

“The Name of the Sea of Japan and Flaws with the Korean Arguments” Q&A*

Masao Shimojo

(Professor emeritus at Takushoku University and a visiting professor at Tokai University and the University of Shimane)

Q1 In 1992, the delegations of South Korea and North Korea raised their objection to the name “Sea of Japan” at the United Nations. Does this indicate that South Korea and North Korea are working together regarding this issue to jointly make such claims?

When it comes to historical issues, South Korea and North Korea tend to cooperate with each other. Both countries have taken similar positions on history issues, partly because it is a good diplomatic means of mounting an offensive against Japan. This continues to be the case today.

Q2 Based on the *Aguk ch'ongdo* (我国総図, complete map of Korea), it would seem natural for South Korea to ask that the sea now internationally known as the Yellow Sea be called “West Sea” and the East China Sea be called “South Sea.” Why does South Korea make the claim that it does only with regard to the Sea of Japan? In this connection, is there any discourse in South Korean academic circles that says that such a claim should be made? Has this discourse reached the Korean government?

Another reason for the South Korean side to have taken up the East Sea issue is the existence of Takeshima in the Sea of Japan. South Korea has illegally occupied Takeshima since 1954, and Takeshima is located in the Sea of Japan. Moreover, they say that the name of Takeshima is not Takeshima, but Dokdo. If Dokdo is in the waters of the Sea of Japan, it is inconvenient because it looks like Japanese territory. So South Korea needs to have the name changed to “East Sea,” the Korean name, and assert sovereignty over Dokdo. This means that the naming of the Sea of Japan and the Takeshima issue are connected. From the South Korean side, therefore, the East Sea becomes an issue because of the Takeshima issue. Since there is no territorial dispute over the

* This article is a summary of the Q&A section of the JIIA webinar “The Name of the Sea of Japan and Flaws with the Korean Arguments,” presented by Professor Emeritus Masao Shimojo of Takushoku University on September 13, 2022. In the webinar, Professor Shimojo explained in a comprehensible manner his views, based on his many years of research, on the flaws in the South Korean arguments regarding the name of the Sea of Japan on the grounds of old maps and documents. The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the policy or position of The Japan Institute of International Affairs or any other organization with which the author is affiliated.

A full video of the webinar is available here:

JIIA webinar “The Name of the Sea of Japan and Flaws with the Korean Arguments”

<https://www.jiia-jic.jp/en/events/2022/09/the-name-of-the-sea-of-japan-and-flaws-with-the-korean-arguments.html>

Please also refer to the following article related to the subject of this webinar:

“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-).”

https://www.jiia-jic.jp/en/resourcelibrary/pdf/EN-The_naming_dispute_of_the_Sea_of_Japan.pdf

South and West Seas, South Korea shows an inordinate interest only in the East Sea. The Takeshima issue is behind the reason why the name of the Sea of Japan is in question.

Q3 Have there been any other disputes between countries over names used by the International Hydrographic Organization (IHO) like the one over the name of the Sea of Japan? If so, how were they debated, and were they ultimately resolved?

I am unfamiliar with the specifics, as I have not attended these meetings of the International Hydrographic Organization (IHO) or the United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, but South Korea appears to be the only country that is making an issue of hydrographic names. In that respect, again, this issue relates to the Takeshima issue. Also, South Korea’s perception of history is a little different from that of other countries. It can be said that these characteristics of South Korea are reflected in those issues.

Q4 Considering the point you made that the South Korean side cherry-picks notations scattered in old documents that have nothing to do with the Sea of Japan—such as that “East Sea” and “Blue Sea” (滄海) denote the coastal waters of the Korean Peninsula and that the sea to the west of the Korean Peninsula was called “East Sea,” as in the sea to the east of China—to make their case, it seems that the South Korean side lacks valid evidence for their claims. What do South Korean researchers think about this? Could you tell us what kind of discussions you have had with South Korean researchers?

I myself am in a dispute with South Korea over the Takeshima issue, and South Koreans do not listen to the opinions of those who make claims that are inconvenient for them. They ignore such opinions. So even if it became evident that the East Sea was not the Sea of Japan, I believe that South Korea will continue to want to use the name “East Sea” for the Sea of Japan and that such moves will continue in the future. In fact, although it was recently decided at the IHO that the name “Sea of Japan” should be used exclusively, the South Korean side remains intent on promoting the simultaneous use of the name “East Sea” and continues to conduct propaganda and information warfare to that end. As long as there is no specialized organization in Japan to debate these historical issues with the South Korean side, South Korea will continue to make one-sided statements. We thus need to lay down a research structure such that we can refute each of the claims made by the South Korean side. In South Korea, if something is inconvenient for them, they will turn a blind eye. On the other hand, if they sense that the other side is weaker, that is, if the Japanese side does not clearly refute the South Korean claims, the South Korean side will keep repeating the same arguments; that is their tendency. Hence, when considering historical issues with South Korea, I think it is necessary for Japan to constantly disseminate information. But to transmit that information, research of that nature needs to be conducted on a daily basis. Unfortunately, as with the Takeshima issue, there are very few researchers on the Japanese side who are engaged in sustained research on such issues. There are also no specialized research institutions. As such, Japanese has no sustainable research institute—“sustainable” being a buzzword these days—no institute for sustainable research to put an end to the claims of South Korean side. I therefore think it is absolutely essential that we keep pointing out the errors in the South Korean claims by continuing our research.

Q5 If we are debating whether the name “Sea of Japan” is a remnant of the colonial period, is it important to ask what the global perceptions were before and after the colonial period and how the maps changed? If so, are there any authoritative maps of the

world that refer to the “East Sea” in precolonial times?

There is the *Kanei suirosi* (Kanei Hydrography), published I think in 1887, which was modeled after British hydrographic journals. As such, the name “Sea of Japan” had already been established by the end of the nineteenth century. Meanwhile, South Korea came to have the historical understanding that the Sea of Japan is the East Sea only after World War II. And based on this historical understanding, it replaces all past references to the “Sea of Japan” with “East Sea.” The South Korean way of research is not to gather various documents and make judgments inductively; rather, it is deductive.

In short, first there is the claim that the Sea of Japan is the East Sea, and when they find references to “East Sea” in Chinese or Korean literature, they have a strong tendency to interpret these sources in a way that suits their needs. Unless we have the research ability to debunk this, we will end up repeating the same historical problems with South Korea or with North Korea. In that regard, the issue of the name of the Sea of Japan is not complicated, since it does not involve human rights issues, as in the cases of wartime “comfort women” or conscription of Korean laborers. It is possible to debunk the claims of South and North Korea by accumulating objective facts. As such, I believe that Japan should use the name of the Sea of Japan as a diplomatic bargaining chip. To do so, Japan must have a scheme in which it can clarify or understand South Korean and North Korean attitudes toward historical issues and then refute them.

Q6 You have made it clear that the South Korean claims are a fabricated history to suit their own purposes. Is this campaign by the Korean government for the simultaneous use of the name “East Sea” alongside “Sea of Japan” still ongoing? How should Japan respond to such moves, including by disseminating information?

Regarding the issue of the name of the Sea of Japan—which South Korea sees as the “East Sea issue”—about nine days before the passage of the “*Takeshima Day*” ordinance that Shimane Prefecture set out to establish, South Korea created a bill for conducting sustained research related to the *Takeshima* issue. It was in September 2006, I think, that a state-run research institute called the Northeast Asian History Foundation was established. The institute engages in research on all fronts, including the Sea of Japan issue, the *Takeshima* issue, the comfort women issue, and the wartime labor issue. Every president of the Northeast Asian History Foundation has been a historian. A historian sits at the top, and this position is equivalent to that of a state minister. There is a staff of about 100 under the president, about 60 of whom are history experts, and 40 are supporting staff. They engage in sustained research under this framework and reflect the results in foreign policy. The Northeast Asian History Foundation functions as a policy advisory organization for South Korea. Unfortunately, there are no such think tanks in Japan. As such, South Korea will likely continue to fabricate history in various ways, and it will bring various historical issues to the fore and use them as diplomatic trump cards. What this means is that Japan and South Korea have completely different perceptions and stances on historical issues. Whether in the case of *Takeshima*, the *Senkaku Islands*, or the Northern Territories, or in the case of the abduction issue with North Korea, Japan is always on the defensive rather than on the offensive. To proactively resolve these issues, then, Japan will need to conduct research and establish a scheme such that it will be able to wage information warfare or cognitive warfare overseas. This is the same as waging war, albeit a war that does not involve military force, and what is important is the logistics route for continuing such disputes. We need to develop institutions for research and generations of researchers who can

conduct such research. There is no point in waging an information war without creating missiles of information.

In that regard, Japan lacks the tactics and strategies to constantly create and disseminate information. Given this current situation, the historical warfare and historical perception issue with South Korea will continue. As for how to break the deadlock, Japan’s political and diplomatic capacity will be key. That is where Japan is lacking. If we can improve in this area, it will be possible for Japan to defeat the false historical perceptions of the South Korean side that I talked about today. Without doing that, I believe Japan–South Korea relations will always remain in the worst state. And the countries that would be most pleased with that are North Korea, Russia, and China. Whether with regard to the historical issues between Japan and South Korea or between Japan and China, or with regard to the name of the Sea of Japan, which I just discussed, it is time for Japan to present recipes for their resolution. Moreover, I believe that now is the last chance to do so. I would like you, the listeners, to be aware of this. The historical documents that the South Korean side or the Chinese side use as arguments for Takeshima, the Senkaku Islands, or the name of the Sea of Japan are virtually all being perverted. They are not interpreting the sources correctly. The problem is that South Korea and China do not realize that they are not correctly reading the documents. Even if they do, they are unable to retract their flawed claims. This is because there has been no strong rebuttal from the Japanese side and no sustained offensive.

In relation to the Sea of Japan issue, the South Korean side has been engaged in propaganda activities in the United States and other countries by working with such people as Korean Americans. In Virginia, Korean Americans have played a central role by cooperating with lawmakers in election campaigns and, in that process, pushing for the simultaneous use of the name “East Sea” with “Sea of Japan.” This eventually led to the passage of a bill in Virginia for the simultaneous use of the names “East Sea” and “Sea of Japan,” and this move would then spread to about seven other states. At the time, the aforementioned Northeast Asian History Foundation actively backed up the bills. Historically, the Society for East Sea, a group under the South Korean government mainly comprising South Korean geographers, has spearheaded the drive for the simultaneous use of the name “East Sea” since the 1990s. When research groups like the Northeast Asian History Foundation and the East Sea Research Association, which have close ties with the Korean government, participate in the movement to promote the use of “East Sea” alongside “Sea of Japan,” this arouses ethnic sentiment among Korean Americans, which in turn leads them to serve their homeland. This inevitably becomes linked with the South Koreans back home and leads to anti-Japanese behavior. If Japan fails to respond appropriately to this trend, that failure will be taken advantage of, and Japan–South Korea relations will become even more difficult. As you can see from what I have shared with you today, there is virtually no basis for the problems of historical perception claimed by the South Korean side. However, I think there is also a big problem with the standard, if you will, of the Japanese side, which failed to recognize this. In historical issues, we need to do more than just criticize South Korea and China; we must also correct the course of Japan’s current situation so that we can engage in historical information warfare. Now is the final chance to do so.