

How The Marginal Seas in Far East to Get Their Name

Lansheng Zhang

Dept. of Geography, Beijing Normal University

Beijing,100875 China

Abstract

Chinese ancestors have known in early days that at the edge of land there was wide boundless water bodies and called it the “Sea”.

But for a long period, sea areas hadn't been named. “Sea” was just a general name opposite to “land”. In 《Yugong》, the earliest book about physiogeographical regionalization in China mainland, the names of mountains, rivers, regions had been definitely named, but no name of sea.

Many evidences indicate that it is from the Spring and Autumn Period to the Warring States period (B.C.770-B.C.221) the Chinese marginal sea was named gradually.

In his Dialogue, Confucius talked little about sea. He said: “ If nobody follows my Dao-his political Ideal-I'll take a small wooden raft floating on to the sea.” Here the “sea” has no name. But Mencius, who lived 100 years later after Confucius, talked about sea more than Confucius and the “sea” he said about all had their definite name. For example, he said: “Hold Mount Tai under the arm and to across the North Sea.” Mount Tai and North Sea are all the names of real places.

Compass was invented by Chinese in the early past. Sitting on the land with compass on their palm, people will be easily to have illusion that they themselves are at the “center” of the world, and will name the regions around them by orientation. Mencius lived in Shandong Province, “the North Sea” he referred to is “the Bohai Sea”, lied in the north of Shandong Province. “ The East Sea” he referred to is “the Yellow Sea”, lied in the east of Shandong

Province.

During the time from the Spring and Autumn Period to the Warring States period, the same sea area may have several different names. For instance, the Bohai Sea once had been called “You Hai Sea”, “Shao Hai Sea”, “North Sea”. And the same sea region can change its name whenever needed. For example a king in early time of Chu State had said that he himself was in the South sea, while a king in later time said he was in the East Sea.

All these indicate that it is the time from the Spring and Autumn Period to the Warring States period that the seas got their names gradually. Until Qin & Han Dynasties, the Bohai Sea, the East Sea, the South Sea had gradually formed their names. But actually the principal part of “the East Sea”, which lies in the east of the most noisy political arena in the history of China, was referred to today’s Yellow Sea for a long time.

The Sea of Japan has ever been called “the East Sea” in Chinese history for a long period. During the period of Tang and Song Dynasties, Liao Dynasty (907-1125) was set up in the north of China by one of the minorities Qidan. Its wide territory stretched eastward to the Sea, and naturally the sea in the east of their territory was called “the East Sea” and the sea in the north of “the East Sea” (now is Okhotsk Sea) was called “the North Sea” by Qidan people. This name is kept in the most time of Jin, Yuan, Ming, Qing Dynasties until the middle of 19th century.

The name Yellow Sea appeared the latest. It was resulted from the influence of the Yellow River, which burst its bank and deprived the course of the Huaihe River to enter the sea for more than six hundred years long time since 1194 .