

Geographical feature and endonym : the case of East Sea / Sea of Japan

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'Sea of Japan' in the Media

During my one-year stay in the United States, I could often find news on Korea in broadcast and newspaper. The Free Trade Agreement between Korea and the US and Korean people's candle light demonstration against it, suicides of famous actress and former president, missile launch of North Korea are among them. Some articles, mostly on North Korea's movement, were accompanied by a map showing the eastern part of Korea. All the maps, without exception, named the sea located in the east of Korea as 'Sea of Japan'.

I wrote to the editor of local newspaper, The Seattle Times, informed that many map publishers appreciate the name 'East Sea' as well as 'Sea of Japan' and use both names in their maps, and argued that in such a small-scale map centered on Korea, it would be more appropriate to use the name that Koreans use. I added that by the same token, Sea of Japan should be used on a map of Japan, and that many commercial map-makers adopt this way of balancing regarding this issue.

Unfortunately, I did not receive any reply to this comment, but it did not take long to know from other sources that the American newspapers have no other choice but to use standard names appearing in the United States Board on Geographic Names database. This shows the power of the standardized name for a geographical feature with designated limit. As the whole body of water

between Korea and Japan is standardized as 'Sea of Japan', even the sea close to the Korean coast should be named as such.

Endonym, Geographical Feature and Perception

UNGEGN defines an endonym as "name of a geographical feature in an official or well-established language occurring in that area where the feature is situated." According to this definition, '동해 Donghae' is an endonym of the sea located in the east of Korea because it is in Korean, the official language occurring in this area. But the problem here is that to what limit of sea Korean is the official language. This is related to the issue of sea boundaries including territorial waters, high sea and exclusive economic zone.

Precise delimitation of seas and endowment of legal status to each part of sea will belong to the field of international law or marine measurement technology. What I want to note, as a geographer, is people's perception on the sea limits: For example, to what limit of sea in the east of them would Korean people perceive as 'their' sea, Donghae? To what limit of sea in the west of them would Japanese people perceive as 'their' sea, Nihonkai?

People's perception is important because it is reflected in naming their places. For example, native Americans regarded themselves as a part of nature, not the master of it. This perception led them to have very descriptive place names (Ashley, 1996; Bright, 2003), e.g. big river (Mississippi), mother of waters (Tacoma), sound of birds (Issaquah), etc. Even more, they had such a name as "where there is heap of stones." This is like "the house with red roof at the corner of playground."

We need well-designed surveys to correctly answer the questions above. But I guess ordinary people's perception (not fishermen's, nor marine scientists') would be centered on the coastal areas: as the place of enjoying the beach and sea bath, fishing, boating, etc. It would be hard to divide Korean's Donghae and Japanese' Nihonkai based on perception, but I am quite certain that there would be very little overlap between these two parts. I believe there would be very few Koreans who perceive the sea which is not visible from Dokdo as Donghae.

This implies that two exclusive names, which could be called as endonyms for each party, can co-exist. But a critical problem happens when there is need to have one standardized name, either for a document or for a map. There could be a serious controversy surrounding this name. Many ill feelings are evoked by a map which writes 'their' name on the sea area we perceive as 'ours'.

Geographical Feature, Its Possibility of Separation

Kadmon(2007) also raised the problem of calling a sea with its opposite side's name, especially for the case of East Sea/ Sea of Japan and Persian Gulf/ Arabian Gulf. He mentioned that covering territorial waters of Korea with the name Sea of Japan produces an exonym and is therefore inappropriate. He also argued that it would be appropriate to employ preferably both names for the high sea area out of the territorial waters.

Kadmon did not clearly mention, but I believe he assumed the possibility of separating seas and naming each of them: one for territorial waters of A country, one for territorial waters of B country, and one for the high sea between them. He suggested that a new term should be added to designate a toponym for a maritime feature in international waters.

We find a case of separating waters in the area between UK and France. It was English Channel (La Manche) in the first draft(1986) of the 4th edition of Names and Limits of Oceans and Seas(S-23), published by IHO. But in the final draft(2002), a right-hand part of it was separated as Dover Strait (Pas de Calais). These two waters are characterized to have dual names, one in English and the other in French.

The glossary of terms published by UNGEGN(2002) defines geographical feature as a portion of the surface of Earth that has recognizable identity. We need more study, but it seems to be hard to find recognizable identity of Dover Strait (Pas de Calais) which separates it from English Channel (La Manche). One thing we find is the opening of Eurotunnel in 1990. But could an undersea tunnel be 'recognizable identity'?

Separation of geographical feature and subsequent naming of each separated feature should be based on the perception of people who are embedded into the feature. Native Americans' perception of geographical feature was confined to a part of river or mountain, not the whole feature. As the result, they did have place names for a bend or a rock, but did not have ones for the whole river or mountain (Hitchman, 1986). The campaign to unite three inland waters in Washington State and British Columbia,, Puget Sound, Strait of Juan de Fuca and Strait of Georgia, into one 'Salish Sea', named after the native American tribe in this area, could be a good starting point for a more coordinated management of this sea area. However, people living there have never perceived them as one feature. This new united name was rejected by the state names board for not having enough evidence to have been used.

As illustrated above, it seems likely possible to separate waters by flexibly applying the definition of geographical feature when based on people's perception. If it be possible to separate the sea between Korea and Japan, then it would be much easier to argue that it should be called Donghae or East Sea, at least for the territorial waters of Korea. In small scale maps, where writing all these separated names is not possible, adopting dual names would be a viable solution.

Donghae or East Sea?

Donghae is an endonym which have long been called by Koreans in their language. Then, why not using this original form instead of a translated one, East Sea? I would argue that a due respect should be given to the specificity of oriental languages (Choo, 2007). Such languages as Korean, Chinese, and Japanese have completely different structure of writing scripts and etymology from those using roman alphabets, and it is therefore very difficult to convey the meaning of the names in the international use. The need for translation of names happens here.

A recent trend of simplifying Chinese transcribed names supports this argument. All the transcribed names in the third edition of Limits of Oceans and Seas, S-23, Tung Hai, Nan Hai and Hwang Hai for East China Sea, South China Sea, and Yellow Sea, were deleted in the fourth edition.

Geographical names in this case could be categorized as 'translated endonym'. If it would not be accepted as an endonym because it is not in an official or well-established language, then we could call it 'translation of an endonym'. Or if we begin with an exonym, then we could call it 'authorized exonym'. East Sea is an exonym because it is in English, not an official or well-established language in Korea, but it is authorized by the Korean people and the Korean government. A similar case would be the country name of Korea. Its endonym is '대한민국 Dae-han-min-guk', but Republic of Korea, as an exonym, is officially used in the international society.

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