Jeju Peace Institute 제주평화연구원

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Humanities and Sociological Approach to Ieodo

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Stretching 1.4 k.m. east-west and 1.8 k.m. north-south, Ieodo sits 4.6 meters below sea level, rising to the surface only in the trough of mountainous waves. This oval rock is located 149 k.m. from Marado, the southernmost islet of South Korea. Meanwhile Sheshandao, China's closest territory, is 287 k.m. away.

Ieodo is not the object of a territorial dispute as it is not an "island" as defined by the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. However, there is some jurisdictional conflict with China in the seas around the reef, where the Yellow Sea intersects with the East China Sea.

Korea maintains that Ieodo is situated within the country's EEZ (Exclusive Economic Zone) according to the median line principle in the delimitation of maritime boundaries. On the contrary, China has insisted that Ieodo is under its jurisdiction due to its claim that the continental shelf on which Ieodo is situated is the natural prolongation of its land mass.

The Case for Humanities and Sociological Approach

To successfully tackle the Ieodo issue, we need to enhance our understanding and knowledge of Ieodo through the studies of humanities and social sciences, including Jeju's history, folk stories, and folk songs. The peaceful utilization of the Ieodo Ocean Research Station (IORS) should also be prioritized with all the data gathered being shared internationally, including with China and Japan.

Jeju Islanders have long dreamed of a "utopia" where they can be free from life's hardships. The native people of this barren volcanic island have always struggled to cultivate the rocky land, having to supplement their harvests with fishing and shellfish gathering to make a living.

The rich seas around Jeju, however, are famous for their rough waves and many of Jeju's menfolk never returned home after braving them for the catch. Their wives couldn't believe that their husbands were dead and instead imagined them living on. A mysterious island, emerging over the horizon, thus became a mythical land for those departed souls.

This island, lodged in the hearts of Jeju's womenfolk, was given the name "Ieodo." One of the songs of Jeju's haenyeo, or women divers, is "Ieodo sa na," and it states, "Does my husband, who has never returned home, live in Ieodo?" To Jeju haenyeo, Ieodo is the "Island of Abundance," full of abalone and sea mustard, but it is also the "Island of Grief," that has taken away their husbands.

Within Jeju's legends and folk songs there are further hints at Ieodo's place in local lore. It was not only a rich fishing ground, but also a marker en route to the outside world, such as China and Japan. "If you want to go to Kangnam (China), look ahead for Henam, Ieodo is halfway." This line from a haenyeo song tells us that Ieodo sentiments are deeply embedded in Jeju's culture.

More than a Legend

However, Ieodo is not just a mythical land of legend. Ieodo is very much an existent oceanic reef and it has led to conflict and controversy with China. In particular, Korea's neighbor recently redrew its air defense identification zone (ADIZ) to incorporate the skies above the rock.

The Society of Ieodo Research (chairman of the board: Ko Choong-Suk) recently found that the spot supposedly marking Ieodo was included in Hendrik Hamel's navigation chart after the Dutchman was shipwrecked on Jeju Island on August 16, 1653. The spot is transcribed as "OOST" in his journal, An Account of the SHIPWRECK of a Dutch Vessel. In 1900, Socotra, a British merchant ship, left Kyushu, Japan, en route to Shanghai China. It struck a submerged rock, Ieodo, which was thereafter known as "Socotra Rock" on international charts.

In 1951, the Korean Alpine Club and the Korean Navy conducted a joint exploration to the Ieodo of Jeju legend. After finding its location, they sank there a copper plate inscribed with the words, "Ieodo, Korean Territory." In 2001, Korea's National Geographic Information Institute finally confirmed the rock's official name as "Ieodo."

As early as in 1969, Dr. Emery reported that the East China Sea continental shelf surrounding Ieodo is the most abundant reservoir of natural gas and oil resources in the world. And this initial survey has been repeatedly confirmed by other scientific research institutes such as the Woodrow Wilson Center in 2005. Furthermore, Ieodo is of great military strategic value.

In 2003, the Korean government completed the IORS, a stilted platform of 36 meters above sea level. The IORS of 1,300 square meters is equipped with high-tech observation and monitoring equipments and includes a heliport. All gathered data are transmitted for use in maritime, weather and fishery ground forecasts, global environmental monitoring, maritime transportation safety, maritime disaster prevention and more. The IORS also functions as a lighthouse for the quarter-million ships that annually pass around the IORS safely.

Ieodo and Korea-China Cooperation

Ieodo was recently included in the new Korean Air Defense Identification Zone (KADIZ) however, the attempt by the Jeju Special Self-Governing Provincial Council to establish the "Ieodo Day" ordinance failed again in December 2013 due to concerns about diplomatic friction with China, as it had in 2007, 2008 and 2012.

In the event that a compromise can be reached between Korea and China on the delimitation of maritime boundaries, Ieodo will be incorporated into Korea's EEZ. However, for that to happen there is a need for great diplomatic effort and reconciliation between the two countries.

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