

Panel discussion

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This conference has prompted reflection on my personal journey toward understanding seas and islands. I was born in Utah, USA – in middle of the western states, very far away from any seas or islands. Eventually I had more exposure to sea and islands, especially through residence in Sweden, Los Angeles, Taiwan, Hawaii, and Korea.

Throughout my life and my scholarly career I gradually learned more about the power of naming, though toponyms have never been an area of expertise/direct study. I came to understand how place names embody identity, history, hopes, etc. I also learned how my own culture has erased indigenous culture/history through toponymic activity. Examples of this include the Great Salt Lake, Ogden city (named after the first white explorer in area), and McKinley High School (the name is a lasting symbol of the U.S. takeover of Hawaii). I realize that power is expressed everyday through regular place-name usage. Even the ability or desire to ignore naming issues/disputes is an expression of power.

My academic training through critical geopolitics (and critical geography more generally) has led to an instinct of “deferring partisanship.” This is somewhat of the notion that identity should not necessarily equate with partisanship. Much of this instinct has been conditioned by “critical geopolitics.” In recent decades (because of history – such as geopolitics’ ties to Nazi Geopolitik) this field has tried to avoid state partisanship as well as ties to concentrated forms of power (such as state power) more generally. (I recognize that this is perhaps a “luxury” that not all scholars can afford.) Thus in my own work on eastern Asia’s maritime territorial conflicts, I have tried very hard not to turn the issue into questions about “which side is right?” So I approached this conference with some reluctance, but I have been pleased to learn that emphasis is more on understanding than partisanship.

With my personal journey as a backdrop, several thoughts about key themes have emerged for me from the conference. First, I think the conference has brought up questions of uniqueness, sameness, and networking. It is remarkable how each individual case of island/naming can be very different in historical and contemporary

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details. These differences make it hard to draw principles that may be globally valid, unfortunately. But at same time, there are enough similarities to identify various themes that are worth exploring. One key theme that emerged is the postcolonial condition. I would like to see more emphasis on whether/how/with whom efforts to increase prominence of the *East Sea* issue are being linked with other similar situations around the world. This means, I think, asking not only who is the focus of increasing knowledge about the *East Sea*, but also how do proponents of *East Sea* naming attempt to support others in somewhat similar situations elsewhere? If *East Sea* naming is defined as part of a postcolonial struggle, are there allies to be made in somewhat similar postcolonial circumstances?

Second, I think it is crucial that we are continually asking the question of why some places become more important than others in regard to naming issues. For example, why is the *East Sea* more important as an object of political effort than the West Sea/Yellow Sea, or even the East China Sea (South Sea?) The fact that the *East Sea* has gained the greatest importance in the Korean context leads me to suspect that the issues involved are much more nationalistic than technical (although I concede that my knowledge isn't enough to fully assess this claim).

Third, the comparative examples brought up in the conference also lead to some speculation about why this and other similar examples are hard to solve. Perhaps, to offer one thought, the "emptiness," remoteness, and separateness of seas, islands and their populations leads to greater nationalistic content being poured into these spaces. In other words, these types of spaces/places become especially malleable symbolically. Relatedly, perhaps, with no population interacting "on the ground" on a regular basis, there is perhaps less opportunity and incentive to solve the conflicting claims.

Fourth, the difficulty of *East Sea/Sea of Japan* issue consists partly in the specific naming options. Both leading naming options "belong" too much to one side or the other. For Koreans, *Sea of Japan* inevitably recalls Japanese colonialism, regardless of original intentions or current thoughts of Japanese. On the other hand, *East Sea* cannot truly work for Japanese because it is a sea to the north and west. East Sea seems too Korea-centric (and perhaps even China-centric). To the extent that the two names are "dueling," this locks the issue into a zero-sum game. To the extent that the names are "dualing" (dual-naming option), this may be a useful temporary compromise, but it likely prolongs the nationalistic (antagonistic) character of the relationship between Korea and Japan.

Fifth, the significance of scales (both spatial and temporal – and spatio-temporal) should not be overlooked. Issues that may appear to be one thing at one spatio-temporal junction may look very different at another. For example, in a (somewhat) China-centric regional world where the sea's traditional names arose historically, naming the seas East, North, West, etc. didn't cause many problems. But suggestions of returning to original names as a way to restore regional harmony and historical significance ignore the reality that the names appear increasingly partisan in today's globalized world. The suggestions also gloss over the extent to which naming can be an issue involving more than just the nearest states. Thus while looking to history is useful and has some importance, history does not necessarily provide the key to resolution (too much emphasis on history can create the "infinite loop" Professor Sang-Hyun Chi identified).

Sixth, the mutability of names ought to be recognized. Names can and do change/evolve according to circumstance. Whether to keep or return to a historical name, or even move to something else, is a political question, not one that has a right or wrong answer based on simply the facts of history. Thus the question of how to weigh/balance history and the future can never be avoided. To put it bluntly, perhaps, the details of history matter because we decide they matter. Those details will matter until they don't. In other words, they will matter until we choose that dwelling on those facts no longer provides much utility – perhaps because of a useful compromise that looks toward a better future relationship.

Lastly, I think that Professor Saltzman's argument that peace is more than lack of war/conflict is very important. This resonates with an argument I ran across previously from the political geographer Nick Megoran, who himself draws on the sociologist of peace Johan Galtung. This is basically the idea that we should regard peace in terms of "okayness." Relationships between groups will not always be perfect. But an "okay" relationship means that each side is not continually attributing the worst intentions to the other side. Both sides have a sense that the relationship is on a solid enough basis to move forward comfortably without frequent reminders of mistrust from the past. From my viewpoint at this particular juncture along my own personal journey of understanding, resolution of *East Sea* issue is likely to follow – not precede – the achievement of more general "okay" peace between Korea and Japan. From this viewpoint, how to create space for cooperation between the opposed sides and how to avoid attributing the worst intentions to the other side seem to be important themes that deserve continued attention. I also think it is important to consider how to pursue the *East Sea/Sea of Japan* issue without giving ammunition to ultranationalists (those who have little interest in creating more peaceful relations between Korea and Japan).