

History Matters: The *East Sea/Sea of Japan* Naming Issue Through the Lens of the Japanese Empire

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This brief paper suggests thinking in slightly different ways about the naming issue of the body of water between Korea and Japan. The need has never been clearer: since April 2014, relations between Korea and Japan have spiraled to all time post 1945 lows. In many ways, this is astonishing given recent historical moments such as the 1998 President Kim Dae-jung and Prime Minister Obuchi Keizo agreement on cultural sharing and the 2002 jointly hosted soccer World Cup.

Yet even then as that moment of Korea-Japan togetherness was unfolding, the use of Japan's wartime and colonial past in the present for unproductive gains was rearing its nasty political head as Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro's repeated visits to the notorious Yasukuni shrine to war dead during the World Cup year made apparent.

Thinking broadly, therefore, about what is at stake in proposing a joint name for the body of water to the east of Korea forces all involved to think contextually. It is not only in Korea's interests to urge the dual naming scheme, but it is also in Japan's interests to accept this idea for the sake of moving the region forward; it is what American slang might call a "soft-ball" approach, and in this context it is a smart option.

Different from the Dokdo issue (islands that the Japanese government formally protests as its own and calls, "Takeshima"), sovereignty is not the focus with the name of the ocean.¹⁾ That these tiny islets fall into the middle of the body of water under discussion, however, is related to the broader matter at hand. As a result, it is germane to train focus on these rocks and the body of water surrounding them, raising issues of how and why Japan's failure to understand Korea's claims to both lays bare the Achilles Heel of Japan's foreign policy: Tokyo's contemporary erasure of Japan's history

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¹⁾ Important to remember, only Japan recognizes Japanese sovereignty over the islands it contests with its neighbors; see my recent essay, "Japan's Island Problem" (<http://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/japans-island-problem>).

of the first half of the 20th century.

Japan claims that the South Korean assertion that Japan's colonization of Korea is related to the international spread in use of the "*Sea of Japan*" is "invalid." Yet, in fact, as has been repeatedly demonstrated. Korea's assertion is correct and logically so not "invalid" as Japan's counterclaim contends. To begin, one needs go no further than Japan's formal annexation of Korea in 1910, which involved the legal name change of the country in its entirety both in regional terminology and also Korea's international name. In a word, after its wars of conquest against Korea as well as collaborationist activities of some Korean officials selling away the country to Japan the country became "Japan's Korea," the ocean previously dividing them now merely an internal body of water.

Thought about differently as some in Japanese ruling circles today clearly would like to do if Japan had not lost the war in 1945 and thus lost its empire outright we would not be having this conversation. The country of "Korea" would be "Japan's Korea" and its officials and scholars would not be in a position to make claims in their own name.

But this is not what happened.

In short, the reason that the Japanese government would even bother to contest the issue over the name of the sea between it and its neighboring country to the west which is significantly different from Japan's attempts to claim sovereignty over Dokdo, the Diaoyutai, and the Kurils brings no gain in resources or capital value whatsoever is to hold firm to the lie that the history of having an empire did nothing to shape the region. This connects to many related issues today which we are not discussing yet bear mention including the issue of reparations for the not insignificant fact of the use of slave labor during the imperial era hundreds of thousands of whom if not millions came over this body of water to Japan from Korea and also of course from China and worked without compensation to build Imperial Japan's war machine which not insignificantly would also be the foundational structure in material terms in many cases for post 1945 Japan's so called economic miracle. To put this differently, the United States gathered its economic momentum as a nation in the 1700 early 1800s in very large part due to the uncompensated use of slaves who crossed the Atlantic Ocean, which has many names most important for that history the Middle Passage. We discuss this in history classes today. Much still needs to be done of course. In Japan's case we are not talking about the 17 or 1830s, however, we are talking about the 1930s and to continue the attempt to wash this away is at the heart of the argument today otherwise Japan

would have absolutely nothing to gain from putting up a protest to such a superficially “value-less” thing: the name of a sea.

So, stepping back it is important to remember that with Japan’s total loss in August 1945, Japan’s geographical shape went from one of massive control — territorial and ocean space to what we know today.

In other words this massive octopus that spanned from North China south to near Australia was reduced seemingly overnight to the seahorse shaped nation school children everywhere have learned on maps since 1952 when the terms of the San Francisco Treaty went into effect

This becomes significant in light of how the historical creation of the Japanese empire involved crossing oceans. Part and parcel of the late 19th century Japanese government’s efforts to expand itself and become one of the world’s imperializing powers was achieved through its adoption of international law for Japan. To be clear, by describing Japan’s imperial projects and designs in the terminology of international law in no way means that what Japanese troops and police did at the time in colonizing Korea, for example (or Taiwan or other places), was just or fair; it does, however, mean that Japanese state aggrandizers legitimated their political, economic, and social actions in the prevailing laws of the day (much as the French did in Algeria or the Americans in the Philippines and so on).

Noticeably, part and parcel of this moment was the adoption into Japanese law and statecraft — laws and terms that over time would come to be practiced throughout Asia in similar terms — of international’s laws understanding of “high seas” and “territorial seas.” In his great 1903 work, “International Law in Peacetime”, for example, Japanese legal thinker Takahashi Sakue drew careful attention to the finer points of 17th century Dutch legal scholar Hugo Grotius’ concept of “freedom of the seas” (using both the Latin phrase *Mare Liberum* and its new Japanese translation 自由海論), defining it with all sorts of neologisms and explanatory notes as any part of the ocean beyond the 3 miles of “territorial waters” (領海) all nations had.²⁾ Takahashi emphasized, moreover, that Grotius’ doctrine provided for the “right of innocent passage” that safeguarded international exchange.

Takahashi and others such as Ariga Nagao were equally known at the time for texts concerning international law during war. Significant in this regard, both men were thoroughly concerned with defining as legal for Japan the nation’s first overseas

²⁾ Takahashi Sakue, *Heiji Kokusaihoron* 1903.

modern wars (1894-95 against China; 1904-05 against Russia).

What does this have to do with today's dual naming issue?

Technically nothing on the one hand, yet, on the other hand and contextually speaking it opens up the ways in which the architects of the Empire of Japan began thinking about the oceans between Japan and the Asian mainland in new ways by the outset of the 20th century. Moreover, it also takes us into understanding how these bodies of water developed a new place in broader Japanese consciousness — something that the erasure of empire in 1945 made abundantly clear in territorial terms (i.e. Japanese were no longer the privileged overlords of their nation's colonized spaces) yet far less clear in oceanic terms.

First came the East China Sea, beginning with the annexation of the Ryukyu islands commonly known as Okinawa to Japan in 1879. Involved in this act of takeover was a shift in social consciousness which would ultimately “bring in” this body of water to Japan as a new sort of “inland sea” space; in other words against hundreds of years of exclusion policy that had turned the oceans around Japan into frontiers against the world to keep foreigners out as much as to keep Japanese in the Japanese government began in the late 19th century to encourage the nation's subjects to go into the sea again.

China's inability to defend the Ryukyu king and his kingdom during the 1870s taught Japan's leaders that they could venture further, and the next step was Taiwan, secured in Japan's 1895 victory over China. During this war, the Imperial Japanese Navy would win key battles in the East China Sea, all upheld as legitimate victories according to the new international laws of war, empire, and open seas.³⁾

Next would come the East Sea/Sea of Japan which held a place of immense importance during Japan's next modern war and which would include a singularly famous event and one that many historians routinely still rely on to declare Japan's arrival on the world stage: Admiral Togo Heihachiro's victory over Russian Admiral Zinovy Rozhestvenski on May 28, 1905 in the East China Sea's northernmost reaches in the Korea Straits/Tsushima Straits where its waters flow into the East Sea/ Sea of Japan.

Japan suffered only a fraction of Russia's casualties during this particular

³⁾ I write extensively about this in my first book, *Japan's Colonization of Korea: Discourse and Power* (U of Hawaii, 2005).

engagement 117 for Japan to Russia's 4380 yet of enduring significance this war introduced to Japanese what historian and Harvard president Drew Gilpin Faust describes as "a Good Death... influenc(ing) not only the last moments of thousands of dying soldiers but also the outlook of survivors who contended with the impact of these experiences for the rest of their lives."⁴⁾ Memorial stones attest to this, dotting islands throughout the East China Sea and into the southernmost reaches of the *East Sea/Sea of Japan* to recall Admiral Togo's port visits to Iriomote, Taiwan, and Tsushima, simultaneously celebrating his accomplishments and commemorating the sailors who died "honorable war deaths" under his command, all of which historical Naoko Shimazu observes as a "rhetorical invention" of this war.⁵⁾

In a word, this is Japan's first wildly popular overseas military victory, and in addition to Togo's triumph at Tsushima which earned him the nickname "Nelson of the East" American President Theodore Roosevelt gave the country of Korea to Japan as a prize for winning the war. Roosevelt's authority to make this gift apparently was problematic only for the Koreans. The international community agreed and rewarded Roosevelt with the second Nobel Peace Prize for his role brokering the peace between Russian and Japan. Among other things, "winning" Korea enabled Japanese strategic thinkers and emerging pan-Asianists alike to conceive of new space with which to buffer "white" imperialism as it was increasingly described at the time connecting the East China Sea's northernmost reaches fluidly with the *East Sea/Sea of Japan*. Countless small islands off of the southern Korean city of Busan and also Jeju island would, moreover, fall under Japanese control, the latter becoming a major staging ground for Japanese kamikaze missions in the region in 1944-45.

For discussion of the East Sea/Sea of Japan, however, the most important feature of Japan's 1904-1905 war was its capture first of Dokdo, then Ulleungdo.

These islands that Japan claims today yet which are Korea territory are two islets and not really fit for human life. On them still today, the cement shards of a platform that the Japanese Navy built initially during the Russo-Japanese War for a watchtower and communications line that would tie Tokyo to the Asian mainland lie at the southern base of the eastern islet directly below the peak where South Korean police barracks stand guarding the nation today (themselves lorded over by enormous satellite

⁴⁾ Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Knopf, 2008), p. 9.

⁵⁾ Naoko Shimizu, *Japanese Society at War: Death, Memory, and the Russo-Japanese War* (New York: Cambridge, 2009), p. 98.

and radio transmitters and receivers);

Oceanographers refer to the *East Sea/Sea of Japan* as a “marginal” sea, which is funny given the significance that this body of water held for building the Japanese nation and empire during the first half of the 20th century. The Japanese government’s pick-and-choose nature of official engagement with the past, however, makes this most apt.

Waves pound the few rubbly beaches where Japanese entrepreneur Nakai Yozaburo built temporary shelters for himself and his workers at the sea lion butchery that he and his son operated there during the first half of the century (and recall that this would lead to the extinction of a species).

Now, because the great German naturalist and explorer, Wilhelm Peters, gave a taxonomic name to this creature in 1866 that includes the Latinized version of “Japan” does that mean the “*East Sea*” cannot be an equal name for the sea in which these animals once lived? No, of course not. That the German map maker von Siebold’s maps of the area were the best maps of the day in Europe and would list the body of water as the *Sea of Japan* is what it was: not because the *East Sea* or *Choson Sea* or *Corea Sea* did not exist but because Koreans had not been invited to participate.

So what happened to the sea lion (which is a sub species of the California sea lion)?

On September 29, 1904, the entrepreneur named Nakai Yozaburo from the Oki islands off of Japan’s western Shimane prefecture petitioned the Japanese Home Ministry, Foreign Ministry, and Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce to incorporate the islands into Japanese territory as well as for exclusive leasehold over them to establish a sea lion hunting operation there.⁶⁾

Nakai described the location of his venture as follows:

There is an uninhabited island called ‘Ryanko’ (Japanese for the French-given name, Liancourt) far out into the sea west of Oki island (by 85 ri) and southeast of (Korea’s) Ulleungdo (by 55 ri)··· There are two rocky islands there··· (with) steep cliffs that soar to the sky··· In the middle of the first island, there is a muddy pond; on the second island, salt-water drips down the cliffs.⁷⁾

It would be beneficial for someone to live on the island and manage it, offering

⁶⁾ Nakai Yozaburo, “Application for Leasehold over the Ryanko Islands,” September 29, 1904, Reel No. 1-0328 pp. 0255-0263, Japan Center for Asian Historical Research, Tokyo (online at www.jacar.go.jp).

⁷⁾ Reel No. 1-0328 p. 0259.

firewood, water, and food to ships that need (such goods). Moreover, it would benefit Japan's growing fishery and trade with the Gangwon and Kamgyeong areas (of Korea).⁸⁾

Thinking further ahead, Nakai added:

Whenever I travel to Ulleungdo I land on the island. There are many sea lions there... In 1903, I built a fishing shed there, brought some fishermen and some gear and began to hunt the sea lions... Many people made fun of my foolishness... I wasted a lot of money, yet I eventually developed hunting and manufacturing techniques and have begun to market them.⁹⁾

Finally, Nakai described how his profits would expand, urging the state to take an interest in his designs, at once making the islands part of the nation and granting him leasehold:

With tanning, (sea lion) hides are a good substitute for cowhide and can be used in many ways. Their oil is equal to whale oil in price and quality... its meat and bones can be ground and mixed into powder for fertilizer... The management of this island will be profitable; its ownership, however, is not clear... (Others) will kill all the sea lions by overhunting... I would limit the size and count of my catch to protect them... Therefore, I ask that the island be quickly incorporated into Japan's territory and leased to me for the next ten years.

In his petition, Nakai reveals much of what remains valued about Japan's modernizing moment: creative business sense and awareness of a broader, lucrative world.¹⁰⁾ He is open to everything.

To read Nakai Yozaburo's individual history as the sole point of the islands' and their surrounding seas incorporation into Japan is not merely "thin" history, however; it fails to understand how this private endeavor would intersect with Japan's larger national moment during the fall and winter of 1904-1905.¹¹⁾ In clear ways, bringing the island that the Japanese government designated Takeshima (Dokdo) into the nation on February 22, 1905 patterned the broader sweep of Japan's emerging empire. Stepping

⁸⁾ Reel No. 1-0328.

⁹⁾ Reel No. 1-0328.

¹⁰⁾ Nakai grew up on the Oki islands, the son of a successful brewer who sent him to Tokyo in 1885 to further his studies. He decided to pursue fishing broadly defined and from the start engaged in the more profitable end of the spectrum: abalone and sea cucumber, for example. His work took him throughout the East Sea/Japan Sea area and eventually he settled on sea lion hunting which is what brings his actions forcibly into the larger record.

¹¹⁾ Nakai's endeavor was quite successful: In 1906, he recorded 1385 kills; in 1907 2094; in 1908 1660 and his son, Yoichi began to run the operation in 1915.

back from the immediate event and thinking more contextually, it is possible to see a variety of things going on beginning with how people such as Nakai began to discover new possibilities for livelihood and profit at the time, now that they could venture more freely beyond the tightly controlled Tokugawa era restrictions on their movement and activity; the nation would follow.

In this regard, it is significant that officials at the Home Ministry rejected Nakai's request. Instead of ignoring him, however, or encouraging him to appeal to the Korean government as Nakai suggested he would do if his government could not help him Home Ministry officials together with supportive members of the Ministry of Agriculture such as Fujita Kitaro (who just happened to be from the same hometown as Nakai) passed his idea along to the Foreign Ministry. Significantly, this matters not so much because it demonstrates that some in the Japanese government considered the island foreign territory (they did; an 1877 memorandum states as much). Nor does it show that Japanese officials were secretly plotting the whole-scale takeover of Korea through this tiny spit of land. Instead, the way Japan's incorporation of Dokdo in 1905 at once shows a commitment to grow the national space and yet also underscores that a comprehensive imperial policy remained very much at bay. On top of this, Japan was actively engaged in war with Russia in waters surrounding the island.

Dokdo's becoming Japanese territory in 1905 points to a moment when the Foreign Ministry's outlook for the nation jibed with the military's desires. Nakai's sea lion proposal found welcome reception with the Foreign Ministry's director for political affairs, Yamaza Enjiro, who forwarded it directly to Foreign Minister Komura Jutarō, one of Japan's most politically astute and internationally minded thinkers (Harvard Law, Class of 1878). Komura had long made clear his determination to engage Japan fully in the power politics of the day: aggressive, overseas imperial development. At this juncture, therefore, to downplay the islands' significance to Japanese strategic thinking in its war against Russia simply misses the point of this island's significance to modern history.

And here for Japan's government at the time and eventually for Japanese of the day the area they call, the Nihon Kai (The Sea of Japan), would become important as a national space, arguably for the first time.

During the same weeks that Nakai appealed to Tokyo for help with his sea lion enterprise (by means of nationalizing the islands he wanted to use as his base), the Japanese Navy's Hydrography Department ordered its own survey of the islands in order to assess whether or not to build a telegraph station and watchtower there. The

order went through January 5, 1905, becoming critical then as integral point of Japan's new telegraph network as it is today for Korea and which proved a critical technology at that time just over 100 years ago in the nation's pursuit of victory at sea over Russian forces at the time.

To insist that because this island became part of the nation prior to the end of the war its incorporation was a separate process misses how history works and fails to understand it and its surrounding sea in context. To be clear, neither the sea, nor these islands were modern discoveries, and their appearance on Korean and Japanese maps hundreds of years old complicates today's problems (let alone the problem of how some Europeans would use the "*Corea Sea*" while some the "*Japan Sea*"). Fishermen had worked in these waters long before either country had its contemporary name, and Koreans argue furthermore that one of their medieval era kings relied on the island as an outpost to battle pirates in these waters. That said, at the outset of the twentieth century for the first time intersecting definitions of modern law, technological transformation, and capitalism wrapped around these rocks in ways that radically changed control over them: pointing to their existence on a map to justify claim would no longer suffice (if it ever had); henceforth these islands like the Kurils and Taiwan before, for example would need to be declared "integral territory" of the nation. The surrounding seas have followed.

Thus, while Japanese diplomats strive to keep the territorial disputes discrete from the mess that is history other Japanese citizens such as Momoyama University professor Kuboi Norio regularly and publicly state that "If the Japanese government comes to view Dokdo not as a territorial issue but as a historical issue, it will enable dialogue to take place...Japan forcibly seized Dokdo so that it could win the Russo-Japanese War," Kuboi said. "Japan justified its annexation on the grounds that no one was living there at the time. This was a product of the imperial mindset."¹²⁾

Opening up thinking about these islands in such a manner would equally broaden the dual naming possibilities for their surrounding seas.

Opening and closing borders

A good place to do further broadening would be on Sado island or in Niigata, the city on the *East Sea/Sea of Japan* whose waters connect Japan to a large swath of the Northeast Asian mainland.

Niigata and its sea linked Japan to its massive territorial empire, becoming known in

¹²⁾ May 24, 2013 .

the 1930s as the “Gateway to Asia.”

Serving as the main exit port for Japanese settlers and soldiers to the heart of that empire then in Manchuria a new train line opened on September 1, 1931 to connect Tokyo to Niigata, ultimately carrying hundreds of thousands from Tokyo to Niigata and on to Wonsan, Ch'ongjin, or Najin on the northeastern Korean coast from where most moved inland. Niigata's ferry routes thus became the vital tie between the empire's center (Tokyo) and "Shinkyō" (New Capital) of Manchukuo, as Changchun was expectantly renamed, and, in 1938 when a Japanese joint commercial venture launched the "Gassan" liner from Niigata harbor, it was the largest ship on the East Sea/Sea of Japan, moving thousands upon thousands back and forth.

Today, however, none of this history is visible, although in Niigata there is no active attempt to bury it. Interestingly other more contemporary problems are at play for Niigata's attempts to understand this body of water's place in the world. The former governor of Niigata prefecture, Hirayama Ikuo, a respected economist formerly at the Bank of Japan and now university president, explained to me with a smile some hurdles he faced trying to put a regional economic development plan into play during the late 1990s: “When we want to make a policy proposal, it has to go through five different desks at the Foreign Ministry (in Tokyo): Russia, China, South Korea, North Korea, and the United States. You can imagine what happens.” He then launched into a lengthy and perfectly structured lecture about Niigata's pre-modern era commercial structure. In it, Hirayama emphasized that Japan today would benefit by loosening its centralized reins of control as in Tokugawa times a point he elaborates further in chapter 6 of his memoirs (“Can Governors Change the Country from the Countryside?”), in which he underscores the increase since 2000 of governors elected to office by “opposing national policy.”¹³⁾ Looked at differently, opponents to such a scheme likely view this ocean in particular as a solidly bordered terrain, predicated on centralized, nationalized control over its islands and the ocean floor; supporters, however, and similar to Professor Kuboi view the ocean as connective tissue for surrounding lands in which regional inhabitants control policy direction and profit allocation, or at least would have a much stronger voice. Likely the name for the body of water would become more fluid, too.

¹³⁾ Hirayama Ikuo, *Watashi wa Konna Shiji ni naritakatta*, Tokyo: Asahi Shinbunsha Shuppan, 2009, p. 169; recent years have seen a surge in publications about these issues but interrogations of the Tokyo/countryside divide are long-standing – to begin see Yamazaki Mitsuru, *Yutaka na Chiho tzukuri wo medashite* (Tokyo: Chuko Shinsho, 1994).