

East Sea

East Sea, the oldest name for this sea,
has been used for over 2000 years.

East Sea, The Issue over the Name of the Sea Area

between the Korean Peninsula and
the Japanese Archipelago

The Republic of 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 and rejects the concurrent use of “East Sea” and “Sea of Japan”.

Meanwhile, based on the fact that the 77 million people living on the Korean Peninsula call the area “East Sea” and that leading cartographers and mass media around the world are increasingly choosing to employ both names, the Korean government advocates the concurrent use of “East Sea” and “Sea of Japan”.



East Sea The Name from the Past, of the Present, and for the Future

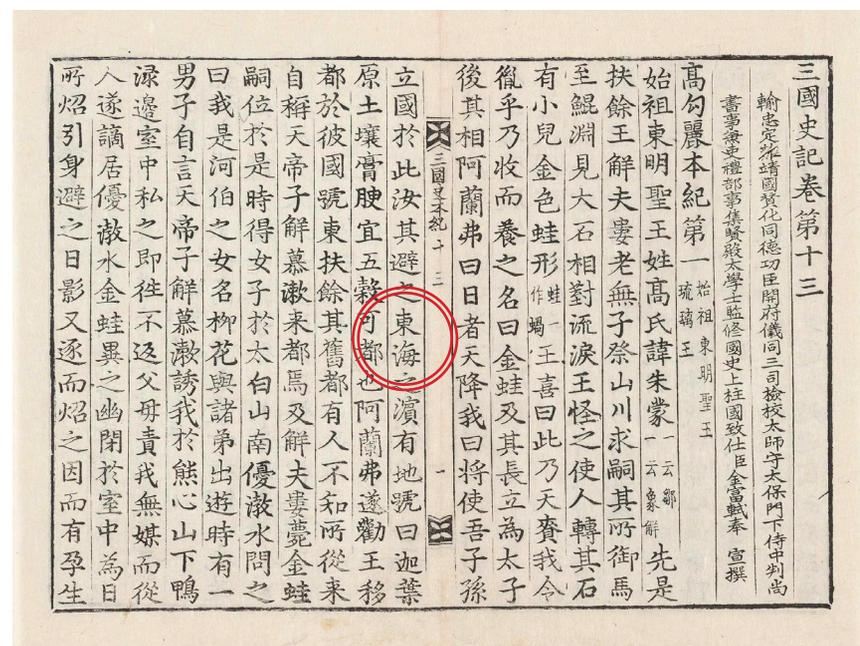
A History of Over 2000 Years

As attested to in numerous historical documents, the name “East Sea” has been used to refer to the sea area between the Korean Peninsula and the Japanese Archipelago for more than 2000 years. To the 77 million people living on the Korean Peninsula, the sea area is known by the name “East Sea”.

Chronicles of the Three Kingdoms (Korea, 1145)

Courtesy of Kyujanggak Institute for Korean Studies of Seoul National University

This seminal book recounts the ancient history of Korea from 57 B.C. to 935 A.D. and shows that the name “East Sea” was used from around 50 B.C.



Until the 19th century, the sea area was also called “Eastern Sea”, “Sea of Joseon”¹⁾, “Sea of Korea”, and “Oriental Sea”. Even a number of Japanese maps, one of which was produced as late as 1870, described this body of water as “Sea of Joseon”, not “Sea of Japan”.²⁾

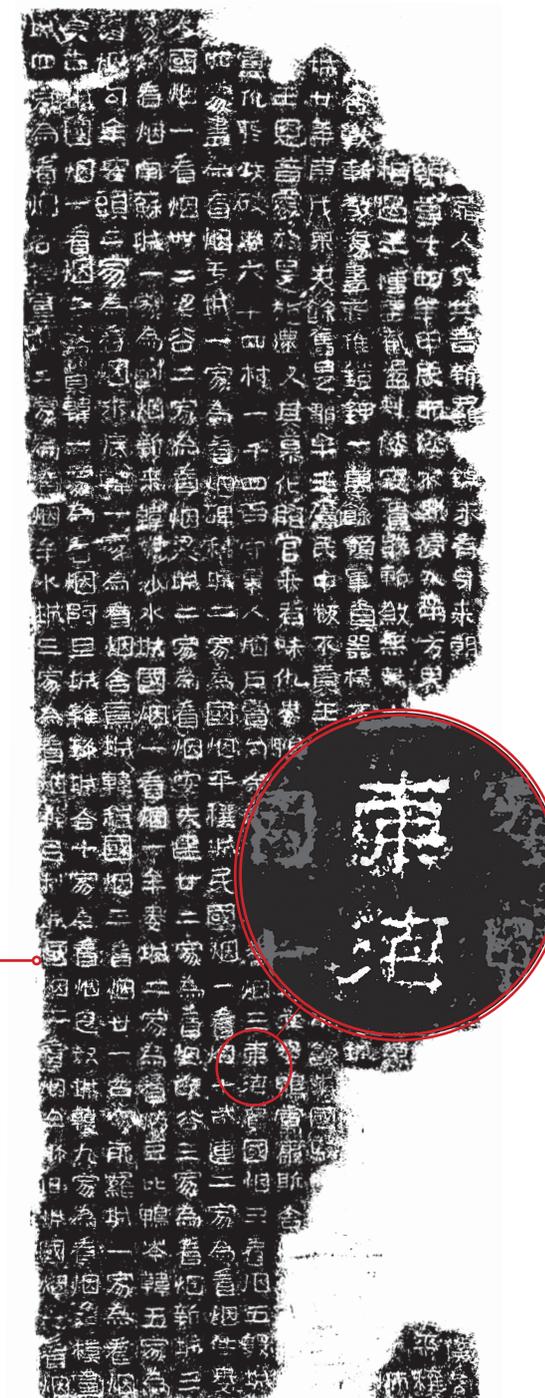
Epitaph on the Monument for King Gwanggaeto of Goguryeo (Korea, 414)

Courtesy of the National Library of Korea

The epitaph on the monument describes the achievements of King Gwanggaeto, the 19th king of Goguryeo, the ancient kingdom of Korea. “東海” is the Chinese word that means “East Sea”.



- 1) Joseon was a dynasty of Korea that ruled the peninsula between 1392 and 1910.
- 2) Various Japanese maps such as the *Simplified Map of Japan's Periphery* created by Takahashi Kageyasu in 1809, the *New World Map* by Mitsukuri Shogo in 1844, and the *Japan's Northeast Marginal Boundary Map* by Yasuda Raishu in 1850 refer to the sea area as “Sea of Joseon”.

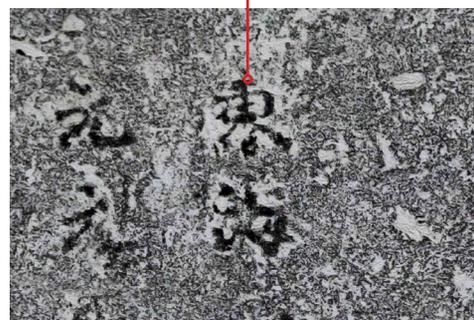


Epitaph on the Monument for King Gwanggaeto of Goguryeo (Korea, 414)
東海 (East Sea)
National Library of Korea

The Sacred Bell of King Seongdeok of Unified Silla (Korea, 771)

Courtesy of Gyeongju National Museum

Inscribed on the surface of this bell are the achievements of King Seongdeok, one of the kings of the Unified Silla Kingdom, and the Chinese characters for "East Sea" are included in the inscription.



A rubbing of the part that contains “東海”, the Chinese characters for “East Sea”

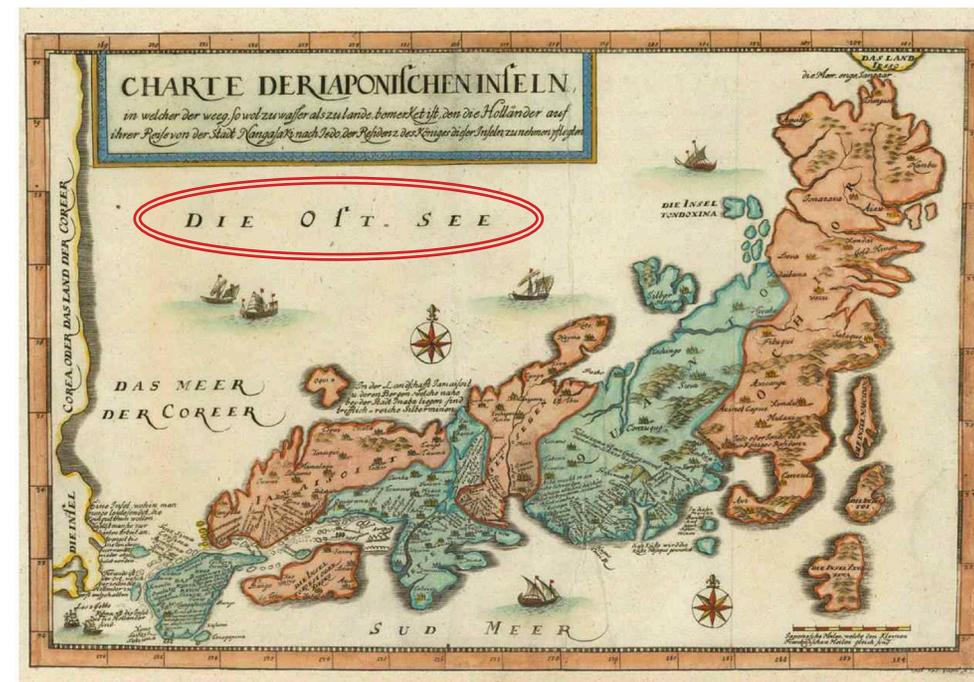
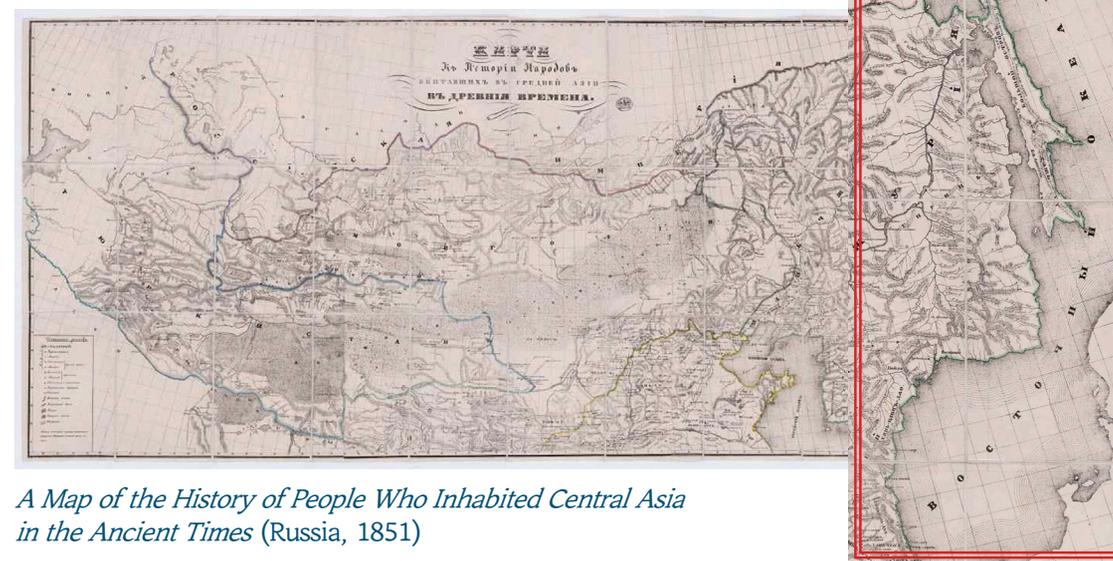


Chart of the Japanese Islands (Germany, 1681)

Created by Jean Baptiste Tavernier

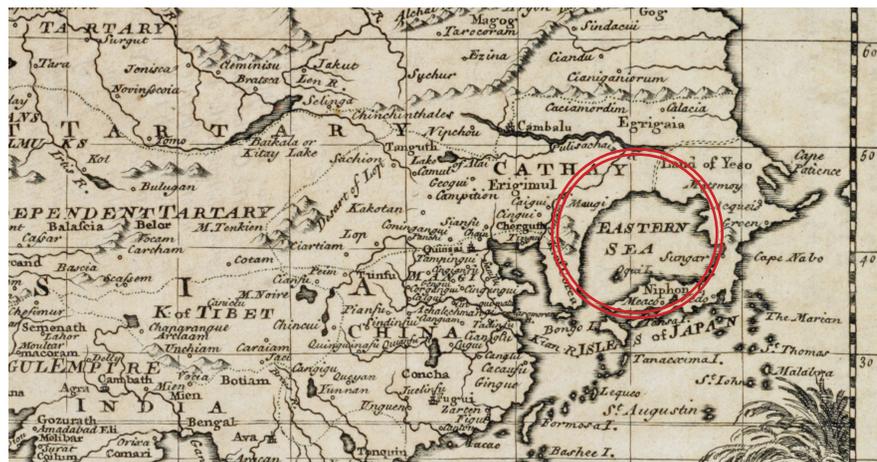
This map was created in Germany and refers to the sea area as “DIE OST SEE”, which means “East Sea” in German.



A Map of the History of People Who Inhabited Central Asia in the Ancient Times (Russia, 1851)

Produced by the Russian Academy of Sciences

This map was created in Russia and refers to the sea area as “ВОСТОЧНЫЙ ОКЕАН”, which means “East Ocean” in Russian. On this map, the “East Ocean” extends to Kuril Islands beyond the eastern part of the Korean Peninsula, which means that the “East Ocean” here does not refer to the east sea of Korea but the east sea of the Eurasian continent.



A Map of Marco Polo's Voyages (England, 1744)

Courtesy of the Northeast Asian History Foundation

In 1705, John Harris compiled a book titled *A Complete Collection of Voyages and Travels* about information on world expeditions, which was later revised by T. Woodward and other cartographers. *A Map of Marco Polo's Voyages* (1744) produced by Emanuel Bowen, a royal cartographer to both King George II of England and Louis XV of France, was included in the revised edition of this book. As seen on the map, "EASTERN SEA" was the common naming of the sea area among British royal cartographers in the 18th century.



Asia Antiqua et Nova (Germany, 1624)

Courtesy of the U.S. Library of Congress

This map of Asia was introduced in *Introductionis in Universam Geographiam* written by Philip Cluver, a German geographer and historian, in 1624. The East Sea is named "MARE EOUM", literally meaning the sea in the east in Latin.



The Revised Full Map of the World (Japan, 1810)

Courtesy of the National Geographic Information Institute of Korea

This map was created by Takahashi Kageyasu, a Japanese cartographer and astronomer. He began working on the world map by the order of the Shogunate government of Japan in 1807 and submitted the map to the government in 1810. He gave the name "Sea of Joseon" to the sea area between the Korean Peninsula and the Japanese Archipelago while he gave the name "Sea of Great Japan" to the sea to the east of Japan.



The World in Two Hemispheres (Russia, 1737)

Courtesy of Goettingen University

This hemispheric map of the world was included in the atlas published by the Russian Academy of Sciences in 1737. The Russian words "Море Восточное", whose literal meaning is the sea in the east, is used to name "East Sea".

The past and the future of *Limits of Oceans and Seas*

In 1929, the International Hydrographic Organization (IHO) released a special publication under the title *Limits of Oceans and Seas*, which is also known as S-23.

The publication has served as an important international reference on the names and limits of oceans and seas.

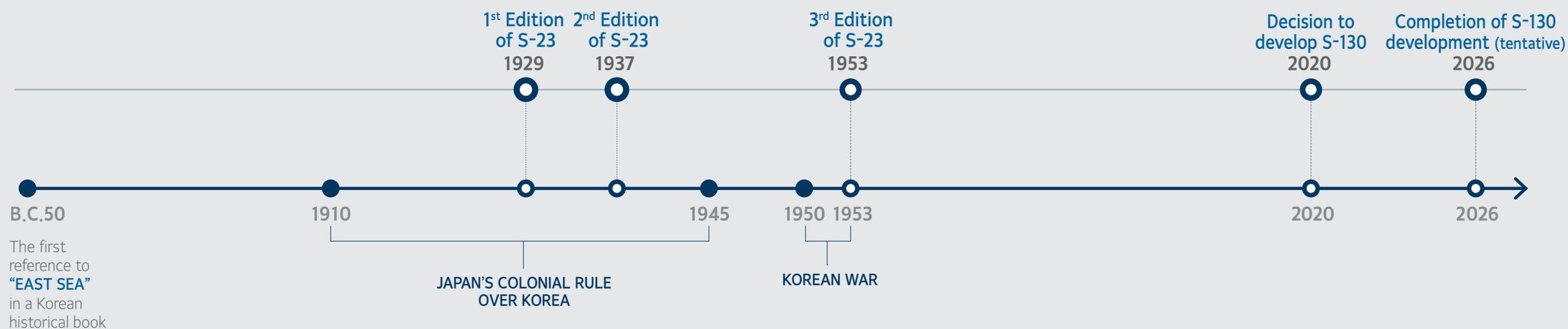
When the 1st and 2nd editions of S-23 were published by the IHO in 1929 and 1937, respectively, Korea was under Japanese colonial rule.

When the 3rd edition was published in 1953, Korea was in the midst of the Korean War. In such circumstances, Korea was unable to present its case for the name “East Sea”.

In 2017, the organization’s 1st Session of the Assembly was held and the member states decided to discuss the future of S-23 taking into account the growing need to modernize the publication, the latest edition of which was published in 1953.

At the 2nd Session of the Assembly in 2020, the member states decided to replace the sea area names in S-23 with unique numerical identifiers and to develop a new digital standard (S-130) that meets the requirements of contemporary geographic information systems.

The IHO currently has a project team working to release S-130 by 2026.



Why “East Sea” should be used concurrently with “Sea of Japan”

The concurrent use of both names conforms to the general naming principles of the international community.

It has long been a general rule in international cartography that the name of a geographical feature shared by two or more countries should be decided by agreement between/among the countries concerned. When the countries are unable to reach an agreement on the name of such a feature, it is widely accepted that all names used by each of the countries are used.

This general rule of international cartography is also confirmed by the United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names in its resolution III/20 adopted in 1977.

International Standardization of Geographical Names (1974) in IHO Resolution A4.2 (1/1972) as amended

“It is recommended that where two or more countries share a given geographical feature (such as, for example, a bay, strait, channel or archipelago) under a different name form, they should endeavour to reach agreement on fixing a single name for the feature concerned.

If they have different official languages and cannot agree on a common name form, it is recommended that the name forms of each of the languages in question should be accepted for charts and publications (e.g. English Channel/La Manche) unless technical reasons prevent this practice on small scale charts.”

Names of features beyond a single sovereignty (1977) in United Nations Resolution on the Standardization of Geographical Names III/20

“The Conference,

Considering the need for international standardization of names of geographical features that are under the sovereignty of more than one country or are divided among two or more countries,

1. Recommends that countries sharing a given geographical feature under different names should endeavor, as far as possible, to reach agreement on fixing a single name for the feature concerned;
2. Further recommends that when countries sharing a given geographical feature do not succeed in agreeing on a common name, it should be a general rule of international cartography that the name used by each of the countries concerned will be accepted”.



Complete Map of Great Japan with Japanese Government Permission (Japan, 1868)

Private Collection

This map of Japan and its adjacent regions was created by Hashimoto Kyokuransai, a Japanese artist and cartographer. On this map, the word “朝鮮海 (Sea of Joseon)” is placed along the east coast of the Korean Peninsula and “日本西海 (West Sea of Japan)” at the west coast of Japan.

This indicates that the name “Sea of Japan” had not yet been established even in Japan by the end of the 19th century.



The Empire of Japan (France, 1793)

Courtesy of the Northeast Asian History Foundation

Robert de Vaugondy was a royal geographer and leading cartographer in France during the 1700s. Unlike other cartographers, he named the sea adjacent to the Korean Peninsula “MER DE CORÉE (Sea of Korea)”, and the sea adjacent to Japan “MER DU JAPON (Sea of Japan)”.

The name "East Sea" is widely used at the international level

Recognizing the legitimacy of the name "East Sea", an ever-increasing number of the world's prominent map producers and media houses have moved away from using "Sea of Japan" solely to using "East Sea" and "Sea of Japan" at the same time. In 2014, a legislation was passed in Virginia, U.S, requiring the name "East Sea" to be used alongside "Sea of Japan" in new school textbooks, and other states have been following suit. A survey conducted by the Korean government also shows a steady increase in the number of maps using the two names concurrently.



National Geographic Information Institute, Republic of Korea.



Korea Hydrographic and Oceanographic Agency, Republic of Korea.

Recent Discussions on the Issue

at International Organizations

Japan's insistence on the sole use of the name "Sea of Japan" is not being accepted.

At the 18th International Hydrographic Conference held in April 2012 for the revision of *Limits of Oceans and Seas (S-23)*, member states were unable to reach an agreement on a variety of issues, including a common name for the sea between the Korean Peninsula and the Japanese Archipelago. At the conference, Japan proposed that the name "Sea of Japan" stay in the revised publication as in the previous edition. However, Japan's proposal was not accepted. Furthermore, at the 2nd Session of the Assembly in 2020, IHO member states decided to replace the sea area names in S-23 with unique numerical identifiers and develop a new digital standard (S-130) that meets the requirements of contemporary geographic information systems, which is another case where Japan's claim that "Sea of Japan" is the only internationally established name is not being accepted.



Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Republic of Korea