

Yuan Wei (1794-1857), His Research and Maps about EAST SEA

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The sea area between Japan archipelagoes and Korean peninsular was called “East Sea” by ancient inhabitants, Han people and non-Han ethnic groups, living in the vast region of Manchuria, or north-west coast of the sea area. Many ancient Chinese documentaries with the copious notes of “East Sea” and several old maps indicating “东海”, the Chinese Characters for East Sea, were presented on the previous seminars held by the same organizer. In the papers on these records and maps, a scholar and official of Ch’ing Dynasty (1644-1911) named Yuan Wei (魏源), was frequently mentioned, because one of his maps clearly identified this water body as “East Sea”. It was this map that prompted my interest to examine thoroughly his works and maps in a bid to uncover all his research about East Sea. The search in his works for anything relating to the sea area found that “East Sea”, both the water body and the people around it, did draw lots of attentions from him. Besides the previous one, another map with “East Sea” made by him was discovered and pages about the history of the people along the north-west coast of the sea area surfaced to the top of his studies on Manchuria. With this outstanding research, Yuan Wei turned out to be the best specialist on East Sea in Modern China.

Born in 1794, Mid-South China, Hunan Province, Yuan Wei was raised in a gentry’s family. Like all the intellectuals of the time, he was educated in an old-style private school in his childhood. The education of the sort requested the students to recite Confucianism Classics despite the abstruse meanings. These classic documentaries would be helpless if one tried to solve a practical issue, however they contribute a lot to historical academic research. Decades later, Yuan Wei found what he had been asked to remember a great treasure for his studies. Although, at the age of 51, he successfully passed the imperial civil examination which was the only way to get a post in the government, he, for some unknown reasons, failed to obtain a good official position that matched his excellent grade in the exam. Having been an assistant of a Mandarin for years, Yuan Wei was in despair about his promotion in the government, which made him shift his vigor to academic studies on history and geography.

During Yuan Wei’s life time, China was undergoing a dramatic change that had never happened in

the past thousands of years. In 1842, when Yuan Wei was almost 50, the great empire was defeated for the first time in military conflict with “barbarians”, as the British was called by the Chinese at that time. The sequent events in the following half century proved that Opium War (1840-1842) was merely the beginning of a series of fiascos and humiliations to Ch’ing government.

The striking result of the wars with Europeans forced Chinese rulers, from the emperor, the Dowager Empress to cabinet ministers, to deliberate on the defense of the country. Some low-ranking officials, without the chance to propose their suggestions on the court meeting or submit the memorials to His Majesty, dedicated themselves to research and book writing. Yuan Wei was obviously amongst them, concentrating his studies on military history of the dynasty in the hope that he can find out, in the comparison of Manchu’s brilliant rising in mid-17th century and her feeble response to Westerners merely two centuries later, the way that could revive China’s strength and power. When he turned to study the early history of Ch’ing Dynasty, much of his attention was paid to the north-east corner of the empire, the western coast of East Sea, where the ancestors of the Manchu emperor had established their state and launched the expedition against Han-Chinese.

In 1842, on the eve of ratification of Nanking Treaty that ceded Hong Kong Island to Great Britain, Yuan Wei finished *Sheng Wu Chi* (圣武记, *Military History of Ch’ing Dynasty*), one out of the fourteen volumes focusing on history of the natives on the west coast of East Sea, which subsequently incorporated into Manchu state.

According to this book, in early 17th century, the vast area of north east China was occupied by several powers, amongst which the strongest were listed as Manchu state, East Sea state and Changbai Mountain State. He said: “The East Sea State consisted of three tribes which located near the coast and on islands nearby, far away from Ming’s border.”* Ming administration was founded by Han-Chinese which ruled the central China. Manchu considered the tribes of East Sea State as his brother with the same ancestor, for their languages and customs were of no difference. Waerka(瓦尔喀) Tribe, one of the three, was at the south of East Sea State, and “her territory was between Yalu River (鸭绿江) and Tumen River (图们江), near Korea and along the coast.”† When Manchu State tried to conquer the tribe, many Waerka refugees flooded into the peninsular,

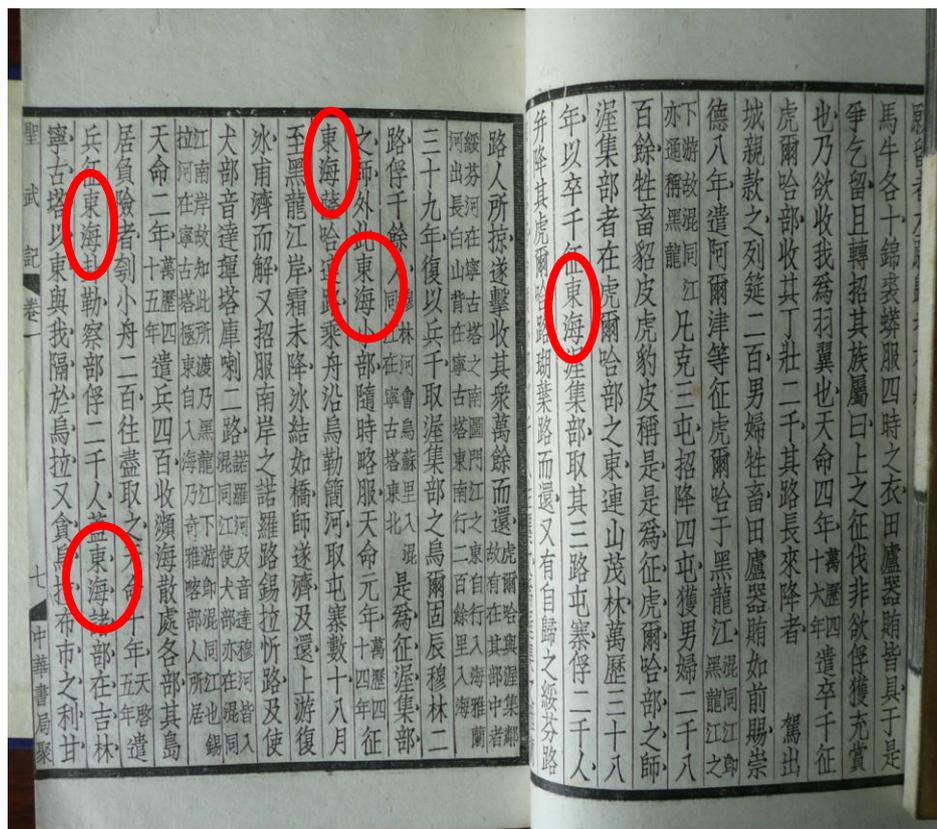
* Yuan Wei, *Sheng Wu Chi*, Vol.1 reprinted in 1984, pp5

† Yuan Wei, *Sheng Wu Chi*, Vol.1 reprinted in 1984, pp6

asking Korea, the ally of Ming Government, to convey the message for help to Ming, the Han-Chinese Administration, which was the main adversary of Manchu at the time. This brought about Manchu's revenge to Korea in 1627, known as “丁卯胡乱”(Barbarian's invasion in the year of Dingmao, 1627) in the history of Korea. As late as 1636, Waerka Tribe incorporated into Manchu State.

In the north of the East Sea State located Huerha(虎尔哈) Tribe, with her people hunting and farming at the valley of Heilong River(黑龙江, Amur River). Manchu first attacked the tribe in 1619, and then in a decisive battle in 1643, defeated it, with nearly 3000 people surrendered and Manchu's military sphere extending to Amur River.

In the middle of the East Sea State, Woji (渥集) Tribe was scattered south of Xing Kai Lake. Manchu and the tribe engaged in a war from 1611 through 1612. More than two thousand people had been captured by Manchu before the tribe disappeared from the region.

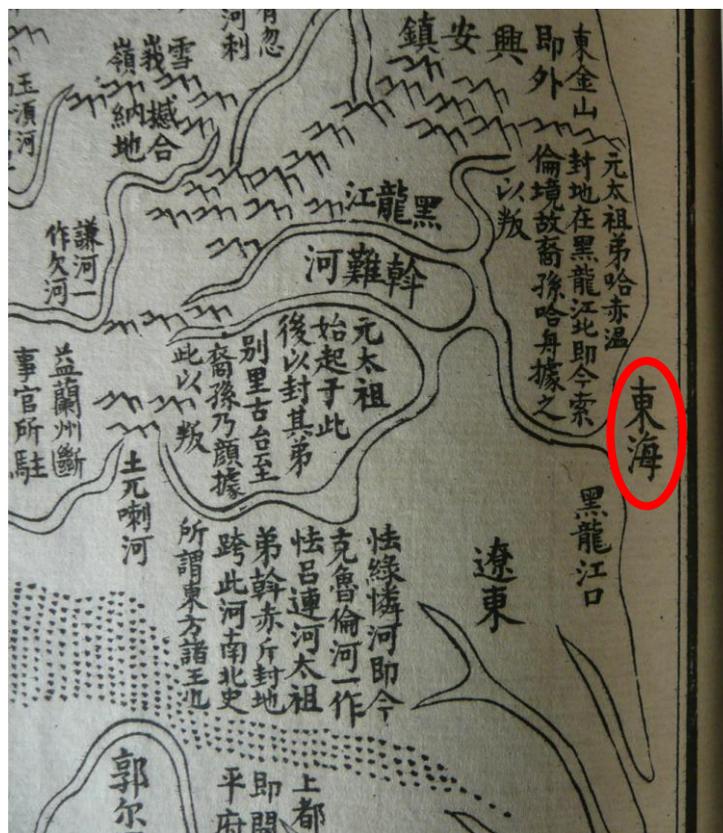


Picture 1 Pages from *Sheng Wu Chi* where natives of East Sea were carefully studied

Besides the East Sea State, there were also some small groups of natives living from the mid Amur

River to its mouth. In Yuan Wei’s book, each of them bore “East Sea” before their own name. When talking about East Sea natives, he singled out Sakhalin Island as one of their residences. “East Sea natives live……on Ku Ye Island*, near the mouth of Amur River. It is much bigger than Taiwan, with natives of Hezhe, Feiyaha, and Elunchun† living upon.”

In the first volume of *Sheng Wu Chi*, Yuan Wei depicted the history of the tribes and natives on the west coast of East Sea and their relations with Manchu State. Had he included in the book a few maps of the area involved in his narratives, it would be much easier for readers to pinpoint these natives and reconstruct their geographical relations. However, not even one map was presented in the work.



Map 1 part of the Map of Yuan’s Territory indicating East Sea at the mouth of Amur River

It seemed that Yuan Wei himself had realized this defect and showed his talent as a cartographer in his second book *Hai Guo Tu Zhi* (海国图志, Maps and Introductions of Overseas Countries),

* Ku Ye Island is the Chinese name for Sakhalin Island. Even today, on Chinese maps, the island is indicated as 库页岛 (Ku Ye Island) .

† Hezhe(赫哲) and Elunchun(鄂伦春) are currently names for two ethnic groups among the 55 across China.

which contained two maps about East Sea. The book aims at diffusing the knowledge about foreign countries to ordinary people.

In the preface, Yuan Wei reviews the history of China with the maps showing her changing territory. When he came to Yuan Dynasty (1260-1368), established by Mongolian and one of the periods that China had the largest domain, East Sea went into his scope. On the map of Yuan's territory, we found at the right side margin “东海” or “East Sea” near the mouth of Heilong River (黑龙江, Amur River). This map has never been noticed by the Chinese scholars who did the research on East Sea. Even though from the perspective of Modern cartography this map is not accurately drawn, we are still able to tell that Mr. Wei assigned the name “East Sea” to the sea area which Amur River flows into.



Map 2 Map of the Northern Part of Korea, 《朝鮮國北境圖》

Following the preface, volumes of maps and introductions to foreign countries are arranged according to their locations and continents. Asia comes first, then Europe, then America and Africa. Yuan Wei started the Maps of Asia with Korean Peninsular. He divided the country into

three parts from the north to the south and made a map for each of them. On the map of the northern part of the peninsular, “东海” or “East Sea” shows up again closely off the eastern coast of the land.

These two maps clearly identified “东海” or “East Sea” as the water body east of Korean Peninsular. Since these two books were of large sale volumes and were reprinted several times till the late 19th century, for Chinese people “东海” or “East Sea” was the first choice of the name for the sea area, as it had been for more than one thousand years*.

To recapitulate, Yuan Wei was considered one of the greatest historians and geographers in Modern China. His research covered a variety of fields including military history, world geography, ancient literature and poem. The studies on East Sea in *Sheng Wu Chi* and *Hai Guo Tu Zhi* made him the first scholar in Modern China to concern the sea area and the first Chinese mapmaker to identify “East Sea” to its proper location. His two maps are the only examples found by far with the Chinese Characters “东海” or “East Sea” on the east of Korean Peninsular.

* The book 大金集礼 *Rituals of Jin Dyansty*, traced the name “East Sea” back to that period which lasted from 1115-1234.