

Handling of the Takeshima Issue in South Korea's Social Studies Curriculum

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Introduction

South Korea's *National Curriculum* are equivalent to Japan's *Curriculum Guidelines*. This article examines how the Takeshima Island issue (concerning the island referred to as 'Dokdo' by South Korea) has been addressed in South Korea's social studies curriculum since 2005, when Shimane Prefecture established *Takeshima Day*.

1 Japan's moves regarding education on Takeshima

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) stated in the 2008 *Commentary on the Curriculum Guidelines* for middle school 'Social Studies' [Geography], 'It is also necessary to deepen understanding of our country's land and territories, as with the case with the Northern Territories, by mentioning the differences between Japan's and South Korea's claims over Takeshima.' Additionally, in the 2009 *Commentary on the Curriculum Guidelines* for high schools, MEXT explained, 'The purpose is to teach about Takeshima in the same way as in middle school.' The ministry instructed that middle and high school geography education should foster a deeper understanding of the Takeshima issue.

In South Korea's 2010 revised social studies curriculum, descriptions of the Takeshima issue were added to middle school history and high school Korean history, whereas previously the issue had been included only in middle school 'Social Studies' <Geography Domain> and high school 'Korean Geography'. This revision appears to have been a response to Japan's policy changes. In the middle school 'History' curriculum, the issue was described as follows: 'Establish a correct view of history and a sense of sovereignty by exploring territorial issues, including Dokdo, and historical conflicts with neighbouring countries'. In the 2011 revision of the social studies curriculum, descriptions of the Takeshima issue were also added to elementary school 'Social Studies', middle school 'Social Studies' <General Social Studies Domain>, and high school 'East Asian History'.

In the 2014 revision of the *Commentary*, descriptions of the Takeshima issue became more detailed in middle school 'Social Studies' [Geography]. It stated, 'It is also necessary to properly address the fact that, although it is our country's inherent territory, [...] it has been illegally occupied by South Korea [...] and that Japan has repeatedly lodged protests against South Korea, thereby deepening students' understanding of our nation's land

and territories'.

Similar expansions were made in the 'History' and 'Civics' sections, as well as in high school 'Geography/History' and 'Civics' sections. The *Commentary* emphasised fostering students' understanding of Takeshima as 'an inherent territory of our country,' South Korea's occupation as illegal, the legitimacy of Japan's annexation of Takeshima under international law, and Japan's pursuit of a peaceful resolution to the Takeshima issue.

2 2015 Revision of the Korean Social Studies Curriculum

In the 2015 revised social studies curriculum, descriptions of the Takeshima issue became more detailed and extensive. There are three key points that merit attention:

First, the phrase 'territorial issues including Dokdo,' which had appeared in the 2010 and 2011 revised social studies curriculum, was removed. This change appears to reflect the realisation that the phrase contradicted the South Korean government's stance that no territorial issue exists regarding Takeshima. The high school history textbook states, 'Dokdo is an inherent part of our territory, which is historically clear and which we now effectively control. Therefore, we should approach Dokdo not as a territorial issue but as a historical issue.' This statement reinforces the claim that no territorial dispute exists over Takeshima. However, this argument, which is based solely on the current status of illegal occupation, is entirely unacceptable.

Meanwhile, MEXT explained in its 2014 revision of the *Commentary* that 'With regard to the Senkaku Islands, it is necessary to understand that the Senkaku Islands are an inherent territory of our country, that our country effectively controls them, and that there are no territorial issues to be resolved, together with their location and scope'.

The second point concerns how the Takeshima issue was addressed in elementary school 'Social Studies'. In the 2011 revised curriculum, the topic was placed under the unit '(1) Our Land is Easy to Live In', but in the 2015 revised curriculum, it was moved to the unit '(8) The Future of a Unified Korea and Global Peace'. The objective of this subject was stated as follows: 'By cultivating a sense of territorial sovereignty over Dokdo, which is our country's inherent territory; examining the efforts and challenges of reunifying the two Koreas; and exploring various cases of global conflicts and the challenges of building a sustainable future, we can envision a unified Korea and foster the attitude of global citizens who strive for peace in global society'.

This framing suggests that South Korea envisions expanding its global influence by incorporating both North Korea and Takeshima within its territorial scope.

The third point is the increased emphasis on active learning. For example, in middle school 'History', an evaluation method was introduced that required teachers to 'conduct writing exercises in which students refute the assertions of Japan and China and assess them based on the accuracy of data research, clarity of arguments, and consistency of logical development'. In 2017, 2018 and 2020, South Korean middle school students sent letters to middle schools in Shimane Prefecture denouncing Japan's Takeshima education. These can be seen as instances in which active learning evolved into independent action.

3 Japan's strengthened education on Takeshima refutes South Korean arguments on the incorporation of Takeshima into Shimane Prefecture in 1905

In the *Curriculum Guidelines* announced by MEXT in 2017, the elementary school 'Social Studies' instructed teachers to 'mention that Takeshima, the Northern Territories, and the Senkaku Islands are our country's inherent territories.' Additionally, in the 2017 *Curriculum Guidelines* for middle school 'Social Studies' [Geography] and [Civics] sections, as well as in the 2018 *Curriculum Guidelines* for high school 'Geography/History' [General Geography] and [Geography Exploration] sections and 'Civics' [Public] and [Politics and Economy] sections, stated to address the issues related to Takeshima as Japan's inherent territory. Furthermore, the *Commentary on the Curriculum Guidelines* instructed teachers to deepen students' understanding of the Takeshima issue. The Takeshima issue was also mandated to be covered in middle and high school history education. As a result, Japan established an educational system addressing the Takeshima issue from elementary through high school, similar to the framework implemented in South Korea under the 2011 revised social studies curriculum.

In the *Commentary on the Curriculum Guidelines* for middle school 'Social Studies' [History] section (announced in 2017) and for high school 'Geography and History' [Exploration of Japanese History] and [General History] sections (2018), the incorporation of Takeshima into Shimane Prefecture in 1905 was explained as follows: 'With regard to Takeshima and the Senkaku Islands, we will also touch on the process by which our country formally incorporated them into its territories based on legitimate grounds under international law, so that students can understand that our country's position on these territories is legitimate both historically and under international law'.

On the other hand, South Korea's 2015 revised social studies curriculum for middle school 'History' framed the 1905

incorporation of Takeshima into Shimane Prefecture as part of Japan's invasion of the Korean Peninsula. Its middle school 'History' section stated: 'Understand the process of Japan's usurpation of national rights and the flow of the movement to protect national rights in line with this, and understand that Japan illegally occupied Dokdo.' Similarly, then curriculum for high school 'Korean History' stated: 'Understand the problems of Japan's illegal incorporation of Dokdo and the injustice of the Gando Convention, which was concluded under Japanese rule'. Since there is no evidence that any government on the Korean Peninsula exercised control over Takeshima before 1905, this claim is incorrect; therefore, Japan's *Commentary on the Curriculum Guidelines* refuted South Korea's assertion.

4 Changes in the South Korea's Social Studies Curriculum

While the 2018 revised social studies curriculum did not introduce changes to subject structures, descriptions of the Takeshima issue in middle school 'History' and high school 'Korean History' were simplified, and references in the modern history segment were removed. In the 2022 revision, the Takeshima issue was completely omitted from the middle school 'History' curriculum, while its description in the middle school 'Social Studies' (Geography domain) was further simplified. In high school 'Korean History II', references to Takeshima were limited to modern history. This contradicts the 2015 curriculum's stance that 'Dokdo should be approached not as a territorial issue but as a historical issue,' but the reasons for this change remain unclear.

In elementary school 'Social Studies', the Takeshima issue was moved from the '(8) Future of a Unified Korea and Global Peace' unit in the 2015 curriculum back to the '(1) Travelling Through Our National Territory' unit in the 2022 revision, which focuses on South Korea's natural environment. The unit has a more practical tone, and the emphasis on using the Takeshima issue as a framework to consider the future of the Korean Peninsula, as seen in the 2015 revision, has diminished. Additionally, the phrase 'inherent territory', which appeared six times in the 2015 curriculum, was removed entirely in the 2022 revision, also indicating a shift in its approach. The term 'inherent territory' refers to a land that has 'never been under the sovereignty of another country' (2017 *Commentary on the Curriculum Guidelines* for elementary schools), but it is also used to strongly emphasise territorial claims. This is likely the case in South Korea as well.

The 2022 revision of high school 'Korean Geography Exploration' includes a policy stating that 'The goal of territorial education is to develop an accurate understanding of our territory and cultivate patriotism, ensuring that learning outcomes do not lead to hatred towards neighbouring countries or unfounded anti-Japanese or anti-Chinese sentiments'. This aligns with the shift in elementary school 'Social Studies' towards a more pragmatic approach.

Conclusion

Below is a list of subjects in the South Korean social studies curriculum that addressed the Takeshima issue:

1997 Revision	Middle school 'National History', High school 'Modern Korean History'
2007 Revision	Middle school 'Social Studies' (Geography domain), High school 'Korean Geography'
2010 Revision	Middle school 'Social Studies' (Geography domain), Middle school 'History', High school 'Korean Geography', High school 'Korean History'
2011 Revision	Elementary school 'Social Studies', Middle school 'Social Studies' (Geography Domain) & (General Social Studies Domain), Middle school 'History', High school 'Korean History', High school 'East Asian History'
2015 Revision	Elementary school 'Social Studies', Middle school 'Social Studies' (Geography domain), Middle school 'History', High school 'Korean History', High school 'East Asian History', High school 'Korean Geography'
2018 Revision	Elementary school 'Social Studies', Middle school 'Social Studies' (Geography domain), Middle school 'History', High school 'Korean History', High school 'East Asian History', High school 'Korean Geography'
2022 Revision	Elementary school 'Social Studies', Middle school 'Social Studies' (Geography domain), High school 'Korean History II', High school 'Korean Geography Exploration'

The above revisions, particularly in the 2010 and 2011 curriculum revisions, expanded the number of subjects and descriptions addressing the Takeshima issue, reaching their peak in the 2015 revision. These changes appear to have been a response to the increase in descriptions of the Takeshima issue in Japan's *Curriculum Guidelines* and its *Commentary*. However, in the 2018 and 2022 revisions, descriptions of the Takeshima issue were simplified, and the number of subjects covering it decreased.

These changes suggest that South Korea's approach to 'Dokdo education' lacks a consistent strategy. At the same time, the emphasis on active learning has remained unchanged. The 2022 revision of the elementary school 'Social Studies' curriculum states that 'students can utilise the websites of institutions related to Dokdo to explore various sources of information about the island'. Japan should respond to this policy by enhancing multilingual dissemination of its claims to ensure their penetration among South Korean students.

Japan's argument is based on three main points: (1) the use of Takeshima under official recognition by the Tokugawa shogunate in the 17th century, (2) the incorporation of Takeshima into Shimane Prefecture in 1905 and the subsequent continuous exercise of administrative authority, and (3) the fact that the San Francisco Peace Treaty did not change Japan's sovereignty over Takeshima based on them. South Korea has no grounds that surpass these claims. In particular, the San Francisco Peace Treaty is crucial, and explaining this fact in the *Commentary on the Curriculum Guidelines* is of vital importance.