



Special Feature

Geography of Korea in the Past

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Editor's Note

LEE Kang Hahn

In the past, the *Review of Korean Studies* (hereafter, *RKS*) hosted a variety of studies from experts in the field of history, art, literature, and philosophy but failed unfortunately to invite studies from others amongst a vast array of fields, which we should have tried to tap into as they have not been featured on the page of the *RKS* as much as they really deserved. So, to correct this problem we decided to invite prominent scholars from the field of geography and ask them to publish their works through the *RKS* so that our readers could have a chance to read and above all else have a grasp on no other than the Korean peninsula itself, as the ultimate region of space which fostered the very Korean culture we came to understand and love.

Five scholars graciously agreed to share their works with us, and it turns out that their articles do cover a wide range of topics, such as the emergence of Historical Geography and the topic of landscape in relevant studies, cultural site markers and the issue of conflicting recollections of historical vestiges, the centers of local administrative units in the past, historical background and evolutions of local names (toponym), and a foreign traveler's accounts on the 19th century Korean peninsula and its culture. We are proud to present their works through the December 2025 issue and hope the readers would enjoy reading something about the geography of Korea.

First, Hong Keumsoo of the Korea University provided us with an article entitled "Historical Geography of Landscape and Heritage Discourse." The author mentions that "environments, landscapes, regions, and spaces of the past are key clues to understanding the geography of the present." According to the author, "Historical Geography" is an area of geographical studies that reconstructs the original form of geographical patterns, while also explaining and analyzing changes that occurred over time and interpreting them with theory and philosophy. The author then highlights a specific trend which regards geography of regions in the past as "landscapes," not as a concrete or completed

form of scenery, but as a concept of representing collective memories, group identity, and most importantly, a heritage. While recognizing recent waves of Historical Geography's shifting toward critical interpretations utilizing metaphors that would unravel deeper meanings embedded in landscape iconography, the author discusses landscapes in Korea to a degree as well.

Choi Yusik of the Chonnam National University's Institute of Social Sciences, provided us with an article entitled "How to Cope with Conflicting Information on Historic Sites through Their Commemorative Texts: A Review of the Historical Cultural Markers in Seoul, Korea." The author follows the Cultural Historical Marker program which since the early 1980s has erected over 300 markers (as of 2024) across the Seoul Metropolitan City, intending to mark notable locations as well as their significance, before the passage of time would push them out of existence or from general memories of the people. However, due to the changing nature and environment of a city as large as Seoul, maintaining pertinent and relevant data featured on those markers is never easy, and the author follows how the authorities are trying to fill informational gaps and reconcile contradictory knowledge. The author also acknowledges the value of the marker program itself, as its function of storytelling was vital in resolving informational conflicts represented by the markers and the places.

Kim Jonghyuk of the Kangwon National University's Institute of Social Science provided us with an article entitled "*Eupchi* and *Eupseong* of the Joseon Dynasty." *Eupchi* refers to administrative centers that govern local regions, and *eupseong* refers to the spaces which housed those local centers. The author examines the *eupchi*-related records from the Joseon dynasty period and, by extension, the *eupchi* centers' significance in urban history, stating that the location of local centers from the Goryeo period (918–1392) were considerably changed and that the local network was rearranged in the 15th century under the newborn Joseon dynasty. Consulting dynastic geographic manuals published from the 15th century through the 19th century, the author deduces historical facts concerning Joseon *eupchi* centers, such as large-scale relocation of local central points, changes in their characteristics, and revamped rural governance that resulted in their evolution into premodern urban centers. The author also recognizes the public's growing interest in these vestiges, as well as their meaning today.

Kim Sun-bae of the Gadeok Elementary and Middle School provided us with an article entitled "The Renaming and Metamorphosis of Korean

Toponyms.” By “toponyms,” the author clarifies that they are the names of geographical features, which have historically changed and continually transformed over time. The author also reveals an intention of more closely analyzing the human factor which resulted in the renaming of Korean toponym and sometimes reorganization of their shapes, over centuries and across multiple periods, which ranged from the ancient period of Korea (the Shilla days) and through the modern days (including the Japanese colonial occupation of Korea). The author recognizes characteristics of each of those periods in terms of toponym renaming, which show total of six tendencies toward standardization: Sinicization to two-character toponyms, unification of generic names, creation of composite toponym, foreign-language toponym and dominant ideological toponym, and the replacement of physical toponyms with abstract ones.

Kim Kihyuk, Emeritus Professor at Pusan National University, provided us with an article entitled “Reading Charles Varat’s ‘Voyage en Corée’ with Daedong yeojido 大東輿地圖.” The author first introduces the readers to the material of which the title of course means “Voyage in Korea.” According to the author, the travelogue was written by one Charles L. Varat (1842–1893), who was a French collector and traveled around Korea in 1888. The author points out that amongst many French beings—oftentimes soldiers—who left records which more or less shaped the Korean image at the time, Varat was the first French civilian to travel across the Korean peninsula via the *Yeongnam* Road, and that it should be noted that Varat was able to offer a more academic knowledge on Korean folk customs and geography than others. It is the author’s evaluation that—unlike other travelers who were diplomats or businessmen—Varat was a folk-geographer, and possibly because of that, “Voyage en Corée” reveals Varat’s willingness to embrace foreign countries’ different culture, as well as his attention towards universality and uniqueness, more so than other travelogues.

We are more than happy to have been able to host all these wonderful studies and are beyond grateful for the authors’ endeavors which would allow the readers to find out fascinating aspects from the Korean peninsula of the past and how it was a geographical sanctuary for the Korean people and its culture. The *RKS* shall continue to strive in the future and attempt inviting expert works from other fields in Korean studies that are associated with relevant subjects for subsequent volumes.