Nationalism in the Japanese Print Media: 
A Case Study of the Dokdo-Takeshima Island Dispute

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Since 1905, when they were annexed by Japan’s Shimane prefecture, Liancourt Rocks—known as Dokdo by the Koreans and as Takeshima by the Japanese—have been a sticking point in relations between the two countries. Although South Korea has had effective control over the islets since the 1950s, Japan continues to contest those claims. More recently in the 2000s, several incidents have served to aggravate Japanese-Korean tension insofar as they relate to the island dispute, amidst a more general trend of Japanese nationalism. This paper examines contemporary events within the dispute and the way in which Japanese newspapers have portrayed the conflict through the lens of nationalism. In particular, this paper focuses on Asahi, Mainichi, Yomiuri and Sankei Shimbun, as they are among the major dailies in Japan with enduring popularity.

Using Benedict Anderson’s definition of the nation as an “imagined community” as well as Michael Billig’s “banal nationalism”—wherein seemingly insignificant actions such as the words used in an article can help foster a sense of nationalism—this paper looks at articles from 2005, when the dispute was reignited through the Shimane prefecture establishment of Takeshima Day, to 2012, when ROK President Lee Myung-bak visited the islets. I argue that all of the newspapers examined, which range from left-leaning to right, exhibit some sense of nationalism in this subliminal “banal nationalism” sense that can further increase hostility between Japan and South Korea.

First, I conduct a quantitative analysis using the metric of the number of times each paper mentioned Dokdo vs. Takeshima in the eight year period from 2005 to 2012. For all four papers, there was not a one-to-one ratio of Dokdo mentions to those of Takeshima, and the discrepancy between mentions was large, with the name Takeshima discussed on average nearly three times as often as that of Dokdo. This gap indicates that there may be a preference for the Japanese name within the press, which while understandable given that the articles are intended of a Japanese audience, demonstrates a lack of acknowledgment of the Korean perspective of the dispute that can encourage a one-sided argument and not inclusivity.

For a more micro level investigation to examine the methods in which newspapers may incorporate nationalism, I employ a qualitative analysis that looks at the criteria of content, organization, sources and language for four events where there was a noticeable spike in the number of times the newspapers reported on the islets. These events were the aforementioned 2005 establishment of Takeshima Day and the 2012 Lee visit, as well as the 2006 Japanese marine survey of the islands and the 2008 textbook controversy. Although they varied for each paper, issues such as not discussing the historical Japanese colonialism aspect of the dispute, organizing the information in a way as to mention the Korean viewpoint last or not at all, and using vocabulary that did not portray Dokdo-Takeshima as a disputed territory but as a part of Japan, were among those found.
As a result, these findings highlight that whether or not the press consciously uses nationalism, newspaper articles do integrate nationalism in the way that Billig conceives. Because of their wide readership, the Japanese press still maintains significant influence in the country despite controversies, and can help shape the dialogue around the island dispute so that it can be constructive rather than antagonistic.