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## ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE NAME 'EAST SEA'

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### Abstract

The mid-nineteenth century saw the age of new nationalisms and the dawn of mass-produced maps and atlases. Cartographic publishers, then as now, wished to be up-to-date with their toponymy and looked to show new and up-and-coming names. The traditional long-standing names for the sea between Korea and Japan (*Sea of Choson*, *Sea of Korea*, *East Sea*, *Oriental Sea*) seemed anachronistic. Instead, the name *Sea of Japan*, already common in Europe and now also associated with the embryonic but growing power of the Japanese Empire, was perceived as the newly relevant label to use. Korea, subsumed as it was within the Japanese Empire and hence deprived of its independent voice, was not in a position to counter this perception. As a result, by the early twentieth century the name *Sea of Japan* had found itself globally established in cartographic publications and indeed the world's major languages. Korea now has an independent voice, but faces huge obstacles in attempting to overturn this linguistic reality; obstacles of language, apathy, resentment, suspicion, and fear of setting a precedent. Perhaps only a relaxation of wider Japanese-Korean relations can provide a context for the resolution of this issue.

## ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE NAME 'EAST SEA'

Language in general has throughout history possessed a deep political dynamic. Yet one particular aspect of language – toponymy – had until the nineteenth century remained largely free from politics. Until then, as a general rule, the language in which a geographical name was conveyed did not overly matter; the conveyor of the name would be expected to use his mother tongue and the reader or listener would have a relaxed attitude towards the chosen name form. But the nineteenth century saw two new and highly significant developments that, although unconnected, combined to thrust toponymy into the political limelight that it enjoys – and from which it suffers – today.

Firstly, rising nationalisms engendered in Europe by the creation of nation states produced new identities that were from the outset fiercely held and contested. Many individuals now saw themselves as the national citizens of a specific country that needed to carve an identity separate from its neighbours. And along with each new nation state came a flagship language that was identified with that nation, and which indeed had been instrumental in the creation of that state. Suddenly it did matter what language was used for a place name. Using a newly 'foreign' language for a feature might suggest an acquisitive mentality which the reader or listener resented, even though use of that same language would not greatly have mattered in the days when the entire land had been subsumed into one common empire.

This newly acquired sensitivity towards geographical nomenclature was further fed by the second of these great nineteenth century developments; the new and widespread appearance in published form of mass-produced maps and atlases. For the first time in history, significant numbers of the educated classes of Europe and Asia were able to sit in their drawing rooms or libraries and study at leisure the geographical names chosen by the great map and atlas publishers of the day. This was an unprecedented opportunity to examine toponymy closely and in the round. Of course publishers, then as now, frequently had to make choices as to which toponym to portray among the several options that might be available to them for each feature – and given the new national sensitivities we have just noted, it is perhaps inevitable that readers did not necessarily always approve of those choices.

The concerns of the readership were directed primarily towards the names of settlements in their own countries, where readers generally hoped to see toponyms written in their own receiver language. But occasionally the cause of reader dissatisfaction involved the name of a feature that was not confined specifically to one country, and arguably did not really belong to any country at all. Such an instance was afforded by the area of open sea located between the Korean peninsula and the Japanese archipelago.

This important maritime feature has had several labels attached to it over the course of history, most notably:

- Names indicative of Korea: 'Sea of Choson' & 'Sea of Korea';
- Names indicative of location relative to Korea: 'East Sea' & 'Oriental Sea';
- Names indicative of Japan: 'Sea of Japan' & 'Japan Sea'.

There are of course differing and seemingly irreconcilable viewpoints as to the relative antecedence and significance of each of these names. But certainly by the nineteenth century, Japanese-produced maps had begun to use the label 'Sea of Japan', a label that had first been seen in seventeenth-century Europe. This label thus joined the traditional long-standing names 'Sea of Choson', 'Sea of Korea', 'East Sea' and 'Oriental Sea' as a rival toponym. And as we have seen, the nineteenth century was precisely the juncture that saw the first mass production of cartographic publications, so perhaps inevitably the name 'Sea of Japan' found favour among the new band of map and atlas publishers – precisely because it appeared to be the newer name. Just as they do today, map and atlas publishers of the time agonised about being up-to-date, anxious to show current names rather than have their products spurned for the use of what might be construed as outdated and outmoded toponyms. To the publishers of the day it would have seemed that 'Sea of Japan' was the up-and-coming name for this feature and hence the label to be employed.

Thus the toponym 'Sea of Japan' had already been finding global favour among nineteenth-century map and atlas publishers prior to the birth of the new imperial Japan, which did not come about until after the Meiji restoration of 1868. But when it subsequently did arrive on the scene, Japanese imperialism then unquestionably played a significant role. Unlike in Europe, where nation states were appearing at the expense of empires, the nation state of Japan in the later nineteenth century was itself becoming an empire. Its territorial expansion violated neighbouring countries, denying them a diplomatic voice for their own national viewpoints. The unequal and increasingly draconian 'agreements' imposed upon Korea in this period prevented that country from lobbying map and atlas publishers around the world to use the Korean preferred traditional name for this maritime feature – 'East Sea'. Instead, the label 'Sea of Japan', already established in Europe but now also actively promoted globally by a newly imperial Japan, became increasingly cemented into global consciousness as the name with the impetus behind it; the seemingly proper and appropriate name for this maritime feature. This affirmation was further reinforced in 1929 when the International Hydrographic Organization (IHO) named the feature as 'Japan Sea' [*sic*] in its important Special Publication 23 (S-23) entitled *Limits of Oceans and Seas*, issued at a time when Korea of course remained occupied by imperial Japan and lacked any independent diplomatic voice with which to present its contrary view to the IHO. The outcome is that today it is only in Korea itself that 'East Sea' continues to hold sway as the principal name for this feature. The rest of the world remains largely comfortable with the 'new' name that proliferated in the nineteenth century – 'Sea of Japan'.

As we know, these events have conspired to endow modern Korea with a deep and pained sense of grievance and ill-fortune; an all-consuming feeling of injustice that the name 'East Sea' has become largely eschewed by global map and atlas publishers. It is perceived as outrageously unfair that historical events of the nineteenth century should have resulted in the almost global loss of the traditional name for the Sea. The huge importance attached by Korea to this issue, which for Koreans is so sensitive and emotive, can easily be demonstrated. The national anthem of the Republic of Korea even begins with the word for 'East Sea' (*Donghae*), the opening verse reading 'Until that day when the waters of the East Sea run dry and Mount Baekdu is worn away, God protect and preserve our nation'. The country's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade regularly features the East Sea / Sea of Japan nomenclature issue as one of the crucial concerns facing the country today – indeed, in an estimation that seems extraordinary to foreigners, it is habitually given equal prominence with the issue of nuclear armaments on the Korean peninsula. And along with the ministry there is a wealth of official and unofficial organisations, seminars, websites and documents all espousing the stated Korean objective of restoring 'East Sea' as a globally accepted name for this feature. In Korea, the name is accorded reverential status and is beloved.

The detached observer will in all likelihood understand the reasons for Korean sensitivity over this issue. Korea's shared historical experience with Japan has certainly been unfortunate, and the legacy of that relationship undeniably lingers today. It is therefore understandable that from the Korean perspective the name 'Sea of Japan' should carry possessive qualities, this toponym being formed in a genitive style which seems to perpetuate those early twentieth century decades when this sea was indeed to all intents and purposes an internal sea set in the heart of the Japanese empire; a sea surrounded and possessed by Japan.

But the same detached observer will nevertheless note that this Sea is not a feature within a single sovereignty and that it is therefore not within the remit of any one of the littoral countries to determine the name that should be used globally. It is for the receiver languages around the world to determine how they should label it in their own languages – there is no single unquestioned 'donor' name. And as we have noted, the reality is that the world's languages have for more than a century mostly chosen 'Sea of Japan' as their first-choice receiver name – their exonym – for this feature, as illustrated in this table:

*Arabic	Baḥr al Yābān	romanized: original form = بحر اليابان
Bulgarian	Yaponsko more	romanized: original form = Японско море
*Chinese	Riben Hai	romanized: original form = 日本海
Czech	Japonské moře	
Dutch	Japanse Zee	

*English	Sea of Japan	
*French	Mer du Japon	
German	Japanisches Meer	
Greek	Iaponiki thalassa	romanized: original form = Ιαπωνική Θάλασσα
Hungarian	Japán-tenger	
Indonesian	Laut Jepang	
Italian	Mare del Giappone	
Malay	Laut Jepun	
Norwegian	Japanhavet	this is the name in both <i>bokmål</i> & <i>nynorsk</i>
Persian	Daryā-ye Zhāpan	romanized: original form = دریای ژاپن
Polish	Morze Japońskie	
Portuguese	Mar do Japão	
Romanian	Marea Japoniei	
*Russian	Japonskoe more	romanized: original form = Японское море
*Spanish	Mar del Japón	
Swedish	Japanska havet	
Tagalog	Dagat ng Hapon	
Turkish	Japon Denizi	
Ukrainian	Yaponske more	romanized: original form = Японське море

*The six official languages of the United Nations are indicated by an asterisk*

It will be seen that in every language above (as well as in many others), the priority name is ‘Sea of Japan’. Whatever the historical origins of this situation, this has for a century or more been a simple fact of language. It inevitably has a huge impact, and not just cartographically; it transfers across into the daily lives of individuals, organisations, the media, and a host of other interested parties. For instance, because – as the table shows – all six official languages of the United Nations employ the label ‘Sea of Japan’ in its various translations as the name for this feature, the United Nations also uses that name in all its documentation, published in those same six languages (though it is important to stress here that the decision of the United Nations to use the name ‘Sea of Japan’ is simply one of editorial practice, not of official policy; it is not within the remit of the United Nations to determine individual geographical names).

Thus when the Republic of Korea became a member of the United Nations in 1991, and began lobbying in favour of its preferred name ‘East Sea’, there were many obstacles to face. It is a fact of life that once a receiver language has settled upon a conventional name (an exonym) for a feature, that language is usually comfortable with its choice and that particular name remains unchanged. Conventional names do not change as if at the flick of a switch, and it is quite possibly unprecedented for the exonym of a major

maritime feature name of this magnitude to change. There has indeed been one notable example of a major maritime feature name changing from a possessive-style label to a directional-style label; the English-language name 'German Ocean' famously mutated into 'North Sea' roughly a century ago. But this is not an analogy or precedent, because it involved a change made by a littoral state – and therefore a donor language – to the name of a feature on its doorstep; an endonym. It seems unlikely that any of the littoral states involved here – Korea, Japan, Russia – would abandon their chosen endonym for the feature; there is too much historical tradition invested in each of the names at issue.

Sympathy for Korea's historical plight is not in itself sufficient to effect a change in the toponym used by the world's languages. And in fact, in its quest for global acceptance of the name 'East Sea', Korea must face hurdles of apathy, resentment and even suspicion. Most countries do not see toponyms that are possessive in linguistic style as bestowing legitimacy on real-life geopolitical possession. Few, for instance, would argue that the labels 'Greenland Sea' or 'Norwegian Sea' imply any particular legal possession of those maritime features. Hence the wider world is not necessarily instinctively sympathetic to the claim that, from a Korean perspective, the name 'Sea of Japan' really does indicate possession. Sometimes this apathy is combined with a degree of resentment, from those who dislike what they may perceive as outside interference in their own receiver language's conventional names. Suspicion enters the equation too; some observers now conclude that the name 'East Sea', so inextricably connected to Korea's perspective upon the feature, has come to denote Korean attribution every bit as much as the name 'Sea of Japan' is indicative of Japanese possession. A further concern is that of precedent; the worry that if a language's conventional name for this feature should and could be changed, then this would open the flood-gates for other countries that dislike other major maritime toponyms to attempt the same tactics of persuasion. Indeed, within the past decade, South Africa has within the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names floated the notion of 'South African Ocean' as a label preferable to the universally used 'Indian Ocean'.

So at present the vexatious issue of the East Sea / Sea of Japan remains unresolved, seemingly far removed from an outcome acceptable to all parties; these being not just Korea and Japan but – importantly – the wider world too. Given that Korea's aim is not to ask the international community completely to abandon the label 'Sea of Japan', but rather to elevate the alternative label 'East Sea' on to an equal footing, there may perhaps be some room for manoeuvre. But Japan remains content with the *status quo*, and perhaps the conclusion to be drawn is that the Sea name issue may be incapable of solution until such time as there is a mellowing of Japanese–Korean relations as a whole. Without such a *dénouement*, there is at present little incentive for the vocabulary of the world's languages to change significantly. What is certain, though, is that should the *impasse* ever be satisfactorily overcome, then the resultant sense of achievement and fulfilment will have bequeathed to us all a true Sea of Resolution.