

The Naming of the Sea of Japan (East Sea) in the Chinese Historical Documents and Research Status by Chinese Scholars

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Abstract: The naming practice for a sea in ancient China is to combine the word for the geographical direction of the sea in question to the central part of China and the word “Hai” (sea). A majority of Chinese scholars contends that there was no official name for the main sea area on the East of the Korean Peninsular before Sui and Tang Dynasties in China. The name of “Donghai” (East Sea) dated back to Liao and Song Dynasties and continued in use up to the late Qing Dynasty. The “Sea of Japan” was first mentioned in the “Peace Treaty of Portsmouth” between Russia and Japan signed in 1905. This name has become the international de facto standard. The author insists that in standardizing the name for the sea area in question the historical evidences and the reality should be prioritized as well as the claims by the neighboring countries. Meanwhile, the international rules should also be taken into consideration.

Key Words: East Sea, Sea of Japan, place name, China

I. The understanding and naming practice for seas in ancient China

China, West to the Pacific Ocean, has a long stretch of coastal line that provides the Chinese people with means of living. The ancient Chinese people believed that China is the center of world and surrounded by seas. “Hai” (sea) is a general term for seas, coming into being by connecting all rivers in the world. The ancient Chinese people also considered that sea is the verge of the world, evidenced in the classic ancient Chinese works such as “Shangshu”(尚书), “Shi”(诗), “Liji” (礼记) and “Mengzi” (孟子). The seas surrounding China were called “Sihai” (四海), interchangeable in use with “Tianxia” (天下)(Gu Renhe, 2001). In “Yugong”(禹贡) the different geographical

features, like mountains, rivers and different geographical areas in China, were given appropriate names. But the naming for seas was left intact except a general term “Hai”.

Though ancient China has an extensive area of seas, the consciousness of owning the sea area was weak because human activities all restrained in the land and orthodox thinking considered seas as decentralized and unworthy place. Thus the naming of the seas was subject to idiosyncrasy and confusion(Chen Cai, An Husen, 1995).

Around the Warring States period(B.C. 480-222), a new naming practice emerged which combined the word of the geographical direction and the word “Hai” to assign names for different seas. For example, in Mencius conversation with the king of the Liang, he said, “carry the Tai Mountain under the arm and overpass the North Sea”. In one of Mencius works, *Jinxin* (孟子·尽心), the “North Sea” and “East Sea” were used to refer to the sea. The systematic exploitation of the naming practice appeared in “Shanhaijing” (山海经), the most important geographical classic in the pre-Qin period. But in this book some big inland lakes were also named after “Hai”, making the naming practice impractical to define the seas(Wu Songdi, 2003). Moreover, the enthusiasm in giving names to seas led to the flood of names for the same sea area. Bohai(Bohai Sea) used to be called “Youhai”(幼海), “Shaohai” (少海)and “Beihai”(北海). The same story also happened on Huanghai (Yellow Sea) which used to be called “Donghai”(Zhang Lansheng, 2003).

To sum up, the names of Sea area in ancient China are taken after the word combination of the geographical direction of seas with to the central Chinese land and the word “Hai”. This method applies not only for the seas in Chinese territory but also those beyond its jurisdiction.

II. The first name for the Sea area east to the Korean

Peninsular and the background

Disagreement does exist in terms of the historical period when a name was assigned to the sea area east to the Korean Peninsular.

After careful analysis of the “Shanhaijing”, Gu Renhe contends that the sea area east to the Korean Peninsular was considered as a part of the “East Sea” back to some 2000 years ago. That is to say, the sea area in question was “East Sea”(Gu Renhe, 2001).

But a majority of scholars insist that there was no name for the sea area in question before Sui and Tang Dynasties(A.D. -10). “Houhanshu”(后汉书), “Jinshu-biography of Sushenzi”(晋书·肃慎氏传) and “Weishu-biography of Doumoulou”(魏书·豆莫楼传), the Chinese books first mention the sea area east to the Korean Peninsular and records the

distribution of ethnic groups in the Northeast China, describe vaguely that the sea is to the far east of China(Xi Guojin, 1995; Wu Songdi, 1995; Han Maoli, 1999).

“Tanghuiyao”(唐会要) written in Tang Dynasty refers to the sea area in question as “small sea”(小海) and “big sea”(大海). Xi Jinguo and Han Maoli think the former is referring to the Ehuocike Sea or Dadan Sea, and the latter is the Sea of Japan (East Sea). The “Xindangshu”(新唐书)records that Bohai people(渤海人) in Tang Dynasty named the sea area northeast to the East Korea as “Nanhai”(南海). But Han Maoli contends that it only refers to the small area in the East Korean Bay.

III. The naming of “Donghai”(East Sea) and its evolution

Though the naming of “Donghai” dates back to two to three thousands years ago, the sea it refers to is the Yellow Sea. The current “Donghai” in China used to be called “Nanhai” (North Sea)(Zhang Lansheng, 2003).

The proper name of “Donghai” for the sea area east to the Korean Peninsular is agreed to be appearing around Song and Liao Dynasties (A.C. 916-1644) as supported by the books such as “Shanchaobeimengbian”(三朝北盟会编), or “Dajinliji”(大金集礼)(Chen Cai, An Husen, 1995; Wu Songdi, 1995, Yuan Shuren, 1996, Zhu Shiguang, 1997).

In the following Liao Dynasty, “Liaohai” (辽海) was assigned to this sea area in question.

Later in Yuan and Ming Dynasties(A.D. 13-17), “Jinghai” (鲸海) was used to refer to this sea area. The full name for the sea is the “Sea of Whale” according to “Huanyutongzhi”(环宇通志) and “Manzhouyuanliukao”(满洲源流考) probably because the sea was an ideal place for whale hunting. But Han Maoli contends that “Jinghai” actually refers to the west Kuje Island of Russia and Hokkaido in Japan, only including the northern part of the sea area east to the Korean Peninsular, but not the southern part(Han Maoli, 1999).

Currently there is no historical evidence in Yuan Dynasty concerning the depiction of the “Donghai”. But Han Maoli believes that the Man people(满族人) in Ming and Qing Dynasties, descendants of Nuzhen people(女真人) in the Song, Liao and Jin Dynasties, inherit the name of “Donghai” since the collapse of the Jin Kingdom. Only because there was no strong bond between Man people and the Central Plain area, there are no written historical records. After the Man people took power from Ming Dynasty, “Donghai” reappeared in the Chinese historical documents(Han Maoli, 1999).

In Ming and Qing dynasties, the naming practice in Bohai Kingdom(渤海国) was re-adopted, dividing the sea area east to the Korean Peninsular into two, the northern part was “Donghai” and the southern part “Nanhai”.

In the early and mid-Qing Dynasty, “Donghai” is still used to assign this sea area. according to “Qingtaizuwuhuangjishilu”(清太祖武皇帝实录) and “Yitongzhi”(一统志). Even after extensive territory north of Heilongjiang Province seceded from China to Russia in the eighth year of Xianfeng Epoch(A.D. 1858) and further give up the sovereignty of the land between east of Wusuli River and west of the Sea of Japan (East Sea) in the tenth year of Xianfeng Epoch, the name of “Donghai” survives to refer to this sea area. In the “Map of North Korean Kingdom”(朝鲜国北境图), volume three of the “Haiguotuzhi” (海国图志) compiled by Wei Yuan in the Daoguang Epoch, “Donghai” still refers to this sea area.

Though the “Sea of Japan” did appear in the international documents, the “Donghai”, “Pacific Ocean”, or the “East Korean Bay”, was still widely used in official documents and emperor decrees in China, referring to this sea area(Zhu Shiguang, 1997).

IV. The appearance of the naming of “Sea of Japan” and the historical background

The name of “Sea of Japan” first appeared in the “Kunyuwangguoquantu”(坤与万国全图) translated from Matteo Ricci, Christian missionary, and published in 1602. But there were a number of mistakes in this map and thus was rarely mentioned by later scholars. For example, the sea east to China was named “Donghai” at that time, but Matteo Ricci named it as “Daminghai” (大明海) probably because he associated the naming of seas with the neighboring countries. Therefore, his convention of the “Sea of Japan” was not recognized by Chinese government.

“Kunyuwangguoquantu” does not assert much influence on the marine altar drawing in China. Until around 1880, the “Sea of Japan” began to appear in Chinese historical documents and altars, but interchangeably in use with “Donghai”(Chen Cai, An Husen, 1995). In the eleventh year of Guangxu Epoch(A.D. 1885), Cao Yanjie used the “Sea of Japan” interchangeably with “Donghai”. In the thirteenth year of Guangxu Epoch(A.D. 1887), Huang Zunxian used “Sea of Japan” in the “Geography”(地理志), volume 10 of the “Ribenguo zhi” (日本国志) compiled by himself. But in later years, many scholars, following suit of Cao Yanjie, insisted using “Donghai” or use “Donghai” interchangeably with “Sea of Japan”(Wu Songdi, 1995).

Over the same period, “Sea of Japan” crept on the maps produced in China. For example, the sea area east to the Korean Peninsular all labeled as “Sea of Japan” in “Diqiuwudazhouquantu” (地球五大洲全图) compiled by Kuang Qixi in 1875, “Wanguoyutu” (万国舆图) compiled by Chen Zhaotong in 1886, Wang Xianqian’s

“Xibirquantu”(悉毕尔全图), volume 1 to his book “Yazhoudilizhilue”(亚洲地理志略) published in the first year of Xuantong Epoch, and the “Zhongwaidiyutushuojicheng”(中外地与说集成) in 1894(Xi Guojin, 1995; Yang Ningyi, 1997).

The point worthy of mentioning is that the name of “Sea of Japan” first appearing in Chinese official document is not officials’ report or the emperor’s decrees but in the “Peace Treaty of Portsmouth”, signed in 1905 when Japan won over Russia in Japan-Russia War in Chinese territory. The fact explicitly proves that governments of Japan and Russia first used the “Sea of Japan” in official documents in the backdrop of Japanese winning over Russia, neglecting the claims of China and Korea and thus making the “Sea of Japan” a legitimate de facto standard around the world(Zhu Shiguang, 1997).

The “Sea of Japan” became the standard in Chinese historical documents and maps after Xinhai Revolution. And this naming continued to be used after the People’s Republic of China was founded. The contemporary geographical domain of the “Sea of Japan” refers to the marginal sea of the Pacific between Asian Continent and Japanese Islands, connecting Dadan Bay and Ehuocike Sea in the north, linking the Pacific through Soya Strait and Tsugaru Strait in the east, and linking the East Sea and Seto-naikai through Tsushima Strait, Korea Stait in the south. Contemporary East Sea is aliases as the East China Sea, referring the sea area with North bank of Yantze River Estuary and Jeju Island to the north, Nan’ao Island of Guangdong Province and Taiwan Island to the south, and Japanese Ryukyu Archipelago to the east.

V. Principles and suggestions for standardization the naming of the Sea of Japan(East Sea)

In early 1970s, Korean scholars cast doubt on the naming of the “Sea of Japan”. In 1992, Korean government officially handed in renaming claim to the related organizations of the UN. Two years later, “The Society for East Sea” was set up. In its annual international workshops, scholars are invited to discuss the naming dispute over the Sea of Japan (East Sea).

Admittedly, the similar claim is not first case in standardizing the naming of the Sea of Japan (East Sea). As early as in 1940, Chinese scholars started to be concerned about the naming dispute over the “Sea of Japan”. Yu Youren first proposed to replace the name of the “Sea of Japan” with the “Sea of Peace” in pursuit of ten of thousand years’ peace. His proposition was applauded with warm responses. In July 1943, six Chinese academic societies (Chinese Science Academy, Chinese Foliage Society, Chinese Geography Society, Chinese Animal Society, Chinese Mathematics Society and Chinese

Meteorology Society) co-held a meeting, discussing the replacement of the “Sea of Japan” with the “Sea of Peace”. Though scholars had varied opinions toward the new name, they thought unanimously that the naming of the “Sea of Japan” is the product of the Colonialism and Hegemony and should be replaced by other names. Later in “Latest Dictionary of Place names of China and Other Countries”, published in 1948, named the sea area east of the Korean Peninsular as the “Sea of Peace”, but it did not survive later(Du Xiangming, 1996; Sun Donghu, 1999).

In recent years, Chinese scholars put forward a many of suggestions to the standardization of the name of the sea area in question. To summarize their opinion, there are some ideas worthy of mentioning:

1. Respect the history. Each of the neighboring country around the Sea of Japan all has a long history and a brilliant culture. Therefore, the name used in the long past and having an extensive meaning should be re-adopted(Zhu Shiguang, 1997; Yang Ningyi, 1997; Han Maoli, 1999; Gu Renhe, 2001; Que Weimin, 2003).

2. Take the modern realities and claims of neighboring countries into consideration. It is a normal phenomenon in history that the name for a sea area is subject to change to meet the historical development. Thus it is reasonable to change the name of a sea area in modern society, especially those names indicative of the colonialism and thus hurting the national feeling of the neighboring countries(Zhu Shiguang, 1997; Yang Ningyi, 1997; Han Maoli, 1999; Gu Renhe, 2001; Zhang Lansheng, 2003).

3. Follow the international practices. In general, the naming of a sea area should not be after the name of a neighboring country if the sea area is not the inland sea of the country. The naming for a sea area between neighboring countries should be carried out by related international organizations in due procedures after in-depth discussion between countries involved(Chen Cai, An Husen, 1995; Yang Ningyi, 1997; Gu Renhe, 2001; Que Weimin, 2003).

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