A Cultural History of Korean Toponyms

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The term "toponym" is derived from two Greek words: *topos* and *onmya* (the Aeolic and Doric form of *onoma*), which mean "place" and "name," respectively. A toponym, thus, is a proper name applied to a topographical feature, whether on Earth or on any other planet. Toponymy is the discipline that studies all aspects of toponyms. A geographical name, strictly speaking, is a toponym applied to a topographic feature or item on Earth. Place name is another term used in this connection, but some scholars in the discipline use this term only to denote a populated place such as a city, town, village, hamlet, or farm. For the cohesion of the discussion in this special issue, however, we will mainly use the term "toponym."

On the theoretical side, toponyms can tell us a great deal about the physical geography, culture, and history of a place as well as about the people connected to the particular locale. After all, it is no wonder, considering it is people who give these names. Places are named not only for their physical properties, but also after local events, important personalities, ethnic, literary or religious sources, and humorous happenings. Linking geography and language, toponyms are material and metaphorical, while being substantive and symbolic at the same time. They are read, spoken, mapped, catalogued, and written in the everyday intimate and official bureaucratic geographies of road signs, street names, and addresses. Through a shared language, a toponym reins in history, folklore, social codes, and beliefs, and ties them to a location in space. The study of toponyms

can be a window to detailed local knowledge and inclusive versions of belonging. After all, any serious study of toponyms requires the questions of power, culture, location, and identity.

In this special issue, therefore, we will look at a toponym as both a cultural and a linguistic phenomenon. A particular toponym has evolved through time in its written and spoken form since its inception, while being influenced from language and other living conditions of those who use it. Although a linguistic phenomenon can be included into a cultural phenomenon, it will be treated in separation from a cultural phenomenon when it is necessary. It is especially necessary when a linguist wants to explore the history of language through toponyms. A group of linguists in Korea have utilized toponyms as the materials with which to reconstruct ancient Korean vocabularies. The articles by Kim Jeong-tae and Park Byeong-Cherl can be classified into the study of toponyms that have developed for the research of linguistic history. Geographers, by contrast, tend to consider toponyms as a cultural phenomenon that reflects the settlement history and power relations of the settlers. The articles by Jung Chi-young, Kim Sun-Bae, and Ryu Je-Hun can be classified into the study of toponyms as cultural phenomena.

The early adoption of transcription of native toponyms in Sino-Korean characters called *hanzi* 漢字 has complicated the evolutionary process of toponyms in Korea. It is only in the late nineteenth century that all the native toponyms began to be publically expressed with the Korean alphabet, Hangeul. This is partly why old-fashioned philological etymologizing, which may be called historical-cultural approach, has long remained a foundation for most empirical name studies. In this approach, more systematic methods to understand the origins of toponyms were adopted. In modern Korean linguistics, for instance, etymological name research has mainly overshadowed positivist approaches. In such an etymological guesswork, historical successions of layers of toponyms, used by different residents, became treated as keys to language and settlement history. The articles in this special issue are all the same in that they employ a historical-cultural approach in one way or another.

A toponym is perpetually gathering and shedding meanings. The multiple forms and meanings of toponyms are part of their accumulated significance. At the same time, misinterpretation is part of the life of a toponym. As language changes its course, like a river, over the centuries, sometimes a toponym gets left behind far from the flood of meaning. Then, like another meander of the river, the meaning of a toponym may be interpreted perhaps in another way and revivified in a new form. The sound may have to be bent to allow this to happen. Eventually, the original meaning may be forever irrevocable, or it may be only accessible to the learned. In his article, Kim Jeong-tae, as a Korean linguist, examines the characteristics of phoneme variation that have resulted in toponymic variation across the space and time in Korea. In addition, he examines the process of adaptation of toponyms to the phonological rules of the relevant local dialect. He asserts that Korean toponyms are characterized by their adaptation to a variety of Korean phonological rules: palatalization, articulation place assimilation, umlaut, vowel rising, and monophthongization. According to him, this phonological adaptation results in phoneme variation, which, in turn, changes the meaning of the toponyms through homonymic attraction.

Toponyms can be divided into three categories. In the first category are transparent names that can be understood by persons who know the respective language, regardless of whether or not a generic element is involved. The second category includes names in which only the generic element is lexically transparent while a historical-linguistic research is often necessary to explain the specific element. Then, lastly, there are names that are not transparent, even to native speakers. Likewise, in the toponymic study, it is sometimes necessary that a toponym should be divided into two elements: generic and specific. In the Korean toponymy, the latter has been called toponymic back morpheme while the former has been called the toponymic front morpheme. As a linguist, Park traces the linguistic histories of toponymic back morphemes, the generic elements, of the pass-related toponyms. In his article, Park even unveils the original forms of pass-related toponyms to trace the history of their subsequent transforma-

tion along with the regional variation. He argues that we can study the history of Korean vocabulary based on the semantics of toponymic back morphemes because it is relatively simple and conservative. From the historical-linguistic excavation of the archives, he concludes that toponymic back morphemes have undergone the complicated process of confrontation, competition, disappearance, and regional variation in the usage.

In contrast, as a historical geographer, Jung examines the specific elements of village names, the toponymic front morpheme, in order to explore the environmental perception among the villagers. He confined his study only to the transparent names in Chinese characters, complied in the early twentieth century, to avoid the historical-linguistic work on the village names. He classified the village names across the Korean peninsula into several categories, depending on the perception of location, topography, water, and climate. His quantitative analysis of the categories of village names reveals that Koreans preferred remote topographical conditions such as valleys and basins for their rural settlement. Within such valleys and basins, they wanted to feel as if they lived in the locations that were elevated, centralized, or located further inland. In his study, Jung also discovered that a high ratio of sunshine-related village names is found amongst the climate-related village names.

It seems that traditional name research has not only "been afraid of politics," but also failed to honestly reflect on its own complicity in power struggle over toponymies. It has typically adopted theoretically (and politically) naïve empiricist foci on the nomenclatures of specific places. The atheoretical character of traditional approaches to toponymy owes much to the fact that such scholarship has, until recently, chiefly developed through research by map makers, specialized linguists, and etymologists. Critical toponymies, by contrast, aim to show that the material and discursive can be brought together into a productive relationship between language and power relations. In this context, Kim Sun-Bae and Ryu Je-Hun, as cultural geographers, attempt to combine the critical toponymic approaches with the traditional name research. The results of their studies indicate that the dif-

ferent versions of a single toponym and the different traditions they reflect point to cultural diversity and dynamism in Korea.

In his article, Kim argues that the diversity of the contested characters of Korean toponyms requires a new research methodology that overcomes the toponymic study of traditional cultural geography. He suggests that the idea of cultural politics would provide a toponymic methodology to focus on the conflicting power relations that have been involved in the evolutionary processes of toponyms. His article examines the making of toponyms under the Confucian ideology in the Joseon dynasty and the subsequent contestation of Confucian toponyms with other types of toponyms. The use of Chinese characters resulted not only in the creation of toponyms in Sino-Korean characters, often embedded with Confucian ideology, but also in the replacement of native and Buddhist toponyms. He concludes that the contestation of toponyms tend to develop into the competition of toponymic territories where specific toponyms are exclusively circulated in everyday life.

Ryu's article examines how unofficial names have changed since Japanese annexation through liberation and to the present. In his article, unofficial toponyms are treated as the term interchangeable with vernacular and indigenous toponyms. In order to examine the life cycle of unofficial names in relation to official names, Ryu divides the time period into two stages: before and after the Japanese annexation in 1910. From such a historical-geographical study, he proposes that the present patterns of naming in the area of Incheon reflect the long and contentious history of Japanese colonialism, the significance of reinstating Korean toponyms after liberation, and the contemporary politics of culture, identity, and belonging. From a critical perspective on the postcolonial toponyms, he proves that toponymic resistance can involve the use of alternative pronunciation for established names. He also notes that indigenous topopyms have disappeared from everyday conversation of the residents in the process of post-industrial urbanization since the 1980s.

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