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Contextual Naming of the Sea between Japan and Korea: Reconciling parallel realities

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ABSTRACT

Parallel realities exist in many spheres of life. This is only a problem if these realities prove to be irreconcilable, in which case a new reality, one upon which all interested parties can agree, may need to be created. Sadly, the parallel realities of ‘Sea of Japan’ and ‘East Sea’ as names for the body of water between Japan and Korea have indeed proved to be irreconcilable, and neither antecedence nor dual naming provides a satisfactory solution. A new – third – name needs to be created. However, it would be unrealistic and unreasonable to expect the existing parallel names to disappear from their own national lexicons. Instead, the solution lies in contextual naming. This involves retaining the existing parallel names for national contexts within Japan and Korea, but also creating a new additional name to be applied in international contexts where the two existing names currently clash. The interested parties would themselves jointly choose this new name, and as a result would feel both proud of it and comfortable with it. In using the new agreed third name in international contexts, Japan and Korea would escape from the confrontational ‘self *versus* other’ mentality that has bedevilled the approach to this toponymic issue up to now, and the bilateral toponymic quarrel between them could thankfully come to an end.

Parallel realities

Those raised in the Christian tradition will have woken up this morning confident in the certainty that today is March 9th 2012. Yet the Gregorian calendar that has provided us with this date, based on the birth of Christ, is far from being in exclusive use. Many alternative calendars are also in existence in other traditions. Islamic tradition, for instance, has not just one but two alternative dates to offer for this same day, both based on the year of the flight of the Prophet from Makkah to Yathrib.¹ The Islamic lunar calendar used in the Arab world considers it to be the 16th day of Rabī‘ ath Thānī (the second month of spring) in the year 1433. On the other hand, the Islamic solar calendar used in Iran deems it to be the 19th day of Esfand, the final month in the year 1390. And many other cultures have yet different certainties about today’s date.

Hence several parallel realities exist about today’s date, and indeed about every date in the calendar. Each of these realities is individually certain, yet collectively they are paradoxical. And because each reality has as its base date an event long ago in history, there is no certainty that the starting point of each has been calculated with absolute accuracy. We cannot be sure that Christ was really born in what we consider as year 1, for example. Today’s chronological labelling may be based on an inaccurate historical reality. All in all, therefore, if we are searching for reductive truth, the only undoubted fact is that today is today. Everything beyond that – every label we choose to apply to this particular day to distinguish it from other days – is an arbitrary human construct designed to help us satisfy our human need to identify, to specify, and to communicate.

This observation demonstrates that, while reality can be certain, it need not necessarily be uniquely certain. Alternative realities, which are every bit as legitimate and robust, may exist as parallel truths. And so it is, of course, with the sea between the Japanese archipelago and the Korean peninsula. The reductive truth here is that this is simply an area of water, which – because it is partly surrounded by land – is of a category that humankind has chosen to categorise generically as a ‘sea’. But because humankind has felt the need to identify and specify this particular sea, and because various socio-linguistic traditions have done so with different labels, we have arrived at a situation where – as we know only too well – we have competing parallel designations for this area of water: the Sea of Japan and the East Sea.

Our experience with calendars tells us that the existence of parallel designations need not in itself be problematic. The Islamic calendar and the Christian calendar both exist without confusion within their own particular cultural orbit. In environments where the two orbits collide, and it is necessary for just one option to be chosen, then in all probability one calendar will defer to the other. And we can see examples of such deference in toponymy, too. In Europe, the water body that most of the world’s languages know as the Baltic Sea is generally known in the Germanic languages as the East Sea, but this situation is not problematic because, in the contexts where one single name for that Sea is required, the Germanic languages are content to set aside their own name and defer to the more generally used name ‘Baltic’.²

Unfortunately, though, in the field of toponymy there are also instances where each of the competing labels is thought of so highly by its proponents, and the corresponding alternative designation so roundly rejected, that the deference option is quite simply a non-starter. As we know, this is the situation in the case of the Sea between Japan and Korea. This present paper is not the place to consider the absolute and relative merits of the competing names for the Sea. It is sufficient to note here the present toponymic reality, which is that most of the world uses the name ‘Sea of Japan’ as its primary label, leaving the Korean equivalent name ‘East Sea’ to fight a determined battle to become recognised on an equal basis.

¹ Yathrib is now Al Madīnah, in Saudi Arabia.

² It is ‘East Sea’ in Danish, Dutch, German, Norwegian and Swedish; and also in Finnish, a non-Germanic language.

This has caused a stalemate which has forced us all to live in a world of parallel realities that in this instance remain determinedly unreconciled. How might we overcome this ongoing problem, a problem that is not helped by the current state of coolness in the general relationship between Japan and Korea?

False solutions

To resolve the problem, we might try to demonstrate that one of these names dates back further into history than its counterpart, and we have seen that many contributors to this debate over the years have attempted to do this. But antecedence can be a sterile argument. Of course history matters, but if we have to go back hundreds of years to try to prove a current toponymic point, does this not suggest that the proof may be of limited relevance today? And is the proof – if proof it be – really incontrovertible anyway? In considering calendars, we noted that we cannot always be certain of years of origin, so can we really be sure that the map triumphantly offered as proof that one particular name has a lengthier antecedence is really the very first map? There may be some map as yet undiscovered that would throw all present theories to the winds. There is another point to be made here, too; antecedence can be not merely a sterile argument but even a dubious ally. A map is designed as a whole discrete creation. Hence the names we see on a map are just one element in a greater whole, and should be seen in the context of that whole. They are very possibly relevant only within the context of the date and the purpose of that map, and extracting a single name from a historical map in order to prove a current point can be akin to taking a literary quotation out of context. So if we choose to utilise a historical map as an aid to our argument, we should be careful what we wish for, because we are inviting use of that map in ways that might prove unforeseen and even counter-productive to our arguments. Political realities – including toponymic realities – change over time, and using historical maps to research a current toponymic point can introduce unwanted perils.

If antecedence cannot solve the dilemma, then we need to seek an alternative solution. Dual naming has frequently been mooted as a possibility, and is indeed applied in several current cartographic products. But this approach carries its own difficulties. Should the names be given equal status or should one be subordinate to the other? And ultimately, perhaps depending on product scale, the cartographer may in any case have to choose just one name, or even avoid the issue altogether by choosing none at all, thus rendering the user a total disservice. It has also been suggested that we might consider separating the Sea into two differently named areas, but this raises the question of where and how the dividing line would be drawn. In any case, such a division would imply that the feature was perceived as having two distinct portions, whereas in reality both the Japanese and Korean peoples, not to mention the rest of the world, surely consider the Sea to be one feature.

Analogies and precedents

Setting aside false solutions, can we instead locate an analogy or precedent? There are instances where a new name has been applied to a maritime area for which one or more names already exist. In 1974, a portion of the Atlantic Ocean south of Ireland and west of the English Channel was deemed worthy of a name – Celtic Sea – in its own right because of its common marine attributes. This newly labelled Sea took its place as a sub-set of the Atlantic Ocean. More recently, in 2009-10, the name Salish Sea was coined to label a newly identified discrete ecosystem just off the western coast of North America, consisting collectively of three already named maritime features: the Strait of Georgia, the Strait of Juan de Fuca, and Puget Sound. In both instances – Celtic Sea and Salish Sea – the new names were filtered into the overall maritime taxonomy without the need for any existing names to be relegated or displaced.

The names Atlantic Ocean, Strait of Georgia, Strait of Juan de Fuca and Puget Sound remain every bit as important and significant in their own right as ever they were beforehand. Depending upon the context of the moment, inhabitants of Seattle can claim with equal validity and certainty that they live (a) on the eastern shore of Puget Sound and (b) towards the southern shores of the Salish Sea. Here again we see an example of parallel realities; apparent paradoxes that can in fact exist side by side in perfect harmony.

When the British historian Norman Davies came to write his substantial history of the islands of which his homeland forms part, he sensed that the name by which those islands are traditionally known – the British Isles – was perhaps not the most judicious label for his purposes, because the history he planned to write was that of both Britain and Ireland. In order to avoid the potential for offence in Dublin, therefore, Davies eschewed his original title (*The British Isles: A History*) in favour of simply *The Isles: A History*.³ It is not a sign of weakness to acknowledge that one's own name for an entity might be considered less than acceptable by partners who share an interest in that same entity, and that it might be diplomatic to use an alternative name when dealing with those partners. Rather, we see in Davies's solution a sensitive recognition of the distinction between national and international contexts; a new name being introduced specifically to respect the international context of a particular geographical feature.

Contextual naming: a genuine solution

Having examined false solutions, analogies and precedents, can we now find a name applicable to the entire feature that would be acceptable to both Japan and Korea? If by this suggestion we mean abandoning the existing names – *Nihon-kai* and *Donghae* respectively – and introducing a new one in their place, then this is surely a wholly unrealistic proposition. The two existing endonyms – the two parallel realities – are so well-established and entrenched into the consciousness of the Japanese and Korean peoples, cultures and languages that they cannot be cast aside. Nor indeed should they be; there is huge emotional investment in each of those names, and politicians and the public in Japan and Korea would understandably never allow them to be dispensed with domestically. But there is a further possibility which has not yet been properly explored. The present tension between the parallel endonyms *Nihon-kai* and *Donghae* arises principally on those occasions when the Sea needs to be named in a bilateral or multilateral context; *i.e.* in an international context. If we can regard the national and the international contexts as being separate, we might be taking the first steps towards a genuine and durable solution. For national purposes, we could retain the parallel realities exactly as they are, as we do with our calendars. But we could then introduce a new name in addition to – not at the expense of – this existing parallel pair of toponyms; a single new name designed for international use.

This notion of contextual separation is already fully acknowledged by the United Nations, which has for more than half a century recognised the toponymic distinction between national and international contexts both for toponymic standardization in general and in particular for several of its constituent aspects (*e.g.* gazetteer specifications and romanization systems). So while on the one hand acknowledging the vital significance that the names *Nihon-kai* and *Donghae* possess within their own national contexts, perhaps we can also re-identify or even re-invent the Sea for those other contexts that are international, and devise a new name for those latter contexts. We have seen that the labels Celtic Sea and Salish Sea each arose out of a perception that a particular international maritime area needed to be looked at in a fresh way, as an ecosystem, and perhaps it would be of assistance if we were able to regard the Sea between Japan and Korea as its own unique and discrete ecosystem too. Certainly there would seem to be every justification for doing so, for in fact UNESCO already categorises the Sea as a Large Marine Ecosystem (LME).

³ *The Isles: A History*, Norman Davies: Macmillan, 1999: 1061pp: ISBN 033376370X.

Moreover, UNESCO regards the Sea plus its littoral hinterlands as a World Marine Ecoregion (MEOW).⁴ Other agencies such as the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) also consider the Sea as an LME.⁵ Alternatively, we may prefer to consider the Sea as a potential world heritage site.⁶ As with the Celtic Sea and the Salish Sea, both possibilities involve the recognition of facets of the Sea that were not apparent in earlier ages, both involve international contexts, and in both instances the introduction of a new name could be seen as useful.

Can we summon the courage and vision to look at the Sea between Japan and Korea in this fresh, modern manner? It is important to emphasise that the existing names – *Nihon-kai* and *Donghae* – would not be replaced or displaced by this proposal. These names would continue to function as endonyms, used on a daily basis in Japan and Korea respectively, exactly as at present. They would continue to be used in national cartography in Japan and Korea. The expression *Donghae* would continue to feature in the Korean national anthem. The Japanese and Korean people would not need to make any adjustments. But the tension that is at present created by using one of these names in a context where the other party is in attendance would be dissipated by the existence of a new name designed to operate within that international context. This new name would recognise that the Sea is a highly significant body of water that demands acknowledgement of the inclusivity of all its littoral countries, and hence a name upon which all those countries can agree. Examples of such international contexts would include:

- The nomenclature of the Sea within bilateral Japanese-Korean relations;
- The nomenclature of the Sea within the conferences, sessions, texts and mapping of the United Nations and its associated agencies;
- The nomenclature of the Sea within the International Hydrographic Organization (IHO), including in particular the IHO publication S-23 titled *Limits of Oceans and Seas*.

This proposed solution does not involve dual naming, and so avoids the acknowledged disadvantages and impracticalities of that practice. Instead, this proposal represents an example of contextual naming: the establishment within the international toponymic lexicon of a new name for bilateral and international use, while at the same time leaving the parallel reality of the existing names wholly intact for national use.

Contextual naming: process, effects and consequences

It would of course be primarily the responsibility of the littoral parties (Japan, Korea and – if she wishes – Russia) to agree on the new third name. The process of establishing a new name would take time, of course, and while discussions are in progress it would seem reasonable to ask that Japan and Korea might each agree to cease the enthusiastic international promotion of its own endonym and the corresponding disparagement of the competing parallel endonym. This would defuse tensions while the third-name solution was being sought, and as an additional benefit would no doubt save a small fortune in the national budgets of both countries too. In terms of the effects this would have upon those most closely involved, this proposal for contextual naming would:

⁴ The UNESCO agency involved is the Ocean Biogeographic Information System (OBIS), part of the Inter-Governmental Oceanographic Commission (IOC). See <http://www.iobis.org/mapper/>.

⁵ See http://www.lme.noaa.gov/LMEWeb/LME_Report/lme_50.pdf.

⁶ For an ecosystem precedent, see *Naming the Salish Sea*, a paper presented by Professor Bert Webber to the 17th International Seminar on Sea Names in 2011 (http://geo.khu.ac.kr/seanames/files/2011_17th/09-Webber.pdf). For the idea of a world heritage site, see *World Heritage Perspective on East Sea (Sea of Japan)*, a paper presented by Professor Que Weimin at the same forum (http://geo.khu.ac.kr/seanames/files/2011_17th/13-Que.pdf).

- Confirm to the Japanese people that the international community acknowledges that their name ‘Sea of Japan’ is sacrosanct in Japan and would continue to be used there exactly as at present;
- Confirm to the Korean people that the international community acknowledges that their name ‘East Sea’ is sacrosanct in Korea and would continue to be used there exactly as at present;
- Ask the Japanese people to recognise that the present international application of the name ‘Sea of Japan’ would give way to the international application of an entirely new name instead – this new name would be jointly agreed with Korea and would not of course be ‘East Sea’;
- Ask the Korean people to forgo their aim of achieving international application of the name ‘East Sea’, on the understanding that an entirely new name would be applied internationally instead – this new name would be jointly agreed with Japan and would not of course be ‘Sea of Japan’.

The consequences of contextual naming would be dramatic. Even before the new name was agreed upon, the very fact that talks to that end were scheduled would have an immediate effect, as follows:

- It would remove the potential for controversy at the 18th International Hydrographic Conference in April 2012 by offering a solution to the problematic IHO S-23 issue of how to label the Sea, since the new third name would fit, singly and without controversy, into the disputed pages;
- It would remove any reason to seek a new United Nations resolution on maritime nomenclature, thereby avoiding an inevitably controversial drafting experience at the 10th United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names (UNCSGN) in August 2012;
- It would remove the temptation to invoke UNCSGN resolution III/20 as support for dual naming, since dual naming is acknowledged as not being the solution.⁷

The resulting agreed third name would be one of which all interested parties could be equally and collectively proud, because they would have chosen it.⁸ In using this name in international contexts, the bilateral toponymic quarrel between Japan and Korea could thankfully come to an end. Both countries would have escaped from the confrontational ‘self *versus* other’ mentality that has bedevilled the approach to this toponymic issue up to now, and would instead display towards the Sea the same sensitivity that Norman Davies demonstrated in respect of ‘The Isles’. Japan and Korea would have acknowledged the simple fact that, when the littoral countries bordering this jointly cherished marine ecosystem come together bilaterally or internationally to discuss it, they need to have available for that feature one single name with which they all feel comfortable. Neither of the presently available parallel names fits that requirement. It is perhaps important to end with a repetition of the fact that such a development would not at all constitute a sign of weakness by any of the partners with a shared interest in the Sea. On the contrary, as a forward-looking and largely bilateral *démarche*, it would instead stand out as a brilliant model of diplomacy that might in turn help to instigate a more general thawing of relations between Japan and Korea.

⁷ In any case, I believe it misguided to invoke this UN resolution in support of dual naming for the Sea. See my paper *Maritime feature names: The role of UNGEGN during its first decade*, presented to the 16th International Seminar on Sea Names in 2010 (http://geo.khu.ac.kr/seanames/files/2010_16th/2010_6_Woodman.pdf).

⁸ My own suggestion is **Sea of Resolution** (解決海 / Kaiketsu-kai in Japanese; 해결해 / Haegyeolhae in Korean; **Море Разрешения** / More Razresheniya in Russian), because introducing a third name in this contextual fashion would hopefully mark the resolution of a hitherto intractable problem. Alternatively, the Sea may possess some inherently unique or distinctive marine attribute that might provide an appropriate third name instead.