tokto Guardians, to encourage international organizations to recognize Korea's ownership of Tokto, as well as the renaming of the "Sea of Japan" to "East Sea."

The Independence Hall is another example of Korean incorporation of Tokto into the nation's culture and collective memory. The Independence Hall, opened in 1987, is the government's premier memorial for commemorating the Korean independence movement. The museum is visited by countless school children on fieldtrips each year. The research branch of the Independence Hall publishes an array of academic and promotional materials that defend Korea's claims to Tokto. The Independence Hall, much like the Tokto Museum on Ullŭng Island, presents a historical narrative of Korea. At this institution, the emphasis is on Japanese imperialist aggression in Korea—and Tokto is presented as a victim of Japanese territorial aggrandizement. This

type of memorialization ensures Tokto is “constantly close to the surface of consciousness, and to the core of moral perceptions”; it also evokes “conscious engagement with the data that a culture helps memory retain” (Cubitt 2007, 145).

Among the many informational materials available at the Independence Hall at the time of our visit was a pamphlet about the purpose and goals of the Hall. On the back of this pamphlet was a map of East Asia and a close-up of the Korean peninsula. On both maps, Tokto is depicted as a dot in the East Sea off the coast of Korea. There were two significant problems with these maps: first, Tokto is located disproportionately closer to Korea than it is in actuality; and second, Ullŭng Island, the closest Korean territory to Tokto, is not on either map (**Figure 1**). Ullŭng is an island 388 times the size of Tokto with a population of 7,764; meanwhile, Tokto houses a single three-person family and security forces. Were it not for the controversy with Japan, Tokto might have been left off the map and Ullŭng included. The cartographic distortions displayed within the Independence Hall and on maps are examples of how the Republic of Korea accords Tokto special status in public memory.

Monuments and exhibits related to Tokto often include information about the islet’s natural habitat and ecology. The Tokto Museum on Ullŭng, for instance, included panels describing the wildlife of Tokto. Similarly, the Independence Hall exhibit contained an interactive computer screen where you could explore the different kinds of flowers, birds, fish, and seaweeds that make Tokto their home. The message conveyed at these locations is that Tokto’s delicate natural ecology is part of Korean conservation efforts. The inclusion of environmental and ecological topics provides a more subtle approach to laying claim to the islets; the imagery of animals and plants, while not an overt political statement, nevertheless draws the viewer in to the national ideology. Complicating the ecological issue are the natural resources, namely natural gas, under the ocean floor and exclusive fishing zones of the Tokto area. While Japan and Korea likely share an appreciation for these resources, neither side emphasizes the economic aspect of the dispute.

In early moves to signify Tokto’s importance to the Korean nation, the government designated the islets as Natural Monument No. 336 in 1982, and featured them



Figure 1: Maps on an Independence Hall of Korea brochure that show Tokto disproportionately closer to Korea. Note that Ullŭng Island is absent.

on stamps in 2004. To further solidify Korea's control over the islets, the government has built a wharf, lighthouse, helicopter landing, and communication towers on Tokto. More significantly, in August 2012, then-South Korean President I Myōngbak visited Tokto during a time of heightened tension; Japan immediately protested and recalled its ambassador from Seoul.

The impact of the government's efforts to insert Tokto into the Korean collective memory and ethnic nationalism is immeasurable. Guy Podoler, a lecturer at the University of Haifa, correctly notes that it is "impossible to know the precise effect

that dominant ideologies have on the individual” or “to quantify and . . . measure the politics of collective memory” (Podoler 2011, 15). Thus, we cannot claim with certainty that the glorification of Tokto at these facilities or institutions has been successful at altering public memory or popular opinion; instead, we are left to focus on the discourse in the public sphere and to extrapolate from there.

Private Efforts to Promote Tokto

Private citizens often act in conjunction with their local and national government offices to embed Tokto deeper into the Korean national memory. Governments, South Korea included, do “not have absolute control over cultural industries and historical memory” nor are “their particular narratives . . . foisted on a disbelieving and recalcitrant citizenry” (Denton 2014, 3). In some cases, the lines between private and official activities in the public sphere are blurred and fluid. The authors have conducted dozens of interviews and engaged in scores of conversations with public officials as well as normal citizens and found no counternarrative or dissent in regard to Tokto. By all appearances, Koreans are unified on this issue.

Tokto’s popularity in Korean culture is such that businesses have commercialized the islets. Businesses throughout the peninsula profit from marketing the islets in a number of ways. Poster-style advertisements featuring Tokto are located inside Seoul’s subway cars; passengers riding the subway can behold ads for cram schools (*hagwŏn*) that feature Tokto’s natural beauty. Additionally, a variety of corporations produce television commercials that utilize Tokto imagery to sell products or services. The commoditization of Tokto is particularly prevalent among businesses selling stationery. In the heart of Myŏngdong, a popular shopping area in Seoul, the authors found a knick-knack shop that sold Tokto-inspired spoons, notebooks, socks, hats, and shirts—all featuring pictures of Tokto or the slogan “Tokto is our Land” written in Korean [독도는 우리땅].

Tokto is also commercialized extensively by seafood restaurants on storefront signs, menus, and business names. The streets surrounding Hong’ik University in Seoul offer a microcosm of the rest of Korean cities. One mom-and-pop restaurant displays a cartoonish squid with “Tokto” (독도) plastered on its body. Another

restaurant, which sells raw fish, uses an image of the islets on its sign and has panoramic photos of Tokto hanging on the interior walls. Some restaurants, such as one in the Park Hyatt in Pusan, boast Tokto shrimp on the menu.

The island of Ullŭng, located near the islets of Tokto, is even more inundated with Tokto promotions and paraphernalia. An observatory on the island, a short distance from the Tokto Museum, offers a view of Tokto in the distance on a clear day; there are viewing binoculars and a giant yellow arrow indicating the “Tokto direction.” An interested buyer can take the cable car up to the Tokto Observatory, which has a gift shop. There, a consumer can purchase an oval-shaped object featuring golden Tokto islets and a protective dome that resembles an oversized Tokto snow globe. Many businesses on Ullŭng utilize “Tokto” as a part of their name (**Figure 2**). Billboards with advertisements for Tokto and stores selling Tokto souvenirs are everywhere. Stores on the island sell Tokto bandanas, T-shirts (both adult and infant sizes), pens, postcards, pins, fans, and plates.

Some of the available paraphernalia specifically targets children and teenagers. In a gift shop at the Independence Hall of Korea the authors purchased a Korean language Tokto-themed comic book that contains historical facts about Tokto and, even more interestingly, portrays Japan as a villain (**Figure 3**). For example, one



Figure 2: Two storefronts on Ullŭng Island that use Tokto as their store name. The one on the left is Tokto Fishing Supplies and the one on the right is Tokto Travel.

page depicts a samurai and a ninja discussing their plans to steal Tokto and make it Japanese land (VANK 2010, 62). The book even links Japan to the Nazis. In one frame (**Figure 4**) a Japanese character and Adolf Hitler stand together; the Japanese man salutes Hitler and exclaims “Heil Hitler! My eternal friend.” Hitler responds, “Well done! Japan.” The accusation that Japan is still in cahoots with the Nazis, and the fact that this allegation is marketed to Korea’s youth, indicates that the islets are shared symbols shrouded in a near-sacred political myth.

The message conveyed to the reader in the comic is drawn from ethnic nationalism: Japan—Korea’s historical nemesis—is still trying to steal Korean land. Thus, Japan’s imperialistic designs on Korean territory are not limited to the past. This book is published by VANK, Voluntary Agency Network of Korea, a quasi-governmental organization that claims to have 70,000 Korean cyber-diplomats. According to VANK’s website, its members “dream of becoming the main players in changing the image of Korea in [a] global society, [because] people all over the world are now changing their perception of Korea.” VANK’s website also provides information on Korea’s claims to Tokto, addresses the comfort women controversy, and promotes



Figure 3: A frame from a comic book published by VANK. The two Japanese men are plotting to take Tokto for Japan. The dialogue in the upper panel is as follows: Samurai: “Someday Tokto will become Japanese land.” The ninja responds, “We will steal Tokto without a sound, like a cloud.”



Figure 4: A frame from the VANK comic book that portrays Japan as being friends with the Nazis.

Korea's position on the naming of the East Sea. Herein we see the amalgamation of historical issues in Korea's collective memory.

Other civic groups also conflate the Tokto territorial dispute with historical injustices committed by Japan, particularly the recruitment of comfort women. Korean ethnic nationalists maintain that Tokto and the surviving comfort women continue to suffer as a result of Japan's unrepentant approach to history and its unwillingness to resolve these historical issues. For example, each Wednesday at noon, comfort women groups and activists meet in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul to demand that the Japanese government apologize sincerely for the historical injustices committed against them. These groups have erected a simple statue across the street from the Japanese embassy (a young woman in a *hanbok* sitting on a bench) to memorialize the comfort women.

Right-wing Korean nationalists, however, take advantage of these protests to advocate for Korean territorial claims on Tokto. The presence of Tokto activists at these protests may explain why in June 2012 Japanese activist Suzuki Nobuyuki placed a wooden board stating "Tokto is Japanese territory" in front of the comfort women statue mentioned above. Suzuki also placed a similar placard next to a

statute of Yun Bonggil, a Korean patriot who assassinated several Japanese colonial officials in 1932. Suzuki's actions caused outrage in Korea, and the South Korean government demanded her extradition; in response, Suzuki mailed yet another placard to the Korean courts (*Korean Herald* Online August 15, 2012, and June 6, 2013). This event sparked a renewed wave of public interest in Tokto.

Any discussion of Tokto must also include the song "Tokto is our Land" (독도는 우리땅), written by Chŏng Kwang'ae in 1982. This tune references climatic, faunal, and geographic details of Tokto, as well as Korea's historical claim to the islets. The song contains a sentence that goes, "Hawaii is American territory, I do not know about Taema-do (Tsushima), [but] Tokto is our land." Every Korean, old and young, seems to know this catchy song. YouTube has scores of covers of the song, many by popular Korean singers and actors. Flash mobs in Seoul and Pusan danced to the song in 2012, and another flash mob of 100 Korean-Americans danced to the song outside City Hall in San Jose, California, on October 24, 2015.

Many public figures in Korean society have involved themselves in their nation's territorial dispute. Popular rock-ballad singer Kim Changhun and actor Song Ilguk organized a 220-kilometer swim relay to Tokto in August 2012 to celebrate Korea's independence day. In response, BS Nippon Corporation, a Japanese broadcast company, postponed the airing of the South Korean drama series *A Man Called God*, which stars Song (*Korean Herald* online August 15 and 20, 2012). As recently as August 2014 singer I Sŭngch'ŏl held a performance on Tokto; Japan responded by denying him entry into that country three months later. The Tokto issue even reached the 2012 London Summer Olympics. Pak Chongu, a midfielder for Korea's soccer team, grabbed a Korean language sign from a spectator that declared "Tokto is our land" and ran across the field after Korea's victory over Japan in the bronze medal match. For this political act, Pak was forbidden from participating in the award ceremony. Also, at the 2009 World Baseball Classic in Korea, fans held similar "Tokto is our land" signs even when Korea did not play against Japan.

Significance of the Tokto Dispute

Korean ethnic nationalism, which is deeply rooted in sensitivity over Korean sovereignty, is at the heart of Tokto's presence in Korean public memory. Koreans believe that Japan's current claims to the isles show the unrepentant nature of the Japanese state in regard to past imperialist aggression; the perceived slights on Korean sovereignty have triggered feelings of victimhood that are part of Korea's ethnic nationalism and collective memory. Korean businesses, governmental agencies, and citizenry have responded to Japan's claims in unison in order to include, promote, and commercialize Tokto as a natural part of the Korean nation.

The Tokto issue is unlikely to be resolved under the current Japanese or Korean regimes. South Korean president Park Geun-hye has delayed all summits with Japan's prime minister Abe Shinzō because Koreans are angered by Abe's supposed historical revisionism, which includes Japan's claims on Tokto (*Korea Herald* online, July 16, 2013). Korean Foreign Minister Yun Byōngse clarified the issue by stating it is "difficult to build a relationship of trust if Japanese leaders continue making remarks taken as historical revisionism," adding that Japan should act sincerely by "facing history squarely" (*Japan Times* online, February 14, 2014). Herein we see that Tokto is part of a larger social and historical menagerie of problems between Japan and Korea, which helps explain its importance to Korean society.

The government's emphasis on promoting Tokto as Korean territory—whether it be through museums, classrooms, or think tanks—serves two functions for the state. First, it is a tactic to ingrain the islets so deeply into Korean civic society that the Japanese government is forced to back down in what Koreans treat as a zero-sum game. Second, Tokto functions as a golden goose that unifies the Korean citizenry because Tokto has become an integral part of Korean anti-Japanese nationalism. However, there is no foreseeable resolution in sight for the Tokto dispute. Interestingly, the Japanese government recently acknowledged (and nothing more) that China disputes Japan's claims to the Senkaku Islands; this was a minor concession, but one of symbolic importance.

Japan seeks to resolve this issue by having the International Court of Justice (ICJ) settle the dispute, but Korea refuses because Koreans consider Tokto an integral part of their nation. Koreans feel that Japan has nothing to lose by lobbying to the ICJ, while Korea, on the other hand, has everything to lose. However, Koreans are content to not take the issue to the ICJ, because they believe it is unnecessary. For them, the issue is more about Japan's failure to recognize Korea's full independence; the controversy will linger in Korea until Japan acknowledges that Tokto is rightfully Korean soil. Historical reconciliation for Koreans grows less likely as Tokto becomes further engrained in Korean collective memory. Resolution for the Korean nation requires that the Japanese completely concede any claims to the islets. A negotiated settlement is not possible. Furthermore, because the Tokto issue is tied to other perceived historical injustices, the Japanese government, which recently settled the comfort women issue with Korea, will also need to rectify a host of other problems in tandem before Koreans consider all accounts settled.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Authors Information

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Laura Whitefleet-Smith participated in the ASIANetwork Freeman Student-Faculty Fellows Program along with four other students from Coastal Carolina University in 2011. She has since earned a Master of Science in Marine Sciences from the University of New England. Laura enjoys interdisciplinary research and concludes that her experience in the ASIANetwork program has prepared her to succeed in her future endeavors.

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