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A foreigner's journey of discovery and Dokdo



Steven Barber, webmaster of www.dokdo-takeshima.com, poses on Dokdo's East Islet during his field trip to the easternmost rocky islets in the East Sea in June 2009. / Courtesy of Steven Barber

By Steven Barber

This is the fourth of a five-part series examining Korean and Japanese claims regarding Dokdo, and the cause of the territorial dispute over the rocky islets sitting midway between the two countries. ED.

It's been over five years since I launched www.dokdo-takeshima.com, a website dedicated to Dokdo that both Korean and Japanese governments claim as their own territory.

What started as playful online debating naturally evolved into something I am quite proud of.

Researching the problem of Dokdo, which lies less than 90 kilometers east of Korea's

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(454) Government seal

Ulleung Island in the East Sea, has given me numerous experiences ranging from sheer boredom to excitement.

Thousands of hours reading and searching online databases were needed to study the problem in depth. I've explored Ulleung Island's valleys and mountains and even spent a night on Dokdo itself.

After many online discussions about Dokdo with both Japanese and Koreans it became apparent that the two countries have different approaches and origins to their beliefs.

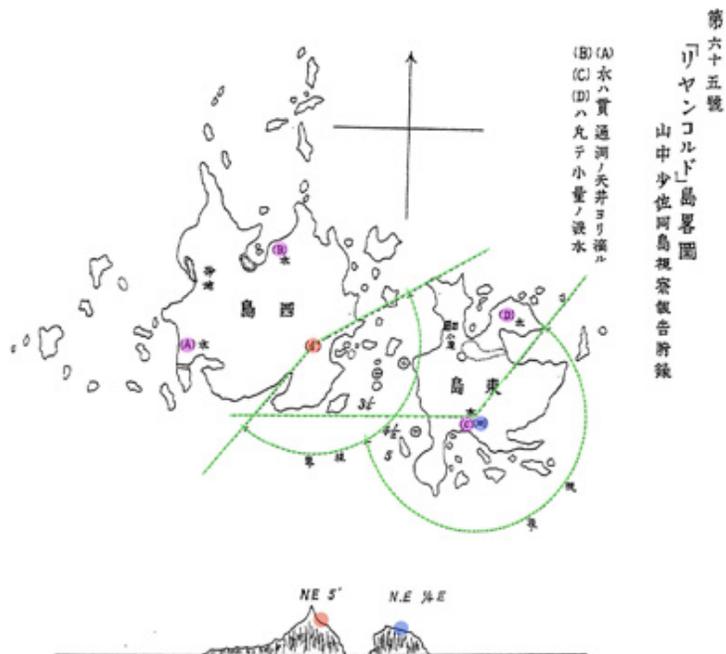
Japan's effort to reclaim Dokdo, which it refers to as Takeshima, is fueled by a small but determined group of right wingers. Most of these Japanese are anonymous.

They obsessively lobby and spread propaganda related to other issues of contention between Japan and her neighbors.

Following Internet links that claim Dokdo as Japan's inherent territory will eventually lead you to the same Japanese netizens who deny the Nanjing massacre, comfort women and other wartime atrocities.

However, Korea's claim for Dokdo is supported by the vast majority of Koreans who believe with conviction the islets are theirs.

With this in mind, the Korean government is truly representative of how Koreans feel about Dokdo while Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs seems to be appeasing right wing activists.



Explanation of Added Colour

- Possible building site on West islet.
- Possible building site on East islet.
- Range of visibility from possible sites.
- Locations of water sources.

アジア歴史資料センター
Japan Center for Asian Historical Records
<http://www.jacar.go.jp/>

Dokdo Island is drawn with dashed lines indicating the range of visibility from various vantage points in this survey map drawn by Shibakichi Yamanaka, deputy commander of the Japanese warship Tsushima, right before Japan's annexation of Dokdo into Japan's territory on Feb. 22, 1905.

/ Courtesy of www.dokdo-takeshima.com

Japan's military motive

Sitting slouched over a computer for hours on end has been rewarding.

After searching through the labyrinth of historical data available on the website of Japan Center for Asian Historical Records (JACAR), I was fortunate to come across files detailing Japan's Imperial Navy's involvement on Dokdo prior to their annexation of the islets.

These records are the "smoking gun" revealing Japan's military motive for unlawfully seizing Dokdo (Takeshima) in 1905.

Koreans assert Japan's annexation of Dokdo was military aggression. Now these records can be read in Japanese with proper historical context.

So, to present these documents to all, especially Japanese gives me great satisfaction.

There are a few documents I uncovered that I feel carry great significance.

The first is the logbooks of the Japanese warship Tsushima. The Nov. 13th 1904 entry specifically states Dokdo (Liancourt Rocks) should be surveyed for military watchtowers and telegraph lines.

Hours of searching paid off when I found the details of the warship Tsushima's survey from JACAR.

The Tsushima's captain stated Dokdo's East Islet was suitable for construction of (military) structures although there was a lack of potable water. These records were dated Jan. 5 1905.

Loopholes in Japan's claims

The survey map drawn by the warship Tsushima's deputy commander Shibakichi Yamanaka proves 100 percent Japan's annexation was military aggression.

Here Dokdo Island was drawn with dashed lines indicating the range of visibility from various vantage points.

Remember these military activities took place before Japan incorporated the Korean easternmost island into Shimane Prefecture on Feb. 22, 1905.

Thus, we know without a doubt Japan annexed Dokdo with the explicit purpose of using the islets to defeat the Russian Navy and control Korea.

The strongest documents to support Korea's claim to Dokdo came from the Japanese themselves.

Japanese online historical archives, university websites, Takeshima (Dokdo) lobby forums and even Japan's government websites helped us immensely.

Documents and maps the Japanese government uses as proof of historical title to Dokdo can be shown as exaggerated, false or even as proof of Korean ownership. Two government brochures, one from Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the other from Shimane Prefecture were easily refuted when we included historical records they deliberately omitted.

Field research on Dokdo

On location field research was an integral part of our website research. More than once I have slogged up Ulleung Island's steep mountains and thick valleys.

I have also stayed overnight on Dokdo and toured the islets extensively. These trips gave us an understanding of the regional geography of Dokdo.

We could use our firsthand knowledge of Ulleung Island and Dokdo to give an accurate analysis of historical maps. Without this on site experience, those who study the issue often misinterpret historical records and maps.

Field research on Ulleung Island and Dokdo was beneficial beyond the study of historical records.

We met many local residents whose livelihood depended on Dokdo Island and adjacent waters. Ulleung Island's tourism and fishing industries are heavily reliant on Dokdo.

By observing the present relationship between these two sister islands we could also understand how Ulleung Island and Dokdo were regarded as inseparable throughout history.

The boat rides to and from Ulleung Island and Dokdo gave us geographic perspective showing the close proximity of these islands. Field research illustrates what even the best books can't.

We also used these excursions to take photos and video images for www.dokdo-takeshima.com.

Firstly, this made the website more visual and interesting. Photographs were used in conjunction with historical materials.

Images help readers to visualize what ancient Koreans (and Japanese) must have experienced when they visited Ulleung Island and Dokdo.

Images of Dokdo from Ulleung Island disprove Japanese claims that the islets couldn't be seen from Ulleung Island.

These pictures strongly support Korea's historical title. Visibility played an important role in defining territorial limits in ancient times.

Some Ulleung Island residents kindly donated photographs to our website as did the Dokdo Police and Dokdo Museum.

By far the most challenging aspect of our website was language.

Making a difference

I never took it upon myself to translate historical records. We frequently hired professionals to have ancient articles translated.

Because Chinese characters can be ambiguous, we would first have a document translated and then reference it with other published interpretations.

Some Japanese and Korean translations were found to be slanted and truth often lay somewhere in the middle.

That said, after analyzing all Dokdo related data we can surely conclude Japanese regarded Dokdo as a sister of Korea's Ulleung Island; Korea too considered Dokdo under their sphere of influence and outside of Japanese territory.

Koreans should understand each individual can make a difference.

In the 17th Century, Korea's An Yong-bok had the courage to confront Japanese invaders on Ulleung Island and Dokdo.

It is a historical fact he sailed to Japan and protested their illegal incursions onto Korean territory.

An Yong-bok took it upon himself to defend Korean soil despite his government's neglect of the region. His actions still remain a strong expression of sovereignty over Dokdo.

Similarly, Yozaburo Nakai, a Japanese fisherman illegally squatting on Korea's Ulleung Island in the early 20th Century would become the false premise Japan currently uses to seize Dokdo.

These people have shown us that for better or worse one person can make a difference in important issues. It can also be learned we can't always depend on our government to look out for our best interests.

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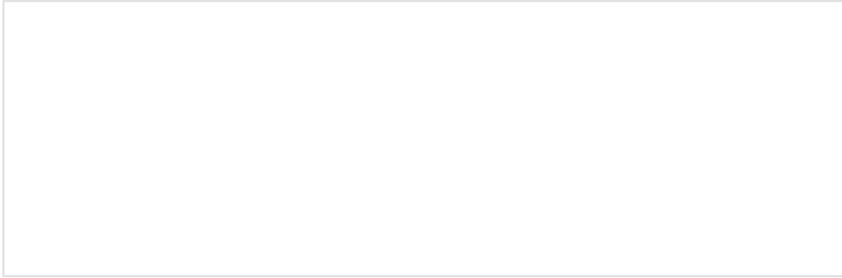
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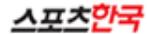
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