

A letter from South Korean junior high school students

The fourth “Shimane Prefecture Takeshima Issue Research Group” was launched on June 11. Two days before that, on June 9, a story about a letter sent from South Korean middle school students to junior high schools in Shimane Prefecture was run by the local newspaper San-in Chuo Shimpo under the headline, “A letter criticizing Takeshima education—from South Korean students to 56 junior high schools in Shimane.” The same day, NHK Matsue broadcasting station also reported on this event in its evening news program with the headline, “A letter from South Korea criticizing Takeshima education.”

On June 10, this news item was also carried by Asahi Shimbun and Yomiuri Shimbun, which reported it in their local news pages for the Shimane area. This ricocheted to South Korea and, in response to the Asahi Shimbun’s article, Korean newspaper JoongAng Ilbo published a news item under the headline, “A letter written by middle school students requesting Shimane Prefecture to stop teaching a distorted history of Dokdo.” This triggered a sensation in South Korea.

The letter that criticized Takeshima education was sent from three third-year students at Hampyeong middle school located in Hampyeon County in South Jeolla Province, South Korea. I saw a copy of the original letter on June 10, when I visited the Shimane Prefectural Takeshima Reference Room in preparation for the research group meeting. As the letter from the middle school students describes the South Korean view of history taught as part of their “Dokdo education,” I found it to be a clear illustration of the reality of current Dokdo education in South Korea. I received a copy of the letter to use as an additional document for examination by the research group on the following day.

In recent years, young people in South Korea have been used to communicate the South Korean view of history to the public inside and outside South Korea, and the letter in question can be considered a good example of this. I wonder how the Japanese news media that reported on the letter perceive the current reality in South Korea. This letter represents a case of students being used for political purposes, and this is a stance that must be criticized.

If the South Korean side claims that Takeshima is a part of their territory, instead of using young people the South Korean Government should make such a claim through diplomatic channels and the dispute should be settled diplomatically. Instead, while insisting that there is no territorial dispute between Japan and South Korea, the Northeast Asian History Foundation, a national policy research institute, the Voluntary Agency Network of Korea (VANK), a government-supported

organization, and the like all encourage and promote their propaganda activities on an international stage using young people.

There was a sequel to the initial commotion caused by the “letter criticizing Takeshima education.” On June 10, Mr. Kim Ho, a reporter for Korean newspaper JoongAng Ilbo, visited Hampyeong middle school to interview the three students involved, along with Mr. Kim Jong Pe, a 43-year-old teacher responsible for the school’s history club. A video of the subsequent interview was then made public. In this interview, Mr. Kim Jong Pe stated, “Our ongoing activities include writing letters to teachers in Japan and creating UCC so that we can send video letters to Korean junior high school students living in Japan as well as Japanese junior high school students.” It turned out that this teacher had played a leading role in the whole process.

In addition, according to the Hampyeong middle school’s website, on June 12, the Dokdo Volunteer Guards Memorial Foundation taught first-year students about the Dokdo Volunteer Guards at the school’s library.



(Source: the Hampyeong middle school’s website)

This took place because Dokdo education has been promoted throughout South Korea since the South Korean Ministry of Education announced the System of Dokdo Education for Elementary, Middle and High Schools in February 2011. Since then, responding to a question posed by the JoongAng Ilbo’s reporter, Kim Ho, a middle school student stated, “I went to Dokdo as part of an on-site learning program and talked with members of the Dokdo Volunteer Guards. I thought it was

an opportunity for me to gain a wider perspective on the Dokdo dispute.” There is some further background to this response. Since 2015, the local education authorities of South Jeolla Province, where Hampyeong middle school is located, have secured budget funds and engaged in various activities such as providing materials for Dokdo education classes, organizing visits to Dokdo to explore its history and culture, supporting the activities of research groups focusing on the practice of Dokdo education classes, and generally acting as the main education support agency leading Dokdo education.

In contrast, the first time the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology publicly mentioned Takeshima was in the 2017 Guidelines for the Course of Study, announced on March 31, 2017. Moreover, no supplementary education materials or specific teaching plans like those that have been developed for Dokdo education by the Northeast Asian History Foundation in South Korea have yet been prepared for Takeshima education. Given the current situation, I wonder how Japanese teachers can teach their students. With regard to the “letter criticizing Takeshima education” from South Korean middle school students, I am not sure if they are able to point out what is wrong and how effectively they are able to provide appropriate guidance to their students in this regard.

I wonder how the Japanese Government will remedy the current situation. I dare to ask this question because the Japanese Government has yet to come up with any effective strategies or tactics for half a century since the Takeshima dispute first arose.

In contrast, the “Shimane Prefecture Takeshima Issue Research Group” published *100 Questions and 100 Answers on the Takeshima Issue* in March 2014, clarifying the whole picture regarding the Takeshima issue. The Dokdo Historical Materials Research Group in North Gyeongsang Province attempted to argue against this information by publishing *A Criticism of 100 Questions and 100 Answers on the Takeshima Issue*, but it failed. This *Critique* was originally published on the North Gyeongsang Province’s website but has since been deleted, and now this website does not show any trace of ever publishing it in the first place – illustrating how they failed to refute any of the arguments put forward in *100 Questions and 100 Answers on the Takeshima Issue*.

Nevertheless, the South Korean side has never ceased to criticize Japan. This is because they have found some weaknesses in the booklet entitled “*10 points to understand the Takeshima Dispute*” prepared by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, based on a report made by the Shimane Prefecture Takeshima Issue Research Group. Unlike the Shimane Prefecture research group, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs lacks the capability to develop effective counter-arguments. Taking advantage of this, whenever the Shimane Prefecture research group points out any faults in

Korean arguments, the South Korean side targets the viewpoints presented by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, knowing that there will be no comeback. Unless we can overcome this structural failure it will be hard for us to ever settle the Takeshima dispute.

So, what the news media should do now is not just confine themselves to reporting what is going on. Why are Japan and South Korea unable to resolve the Takeshima dispute? What the media should do is investigate and identify the real roots of the problems hindering a settlement in both countries.

When the Shimane Prefectural Assembly was taking steps to enact the Takeshima Day ordinance, it was the Japanese Government of the time that tried to prevent the ordinance from being adopted. This stance continued even after the Democratic Party of Japan took over the administration. The Takeshima dispute has, therefore, taken on the aspect of an “internal affair” in both Japan and South Korea, as well as being an “international affair” between the two countries.

Under such circumstances, the letter from the South Korean middle school students has some potential to provide clues on how to resolve the Takeshima dispute. In the interview conducted by Korean newspaper JoongAng Ilbo’s reporter, Kim Ho, the three students from Hampyeong middle school said, “We want to have opportunities for discussions with Japanese junior high school students.” This indicates that it has now become necessary for Japanese and South Korean junior high school students to talk with each other about the common challenge of how best to settle the Takeshima dispute, rather than just talking about Japan-South Korea relations based on the ideas suggested by adults. In order to provide opportunities for such discussions, I encourage Japanese junior high schools to study and learn more about the Takeshima dispute so that they can discuss this topic further with the three third-year students from Hampyeong middle high school.

We, at the fourth “Shimane Prefecture Takeshima Issue Research Group,” will continue to examine Takeshima-related research activities in South Korea and, as before, work towards clarifying the relevant historical facts. I hope that, in order to settle the Takeshima dispute, a lot of people inside and outside Shimane Prefecture will participate in our activities - to the maximum extent possible.

I hope this will come about because the Takeshima dispute also constitutes a source of embarrassment to both Japan and South Korea that should not be allowed to continue.

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