

Territorial Names: Historic and Political Considerations

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The words contained in the national anthem of the Republic of Korea are a clear indication of the crucial importance of the *East Sea* issue to the Korean nation and people. A physical manifestation of the symbolic importance of the *East Sea* is the Seokguram cave grotto on the east coast of the Korean peninsula overlooking the sea, near the former Unified Shilla capital of Gyeongju.

The naming of the Great Lakes in North America provides a historic example of the connection between territorial naming – in this case a body of water – and the manifestation of political power. The French colonizers replaced the name for the largest of the Great Lakes, changing the traditional Ojibwa name of Gitchee Gumee with Le Lac Superior or Lake Superior, as the name for the largest fresh water lake in the world. Other colonized peoples – the Irish and the Congolese – have changed territorial names which were painful legacies of a harsh colonial era: the Irish seaport of “Queenstown” was changed back to Cobh and the Democratic Republic of the Congo’s capital city’s name was changed from “Leopoldville” to Kinshasa.

Different historic interpretations can lead to alternative names for the same place. The divisions of the American Civil War are manifest in alternative names, based on regional North versus South differences, for the first major battle site of the War. The battle site is called Bull Run in the North and Manassas in the South up to the present day.

The *East Sea* issue has gained prominence in Virginia on more than one occasion. First it became a subject of controversy for the Pentagon in northern Virginia last year. In connection with the 60th anniversary of the Korean War Armistice in 2013, Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel and the South Korean Ambassador dedicated a permanent Department of Defense Korean War Exhibit. However, the maps depicting key engagements during the war used exclusively the name “*Sea of Japan*” for the body of water lying east of the Korean peninsula and not “*East Sea*.” The South Korean Government has reportedly officially requested that the exhibit maps be corrected.

Legislation before the Virginia State Legislature in Richmond earlier this year to have Virginia school textbooks in the future use “*East Sea*” in addition to “*Sea of Japan*” became the focus of vigorous lobbying efforts by both the Korean-American community and the Japanese Embassy. Even the Washington Post newspaper entered the controversy with some negative and prejudicial comments. The Korean-American community of Virginia should be commended for its outstanding efforts in this regard.

Anyone who would wonder why the Korean people have a deep interest in the name of the body of water which lies just east of the Korean peninsula need look no further than the words of the national anthem of the Republic of Korea. The first three words, of course, invoke “the waters of the *East Sea*” (dong hae mool) as intricately connected with the Korean national psyche. This explains the special attention being given to this territorial name both at home in Korea and among the Korean diaspora around the world.

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A symbolic manifestation of the importance of the *East Sea* and its waters to the Korean people is found in a cave shrine not far from this former capital city of the Unified Shilla dynasty. The Seokguram grotto, built in the Eighth Century, is the 24th National Treasure of Korea. Resting 750 meters above sea level, the grotto overlooks the *East Sea*. The Seokgamoni Buddha of Enlightenment, casting a gaze out over the waters the *East Sea*, is recognized as the traditional protector of Korea and a supernatural barrier to foreign invasion from the east.

To those who would state that a territorial name is written in stone and can never be subject to change or debate, I would just note that names can be quite temporal, always subject to change. Was it not the great Western playwright William Shakespeare who penned the observation in the romantic tragedy “Romeo and Juliet”, that “a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.” So it is with all objects that are named by man. One could say that “a sea by any other name would still rise and fall with the tides.”

The naming of territories, including bodies of water, reflects not only history, but also power politics – the rise of one people as another goes into decline. The conqueror assumes the prerogative that he is entitled to name that which he seizes by force of arms.

As an example, American school children of my generation were usually taught to memorize some lines from American writer Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s epic poem about Native American people, the Song of Hiawatha:

By the shores of Gitche Gumee,
By the shining Big-Sea-Water,
Stood the wigwam of Nokomis,
Daughter of the Moon, Nokomis

But where was this “Big-Sea-Water” named Gitche Gumee about which the poet wrote? Our English literature teachers never explained this to us. It took me fifty years to discover the answer. While on a trip to the Great Lakes region this past summer, while visiting the Hiawatha National Forest in the Upper Peninsula of the State of Michigan, I finally learned the answer. In the town of Saint Ignace, at the Museum of Ojibwa Culture, I found my answer. The Ojibwa, often called the Chippewa in English, were one of the largest groups of Native Americans when the Europeans arrived. “Gitche Gumee”, meaning “be a great sea” in the Ojibwa language, was the Native American name for Lake Superior, the largest of the Great Lakes and the largest fresh

water lake in the entire world. It was the French who first called this body of water “Le Lac Superior” – which became Lake Superior in English. The French of course came with guns, planting the flag of the King of France, and declaring Lake Superior and all the surrounding area to be French territory. As the conquerors, they could call this body of water whatever they wished.

But the French are long gone from the Great Lakes and the descendants of the Ojibwa people remain. Interestingly, the four other Great Lakes all bear Native American, not French or English, names. In the Wyandot or Huron language, Ontario means “lake of shining waters.” Lake Erie is named for the Erie tribe of Native Americans who lived along its southern shore, just as Lake Huron is named after the Huron people who inhabited the Great Lakes area. The word “Michigan” is believed to come from an Ojibwa word “mishigami” meaning “great water.”

For purposes of consistency, and in recognition of renewed emphasis on Native American culture and history, I would like to suggest here today that some thought be given to re-naming Lake Superior with its original Ojibwa name of Lake Gitche Gumee.

Other territorial names which have been linked to historic conquest have been altered with changing circumstances over the passage of time. The seaport in southwest Ireland, which was the last port of call for the Titanic as it left Europe, was known as “Queenstown” during the colonial period. Following Irish independence, however, none of the Irish wished to have a city named for a foreign monarch. The port’s name was changed back to Cobh. Likewise, Africans were not pleased when the name “Leopoldville” was given to a Congolese city in honor of the King of the Belgians, who was a harsh imperial ruler. They changed the name of the capital city of the Democratic Republic of the Congo to Kinshasa following independence. In a reaction similar to that of the Irish and the Congolese, Koreans reportedly are concerned over the name “*Sea of Japan*” for a body of water adjacent to their peninsula.

In 1929, when the International Hydrographic Organization began labeling the body of water between Japan and the Korean Peninsula as the *Sea of Japan*, Korea was a colony of Imperial Japan. The name “*Sea of Japan*” therefore, is seen as having been imposed by a colonial power through the use of military force. As such this is a name which is associated with an era of Korea’s national decline and brings to the surface painful memories of a harsh colonial rule.

Geographic place names not only depend on the ebb and flow of military power, but also can vary depending on one’s own geographic or historic perspective. Let me

explain. If you take a short drive out of Washington, D.C. along Interstate-66 you will come to an old Virginia town named Manassas. On the edge of the modern town is a historic battle site, the first major armed encounter of the Civil War following the shelling of Fort Sumter in Charleston, South Carolina.

So what is the name of this historic battle site? Well, that depends on the place where one is standing. I grew up in Illinois, known in America as the “Land of Lincoln,” and was proud to have a great-grandfather who fought for Lincoln and the Union in the Civil War. In my family and at my school the battle site was always called “the Battle of Bull Run,” named after the small creek that runs in the town’s vicinity. In the Southern states and among descendants of Confederate soldiers, however, the very same battle site is called by a different name, the Battle of Manassas – named after the Virginia town itself. In the United States there are fifty departments of education, one for each state, and textbooks are written to reflect local, not national, thinking. North is north and South is south as far as Civil War history.

When I first moved to Virginia from Illinois in the nineteen seventies and someone referred to “the historic Battle of Manassas,” I frankly had no idea what they meant. To borrow from the Chinese phrase of “one country, two systems,” what we have always had in America with regards to the Civil War, is “one country, two historic interpretations,” or in this case “one place, two names.”

Neither side would yield for a century or more on the historic issue of the battlefield’s name. The Federal Government wisely decided not to push the matter. Two names for one place were passed down from generation to generation.

That, in my understanding, is all that Koreans are asking for with regard to the “*East Sea/Sea of Japan*” controversy – just agreeing to disagree on what is the name for the body of water that lies between the Korean peninsula and the Japanese islands – just like “Bull Run” versus “Manassas.” But then things became not so simple in Virginia, where a second battle followed the Battle of Bull Run. It was called “the Battle of the *East Sea*” and it was fought in the halls of the Virginia State Capitol, a building designed by that great Virginian Thomas Jefferson. Let me explain that story and the heroic efforts of the Korean-American community in that regard.

Last year during a very competitive campaign to elect a new governor in Virginia, the estimated over eighty thousand strong Korean-American community of Virginia obtained a promise from the Democratic Party’s nominee, Terry McAuliffe, that he would sign legislation, if elected, to direct that textbooks used in Virginia’s public schools

would give the name for the body of water lying between Korea and Japan as “*East Sea*” as well as the previously designated name “*Sea of Japan*.”

This had followed a previous public relations controversy within Virginia in the summer of 2013 involving the name “*East Sea*” and the U.S. Department of Defense. As part of anniversary events commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of the Korean War Armistice, U.S. Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, accompanied by the South Korean Ambassador, cut a ribbon on June 18, 2013 opening a permanent Korean War exhibit within the Pentagon. A sharp-eyed Korean journalist soon noted that all of the exhibit’s maps labeled the waters off of the east coast, where major Korean War operations such as the large-scale Hungnam and Wonsan troop and refugee evacuations took place, as “*the Sea of Japan*.”

According to an August 23, 2013 report in the U.S. military newspaper Stars and Stripes “South Korean officials have asked the United States to change the name of a body of water used in a new Pentagon exhibit on the Korean War” and “U.S. officials said they would consider it.” However, when I visited the exhibit at the Pentagon in northern Virginia last November, no changes had been made to the exhibit at that point in time.

After Terry McAuliffe was elected Governor of Virginia in November 2013 the textbook issue came to the forefront, even before he was sworn in as Governor in January 2014. According to a report in the Washington Post, Japanese Ambassador to the United States Kenichiro Sasae sent the Governor-elect a letter in December 2013 urging him to oppose the legislative measure – despite his campaign pledge to the state’s Korean-American community – that would require future Virginia textbooks that use the phrase “*Sea of Japan*” to note that it is also referred to as “*East Sea*.” The letter reportedly warned that the legislation risked damaging economic relations between Japan and the State of Virginia.

The Post obtained a copy of the letter. Ambassador Sasae reportedly wrote that “Japan has been the second largest source of foreign direct investment in Virginia, with almost \$1 billion dollars in the last five years. Around 250 Japanese companies are investing in Virginia, employing 13,000 Virginians in 2012. Japan has also been a major export market to Virginia (2012: \$475 million). . . I fear, however, that the positive cooperation and the strong economic ties between Japan and Virginia may be damaged if the bills are to be enacted.”

The Embassy of Japan also hired lobbyists from the McGuireWoods law firm in

Richmond to reportedly make the case that state legislators had no business weighing in on an issue that involved primarily foreign affairs. In a second “Battle of Richmond,” (the first being the Civil War siege of Petersburg/Richmond, a battle in which my great-grandfather participated on the Union side) first Japanese Ambassador Sasae and then South Korean Ambassador Ahn Ho-young traveled from Washington down to Richmond to lobby both the Governor and legislative leaders.

Press reports following Governor McAuliffe’s inauguration in January indicated that both he and his staff, concerned by potential trade repercussions for Virginia, worked behind-the-scenes to quietly shelve the legislation. One version of the bill was killed by Democrats in the State Senate.

However, the Korean-American community, advised by House of Delegate member Mark Keam, kept up the pressure on Governor McAuliffe to keep his campaign pledge. The Republican Speaker of the Virginia House of Delegates decided not to allow the Democratic Governor to avoid the *East Sea* issue and scheduled a vote in March on a Senate version of the bill. The vote was 82-16 in favor. The Richmond Times-Dispatch carried a photograph of members of the Korean-American community and representatives of the Korean media flooding into a standing-room-only press conference immediately after passage of the bill which Governor McAuliffe then signed into law.

As the great former Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives Tip O’Neill famously observed “all politics is local.” The actions of the Korean-American community in petitioning their elected representatives could be considered as American as apple pie. This grass-roots movement followed in the footsteps of Irish-Americans, Jewish-Americans, Greek-Americans, Cuban-Americans and Taiwanese-Americans, to name a few ethnic groups, all of whom have petitioned their representatives in the past on foreign policy issues.

This issue of the *East Sea* in Virginia seemed to have been settled. That is why it was rather shocking when the Editorial Board of the Washington Post on August 19th, during summer vacation season when most policymakers are gone from Washington, ran an article which could be considered both inflammatory and degrading to the Korean-American community. Titled “Pandering (나쁜 짓을 주선하다) to Northern VA’s Koreans is going to extremes” (link: http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/pandering-to-northern-vas-koreans-is-going-to-extremes/2014/08/19/f9032eea-271e-11e4-8593-da634b334390_story.html) The piece launched a frontal attack on the grassroots lobby-

ing of the community in northern Virginia in ethnic terms – something, I can assure you, the Post would not dare to do to other ethnic groups, such as the Jewish-American or Irish-American communities. The newspaper did not even give the community the courtesy of referring to its members as fellow U.S. citizens – labeling them as “Koreans” – implying aliens – rather than as Korean-Americans.

The objective of the article appeared to be at least partially political connected to election year politics. The Washington Post, a liberal publication which usually endorses Democratic candidates, used the piece to criticize Barbara Comstock, the Republican nominee for an open House seat in a northern Virginia House district, for her support on the *East Sea* issue. The district where Ms. Comstock is campaigning has a sizable Korean-American population. Ms. Comstock has been polling ahead in next week’s Congressional elections and the critique seemed designed to try to slow her momentum.

The Editorial Board also criticized the successful effort of Fairfax County’s Korean-American community to place a memorial garden to the Comfort Women just behind the County Government Center. The Editorial Board went on to ask: “But what other ethnic, national or historical grievances will Fairfax agree to memorialize at its government center? Irish repression at the hands of the British? The Armenian genocide perpetuated by the Turks? The 14th-century Battle of Kosovo, in which the Serbs were wiped out by the Ottomans?”

I submitted a rebuttal in a Letter to the Editor of the Washington Post (Appendix A) but the paper declined to print it. The editors do not seem to comprehend that the Comfort Women issue is not just a Korean-Japanese issue, but a human rights and women rights issue involving the ongoing crime of sexual trafficking of women and girls during armed conflict, as demonstrated earlier this year by Boko Haram’s abduction of school girls in Nigeria. I gather the Post has never heard of the Holocaust Museum just off the Mall in Washington, DC? On the subject of the suffering of the Irish at the hands of the British colonial authorities being commemorated in the United States, I have attached as Appendix B a list of twelve memorials established by local governments throughout the United States. The Korean-American community has similarly championed the construction of Comfort Women memorials in New Jersey, New York, California, and Virginia and is reportedly promoting similar memorials in Chicago, Detroit and Georgia. The Korean-American community’s diligent and energetic promotion of the *East Sea* and Comfort Women issues in their new country has been of in-

valuable assistance in gaining international attention.

In conclusion, there are many historic and political variables that greatly influence the use of territorial names. Changing circumstances have in the past led to the use of alternative names or even the replacement of certain territorial names. Territorial names, therefore, always remain subject to re-evaluation.

Appendix A

September 3, 2014 Letter to the Editor (unpublished) in response to the August 19th Washington Post Editorial Board Piece Titled “Pandering to Northern Va’s Koreans”

Dear Editors

The August 19th Editorial Board piece on “pandering to Northern Va’s Koreans” was rather misguided. It also ignored the axiom of former Speaker Tip O'Neill that "all politics is local." The fact that political leaders in northern Virginia would respond to their Korean-American constituents - please note that the "Koreans" criticized by the Post are, in fact, our fellow U.S. citizens - derives from traditional, town hall American democracy. The Post was especially out-of-step on the subject of the Comfort Women, or Imperial Japan’s “enforced sex slaves,” as former Secretary of State Clinton stated. Pope Francis’s recent embrace of the Comfort Women at a Mass in Seoul demonstrates the universal women's right quality of an issue which should be of concern to all. The message of the memorial garden in Fairfax -- never again -- is no different than that of the Holocaust Museum in Washington. As to the issue of territorial names, one need drive no further from D.C. than to the Civil War battle site at Manassas - or rather Bull Run, depending on one’s ancestors’ Civil War sympathies - to ascertain that such matters remain a historically open question. The Post's suggestion that Virginia's government needs to pay attention to Japanese foreign investment is, of course, another form of political pandering.

Appendix B

List of Memorials in the United States Commemorating Irish Suffering at the hands of British colonial authorities (Wikipedia)

- In Boston, Massachusetts, a bronze statue located on the Freedom Trail depicts a starving woman, looking up to the heavens while her children cling to her.
- Buffalo, New York has a stone memorial on its waterfront.
- Cambridge, Massachusetts has a memorial to the famine on its Common.
- Chicago Illinois has a Famine Memorial at Chicago Gaelic Park.
- Cleveland, Ohio: A 12-foot-high (3.7 m) stone Celtic cross, located on the east bank of the Cuyahoga River.
- Keansburg, NJ has a Hunger Memorial in Friendship Park on Main Street.
- New York, New York has the Irish Hunger Memorial which looks like a sloping hill-side with low stone walls and a roofless cabin on one side and a polished wall with lit (or white) lines on the other three sides. The memorial is in Battery Park City.
- Philadelphia, Pennsylvania has a famine memorial at Front and Chestnut Streets, near Penn's landing...
- Phoenix, Arizona has a famine memorial in the form of a dolmen at the Irish Cultural Center.
- Providence, RI has an Irish Famine Memorial along the Riverway, dedicated on November 17, 2007.
- Hackensack, New Jersey has a large stone located on the front corner of the Bergen County Government Court House on Main Street, honoring all of those who perished in the famine. Every year in October, numerous Irish-American organizations from northern New Jersey hold a ceremony to remember all of those who perished.
- Rochester, New York has a black granite memorial on the grounds of St. John Fisher College erected in 1997, one hundred and fifty years after the worst of the hunger by the Ancient Order of Hibernians.