

**“East Sea” and “Korean East Sea”**  
**– Records about the Sea Area to the East of Korean Peninsula**  
**on Chinese Literatures during the last 1000 years**

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The sea area to the east of Korean Peninsula, which is located in the west of Japan archipelago and the southwest of Sakhalin (Ku Ye Island), is called “East Sea” or “Sea of Japan”. The documents of ancient China indicate that the nomination of this sea area started from Tang (唐) Dynasty (618–907), nearly one thousand and five hundred years ago. At that time, the sea area was called “Xiao Sea”(小海), “Shao Sea”(少海) or “Southern Sea”(南海) by Chinese people. But the meaning of the name only refers parts of the sea area to the east of Korean Peninsula, not the whole area. We can confirm that the documents of Tang Dynasty did not contain the proper name referring to this whole sea area.

The name “East Sea”, recorded by the literatures of Liao (辽) and Jin (金) Dynasty (906-1279), was continued to be used by the local residents Nu Zhen (女真) and their descendant Manchurian. Some other names also appeared during that period, but it still cannot be used as the proper name for the whole sea area. Moreover, although the northern area of SEA OF JAPAN was named “Jing Sea” or “Jing Chuan Sea” in Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368) and the name “East Sea” was not found in the literatures of that time, we can say that the name “East Sea” was continually used from Liao and Jin Dynasty, because Manchurian of Ming and Qing Dynasty, the offspring of Nu Zhen, was living in western coast of this sea area during Yuan Dynasty.

The article *Ji Dong Hai Zhu Wen* (《祭东海祝文》) printed in the book *DA Jin Ji Li* (《大金集礼》) showed us some proofs that the name “East Sea” was called

to this sea area by Nu Zhen people, the residents living on the western coast. After Jin Dynasty, Manchurian, the descendant of Nu Zhen, accepted the name “East Sea” from their ancestors. Just because the relation between the northeast China and the central part was not close enough to make the name popular, we seldom see the records about “East Sea” in the documents of that time. In 17th century, when the Manchurian grew up in the northeast to build Qing Government, the name East Sea was popular again and it reappeared in the books of that time frequently. In conclusion, “East Sea” was the first name of this sea area. It was used from Liao and Jin Dynasty until the late of Qing Dynasty (1644-1911).



Map 1 Map of the Northern Boundary of Korea, 《朝鮮國北境圖》

And in Qing Dynasty, there are the distinct understanding about the range of “East Sea” in the documents, which includes the whole Tatar Channel in the north and the whole sea area to the north of Korean Peninsula in the south. According to *Shuo Fang Bei Cheng* (Defense of North Boundary, 《朔方備乘》卷一) volume one, “Huntong River (混同江), the confluence of Songhua River (松花江) and Hei River (黑水), runs through Ning Gu Ta (寧古塔) and San Xing (三姓) and flows into East Sea”. Huntong River is the lower reach of Heilongjing River (黑龍

江). Another book named *Dong Bei Bian Fang Ji Yao* (*Frontier Defense of Northeast*, 《东北边防辑要》) said that some of the islands near Sakhalin (Ku Ye Island) are at the estuary of Huntong River, such as East Sea Island”(See volume one, *Ku Ye Dao Yan Ge Xing Sheng Kao Studies on History and Geography of Sakhalin* 库页岛沿革形胜考). These records demonstrate that the sea area into which the Huntong River flows is called “East Sea”. In the book *Hai Guo Tu zhi* (Maps of the Countries Overseas 《海国图志》) by Wei Yuan in Qing Dynasty, “East Sea” was marked beside the east coast of Korean Peninsula (Map 1). (See volume three, *Map of North Korean boundary, Chao Xian Guo Bei Jing Tu, Map of the Northern Boundary of Korea*, 《朝鲜国北境图》). This indicates that the “East Sea” in Chinese historical records means the same sea area as what the Western colonizers called “Sea of Japan”.



Map 2

Apart from the name “East Sea”, “Korean East Sea” was also used to call this sea areas in such literatures of Ming Dynasty(1368-1644) as *Hai Fang Zuan Yao*(海防纂要, Introduction of Coast Defense) and *Wan Li San Da Zheng*(万历三大征, Three Expeditions of Emperor Wan Li ,1573-1620). *Hai Fang Zuan Yao*(海防纂要, Introduction of Coast Defense), altogether thirteen volumes including one volume of maps, was written by Wang Zaijin(王在晋), who was a general in charge of the coast defense from Liaoning to Shandong Province. He was very familiar with the sea areas around North China. The book, based on his knowledge and other works about coast defense, describes the details of sea areas around China and Korea, the key of coast defense and transportations in these sea areas. On Wang’s Map in this book, “Korean East Sea” was marked to indicate the sea area east of Korean Peninsula (Map 2).



Map 3

*Wan Li San Da Zheng*(万历三大征, *Three Expeditions of Emperor Wan Li* ,1573-1620) was another book to call this sea area "Korean East Sea". Mao Ruizheng (茅瑞徵), the author, recorded in his three volume work the war between Japan and Korea in 1592. The war, called "Korean War during Wan Li Period" (万历朝鲜之役) in China and "Defense War in the year of Renchen" (壬辰卫国战争), was triggered by Toyomito Hideyoshi' s(丰臣秀吉) invasion to Korean Peninsula. Ming Government was involved in the war by sending the military troops to the peninsula under the Korean King's request. After seven years of endeavor, Korean won the war. Mao Ruizheng recorded the war in his book, with some maps to show the battlefield, on which he used the "Korean East Sea" to indicate the sea area east of the peninsula (Map 3). In the literatures above, Chinese name for this sea area changed from "East Sea" to "Koran East Sea". This might be related with the foundation of Choson Dynasty in 1392. During the period, Chinese not only knew more about the sea area but also more about the peninsula.

In conclusion, all the documents and researches prove that the name "East Sea", which originally appeared in Liao and Jin Dynasty, had been continually used by Nu Zhen and their descendant Manchurian, who lived beside this sea area until the late of Qing Dynasty. After the foundation of Choson Dynasty in 1392, "Korean East Sea" appeared in some Chinese literatures. Both "East Sea" and "Korean East Sea" are names for the same sea areas east of the peninsula, given by the residents living on the western coast of the sea area. The name "Sea of Japan" by western colonizers in modern history didn't have any historical basis. The names recorded in Chinese and Korean historical literatures such as "East Sea" should be the better choice.