

The Naming Principia for Seas in Chinese Traditional Time

Songdi. Wu
(Visiting Scholar, Harvard University; Professor, Fudan
University, Shanghai, China)

Naming in Ancient Chinese Maps

Coastal area has been the place of Chinese people's living. Sea or ocean appeared in very old ancient Chinese literature. So it is worthwhile to review and examine ancient Chinese literature on sea and ocean.

Sea is a general word for the Chinese people. The oldest Chinese dictionary defined "sea was the heavenly pond accepting waters from all the rivers and streams." They considered sea as the center of the world. Therefore, they divided sea from the four directions, and named the sea as four seas: East Sea, West Sea, North Sea and West Sea. Before the Chin dynasty, there had been no division of the sea yet. Most probably, there was no ocean-going human activities then. No need to navigate the ocean was recognized.

Since Han and Tang dynasties, four seas have been used. Since international trades expanded, the maps included India and named Ganges River as the East Sea from the point of Indians, not of Chinese, for example.

Matteo Ricci in the later part of Ming dynasty introduced the Western maps and concepts of geography. His world map and Giulio Aleni adopted Western sea names without consideration of Chinese and Oriental people's usage.

Sea of Japan appeared in ancient Chinese and European maps indicated the coastal

zone surrounding the islands of Japan. The vast body of water in between Japan and Korea was named East Sea, Sea of Koyro or Sea of Japan. Japanese maps published before the 19th century did not use the name, Sea of Japan. Some even used the Chosun Sea or Sea of Chosun.

The Chinese maps published during the Ming dynasty and Ching dynasty before 1884 used the name East Sea. Sea of Japan appeared in the Chinese maps in 1884.

The influence and impacts of Western maps on Chinese people were minimal. For example, South China Sea and East China Sea in the Western maps were not accepted by Chinese people: They are still used as South Sea and East Sea. Sea of Japan appeared in Matteo Ricci's map in 1602 was for the first time adopted in the Chinese map in 1884. Chinese people still prefer to use the concept of four seas: East Sea, West Sea, North Sea and South Sea.