

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 naming 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.” Probably because the government of South Korea thought that it would be difficult to get agreement to use “East Sea” as the sole name, they have been arguing that both “Sea of Japan” and “East Sea” should be simultaneously used since the 1997 conference of the International Hydrographic Organization.

US President Trump used the word “Sea of Japan” when he spoke to U.S/ sailors aboard a US navy vessel at the Yokosuka base on May 28. His reference to the Sea of Japan was widely reported by the South Korean media and, at a press conference, South Korean Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Kim In-chul stated that the name “East Sea” must be used alongside the name “Sea of Japan.” According to the South Korean media, a U.S. Department of State spokesperson stated that the US government uses only one name decided by the US Board on Geographic Names to refer to all high seas features and the name approved by the Board for the body of water between Japan and Korea is the Sea of Japan.

The reason why Seoul continues to insist on the name “East Sea” is because the South Korean government, which has occupied the Japanese territory of Takeshima (Korean name of Dokdo) since 1954, has associated the territorial issue with the naming of the Sea of Japan. Part of the South Korean side’s logic for justifying the name “East Sea” is that, if Dokdo (Takeshima) is in the Sea of Japan, then it is inappropriately appears as if Dokdo is in Japanese territorial waters. In this regard, the South Korean government has claimed that the name “East Sea” has been used for 2000 years and should be used instead of the name “Sea of Japan”.

The basis for the claim that the name “East Sea” has been used for 2000 years is the phrase “beaches of the East Sea” from the Book of the Sage King *Tongmyǒng* of the

*Koguryō*¹ Annals (高句麗本紀始祖東明聖王條) in the *Samguk sagi* (三國史記, history of the three kingdoms). The South Korean side also argues that the reason why the name “East Sea” was excluded from the *Limits of Oceans and Seas* of the International Hydrographic Organization in 1929, in spite of the use of the name for 2000 years before that, is that Korea was under Japanese rule at that time and thus deprived of the opportunity to assert the legitimacy of the name” East Sea”.

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* (廣開土王碑, a stone monument erected in 414), the *P'alto ch'ongdo* (八道總圖, complete map of the eight provinces), the *Aguk ch'ongdo* (我國總圖, complete map of Korea), and other pieces of evidence² that have been identified by the South Korean government do not refer to the Sea of Japan. For instance, the word “*Donghae*” in the *Aguk ch'ongdo* only refers to the eastern coastal waters off the Korean peninsula (not whole part of the Sea of Japan.) In the case of “beaches of the East Sea (東海之濱)” from the *Samguk sagi*, the word “*Donghae*” refers to the Yellow Sea or the East China Sea. “*Donghae* merchants (東海賈)” in the *Kwanggaet'o Stele* refers to merchants in the place called *Donghae*. The word “*Donghae*” in the *P'alto ch'ongdo* signifies ritual sites (*Donghae* Shrine) on the ground. The word 東海 (*Donghae*) appeared in these pieces has nothing to do with the body of water called the Sea of Japan as determined by the International Hydrographic Organization in *Limits of Oceans and Seas*. As such, it does not qualify as an alternative to the name “Sea of Japan”.

2. “East Sea” in the *Aguk ch'ongdo*

For example, in the case of the *Aguk ch'ongdo*, it is true that it mentions “*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 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 be natural that Seoul would also claim that the names “Yellow Sea” and “East China Sea” should be replaced

¹ *Koguryō* is one of the three kingdoms whose historical record is compiled in the *Samguk sagi*. It was found in the area north to the Yalu River in the 1st Century BC and expanded its territory to a part of both the Korean Peninsula and northeast China.

² For the view of the South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, see http://www.mofa.go.kr/www/wpge/m_3838/contents.do

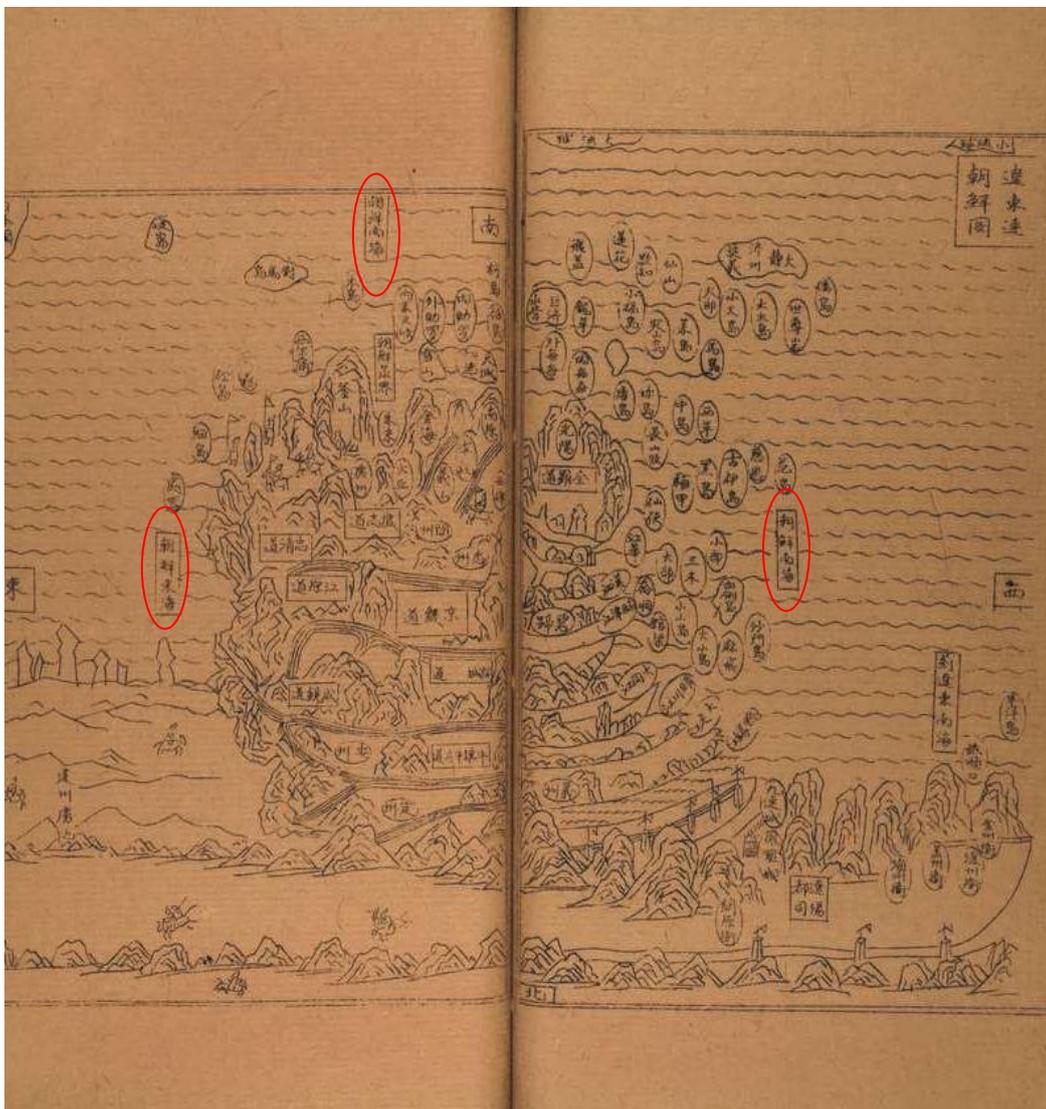
by the names “West Sea” and “South Sea” respectively, but Seoul is making no such demands. The only reason why the South Korean government takes issue with the Sea of Japan is because that is where the Takeshima (Dokdo) is located.



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 “East Sea” in the *Aguk ch’ongdo* refers to only the stretches of the Korean peninsula’s eastern coastal waters can be verified by the Map of Liaodong and Korea (遼東連朝鮮圖) 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 is indicated as “Korean West Sea (朝鮮西海),” the southern coastal waters as “Korean South Sea (朝鮮南海),” and the eastern coastal waters as “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*

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

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

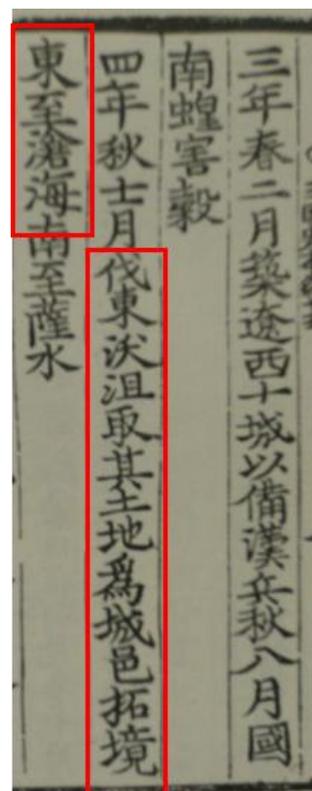
Now, where were the “beaches of the East Sea” located? In the *Samguk sagi*, the phrase “beaches of the East Sea” were used to refer to area where the Sage King *Tongmyŏng*, the founder of *Koguryŏ*, moved to established his new state. If so, we should be able to infer where the “East Sea” was based on the territory of *Koguryŏ* at the time of its founding. Taking a look at entries about *Koguryŏ* 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 (魏志東夷傳)” in the *Sanguozhi* (三國志, Records of the Three Kingdoms)³, *Koguryŏ* was founded near the upper reaches of the Yalu River in the 1st Century BC. The area to the east of *Koguryŏ* was occupied by Eastern *Okchŏ* (東沃沮). In other words, at the time of its founding, *Koguryŏ*’s territory was not adjacent to the Sea of Japan.

In fact, according to the *Koguryŏ Annals* of the *Samguk sagi*, *Koguryŏ* did not defeat Eastern *Okchŏ*, expand its territory eastward, and reach the Sea of Japan until the reign of King *T’aejo* (太祖), sixth generation after the Sage King *Tongmyŏng*⁴. The “East Sea” in the *Samguk sagi*, based on which the South Korean government asserts that the name

³ According to “an Account of *Koguryŏ*” of the “Records of Wei: An Account of the Easterners” in the *Sanguozhi*, and “An Account of the Easterners” in the *Hou Hanshu*, “*Koguryŏ* lies to the east of Liangdong, with Korea and the Yemaek to the south, the *Okchŏ* to the east, and *Puyŏ* 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 *Okchŏ*” of the “Records of Wei: An Account of the Easterners” in the *Sanguozhi*, “Eastern *Okchŏ* is to the east of the *Kaema Mountains* in *Koguryŏ*, by the eastern shore [facing] the great sea (東沃沮、在高句麗蓋馬大山之東、東瀆大海.)”

⁴ 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條), *Koguryŏ Annals*, *Samguk sagi*, “They attacked Eastern *Okchŏ*, 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).”

“East Sea” has been in use since 2,000 years ago, was not the Sea of Japan.



“Records of Wei: An Account of the Easterners (魏志東夷傳)” in the Sanguozhi (三國志, Records of the Three Kingdoms)

The Koguryŏ Annals (高句麗本紀) of the Samguk sagi(三國史記, history of the three kingdoms)

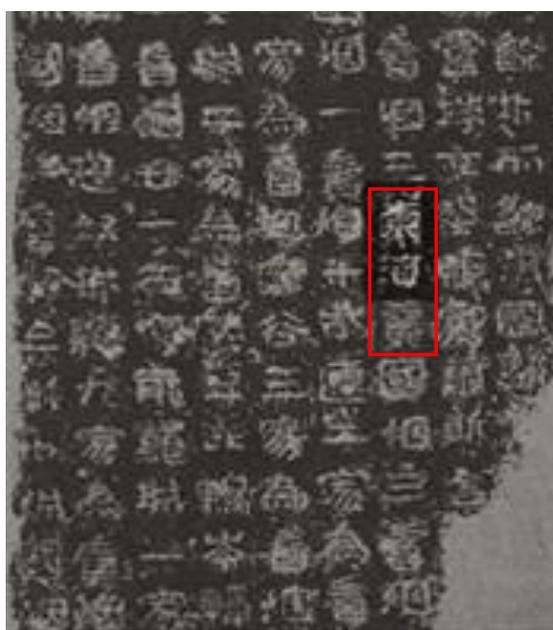
4. The “Donghae Merchants” on the “Kwanggaet’o Stele”

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 Koguryŏ 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 Merchants⁵.” The South Korean government took

⁵ The passage around the phrase “Donghae Merchants” on the Kwanggaet’o Stele that

notice of the word “*Donghae*” of the phrase “*Donghae Merchants*” and assumed it to signify the Sea of Japan.

However, the “merchants” called the “*Donghae Merchants*” mean “merchants” in the place called *Donghae* (東海). The Chinese character “海” means not only “sea” but also “direction.” That was the same in Korea and the character “海” was also used for names of places on the ground. It is unclear where that *Donghae* was, but it is rather arbitrary to assert that the “*Donghae merchants*” were those in the Sea of Japan without further evidences.



The “*Donghae Merchants* (東海賈)” on the “*Kwanggaet’o Stele* (廣開土王碑, 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).” That is, the “*Donghae Merchants*” mean “merchants” in the place called *Donghae* (東海), which may be on the ground.

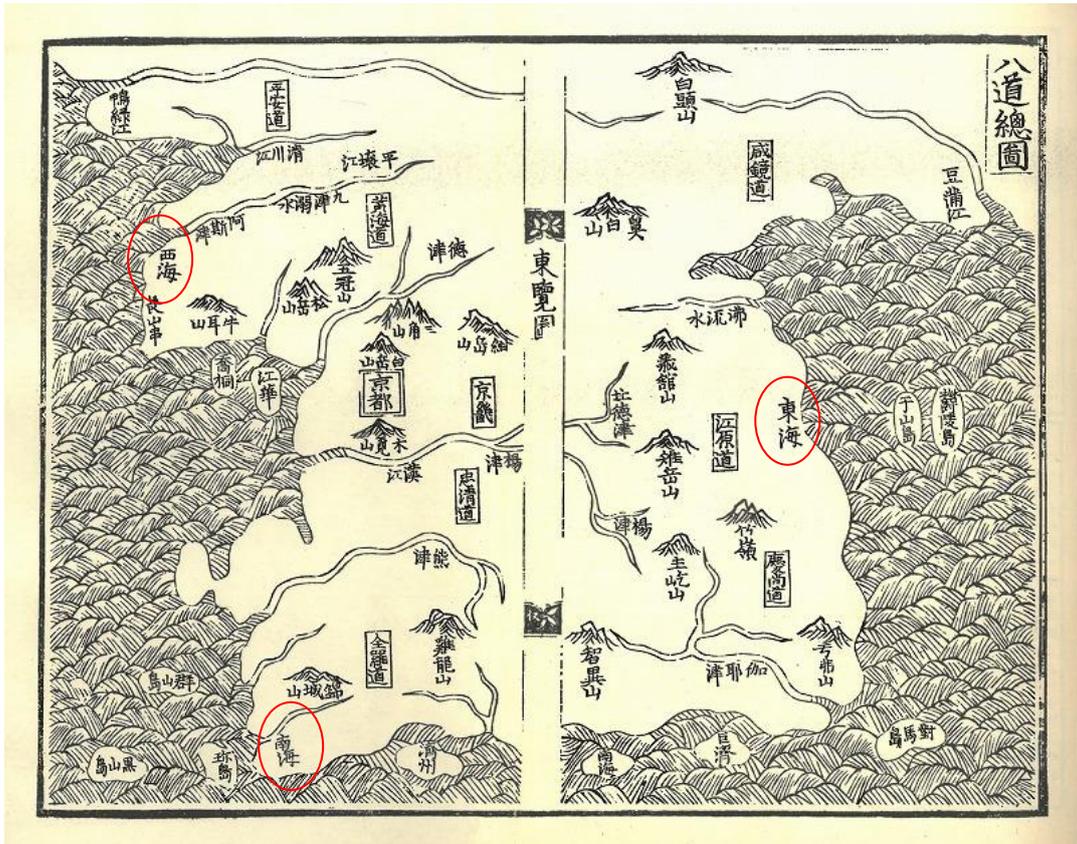
the Korean government has cited as evidence is “Of the *Donghae* merchants, three are *kugyŏn* households and five are *kanyŏn* households (東海賈國烟三看烟五).”

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* (東國輿地勝覽, 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 ground. Seoul interpreted this “*Donghae*” as the Sea of Japan, but that is unfounded speculation. That is because the afterword of the *Tongguk yŏji sŭngnam* specifies the following with regard to 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 as well as 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)” included 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),” as shown in the photo below, and the “*Namhae*” was also the “*Nanhae Sanctum*.” 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 as 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 “*Donghae Sanctum* (東海神廟),” that was rebuilt in recent years



The “*Nanhae Sanctum*”

Moreover, regarding the *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 the 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 the coastal waters and the open sea, which was called the Great Sea. This division between coastal waters and open sea comes from the fact that the *Tongguk yŏji sŭngnam* was compiled according to the same policy as the *Da-Ming yitong zhi* (大明一統志, Records of the Unity of the Great Ming.)

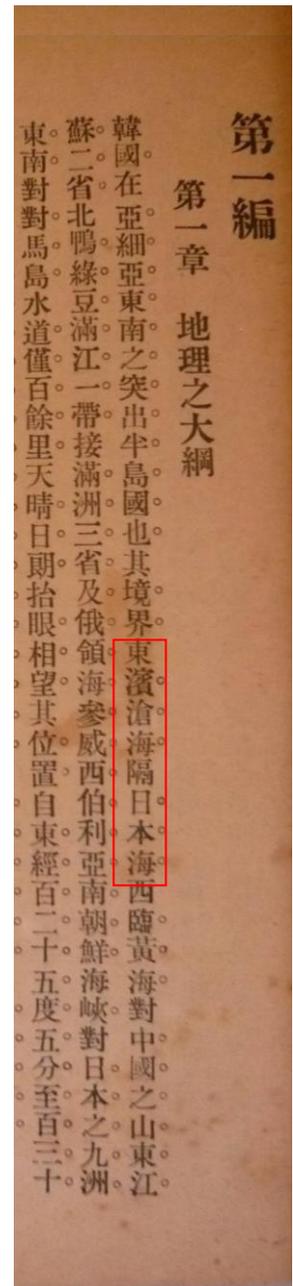
This tradition of differentiating between the two continued into modern times. Pak Ŭnsik (朴殷植) wrote the following in his *Painful History of Korea* (韓國痛史, published in 1915):

“Korea is a peninsular nation sticking out in the southeast of Asia. Its borders are [along] the Blue Sea (蒼海) 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.”



“Kangwŏn Province (江原道),” in the *Tongguk yōji sūngnam* (東國輿地勝覽, Survey of the Geography of Korea)

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 the coast waters off the Korean peninsula and the Sea of Japan 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 the East Sea name in 1929 as it was under Japanese colonial rule, but at the time of the Sea of Japan’s inclusion in the *Limits of Oceans and Seas*, East Sea was used in Korea as a name for coastal waters off the Korean peninsula. It was only after WWII that East Sea came to be used for the Sea of Japan. An article in the *Dong-A Ilbo*, dated June 15, 1946, had the headline “East Sea or Sea of Japan?” but that was because a debate about whether to call the Sea of Japan the East Sea just had emerged.



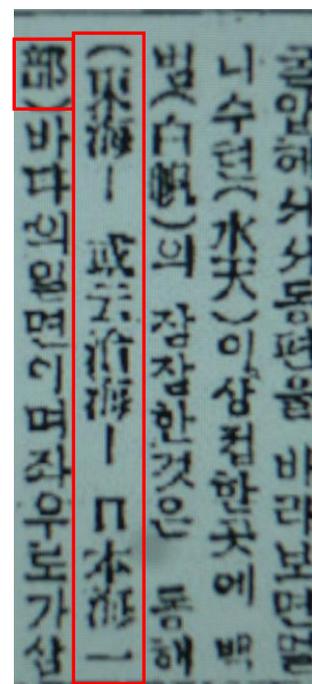
Painful History of Korea (韓国痛史, published in 1915) written by Pak Ŭnsik (朴殷植)

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

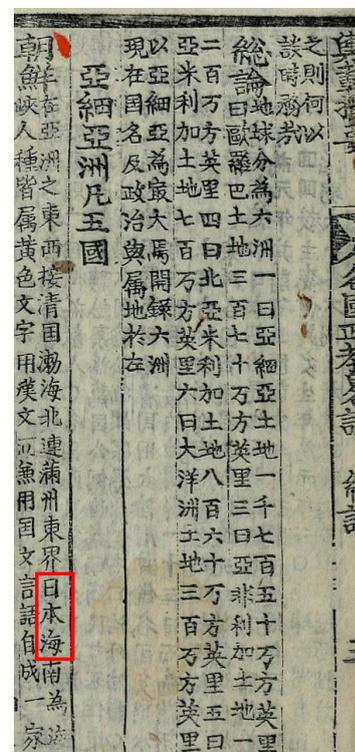
Seoul repeatedly argues that the names “Sea of Japan” and “East Sea” should be used side by side because “East Sea” has been used since 2,000 years ago. But it was not until around the mid-twentieth century that the Sea of Japan came to be called the East Sea in the Republic of Korea.

As mentioned above, the Korean patriot Pak Ŭnsik differentiated between the Sea of Japan and the Blue Sea in his *Painful History of Korea*. That we because the name “Sea of Japan” had been used also 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 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 [along] the beaches of the Yellow Sea in the west.”

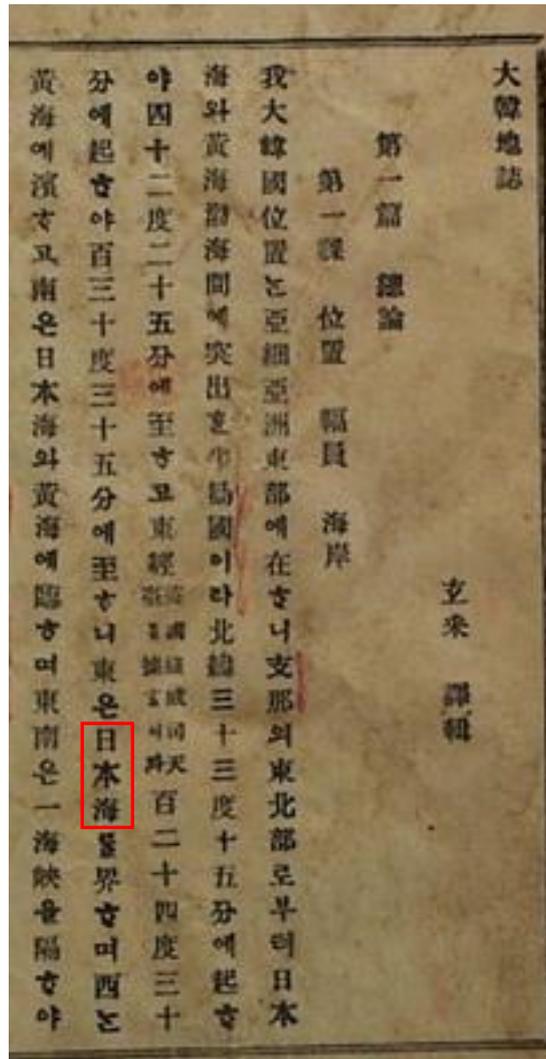
As the South Korean government demands the name “Sea of Japan” to be changed to “East Sea,” they emphasize the inappropriateness of the name Sea of Japan in light of Japan’s colonial rule. Yet, the name Sea of Japan was not decided solely by Japan. a cartographer in the Japanese Navy, in 1876, also says “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, sticking with the name Sea of Japan.



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



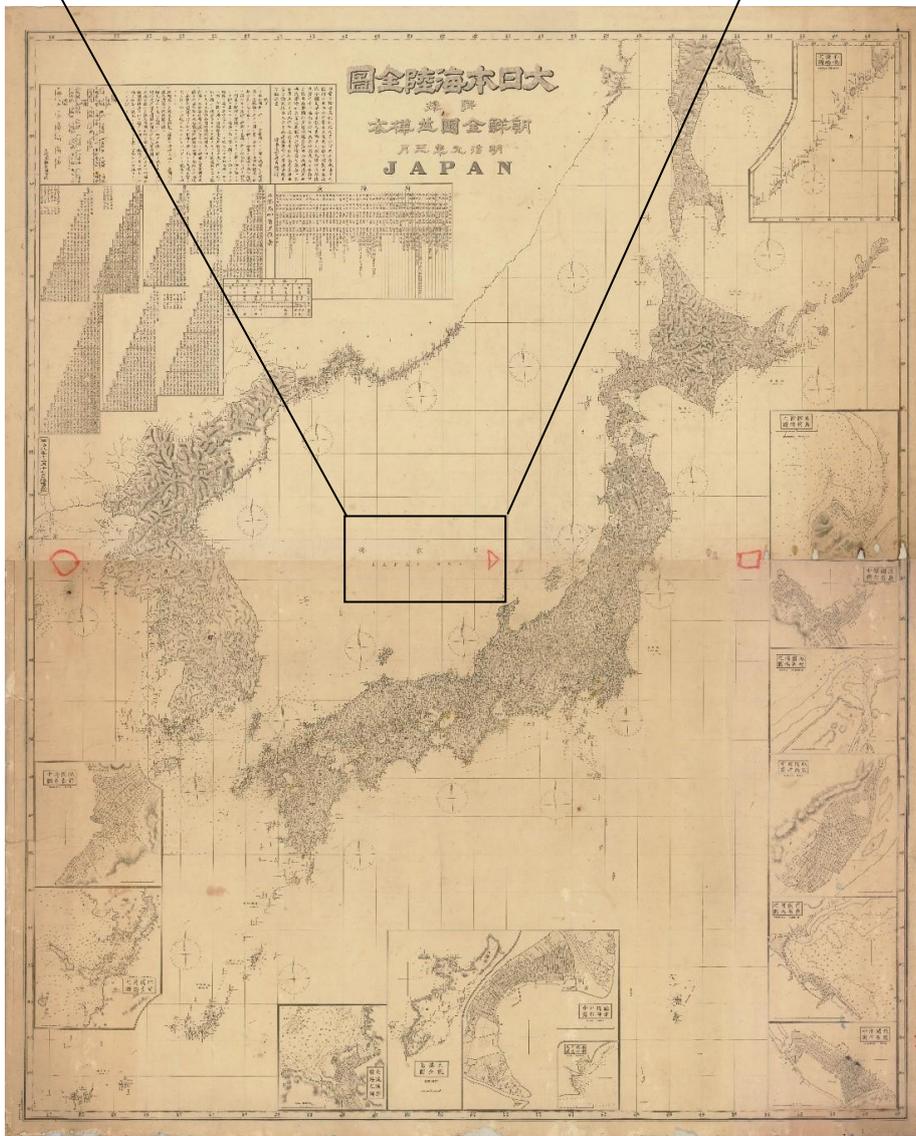
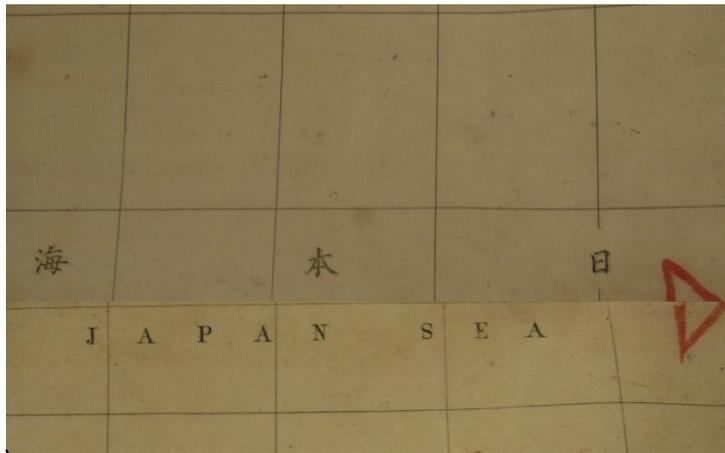
The Yŏlchae ch’waryo (輿載撮要)



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-mentioned history. The South Korean side’s emphasis on 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 a coastal waters off the Korean peninsula, names of places on the ground, or 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 Sea of Japan and East Sea side by side as the internationally established names.



The Complete Map of the Land and Sea of Great Japan, Along with Korea and Karafuto (日本海陸全国联接朝鮮樺大) made by Ōjiri Hidekatsu (大後秀勝)