

Conflicts, Names and Sea Space: A Review of the 22nd International Seminar on Sea Names

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Abstract

This critical commentary and special section editorial reflects on the recent twenty-second installment of the International Seminar on Sea Names held from 23–26 October 2016 in Jeju Island, South Korea. A brief history of the seminar series is proffered in light of several of the evolving political and academic developments that surround the *East Sea–Sea of Japan* naming dispute. The three papers in the special section are summarised in terms of their relevance to a Korean and international take on this germane Northeast Asian maritime and territorial issue. In summary, the papers and the seminar series are submitted as a key intellectual environment where future inroads into critical political and maritime toponymy and geography, sea and island toponymy, and sea and island studies in general can be examined and teased out.

Keywords: critical geography, critical toponymy,
East Sea–Sea of Japan naming dispute, islands

Toponymic Skirmishes and Marine Encounters

On invitation I recently had the pleasure to attend the 22nd International Seminar on Sea Names from 23 to 26 October 2016. This seminar series co-sponsored by The Society for East Sea and The Northeast Asian History Association has since its inception attracted attention from South Korean academics, scholars, journalists,

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and people involved in Northeast Asian politics. Its most recent installment saw South Korea's tourism mecca Jeju Island as its backdrop. It also witnessed the development of a more obvious bilateral presence than hitherto with the attendance for the first time of both Korean and Japanese delegates. In addition to these Northeast Asian representatives, the seminar series has most definitely cultivated an international flavour with speakers from Algeria, Australia, Austria, Denmark, Finland, France, UK, and USA. While the academic and intellectual force which has evolved through the seminar series has primarily focused on the politics and geography of the *East Sea-Sea of Japan* naming dispute, the spread of presentations and panel discussions in the 2016 event demonstrates how broad the range of possible takes on sea naming has and might become. With the added presence of linguists, onomasticians, historians, and cartographers to the already well-founded geographical focus of the seminars, the relevance of the Korean-Japanese sea naming dispute specifically and sea naming matters in general continues to be made more relevant to a wider audience.

As an academic researcher, the position I take in this critical commentary and special section editorial is primarily theoretical. Additionally, there is the possibility that several of the raised issues are relevant to a more practical set of political solutions related to the naming issue. I wish to accomplish several tasks: first, to summarise the present historical and intellectual context of the presented papers and some of the associated administrative setting; second, to tease out an editorial core around the papers in the special section and propose their significance to sea naming in general; third, to illustrate how the sea naming series encourages a more critical position on critical political and toponymic geographies and to propose how possibilities arising from these seminars are germane to advancing research agendas in several disciplines including political geography, analytical and political cartography, and toponymy, linguistics, and ethnography.

The Seminar

A summary from a pamphlet published by The Society for East Sea (2014: 3) summarizes well the philosophy behind the 22-year established seminar series:

The Republic of Korea—South Korea—and Japan are yet to agree upon a common name for the sea area between the Korean Peninsula and the Japanese Archipelago. Japan claims that the name “Sea of Japan” is the only internationally established name for the body of water concerned and rejects the accommodation of any other name. Meanwhile, based on the fact that the 75 million residents of North and South Korea are using the name “East Sea” and as leading cartographers and mass media around the world are increasingly choosing to employ both names, the Korean government advocates for the concurrent use of the “East Sea” and the “Sea of Japan” until an agreement is reached upon a single common name.

Although the hydronym—name for a body of water—*Sea of Japan* is more widely used internationally, Korean academicians have tried to find solutions to this

long-term dispute and to provide regular academic fora to discuss this issue. As a result, the sea names seminars have been developed to focus on the history and politics of the *East Sea–Sea of Japan* issue while at the same time being arguably one of the most significant international meetings dedicated entirely to toponymy and especially the topic of sea names. The fact that this year’s seminar took place in Jeju Island, the Korean Peninsula’s most significant southerly land mass and a large island holding a strategic historical and geographical position relating to South Korea, Japan, and China, is noteworthy; because of its location, Jeju, the island so well endowed with a role for keeping peace in the area, seemed like a fitting place for the possibility of a reconciliation of conflict, sea, and names, hence the subtitle of the seminar: Names of Islands and Seas: Connecting People, Culture, History and the Future.

Apart from the dialogue between Korean and Japanese participants, which could most definitely be increased in forthcoming versions of the seminar, and which took place relating to more technical and political details of the naming issue, the academic thrust of the presentations was strong. From more general work on teaching, education, and geographical naming through exo-endo (external-internal) nomenclature to Arctic and European sea and land naming case studies, the breadth of the intellectual push was vast. Coupled with this were some passionate positions, particularly from several Japanese delegates who claim that this sea naming issue is almost a non-issue in Japan and in its media. Any future solution or work-in-progress outcome to the name, at least from the South Korean side, would be a long-standing concern. Some posit the naming conflict is political rather than legal while on the academic front scholars addressed the *East Sea–Sea of Japan* debate from historical, cartographic, and more personal perspectives. It arose that any consideration and possible need for a result to the naming question would have to involve at least some Russian influence and consideration because Russia has coastal claim to this linguistically and toponymically contentious body of water.

What became clear over the two days of presentations and discussions is that any nomenclature-based reconciliation would concurrently have to involve academic, politico-legal, and ultimately human representation. While any one perspective may be directed toward finalizing such matters, I believe the academic power of these dialogues lies in the acknowledgment of the fuzziness of boundaries and the observance that perhaps people do not necessarily want results or even to listen to others. I now summarize three of these academic studies on sea and land names presented at the Jeju seminar and condense their methodological and theoretical relevance to the broader field of sea naming and critical and conflict-focused toponymy.

The Special Section

Taking this historical background and applying it to the present set of papers, there arise several pertinent characteristics applicable to the study of island toponymies, sea names, and marine territories. Radil takes the stance of a political

geographer and delivers a strong argument delineating how the geopolitics of toponymy can be seen in terms of their movement from the theoretical to the practical. By observing placename changes and by realising how such toponymic variation can be used to appreciate geographic concepts like scale and name change motivation, the eastern Mediterranean island nation of Cyprus, with its Greek and Turkish linguistic and cultural influence, is used to apply theoretically relevant positions relating political, geographical, and linguistic territoriality and conflict to a contested island toponymy. Cypriot toponymy within its divided island spaces exists as a vehicle for deciphering differently embedded political and economic relationships. The stance Radil takes is enticing in terms of its offering of future possibilities relating size and scale in place, islands, territoriality, and a new theoretical turn in toponymy. He ends by suggesting that such a critical take on naming and place proposes a reinvigorated toponymy, which can easily be integrated with more orthodox and mainstream political geography.

These musings on scale, islands, and territory prepare a germane segue into Nash's treatment of a small scale example of sea naming and its possible relationship to larger magnitude. Using the results of documenting fishing ground naming history on and around three islands in Oceania—Norfolk Island (South Pacific), Dudley Peninsula, Kangaroo Island (South Australia), and Pitcairn Island (South Pacific)—and placenaming practices more generally encompassing islands, insularity, isolation, and the sea, Nash argues that small scale fishing ground names as sea names are not only stark examples of maritime and aquatic cultural heritage, but they provide a microscope for observing interaction involving micro sea names and sea space and marine names as folk capital. Because the Pitcairn Island example in particular is hyper isolated, involves both land and sea, and is minute in comparison to larger disputes such as the *East Sea–Sea of Japan* issue, it is presented as a possible case in point for the possibility for creating a peaceful reconciliation not only between the naming sea and land, which was the focus of the Jeju Island seminar, but for larger scale sea naming disputes in general.

Radil's more theoretically driven position through to Nash's scale-focused deliberation leads to Gammeltoft's practically and historically focused consideration of the "one letter war" and the naming of Skagerrak or Skagerak, the strait running between the southeast coast of Norway, the southwest coast of Sweden, and the Jutland peninsula of Denmark. What may appear as a minor spelling convention hang-over between these three Nordic countries, with Norway opting for the single -r- option while Denmark and Sweden persisted with the double -rr- choice, is presented as a window into more general sea naming conventions and possibilities. Gammeltoft illustrates how what may appear as an unlikely and seemingly trivial disagreement can assist in arriving at an understanding of how sea naming questions become politicized and eventually (somewhat) resolved. The Skagerrak–Skagerak hydronymic contention and conflict depicts beautifully the effectiveness of the marine environment for revealing the fuzziness of technical, cultural, and territorial debates.

The Future

In looking to the future regarding both the prospect of a resolve regarding the naming issue and managing a continuing intellectual debate on sea naming and critical political toponymy, I wish to draw on the summary of the final panel discussion moderated by Professor Sungjae Choo, President of The Society for East Sea. While there was overwhelming consensus that any continued conversation should involve both South Korean and Japanese experts and that any naming solution should take a humanistic approach in that it should be equitable and just, the potential continuing role of the seminar series in expanding academic debate in critical political geographies, marine toponomastics, and island studies is vast. Topics such as geographical names as cultural heritage, the human-human interface in sea name research, economic roles of the sea and its names, and intra- and extra-linguistic aspects of names are all welcome in this eclectic forum. Where a politico-legal perspective may be focused primarily on solution-based outcomes, conflicts and disputes provide fertile environments for intellectual maturation. Geographically diverse excursions into Mediterranean, Nordic, North African, Northeastern Asian, and South Pacific sea naming examples, all with differing spatial and scale considerations and linguistic complexities, make for a ripe academic milieu to harness apparently disparate opinions into a more cogent interdisciplinary nucleus.

Ways forward for using the lens of the *East Sea–Sea of Japan* naming dispute and this seminar series involve assessing the effectiveness and understandability of the dual naming context, the establishment of equitable naming and social justice possibilities, addressing the benefits to both Korea and Japan of a dual name, understanding the possibility of a win-win outcome, and predicting the reality of using maps in education to spread knowledge about politicized and dynamic processes of and in toponymy. In conjunction with these what appear to be perennial discussions in any future formats of this seminar series, new blood and novel perspectives would benefit the now well established section of bedrock and its bearing on maritime and territorial studies. It is my wish that upcoming semblances of this series attend to attracting these hopeful, new, and energetic members to the fold so that (Northeast Asian) sea naming and its home within critical political toponymy can remain agreeable bedfellows.

The opinions expressed in this critical commentary and special section editorial are the solely the author's. They should not in any way be considered to be aligned with or to represent those of The Society for East Sea, any other Korean agency or the Journal of Territorial and Maritime Studies. Many thanks to all the seminar delegates, especially to Sungjae Choo, Peder Gammeltoft, and Steven Radil.

Reference

The Society for East Sea. *East Sea: The Name from the Past, of the Present and for the Future* (brochure). Seoul: Society for East Sea, 2014.