

The Name “Sea of Japan” Is the Only Internationally Established Name  
(The Debate Concerning the Naming of the Sea of Japan - Analysis of the South Korean Government’s Arguments based on Historical Materials and Maps-)

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## 1. Introduction

Disagreement about the name of the Sea of Japan has persisted between Japan and South Korea since the sixth UN Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names (UNCSGN) in 1992. During this time, the Japanese government has consistently maintained that the name “Sea of Japan” is the only internationally established name. The name “East Sea,” which the government of South Korea has insisted on using instead of “Sea of Japan,” has historically referred to only the coastal waters off the Korean Peninsula, not the whole area of the Sea of Japan, and it does not qualify as an alternative to the name “Sea of Japan.”

However, Seoul continues to object to the use of “Sea of Japan” and insist on “East Sea.” This is because the South Korean government, which has occupied the Japanese territory of Takeshima (Korean name: Dokdo) since 1954, has associated this territorial issue with the naming of the Sea of Japan. The issue has been taken up diplomatically by the South Korean government.

Part of the South Korean logic for justifying the name “East Sea” is that, if Dokdo (Takeshima) is in the Sea of Japan, then it inappropriately appears as if Dokdo is in Japanese territorial waters. In this regard, the South Korean government has claimed that “East Sea” has been used for 2000 years and should be used instead of “Sea of Japan.”

The basis for the claim that “East Sea” has been used for 2000 years is the phrase “beaches of the East Sea” from the Book of the Sage King *Tongmyŏng* of the *Koguryŏ*<sup>1</sup> Annals (高句麗本紀始祖東明聖王条) in the *Samguk sagi* (三国史記, History of the Three Kingdoms). The South Korean side also argues that “East Sea” was excluded from the International Hydrographic Organization’s 1929 *Limits of Oceans and Seas*, in

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<sup>1</sup> *Koguryŏ* is one of the three kingdoms whose historical record is compiled in the *Samguk sagi*. It was established in the area north to the Yalu River in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century BC and expanded its territory to parts of both the Korean Peninsula and northeast China.

spite of the name's use for 2000 years before that, because Korea was under Japanese rule at that time and thus deprived of the opportunity to assert the legitimacy of the name "East Sea."

Probably because of a belief that it would be difficult to reach an agreement on using only "East Sea," Seoul has argued since the 1997 conference of the International Hydrographic Organization that both "Sea of Japan" and "East Sea" should be used simultaneously.

However, as discussed in detail below, the word 東海 (*Donghae*, *Dong* means East and *Hae* means Sea) that appears in the *Samguk sagi*, the *Kwanggaet'o Stele* (広開土王碑, a stone monument erected in 414), the *P'alto ch'ongdo* (八道総図, complete map of the eight provinces), the *Aguk ch'ongdo* (我國総図, complete map of Korea), and other pieces of evidence<sup>2</sup> that have been identified by the South Korean government do not refer to the Sea of Japan. The word 東海 (*Donghae*) appearing in these pieces only refers to the eastern coastal waters off the Korean peninsula (not the whole Sea of Japan) or the Yellow Sea or the East China Sea and has nothing to do with the body of water called the Sea of Japan today.

## 2. "East Sea" in the *Aguk ch'ongdo*

For example, it is true that the *Aguk ch'ongdo* mentions the *Donghae* (East Sea) to the east of the Korean peninsula, but the western and southern coastal waters off the Korean peninsula are also indicated as *Seohae* (西海, West Sea) and *Namhae* (南海, South Sea), respectively. *Seohae* is a part of the Yellow Sea and *Namhae* is a part of the East China Sea, so they are names for stretches of the Korean peninsula's coastal waters. In light of the South Korean government's argument that "East Sea" should be used instead of "Sea of Japan," it would also be natural for Seoul to claim that "Yellow Sea" and "East China Sea" should be replaced with "West Sea" and "South Sea" respectively, but Seoul is making no such demands. The only reason why the South Korean government takes issue with the Sea of Japan is that is where Takeshima (Dokdo) is located.

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<sup>2</sup> For the views of the South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, see [http://www.mofa.go.kr/www/wpge/m\\_3838/contents.do](http://www.mofa.go.kr/www/wpge/m_3838/contents.do)

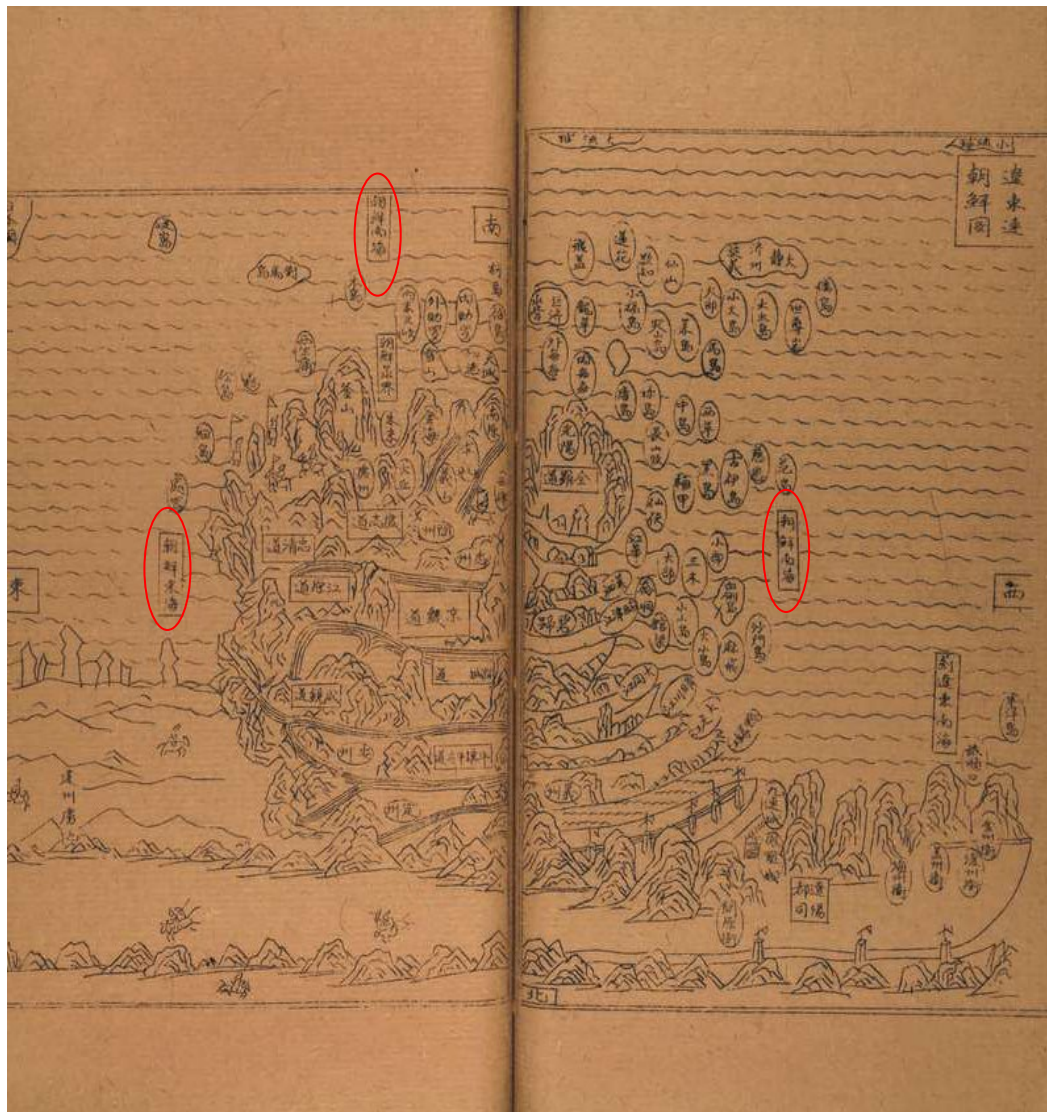


*Aguk ch'ongdo* (我国総図, complete map of Korea)

In the *Aguk ch'ongdo*, in addition to “*Donghae* (東海, East Sea)” to the east of the Korean peninsula, the western and southern coastal waters off the Korean peninsula are indicated as “*Seohae* (西海, West Sea)” and “*Namhae* (南海, South Sea),” respectively. In light of the logic by the South Korean government, it should have taken issue with *Seohae* and *Namhae*, too. But it has not done so.

Moreover, the fact that the East Sea in the *Aguk ch'ongdo* refers to only the stretches of water off the eastern coast of the Korean peninsula can be verified by the Map of Liaodong and Korea (遼東連朝鮮図) in the *Haifang zuanyao* (海防纂要, Compilation on Maritime

Defenses), compiled by Wang Zaijin of the Ming. There, the western coastal waters off the Korean peninsula are indicated to be the Korean West Sea (朝鮮西海), the southern coastal waters the Korean South Sea (朝鮮南海), and the eastern coastal waters the Korean East Sea (朝鮮東海.) They only mean the coastal waters off the Korean peninsula. Thus, the South Korean government's claims that "East Sea" in the *Aguk ch'ongdo* refers to the whole area of the Sea of Japan are nothing other than an arbitrary interpretation of the map.



The Map of Liaodong and Korea (遼東連朝鮮圖) in the *Haifang zuanyao*  
 (海防纂要, Compilation on Maritime Defenses)



### 3. The “Beaches of the East Sea” from the *Samguk sagi*

We can see another example of the South Korean government’s arbitrary interpretation of literature in its claims regarding the phrase “beaches of the East Sea” from *Koguryō Annals* of the *Samguk sagi*, which is taken as evidence that “East Sea” has been used for 2,000 years. The South Korean government does not doubt that *Koguryō* is a part of Korean history, but China perceives *Koguryō* to be a regional Chinese kingdom. From the perspective of the Chinese, “East Sea” in the phrase “beaches of the East Sea” refers to the Yellow Sea or the East China Sea.

Now, where were the “beaches of the East Sea” located? In the *Samguk sagi*, the phrase “beaches of the East Sea” was used to refer to the area where the Sage King *Tongmyōng*, the founder of *Koguryō*, moved to establish his new state. If so, we should be able to infer where the East Sea was based on the territory of *Koguryō* at the time of its founding. Looking at information about *Koguryō* in books such as the “Treatise on Geography (地理志)” in the *Hanshu* (漢書, Book of Han), the “Treatise on Geography” in the *Hou Hanshu* (後漢書, Book of the Later Han,) and the “Records of Wei: An Account of the Easterners (魏志東夷伝)” in the *Sanguozhi* (三国志, Records of the Three Kingdoms),<sup>3</sup> *Koguryō* was founded near the upper reaches of the Yalu River in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century BC. The area to the east of *Koguryō* was occupied by Eastern *Okchō* (東沃沮). In other words, at the time of its founding, *Koguryō*’s territory was not adjacent to the Sea of Japan.

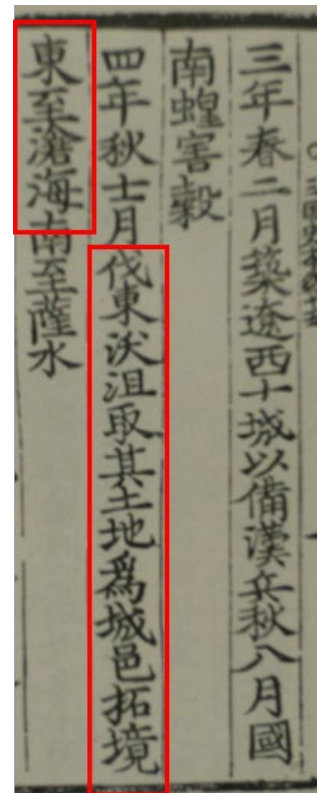
In fact, according to the *Koguryō Annals* of the *Samguk sagi*, *Koguryō* did not defeat Eastern *Okchō*, expand its territory eastward, and reach the Sea of Japan until the reign of King *T’aejo* (太祖), the sixth ruler after the Sage King *Tongmyōng*.<sup>4</sup> The “East Sea” in the *Samguk sagi*, based on which the South Korean government asserts that the name “East Sea” has been in use since 2,000 years ago, was not the Sea of Japan.

<sup>3</sup> According to “an Account of *Koguryō*” of the “Records of Wei: An Account of the Easterners” in the *Sanguozhi*, and “An Account of the Easterners” in the *Hou Hanshu*, “*Koguryō* lies to the east of Liangdong, with Korea and the Yemaek to the south, the *Okchō* to the east, and *Puyō* to the north (高句麗在遼東之東、南與朝鮮、濊貊、東與沃沮、北與夫餘接).” According to “an Account of Eastern *Okchō*” of the “Records of Wei: An Account of the Easterners” in the *Sanguozhi*, “Eastern *Okchō* is to the east of the Kaema Mountains in *Koguryō*, by the eastern shore [facing] the great sea (東沃沮、在高句麗蓋馬大山之東、東瀕大海.)”

<sup>4</sup> According to the Record of Seventh month in the fall of the 4th year of the reign of King *T’aejo* (太祖大王四年秋七月条), *Koguryō Annals*, *Samguk sagi*, “They attacked Eastern *Okchō*, took their land, towns, and villages, and expanded their borders to the Blue Sea in the east (伐東沃沮、取其土地為城邑、拓境、東至滄海).”



“Records of Wei: An Account of the Easterners (魏志東夷伝)” in the *Sanguozhi* (三国志, Records of the Three Kingdoms)  
 “Eastern *Okchō* is to the east of the Kaema Mountains in *Koguryō*, by the eastern shore [facing] the great sea”



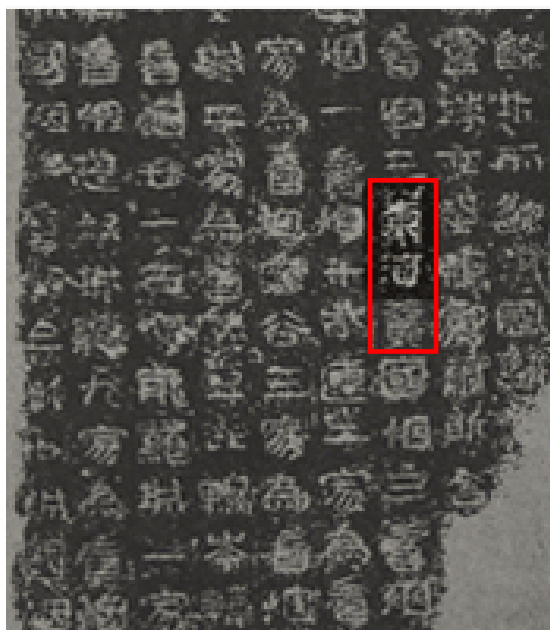
The *Koguryō Annals* (高句麗本紀) of the *Samguk sagi* (三国史記, history of the three kingdoms)  
 “They attacked Eastern *Okchō*, took their land, towns, and villages, and expanded their borders to the Blue Sea in the east”

#### 4. The “*Donghae* Merchants” on the *Kwanggaet’o* Stele

Now, what about the word *Donghae* on the *Kwanggaet’o* Stele, erected in 414? The *Kwanggaet’o* Stele was erected by King *Changsu* (長壽王) of *Koguryō* to extol the accomplishments of his father King *Kwanggaet’o*, so it is inscribed with tomb keepers to protect the tomb of King *Kwanggaet’o* as well as their numbers. Among those

keepers were the “*Donghae* Merchants.”<sup>5</sup> The South Korean government took notice of the word “*Donghae*” in the phrase “*Donghae* Merchants” and assumed that it signified the Sea of Japan.

However, the Chinese character “賈” means merchants, therefore the *Donghae* Merchants means only merchants in the place called *Donghae* (東海). It is unclear where *Donghae* was, but it is rather arbitrary to assert that the *Donghae* merchants were merchants in the Sea of Japan without further evidence.



The “*Donghae* Merchants (東海賈)” on the “*Kwanggaet’o* Stele (広開土王碑, a stone monument erected in 414)”

The South Korean government pays attention to the word “*Donghae* (東海)” in the “*Kwanggaet’o* Stele” and assumed it to signify the Sea of Japan without taking into account the context in which the word *Donghae* was used. The passage around the word *Donghae* on the *Kwanggaet’o* Stele is “Of the *Donghae* merchants, three are *kugyŏn* households and five are *kanyŏn* households (東海賈國烟三看烟五).” It has nothing to do with the Sea of Japan.

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<sup>5</sup> The passage around the phrase “*Donghae* Merchants” on the *Kwanggaet’o* Stele that the Korean government has cited as evidence is “Of the *Donghae* merchants, three are *kugyŏn* households and five are *kanyŏn* households (東海賈國烟三看烟五).”

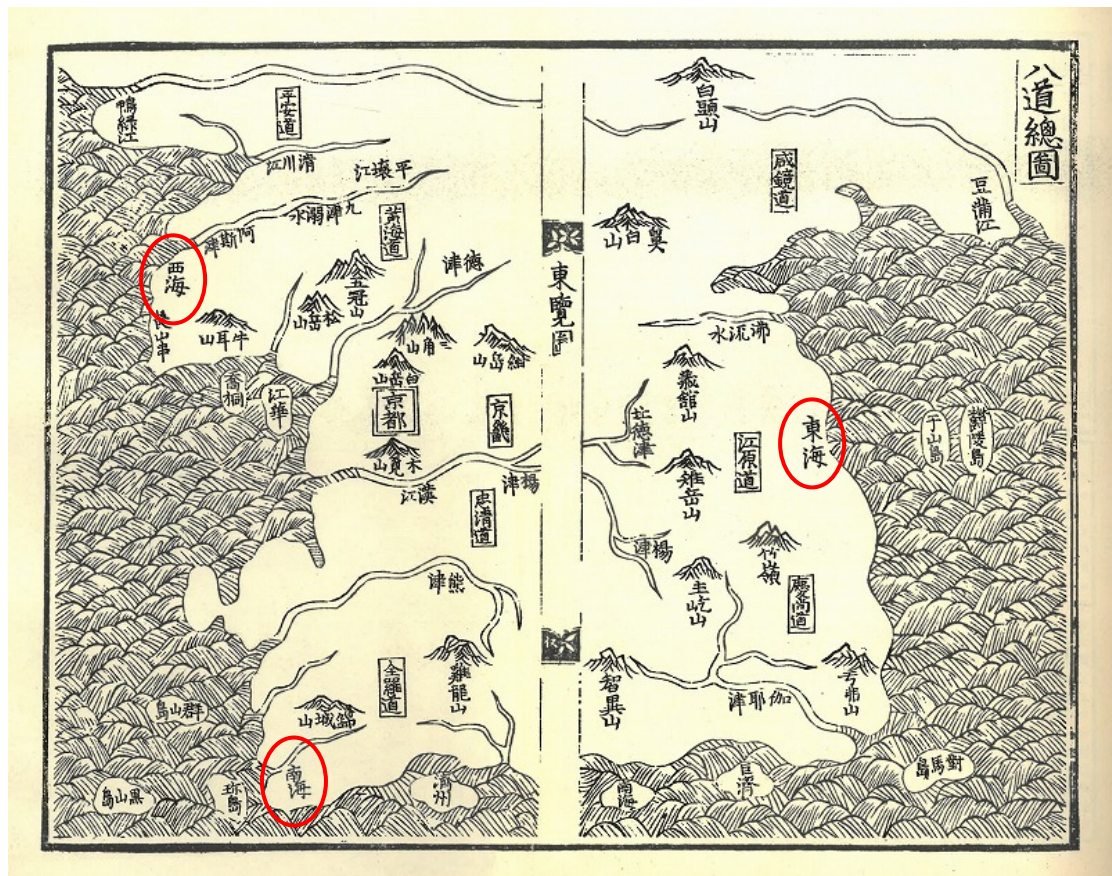
## 5. The word “*Donghae*” in the *P’alto ch’ongdo*

The South Korean government regard the name “*Donghae*” in the *P’alto ch’ongdo* as the Sea of Japan. Yet this is another distorted interpretation. The *P’alto ch’ongdo* is a map of all of Korea included in the *Tongguk yŏji sŭngnam* (東国輿地勝覽, Survey of the Geography of Korea). It shows large rivers like the Han River and the Yalu River as well as the names *Donghae*, *Namhae* (南海), and *Seohae* (西海) on the land. Seoul interprets this *Donghae* to mean the Sea of Japan, but this is unfounded speculation, because the afterword of the *Tongguk yŏji sŭngnam* specifies the following regarding the *P’alto ch’ongdo*:

“The comprehensive map in the beginning of the book (the *P’alto ch’ongdo*) is a record of sacred peaks, famous mountains and large rivers listed in the Ritual Codes (祀典).”

The large rivers and the *Donghae* depicted in the *P’alto ch’ongdo* referred to the locations where state rituals took place as prescribed in the Ritual Codes. In fact, the *Donghae* shown in the *P’alto ch’ongdo* marks the location of the *Donghae Shrine* (東海神祠) in the Yangyang District Section (襄陽都護府条) of the *Tongguk yŏji sŭngnam*. The *Donghae Shrine* was rebuilt in recent years as the *Donghae Sanctum* (東海神廟) shown in the photo below, and the *P’alto ch’ongdo*’s *Namhae* was also the *Nanhae Sanctum* (南海神廟). The *Donghae* in the *P’alto ch’ongdo* marked the location of the *Donghae Shrine*, where state rituals took place, as specified in the afterword of the *Tongguk yŏji sŭngnam*. This *Donghae Shrine* cannot be interpreted to be the Sea of Japan.





The word “Donghae (東海)” in the *P’alto ch’ongdo* (八道總圖, complete map of the eight provinces). The word “Seohae (西海)” and *Namhae (南海)*” are also in this map.



The “Donghae Sanctum (東海神廟),” that was rebuilt in recent years



The “Nanhae Sanctum (南海神廟).”

Moreover, regarding this *Donghae*, the afterword of the *Tongguk yŏji sŭngnam* states that “Each map of the eight provinces records the mountains guarding each area as well as its four boundaries.” The maps depicting the administrative divisions bordering on the Sea of Japan, “*Hamgyŏng Province* (咸鏡道),” “*Kangwŏn Province* (江原道),” and “*Kyŏngsang Province* (慶尙道),” all show their “four boundaries (四至四到)” and specify adjacent areas.

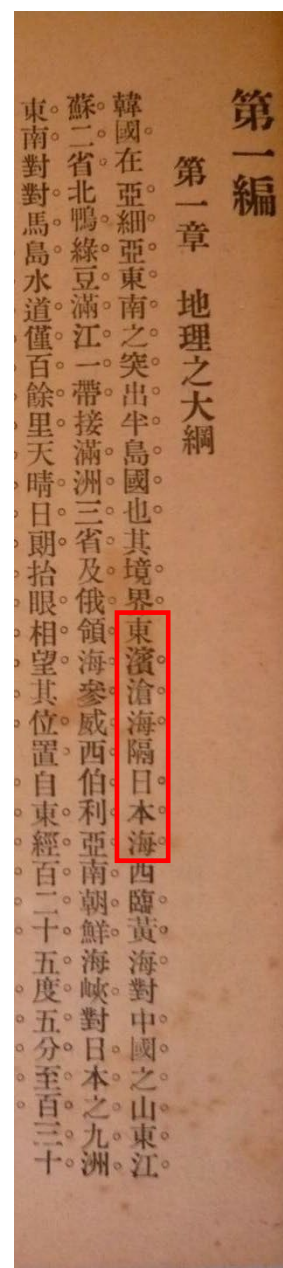
At the eastern edges of the maps of “*Hamgyŏng Province*,” “*Kangwŏn Province*,” and “*Kyŏngsang Province*” there is the notation “Great Sea to the east (東抵大海).” This is because, at that time, Korean differentiated between coastal waters and the open sea, which was called the Great Sea. This distinction between coastal waters and the open sea comes from the fact that the *Tongguk yŏji sŭngnam* was compiled according to the same editorial policy as the *Da-Ming yitong zhi* (大明一統志, Records of the Unity of the Great Ming.)



“*Kangwŏn Province* (江原道),” in the  
*Tongguk yŏji sŭngnam* (東国輿地勝覽,  
 Survey of the Geography of Korea)  
 At the eastern edge of the map, there is  
 the notation “Great Sea to the east (東抵大海)”

This tradition of differentiating between the two has continued into modern times. Pak Ŭnsik (朴殷植) wrote the following in his *Painful History of Korea* (韓国痛史, published in 1915):

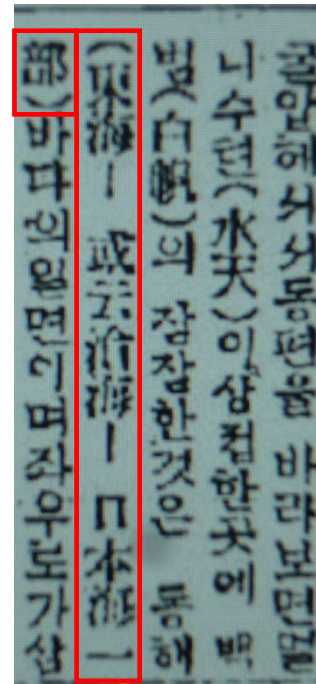
“Korea is a peninsular nation sticking out from southeast Asia. Its borders are the Blue Sea (滄海) and are separated from the Sea of Japan to the east as well as the Yellow Sea facing the two Chinese provinces of Shandong and Jiangsu to the west.”



*Painful History of  
Korea* (韓国痛史,  
published in 1915)  
written by Pak  
Ŭnsik (朴殷植)



This was fourteen years before the International Hydrographic Organization determined the names of the oceans and seas. This shows that the Blue Sea was considered to be the coastal waters off the Korean peninsula and the Sea of Japan was considered to be the open sea offshore at that time. This is also indicated by the wording “the East Sea, also known as the Blue Sea, a part of the Sea of Japan” in an article in the *Dong-A Ilbo* (東亞日報), dated July 1, 1926. The South Korean government argues that Korea was unable to assert in 1929 that the name of the sea was the “East Sea” because it was under Japanese colonial rule, but at the time of the Sea of Japan’s inclusion into the *Limits of Oceans and Seas*, “East Sea” was used in Korea as a name for the coastal waters off the Korean peninsula. It was only after WWII that “East Sea” came to be mean the Sea of Japan. The headline of an article in the *Dong-A Ilbo*, dated June 15, 1946, was “East Sea or Sea of Japan?” but that was because the debate about whether to call it the Sea of Japan or the East Sea had just emerged.

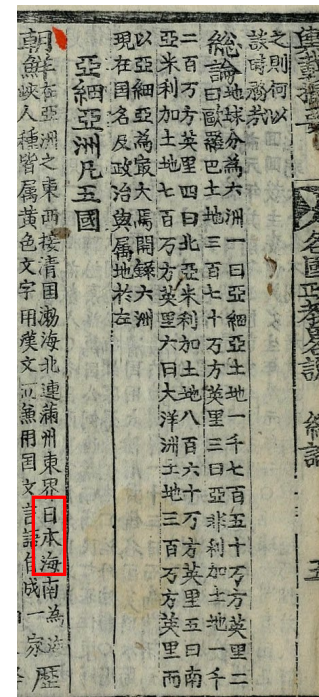


The *Dong-A Ilbo* (東亞日報), dated July 1, 1926

## 6. The Name “Sea of Japan” was Used also in the Korean Peninsula in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century

Seoul repeatedly argues that the names “Sea of Japan” and “East Sea” should be used side by side because “East Sea” has been used for 2,000 years. But it was not until around the mid-twentieth century that the Sea of Japan came to be called the East Sea in the Republic of Korea.

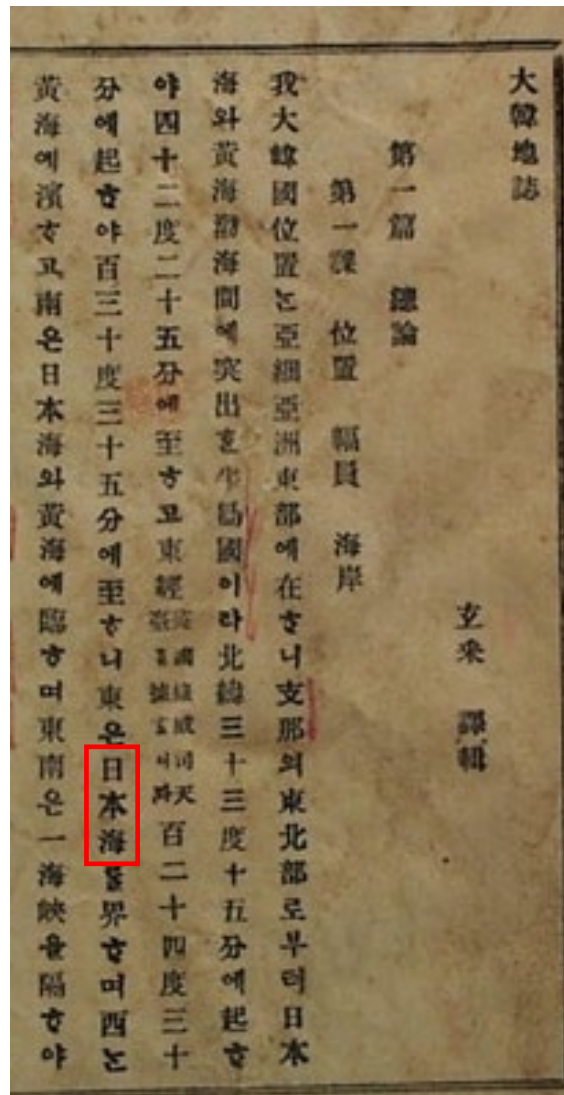
As mentioned above, the Korean patriot Pak Ŭnsik differentiated between the Sea of Japan and the Blue Sea in his *Painful History of Korea*, because the name “Sea of Japan” had been also used on the Korean peninsula since the second half of the nineteenth century. The *Yŏlchae ch’waryo* (輿載撮要) from 1896 states that Korea “is in eastern Asia. It borders the Bohai Sea of the Qing to the west. It is connected with Manchuria to the north, and is demarcated by the Sea of Japan to the east.” Also the *Tae-Han chiji* (大韓地誌, Atlas of the Great Korean



The *Yŏlchae ch’waryo* (輿載撮要)

Empire, published 1899), translated, edited, and compiled by Hyŏn Ch'ae (玄采) of the Korean Empire, states that Korea is “demarcated by the Sea of Japan in the east and the beaches of the Yellow Sea in the west.”

As the South Korean government demands the name “Sea of Japan” be changed to “East Sea,” they emphasize the inappropriateness of “Sea of Japan” in light of Japan’s colonial rule. Yet, “Sea of Japan” was not decided solely by Japan. The *Complete Map of the Land and Sea of Great Japan, Along with Korea and Karafuto* (大日本海陸全圖 聯接朝鮮樺太) made in 1876 by Ojiri Hidekatsu (大後秀勝), a cartographer in the Japanese Navy, also says “日本海/JAPAN SEA,” but that is because it was drawn based on British sea charts. Subsequently, the *Taiwan suiro shi* (臺灣水路誌, published 1883) and the *Chosen suiro shi* (朝鮮水路誌, published 1894) were also compiled by referring to British nautical charts, maintaining the name “Sea of Japan.”



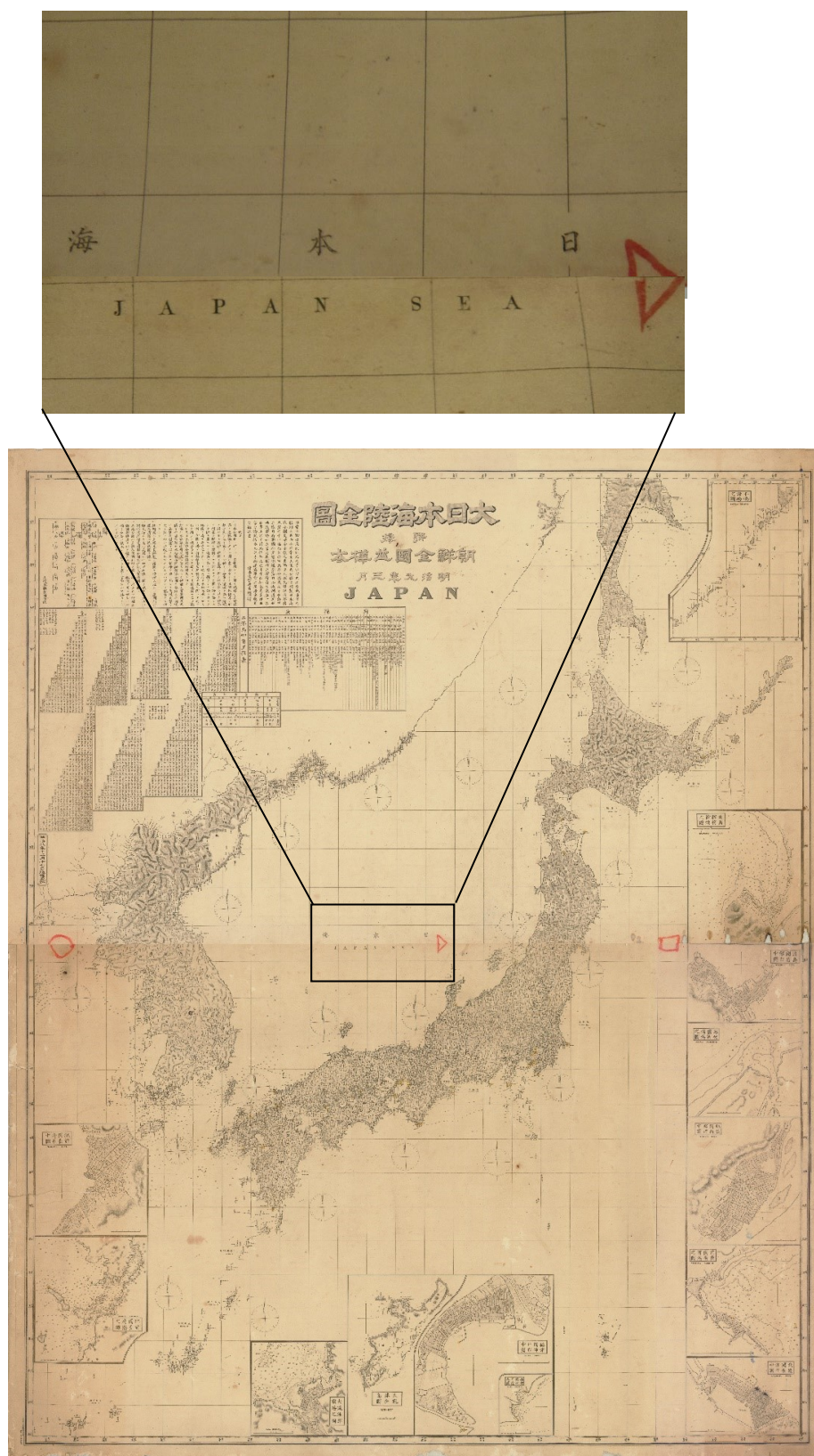
The *Tae-Han chiji* (大韓地誌, Atlas of the Great Korean Empire, published 1899)



## 7. Conclusion

The Japanese government's statement that "Sea of Japan is the only internationally established name" is based on consideration of the above history. The South Korean emphasis of Japanese colonial rule is totally irrelevant here. Moreover, as I have discussed at length, the word 東海 (*Donghae*) that the South Korean government brings up as evidence in their challenge against the name "Sea of Japan" was either the coastal waters off the Korean peninsula, names of places on land, the Yellow Sea, or the East Sea of China. We should not refer to the Sea of Japan as the East Sea. It is also inappropriate to use the names "Sea of Japan" and "East Sea" side by side as internationally established names.

Finally, I sincerely hope that the South Korean government is able to realize that its persistence in this naming issue even to the point of distorting historical facts has become a source of confusion in the international community.



The Complete Map of the Land and Sea of Great Japan, Along with Korea and Karafuto (日本海陸全圖聯接朝鮮樺太) made by Ōjiri Hidekatsu (大後秀勝)

※This leaflet represents its author's view.