

SHIM, JEONGBO (2022) The history of the East Sea and the Sea of Japan: Origin of geographical names, conflicts and solutions. Springer. Cham. XXIX, 186 pages, 14 b/w illustrations, 194 illustrations in color. ISBN 978-3-031-07044-0 (eBook). <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-07044-0>. US\$ 129.

The contested (geo)politics of toponymy is a well-known phenomenon in the past and contemporary international relationships (e.g., KADMON 2004, GIRAUT & HOUSSAY-HOLZSCHUCH 2016). The traditional examples of the competing place names include exonym/endonym issues (WOODMAN 2012) and the various forms of “toponymic wars” (KADMON 2004: 85). In addition, the current cases of “performative toponymic solidarity” (GNATIUK & BASIK 2023) and other types of “toponymic diplomacy” (DÜZGÜN 2023) have emerged worldwide.

In this context, the persistent problem of the East Sea/Sea of Japan has been a long-standing hot topic for debate among politicians and the global academic community for decades (see, e.g., among others, DUDDEN 2017, Short, DUBOTS 2022, O’REILLY 2023). *The History of the East Sea and the Sea of Japan* by Jeongbo Shim, professor at Seowon University, Republic of Korea, can serve as an exemplary historical-geographical study of this problem, combining the analysis of the various historical maps and other documents published in different periods in many countries with robust analysis of the political toponymic dispute. The book consists of a foreword by Shuichi Nakayama, professor emeritus at the University of Hiroshima in Japan, a preface, an introduction, and seven chapters dedicated to various aspects of the historical and (geo)political dispute. In the Introduction, the author provides a general historical framework of the naming dispute issue between Korea and Japan. He states that the Korean name *Donghae* (the East Sea) was first fixed in historical documents in 59 BCE. In contrast, according to the author, the name the Sea of Japan has a Western, non-Japanese origin and was inserted into the maps in 19th century Japan instead of the widely accepted traditional name *Bukhae* (the North Sea) due to the Westernization of Japanese society during the Meiji Period (p. xi).

The first individual chapter, “The story of geographical names and disputes”, introduces general toponymic information about the origin and the functions of place names. The author provides some examples of disputes and controversies over place names both on local and regional levels. In this chapter, the author states that the dispute over the East Sea and the Sea of Japan was first raised in 1992 (p. 5).

Chapter 2, “Beginning of discomfort and dispute,” discusses the historical roots of the toponymic issue. The author starts with the role of 20th-century international organizations, such as The International Hydrographic Organization (IHO) and the UN, with the UN Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names and the UN Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN). Then, he discusses the Korean attempts to justify the endonym of the East Sea, which has been known and used for more than 2000 years by Koreans, and the dual name East Sea/Sea of Japan. Later, the positions of Korea and Japan in the dispute and several examples of controversies and boycotts of the names by different actors show the role of the name as a powerful (geo)political tool.

Chapter 3, “The East Sea, an endonym of Korea,” discusses the origin of the hydronym East Sea and its existence in cartographic materials, documents, monuments, literary works, and other ancient artifacts in Korea. Seventeen figures with ancient maps included in this chapter enriched the material about the historical path of the Korean endonym.

In Chapter 4, “Endonym and exonym of Japan,” the origin of the Japanese endonym, the North Sea, first time appeared in the historical record of ancient Japan, book *Nihon Shoki* (the Chronicles of Japan) in 720, and the use of this term in everyday life, books, and documents until the late nineteenth century (pp. 37-38). The artificial exonyms *the Sea of Joseon* and *the Sea of Japan* (or one more version – *The Sea of Great Japan*) were created by Western cartographers and inserted on Japanese maps primarily in the nineteenth century, and, finally, officially established on the maps at the beginning of the twentieth century.

In the following chapter, titled “Various exonyms used in the West,” the author contends that there was no standard worldwide accepted name for the sea even at the beginning of the twentieth century. Instead, there was an assortment of various forms of hydronym that appeared in Western maps from the first half of the seventeenth century. Among them, the names Mare de Mangi, the China Sea, the Sea of Japan, the North Sea of Japan, the Sea of Korea, the Oriental Sea, the East Sea, Mare de Tartaria, and some dual forms of names were used. Notably, the author states that the name *the Sea of Japan* became widely recognized in the West only in the nineteenth century due to the increased number of expeditions and missions to Japan.

Chapter 6, “Sea of Japan and East Sea in Geography Education of the modern period,” analyzes the content of the historical geography textbooks related to the names of the sea in Japan and Korea since 1869. Importantly, during the late Meiji Restoration period and after the Russo-Japanese War, the name *Sea of Japan* became increasingly used

in Japan due to growing nationalistic and imperialistic sentiments. At the same time, in Korea, the name *Sea of Japan* was “the most preferred name” (p. 129) in the late nineteenth - early twentieth centuries. After the annexation of Korea during colonial times, the name East Sea disappeared entirely from the textbooks. Clearly, after 1945, the national liberation of Korea, the name of the East Sea was reinstated.

In concluding Chapter 7, “The unfinished story of geographical names,” the author provides possible solutions, including the Korean version of the dual name the East Sea/the Sea of Japan. The author argues that “developing an accurate understanding of the history of these two names and making continuous academic and private exchanges is one of the solutions to this problem” (p. 167).

Among the limitations, it should be noted that on the Russian nineteenth-century map (figure 5.26), the cartographers show the East *Ocean*, not the East *Sea*, as pointed out by the author (p. 89). In this case, this name has no connection to the Korean name of the sea as this is a traditional Russian name for the Pacific Ocean. In fact, in Russian maps, until 1917, the name *East Ocean* was traditionally used instead of the hydronym Pacific Ocean since the first expeditions to this part of the Asian continent by Russian settlers and explorers (POSPELOV 1998: 418).

Noticeably for a neutral reader, although the author contends that the materials in this book were “collected out of interest in the East Sea and the Sea of Japan from a personal perspective without a political agenda” (Shim 2022: ix) it seems the volume overall has many pretty biased elements based on the Korean position in this dispute. For instance, the name’s East Sea “geographical absurdity” (VUOLTEENAHO 2016: 310) from the Japanese perspective (it is not in the east of Japan) should have also been mentioned together with the various geopolitically motivated factors discussed in the book.

Speaking about the prospective debates, undoubtedly, the geopolitically motivated issues of competing place names in such *toponymic frontiers* as Antarctica and the Arctic, the *pelagonyms*, the names of the seas and their parts, and *bathynonyms*, the names of the natural underwater features, will be in the forefront of the future symbolic geopolitics of toponymic conflicts. Regarding the East Sea/Sea of Japan problem, it seems possible to agree with Gerry O’Reilly, who indicated that this is not only a question of toponymic changing because the complicated process requires “to ‘deconstruct’ systemic reactions, mindsets, and attitudes giving credence to post-colonial and post-WWII apologies and building sustainable futures” (O’REILLY 2023: 68).

Lastly, the book is an exciting source of information about the historical geography of toponymic changes in the East Asian oceanic subregion. It is also largely success-

ful in providing comprehensive historical analysis based on, first of all, a variety of cartographic sources. The volume can serve primarily academicians and students in geography, history, onomastics, and cognate fields of social sciences, as well as everyone interested in the (geo)politics of place names.

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