

# One feature, two names and many issues: The political geographies of naming the sea between Korea and Japan

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The names for the sea between Korea and Japan have been a thorny issue since early 1990s when Korean government officially raised this issue in the international stage. Despite this naming issue is relatively less contentious one than other territorial and historical issues the understanding and settlement of this dispute is not simple and straightforward. This article addresses that there are a few political geographical theoretical points for the better understanding of this naming issue. The first discrepancy between the perspectives of two states is the approach to naming issue through post-colonialism. Whereas Koreans consider this naming issue as the project restoration of place names after the end of colonialism, Japanese seems to take the “genesis” and “diffusion” of the sea name as a neutral “evolutionary” process. Second, it should be noted that how the naming issue is discussed, disputed and handled in international organizations. In one sense, the case of *East Sea* shows the possibility of international cooperation and the capability of international organizations. However, the operation of international organizations on this naming issue reveals the problems and limits of international cooperation and organizations. Lastly, and not least importantly, this naming issue asks us to have a multi-scalar approach to managing and solving this contentious issue. As long as the sea name issue between Korea and Japan shows the messiness of domestic/international entanglement, the solution would not be a neat one.

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## INTRODUCTION

Despite the increased economic and cultural exchanges between East Asian countries, political cooperation and its institutional foundation are at the nascent stage. As the expression “Asian Paradox” implies, economic interdependency and security and political cooperation do not go hand in hand in this region (Manning, 1993). Although there are many reasons that prevent further cooperation, but it is hard to deny that there are collisions of different envisions of geographies among countries in this region. Notwithstanding, naming issue has been one of the significant issues among East Asian countries. Korea and Japan has not reached an agreement on the name of the sea between Korean Peninsula and Japanese Archipelago, which became an issue of international

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society when the Republic of Korea raised this issue at UN in 1992 (Choo, 2012). This paper aims to summarize and reinterpret this naming issue from the perspective of political geography. The discipline of political geography has changed its focal points from a spatial delineation of territories and statecraft to the issues of spatialities at various scales with multiple actors. The naming issues have become the key ingredient for the understanding political geographies of many regions since place names are the representation of identities and also show how power is mediated across political agents and various spatial units. The arguments and their implications will be addressed in the following chapter.

## ONE SEA AND DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE AND ARGUMENT

### *Post-colonialism*

One of the keywords to understand the disagreement between Korea and Japan is the notion of post-colonialism. Generally, post-colonialism refers to an intellectual movement to have a critical review of the culture and history of colonizing and colonized people (Woon, 2015). Geographers, specifically, have focused on the construction and dissemination of geographical knowledge, representations of “colonized areas” and “colonizing power.” The term also refers to a period after the end of colonialism. If we accept the definition of post-colonialism as a specific period, colonialism would be a comprehensive term including processes and results of events that happened in the past.

The different arguments on *East Sea/Sea of Japan* clearly show the confronting perspectives from both societies of Korea and Japan. For example, the Press Release of the United Nations introduced the argument of both Koreas on the name of the sea when two Koreas brought this issue to UN.

*They (Both Koreas) said the term “East Sea”, “Japan Sea”, “Sea of Korea” and “Orient Sea” had all been used over the centuries...The representative of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea stated that the issue was related to colonialism.* (United Nations Press Release NR/188)

Although the remark on colonialism was made by DPRK, the Republic of Korea has maintained similar position. Although what the term colonialism refers to is not clear enough here, it is important to understand that colonialism is a keyword in this argument.

The definition of colonialism is somewhat clearer on the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of ROK states:

*With the rise of Japan as a strong power in Asia in the late 19th century and the early 20th century, when world maps were being drawn similarly to current ones in earnest, the sea area between the Korean Peninsula and the Japanese Archipelago became widely known as the “Sea of Japan.” Usage of the name “Sea of Japan” further increased while Korea did not have the opportunity to claim the legitimacy of the name “East Sea” to the international community during its Japanese **colonization** period, particularly when the International Hydrographic Organization (IHO) published its first edition of the “Limits of Oceans and Seas” in 1929, a major source of reference for the names and borders of waters around*

*the world. Moreover, when its second edition was published in 1937 and the third edition in 1953, Korea continued to remain under the Japanese rule and was also in the middle of the Korean War respectively. (Homepage of Ministry of Foreign Affairs of ROK)*

Contrary to the argument of Korea, Japan's argument is based on the "genesis" and "neutral" process of dissemination of geographical knowledge. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan refutes the Korean argument by:

*ROK assertion: "The name Sea of Japan became widespread as a result of Japanese expansionism and colonial rule." The Japanese Government's survey of historical maps confirms that the name Sea of Japan was already prevalent at the early 19th century. Japan during the Edo Period (1603-1867) had an isolationist policy, and was unable to exercise any influence to establish the name Sea of Japan. Consequently, the ROK's assertion that the name Sea of Japan became widespread as a result of "expansionism and colonial rule" in the latter half of the 19th century is wholly invalid. (Homepage of Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan)*

As seen the two confronting arguments, Korea considers the dissemination of the name "Sea of Japan" had occurred in the process of colonialism while Japan emphasizes the advent of the name began before the formation of Japanese Empire. Thus the battles of "old maps" have been continued. However, as many political geographers have pointed out (see the brief summary of Woon (2015) and Sidaway (2008), recent discussions on post-colonialism have centered on critiquing "Western" production of geopolitical knowledge. In this vein, the argument of Korea does not have related with denouncing Japanese colonialism as least on this issue of *East Sea*. Rather, it raises issues about how Western powers had created geographical knowledge and disseminated it. Old maps are just the product of geographical knowledge of Western powers, which is related to the question of the validity of finding of old maps with Japan Sea, Oriental Sea, Chosun Sea and so forth as the concluding evidence for this naming issue. Therefore, the restoration of place names after colonialism (e.g., Chennai from Madras, Kolkata from Calcutta, and Mumbai from Bombay) or the restoration before "internal colonization" (Denali from Mount McKinley in the US, Uluru from Ayers Rock in Australia) should be understood in the same context of post-colonialism.

Extending this notion of post-colonialism, it is possible to think of the text and documents produced by international organizations. One of the arguments to justify the single use of *Sea of Japan* is based on the "practice of UN". In other words, some argue that UN has used the name *Sea of Japan* to refer the sea between Korea and Japan. However, the practice of UN Secretariat Office is far from the official decision of UN and the practice is nothing but a series of action based upon the knowledge produced in a specific period of time, which should be questioned and validated. In this sense, the post-colonialism project is never ending (Gregory, 2004).

### ***Global standard and hegemonic decline***

When we open recently published atlas, it would be so alarming that there are many brackets used for place names. There are different reasons for the use of brackets, such as additional explanation or ownership (e.g., Western Sahara, disputed territory;

Greenland, to Denmark; Jersey, British Crown Dependency; Paracel Island, disputed), information of endonym or exonym (e.g., Rhine/Rhein, Kolkata/Calcutta, Gwangzhou/Canton), and dual naming (e.g., *Sea of Japan/East Sea*; Victoria-Gasteiz, Falkland Islands/Islas Malvinas, Halab/Aleppo, Derry/Londonderry, Burma/Myanmar, Haida Gwaii/Queen Charlotte Island). However, international groups of geographical names well recognize that the endeavor to come up with standardized names for international users. Also, it is known that the US has maintained the rule of one name for one feature.

In fact, the current international institutional foundation has been established by the projects of the US. As seen in the declassified documents of the US government right after World War II, the initiative of the US is to disseminate the American way of life and system to the world (Flint, 2012). Many security, economic and financial institutions have been established and served for providing and enforcing kinds of a global standard to the rest of the world. In political geography and international politics, the era after the World War II of American ascendancy has been understood as the hegemonic period of the US (Agnew, 2005). Consequently, the mission of the US naming agency in international society was applying its rules of naming to rest of the world. One of the important rules of naming adopted by the US BGN (Board of Geographical Names) is one standard name among the most widely used names in English, which was abided by the representatives of the US in international institutions. Most importantly, US has taken its role to make global standards and rules to be applied. Notwithstanding, geographical names have been discussed and standardized in the arena of UN (UNCSGN, UNGEGN). As the term “standardization” connotes, this process was an endeavor to have one name for one geographic feature in reality. The *Manual for the national standardization of geographical names* by United Nations Groups of Experts on Geographical Names is a text to decipher the spirit behind this standardization process as follows:

*Where some names occur in varying or grammatical forms, the national names authority should consider making **one** of those forms the official standard name (35)*

*In the case of named feature that lie on or across international boundaries, **cooperation and agreement** would be mutually beneficial to each country and its people (39)*

As addressed above, however, dual and multiple names are widely spread by different reasons. In addition, the dual naming of *East Sea* and *Sea of Japan* is common in major atlas publishers, such as National Geographic, Collins, DK, Oxford, Britannica, and so forth (Choi, 2011). Moreover, multi-cultural and multi-linguistic environment has made it easier for many countries to adopt dual and multiple place name policies. Here, it might be natural to have a critical review on the naming policy of the US. Despite the decades of endeavors, it seems unrealistic to adhere to one name for one feature rule at least in international context. Also, it is not so excessive speculation to expect the Romanized names of endonym would gradually replace the English exonym (See the European or Chinese sections in atlases!). More surprisingly, a recent document presented in the 29th Session of UNGEGN in Bangkok, Thailand shows that many UN specialized Agencies do not use the standard county names (Working Paper No. 74/12 submitted by the US BGN). In sum, it might not be so plausible to keep its strict rule of one standard name in this era of hegemonic decline. Indeed, it has been a meaningful

and important task to standardize geographical names in terms of facilitating to have standard Romanization system and encouraging systematic and scientific management of geographical names. However, it should be emphasized that the standardization of geographical names means more than having only one name for one feature.

### ***Messy political geographies of multiple-agents***

As discussed in the previous chapter the pursuit of global standard and actual usage of geographical names has had some discrepancies. If we agree on the traditional division of labor of dividing the business of geographical names into “decision and management” and “use of names” it is more or less out-of-date dichotomous understanding of this business. Rather recent discussions and debates ask us to look into the process of geographical names under the consideration of multiple agents. For example, it is widely recognized that IHO has taken care of names of oceans, seas, and other marine features while UNGEGN has been interested in the management of general geographical names. However, we have witnessed there are many other important actors of state, such as civil society, IT business, Media, publisher and so forth.

If we focus on IHO, its special publication S-23 has been the most important and authoritative reference on sea names. Thus, countries have tried to include their perspectives in the new versions of S-23. As we are well aware of, however, the revision processes have not been so productive. Most importantly the disagreement between Korea and Japan has been a thorny issue in IHO. ROK has argued that both names of *East Sea* and *Sea of Japan* should be accepted for charts and publications according to IHO Technical Resolution A.4.2.6 with also UNCSCGN Resolution III/20. Contrary to the argument of ROK, the official remark of Japan:

*these resolutions presume that the geographical feature concerned is under the sovereignty of two or more countries, such as in the case of a bay or strait, and does not apply to the high seas such as with the Sea of Japan. Following the ROK's assertion, if even one of the countries bordering the Atlantic or Pacific were to raise an objection to the names of these oceans, it would lead to the use of multiple names, which would clearly be unmanageable. The international community cannot accept such an argument”* (Website of Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan).

However, the weakness of Japanese argument on the sovereignty lies on the fact that seas would be under the sovereignty of multiple states. Even high seas are generally divided into several waters. More importantly, the resolution did not elaborate the exclusion of high seas from the application of this rule. While this legal interpretation of resolutions has been debated, the realities of sea names are quite different from S-23. Some names are only used in S-23. ‘Inner Seas Off The West Coast of Scotland’, ‘Mediterranean Sea, Western Basin’, ‘Lakshadweep Sea’, ‘Sound Sea’ are kinds of archaic words in world atlases.

While the discussion in IHO could not have produced meaningful agreements between member states, many actors appeared in the geographic names world. Despite these actors do not produce any official rule of naming, they have influenced a significant impact on geographical names. First of all, commercial map providers have a huge impact on daily lives. In most cases, companies like Google generally follow the rule of

IHO, not always. It is so surprising to see the difference between S-23 and commercial map producers, such as Google, MS Bing Map, and recently Chinese Baidu Map.

Recently, it has been very important to understand the role of civil society and consumer groups since they can give pressure to companies and publishers. Furthermore, recent IT technologies combined with mobile environment penetrate every corner of daily lives, the debates over the use of geographical names are more discernable. For example, car-producers (e.g., GM, Toyota), computer games (e.g., Sid Meier, KOEI), and other manufacturing companies (e.g., IKEA, North Face) have had experiences to use different geographical names according to target markets.

Indeed, examining the current fault line between international naming authorities and other stakeholders need a caveat. The role of international organizations should be respected, and it is not even desirable to include all the usage of geographical names by different groups. However, it is not a trivial task to be set aside to think about the strict rule of naming and perfect agreement between states in international naming authorities. While states and naming experts are struggling with legacies of naming communities and waiting voluntary agreement by member states, the real world of state, civil society, companies are finding their own survival strategies of dual naming, maintaining multiple geographical name database, and even maps without geographical names.

## **CONCLUSION**

The purposes of this article are addressing the current issues between Korea and Japan and providing theoretical points for the better understanding confronting perspectives. Some of the issues were reviewed by each perspective in the study of political geography. The points are as follows;

First, one of the reasons behind this long-standing debate between Korea and Japan is the understanding of post-colonialism. The post-colonial renaming process should be approached from the critical evaluation on the era of colonialism. The focus is on the era and the production of geographical knowledge in that period not the intention and atrocities of colonizers.

Second, the great achievement of post-World war world is the international governance proposed by the US. Also, management of geographical names has been implemented under the idea of international order and global standard. To fulfill this purpose, one name for one feature was the best method. However, this golden rule is under challenging from many actors during this period of hegemonic decline.

Third, there are many stakeholders other than international authorities within the area of geographical names. The binary divide “enactment” and “implement” is not clear anymore. Moreover, the numbers and influence of stakeholders are increasing. International naming authorities encounter serious challenges to narrow the gap between their legacies and the real world.

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