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The use of Hanja (Chinese characters) in Korean toponyms: Practices and issues

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The use of Hanja (Chinese characters) in Korean toponyms: Practices and issues

Abstract: Chinese characters called *Hanja* in Korean have exerted a strong influence on the formation of Korean toponyms, even after the invention of the Korean scripts *Hangeul*. This paper summarizes practices of using Hanja in Korean toponyms and investigate unique features occurring in the evolution of Hanja toponyms interactively with their Hangeul counterparts. The diverse use of Hanja components and varied paths of their evolution confirm that the essence of Korean toponyms should be understood by taking note of the role that the Hanja elements have played. It is hypothesized that the semantics would be more important in Hanja toponyms than those in other languages because they are based on logographic characters. Testing this hypothesis remains as a topic for future research.

Keywords: Hanja, Hangeul, semantics, logographic scripts, toponyms.

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L'utilisation de Hanja (caractères chinois) dans les toponymes coréens : pratiques et problèmes

Résumé : Des caractères chinois appelés *Hanja* en coréen ont fortement influencé la formation des toponymes coréens, même après l'invention de l'alphabet coréen *Hangeul*. Ce document résume l'utilisation de Hanja dans les toponymes coréens et étudie de manière interactive les caractéristiques uniques de l'évolution de ces toponymes. L'utilisation diversifiée des composants du Hanja et les différentes voies de leur évolution confirment que l'essence des toponymes coréens doit être comprise en prenant en compte le rôle joué par les éléments du Hanja. On suppose que la sémantique serait plus importante. Dans le Hanja, les toponymes sont plus nombreux que ceux des autres langues, car ils sont basés sur des caractères logographiques. Le test de cette hypothèse reste un sujet de recherche future.

Mots-clés : Hanja, Hangeul, sémantique, écritures logographiques, toponymes.

Verwendung von Hanja (chinesischen Schriftzeichen) in koreanischen Toponymen: Praktiken und Probleme

Zusammenfassung: Chinesische Schriftzeichen, die auf Koreanisch *Hanja* genannt werden, hatten auch nach der Erfindung der koreanischen Schriften *Hangeul* einen starken Einfluss auf die Bildung koreanischer Toponyme. Die vielfältige Verwendung von *Hanja*-Komponenten und ihre unterschiedlichen Entwicklungen bestätigen, dass das Wesen der koreanischen Toponyme verstanden werden sollte, indem man die Rolle der *Hanja*-Elemente zur Kenntnis nahm. Ob in *Hanja* Toponyme häufiger sind als in anderen Sprachen, da sie auf logographischen Zeichen basieren, ist eine Hypothese, die in zukünftiger Forschung zu verifizieren sein wird.

Schlüsselbegriffe: Hanja, Hangeul, Semantik, logographische Skripte, Toponyme.

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The use of Hanja (Chinese characters) in Korean toponyms: Practices and issues

SUNGJAE CHOO

1. Introduction

The practices of naming places and features have a long tradition in the Korean Peninsula since the Korean nationals were formulated with their own unique language system. However, names in their written form did not appear until the Three Kingdom period, from 57 BC to 668 AD, when Chinese characters were borrowed and fully adopted as the writing system of the Korean language (Choo et al. 2016: 18). Chinese characters (漢字) are known as *Hanja* (한자) in Korean, *Kanji* (かんじ) in Japanese, *Hànzì* in Chinese and *Chữ Hán* in Vietnamese, according to the differentiated ways of reading.

The invention of the Korean script *Hangeul* in 1443 by King Sejong the Great, the fourth sovereign of the Joseon Dynasty, and his scholars was a great turning point in the Korean writing system in that Koreans could now write words and sentences as they sounded. Hanja were used as logographic scripts in which every character and its parts had a meaning and was not for delivering spoken sounds.

The long-standing use of Chinese characters in the Korean writing system has left a big gamut of vocabulary in Korean with their origin, including such proper nouns as toponyms and personal names as well as common nouns and adjectives. These are called *Sino-Korean* words, as compared to native Korean words (Choo et al. 2016: 28). Continuous exchanges with China in respect of political, societal system and culture had an influence on maintaining or even increasing Sino-Korean words even after Hangeul came into use. The nobility and the government preferred using Hanja in their written communication.

This paper aims to summarize the practices of using Hanja in Korean toponyms, taking note of their general components with individual meanings, and to investigate a few unique features occurring in choosing scripts, such as transposing Hanja to Hangeul, replacing a toponym with the same sound but a different Hanja character. It will then be extended to drawing some issues created when reading Hanja characters of Chinese and Japanese toponyms in the Korean way and writing them again in Hangeul.

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2. Hanja elements in Korean toponyms

A wide range of toponyms currently in use in Korea have Chinese character origins and thus can be written in Hanja. The use of Hanja in Korean toponyms can be found in every type of naming which results from human perception of geographical features (Choo 2018a: 28; Choo 2015: 141–146; Kim & Ryu 2008: 602–605).

Hanja words representing cardinal direction or position are found in many cases. *Namsan* (남산, 南山) was named for its location in the south of the people's residence (*nam* is 'south' and *san* is 'mountain'), while *Bukchon* (북촌, 北村) for its location in the north of the built-up area (*buk* is 'north' and *chon* is 'village'). Relative location was often noted: *Gangnam* (강남, 江南, 'south of river'), *Gangseo* (강서, 江西, 'west of river'), *Seongdong* (성동, 城東, 'east of fortress'), and *Seongbuk* (성북, 城北, 'north of fortress'). Here, *gang* is 'river' and *seong* is 'fortress,' while *dong* is 'east' and *seo* is 'west.' Besides, such syllables (characters) as *sang* (상, 上, 'upper'), *jung* (중, 中, 'center' or 'middle'), *ha* (하, 下, 'lower'), *jeon* (전, 前, 'front') and *hu* (후, 後, 'back') were often used.

Descriptive names normally given to natural features contain Hanja words with specific meanings. For example, *Gwanaksan* (mountain) describes its 'rock' (악, 岳, *ak*) in the shape of a Korean 'hat' (관, 冠, *gwan*), and *Doksan* conveys its 'sharp' (독, 禿, *dok*) shape. *Seoraksan* has its origin in the 'snow' (설, 雪, *seor*) covering the summit, while *Baekdusan* has the components of 'white head' (백두, 白頭, *Baekdu*). New built-up areas were often named *Sinchon* (신촌, 新村) meaning 'new town,' or *Sinseol-dong* (신설동, 新設洞) meaning 'newly established district.'[1] It is known that *Buramsan* (불암산, 佛岩山) was named for the shape of its rock resembling 'Buddha' (불, 佛, *bur*), but it is also regarded as an expression of wish for observing Buddhist ideals.

Hanja components most frequently found in Korean names, both of places and of persons, must be characters representing ideal images. Name-givers sought for the identification and association of their places with the meaning and value of the characters they adopted. One of the typical practices was employing the group of characters representing Confucian values. Four basic norms, 인(仁, *in*, 'benevolence'), 의(義, *ui*, 'righteousness'), 예(禮, *ye*, 'propriety'), 지(智, *ji*, 'wisdom'), together with virtues of 'loyalty' (충, 忠, *chung*), 'devotion' (효, 孝, *hyo*), and 'trust' (신, 信, *sin*) were the most preferred characters. Examples include *Inui-dong* (인의동, 仁義洞) (*dong* means 'village'), *Yeji-dong* (예지동, 禮智洞), *Chungsin-dong* (충신동, 忠信洞) and *Hyoja-dong* (효자동, 孝子洞).

[1] 洞 (*dong*) is a generic term for an administrative unit in urban areas, while 村 (*chon*) is conventionally used to denote a village of any kind.

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Attempts for identification are also found in those toponyms adopted from names of other features, objects, prominent figures, or historical events. As these names originated in Hanja words, toponyms as their followers were also based on Hanja writings. The *Wirye* (위례, 慰禮) New Town adopted its name from a fortress city belonging to Baekje, an ancient kingdom located in the same area, while the city of *Sejong* (세종, 世宗) from one of the greatest kings in Korean history. *Jeoldusan* (절두산, 切頭山) replaced the name *Jamdubong* (잠두봉, 蠶頭峰; *bong* means 'peak' or 'mountain'), which originated in its shape, 'silkworm' (잠, 蠶) 'head' (두, 頭), in commemoration of the Christian martyrdom which happened in the mid-nineteenth century. *Jeoldu* means 'cutting off (절, 切, *jeol*) head' (두, 頭, *du*).

As seen in the general practices of using Hanja, Korean toponyms cannot be completely understood without considering them together with their respective Hanja characters. People's perception of places has been reflected in their names expressed in Hanja. Associating different but same sound Hanja characters with a name in Hangeul might thus lead to a totally wrong understanding of the meaning and identity contained in that name. It might be stated that "the real heart and soul of a Korean toponym surely lies in its Hanja version."[2]

3. Evolution of Hangeul and Hanja toponyms

Since the beginning of adopting Chinese characters to write Korean words, there have been evolving patterns of using Hanja names, interactively with their Korean sounds. There also occurred the transposition of Hangeul and Hanja names, creation of composite Hanja names, replacing with different characters of Hanja, etc.

3.1. Borrowing Hanja in general

The initial function of borrowing Chinese characters was to convey the Korean sound of names with or without the meaning of the characters. A stream called *Beodeunae* (버드내) meaning 'stream (*nae*) with willow trees' (*beodeu*) adopted its Hanja writing 柳等川 (*Yudeungcheon*), which was composed of 柳 (sounding *yu*) as a Chinese character meaning 'willow tree,' 等 (sounding *deung*) as a Korean sound similar to 드 (*deu*), and 川 (sounding *cheon*) as a Chinese character meaning 'stream.' The original name found its writing but the Korean sound turned totally changed. Another example is the place called *Godan* (곶안), named for its location; 'inside' (*an*)

[2] A British toponymist Paul Woodman mentioned this after his long observation of the Korean toponyms (correspondence with the author, 8 June 2016).

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of a 'cape' (*god*). A Hanja name 古棧 (고잔, *Gojan*) was adopted to convey a somewhat modified sound, but without its meaning; 'old' (*go*) 'branch' (*jan*).

The evolution of the name of a city in central Korea, *Gongju*, provides a conspicuous example of substituting characters of meaning and sound. The area was called *Gomanaru* (고마나루), in which *goma* presumably meant 'bear' (*gom* means 'bear' in the current Korean language) and *naru* meant 'ferry.' The village around the river *Geumgang* was chosen as the capital city of the Baekje Kingdom around the 5th century with the name *Ungjin* (熊津, 웅진), which was an exact transfer of *gom* (곰, 熊 in Hanja sounding *ung*) and *naru* (나루, 津 in Hanja sounding *jin*). In the succeeding unified Silla Dynasty, the name changed into *Ungju* (熊州, 웅주), according to the newly adopted generic name *ju* meaning 'village' or 'city.' The name changed again in the next dynasty Goryeo into *Gongju* (公州, 공주), in which *gong* was presumed to be a modification of *gom*, meaning 'bear.' As *gong* (公) literally means 'fair,' 'noble' or 'public position,' so interestingly enough, *Gongju* succeeded in accumulating its identity as it grew as a center of education with prominent universities and high schools.

The transposition of Hanja and Hangeul toponyms still occurs. A subway station in the metropolitan Seoul changed its native Korean name *Beolmal* (벌말) into *Pyeongchon* (坪村, 평촌) with exactly the same meaning, 'spacious village.' It is known that there was petition of change from the local residents with a view to increasing their asset values. On the contrary, native Korean names are sometimes used as a means of place marketing. Seocho-gu, a district in the Gangnam area of Seoul, prefers using the name *Seoripul*, a native Korean name for *Seocho*, meaning 'auspicious grass,' as a means of place marketing with a higher valued brand name.

3.2. Creating composite names by combining Hanja characters

Hanja characters derived from a few, mostly two, toponyms are often combined to create a new name. One outstanding case was the creation of names of the higher administrative units in the Goryeo Dynasty. The name *Gyeongsang-do* (慶尙道, 경상도; *do* means 'province') was formulated by combining each character of the two largest cities of the area, *Gyeogju* (慶州, 경주) and *Sangju* (尙州, 상주). Likewise, the name *Chungcheong-do* (忠淸道, 충청도) was a combination of *Chungju* (忠州, 충주) and *Cheongju* (淸州, 청주). Both these units were later divided into *buk-do* (北道, 북도) and *nam-do* (南道, 남도), meaning 'northern' and 'southern' provinces, respectively.

The method of combining the first characters of two names was often used to coin a new name for a new place. The name *Hannam-dong* (漢南洞, 한남동; *dong* means 'township') was obtained by merging *han* in *Hangang* (漢江, 한강; *gang* means 'river') and *nam* in *Namsan* (南山, 남산; *san* means 'mountain'), in

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need of a new name for a larger administrative unit in the Japanese colonial period. The place was located between *Hangang* and *Namsan*.

A broadscale restructuring of administrative units carried out in 1914, the early Japanese colonial period, produced many composite names adopting one character from two names. The name *Insa-dong* (仁寺洞, 인사동), a currently famous traditional district in Seoul, originated from a combination of *in* in *Gwaninbang* and *sa* in *Daesa-dong*. *Changsin-dong* (昌信洞, 창신동) came from *chang* in *Inchang-myeon* and *sin* in *Sungsin-myeon*, while *Sungin-dong* (崇仁洞, 숭인동) from *sung* in *Sungsin-myeon* and *in* in *Inchang-myeon*.

Nevertheless, interpreting composite names based on the meaning of Hanja characters may sometimes be misleading. For example, the township name *Ikseon-dong* (益善洞, 익선동), which literally means 'virtue' (善, 선, *seon*) 'adding' (益, 익, *ik*), might make sense as a branding of the place, but absolutely not in reality because it was created by combining two names, *ik* in *Iknang-gol* and *seon* in *Jeongseon-dong*.

3.3. Replacing Hanja characters with the same sound

There are often cases in which replacing Hanja characters with the same sound takes place. The replacement of a character in *Inwangsan* was driven by a public sentiment associated with colonial remembrance. Its Hanja writing 仁旺山 was regarded as having been intentionally changed from 仁王山, with a view to denoting 'Japanese' (日) 'king' (王). Both characters 旺 and 王 have the same sound, *wang*. This argument was not fully evidenced by historic literature, but the Korea Committee on Geographical Names (KCGN) did not have any choice but to accept the proposal to 'turn the name back.'

One of the replacements with more evident difference in meaning is the case of *Wontongsan*, the name of a mountain located in the middle of the Korean Peninsula. Its Hanja name used to be written 怨慟山 which literally means 'mountain of resentment and sorrow.' A proposal was developed to rename it into 圓通山 with the same sound and thus written in the same Hangeul 원통산. As this new name meant 'mountain of smoothly getting across,' it was much more acceptable than the former unattractive one, and earned unanimous approval from KCGN.[3] A historical evidence that this newly proposed name was used before supported this approval.

From these cases, we can infer that the semantics of names might compose a more crucial element in Hanja toponyms than in the case of toponyms in other scripts. This hypothesis may well be supported when

[3] This convention of searching for more attractive or desirable semantic meanings, mostly by the literati according to their 'moral standard,' is called 雅化 (*yahua*) in Chinese, which means 'refining or polishing' (courtesy of Taiwanese toponymist Peter Kang).

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considering the logographic nature of Hanja characters. Every Hanja character is expected to be used in a more positive way when it appears in a toponym.

3.4. Toponyms with the same sound but different Hanja characters

As there are groups of different Hanja characters with the same sound, there could be confusion in communicating using only Hangeul scripts. This could be counted as a group of homonyms. There are three townships in Seoul with the name *Sinsa-dong* (신사동), but with all different Hanja characters: 新沙洞, 新寺洞 and 新士洞. In conversation, there follows the inconvenience to identify which one is mentioned. This supports the idea that Korean toponyms should be communicated with the elements of Hanja characters.

Hanja toponyms are sometimes associated with others with the same sound, bringing about some funny as well as confusing situations. When this association is extended in the negative direction, there may arise requests for renaming. The case of *Gosa-dong* clearly illustrates this process. Its name originated from 'storage' (庫, 고, *go*) 'shelters' (舍, 사, *sa*) which existed in this area. It sounded coincidentally the same as 枯死, meaning 'dried' (枯, 고, *go*) and 'die' (死, 사, *sa*). The residents requested renaming due to its associated negative meaning, and subsequently proposed a totally different name *Odong-maeul* (*maeul* is 'natural village') originating from 'paulownia trees' (*odong* in Korean).

A port village near Busan, the second largest city in Korea, has been called *Daebyeon* Port. Its Hanja name is 大邊港, which originated from its location in the 'surroundings' (周邊, 주변, *jubyeon*) of a 'storage' called 大同庫 (대동고, *Daedong-go*). But the name coincidentally sounds the same as 대변(大便) meaning 'human feces.' There has been a proposal to rename it due to its derogatory nature when written just in Hangeul. The name of the port is still maintained because there are also strong voices to preserve it as a name with cultural heritage. It is reported, however, that an elementary school in the port village has recently been renamed from *Daebyeon* Elementary School to *Yongam* (용암, 龍岩, meaning 'dragon rock') Elementary School.

3.5. Reversing the sequence of Hanja characters

Another way of avoiding unattractive or negative sounds was to reverse the sequence of Hanja characters. One representative example is the name *Jugi-myeon* (竹二面, 죽이면; *myeon* is an administrative unit of rural villages). This name was created together with *Jugil-myeon* (竹一面, 죽일면) and *Juksam-myeon* (竹三面, 죽삼면), originating from *Juksan-gun* (竹山郡, 죽산군; *gun* is a greater administrative unit equivalent to county). *Juk* (or *Jug*) means 'bamboo,' and il (一, 일), i (二, 이) and sam (三, 삼) are numbers; 'one,' 'two' and 'three.'

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Jugi-myeon sounded like the meaning of 'if (I) kill (you)' ('kill' in Korean is 죽이다, *jugida*). This negative meaning led to the name being changed to *Ijuk-myeon* (二竹面, 이죽면), with two Hanja characters reversed. With this change, *Jugil-myeon* and *Juksam-myeon* were also renamed to *Iljuk-myeon* (一竹面, 일죽면) and *Samjuk-myeon* (三竹面, 삼죽면). Currently, *Iljuk-myeon* and *Samjuk-myeon* remain, but *Ijuk-myeon* disappeared, replaced by Juksan-myeon (竹山面, 죽산면), a scaled-down name from *Juksan-gun* (竹山郡, 죽산군), which existed up to the 1910s.

The repulsion in using toponyms with negative meanings found in the case of Korean is quite contrasting with the toponymic use in other cultures. For example, it is known that the Danish toponym *Helvede* which means 'hell' does not receive any objection from the Danes. It is also hypothesized that the Korean uniqueness would have been formulated in the process of transposing toponyms in Hanja and Hangeul, which are logographic and phonetic scripts, respectively.

4. The use of Chinese characters in Korean, Japanese and Chinese

4.1. Differentiated ways of reading and the creation of exonyms

Although Chinese characters provided common sources to be used in Korean and Japanese, they have been quite differently modified according to the nature of each language. Even in China, Simplified Chinese known as *Jiǎntǐzì* (简体字) was adopted, as a replacement of Traditional Chinese known as *Fántǐzì* (繁体字). Some complex characters used in Korean (as Hanja) and Japan (as Kanji) were also simplified, but not as intensely as in Chinese.

The most greatly differentiated element was the way of reading Chinese characters in each of the three languages. One of the preferred examples very near to ordinary people's life is the word for 'toast.' It is commonly written 乾杯 (or 干杯 in Simplified Chinese), but differently read: *geonbae* in Korean, *kanbai* in Japanese, and *gānbēi* in Chinese. These different ways of reading influence the use of names, be they personal or geographical.

A specific note should be taken of the case in which Japanese and Chinese toponyms are read in the Korean way and again written in the Korean script Hangeul. For example, *Tokyo* (東京), the capital of Japan, is read [doŋgjəŋ] in Korean when being faithful to the sound of each character. When its Hangeul form 동경 is used in documents or maps, then it will create an exonym (Choo 2014: 155). Likewise, when the capital of China *Beijing* (北京) is read [bukgjəŋ] and written 북경, it will also produce a Korean exonym.

As a phonetic script, Hangeul makes it possible to write endonymic forms of *Tokyo* and *Beijing*, 도쿄 and 베이징. These names come by reading them in

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the context of the language used, Japanese and Chinese, not according to the sounds in Korean. According to a survey applied to Korean people in their twenties, endonyms (도쿄, 베이징) are more frequently used than exonyms (동경, 북경) in documents and everyday conversation (Choo 2018b: 154). It is interpreted, on the one hand, that the frequent use of endonyms is related to the guidance of education and media. In fact, there has been strong encouragement for respecting the ways of reading toponyms and anthroponyms in their own languages and writing them in Hangeul (Choo 2014: 156).

On the other hand, one could also claim that less use of Hanja in general made the respondents to the survey unable to associate the names with their original Hanja characters and thus adhere to using just Hangeul names. It is believed that different age groups may display different tendencies of using exonyms; the older the language users are, the more they are exposed to using Hanja toponyms and the likelier they are to use exonyms in Hanja. It is confirmed again that toponymic use in Korea has been greatly influenced by the script employed.

4.2. Creating a new Hanja toponym

There is a case in which a new Hanja toponym was created in Korea for Chinese users. The capital city Seoul used to be called *Hancheng* (汉城) in Chinese in the absence of its Hanja name. Actually, *Seoul* (서울) is one of the few native Korean toponyms. The metropolitan city government of Seoul realized that the name *Hancheng* did not convey the Korean reading of the city and therefore was definitely an exonym, although it represented the Korean name in the Joseon Dynasty, *Hanseong* (漢城, 한성).

A new name suggested by the city government was 首尔, which sounded very similar to *Seoul* and had the meaning 'head city.' When the renaming was requested in early 2005, the Chinese government commented that it would take time to replace the previous one, due to its old history in use. However, it was as early as October 2005 that the Chinese government announced its decision to use the new name in their documents and public facilities.

This case illustrates a specific situation of creating new Hanja toponyms to be used beyond language boundaries. Nevertheless, if there still is the desire to have Korean names employed by outsiders as closely as possible to how Koreans use them, there could appear examples of new Hanja toponyms.

5. Conclusion

Since its adoption in the Korean language as a writing system, Chinese characters, preferably called *Hanja* in Korean, have played a crucial role in

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formulating toponyms in Korea. Given the wide variety of vocabulary in the Korean language derived from Hanja origins, the names of natural features, cultural traits, human settlements, places, and so on have been established as a result of a natural process, interactively, in connection with with the Hanja components. Human perception based on Hanja words was accommodated in toponyms with Hanja origins. When toponyms are represented just in *Hangeul*, the Korean scripts, there could be cases when the adequate meaning was not conveyed or a wrong association with different Hanja characters occurred. Therefore, the nature of toponyms in Korea cannot be understood completely without referring to the role that the Hanja writing system has played.

This paper confirms the aforementioned argument by illustrating diverse practices of using Hanja characters in Korean toponyms, including characters representing direction or position, shape, ideal images, and historical figures and events. It also shows that Hanja toponyms have efficiently evolved in agreement with linguistic, social and geographical requirements. The article exemplified linguistic interactions between Hangeul and Hanja toponyms, the creation of new composite toponyms to meet geographical restructuring, and the replacement or reversal of Hanja characters to avoid unattractive or confusing orientation.

It was discovered that the semantics contained in Hanja names are considered very important by Korean users, and this motivates them to develop renaming proposals when the currently used names are met with some reserve. In the same vein, a few toponyms tend to be avoided when they are associated with other characters which have a different meaning but with the same sound. The hypothesis that meaning is more important in Hanja toponyms than in those in other languages because the former are based on logographic characters is worth testing. It might be extended in general to all Asian languages sharing Chinese characters, including Taiwanese, Vietnamese, Mongolian, as well as Korean, Chinese and Japanese. A test of this hypothesis could be accomplished by setting up a group of research on such topics as the characteristics of evolutionary paths of using Chinese characters in each language group, differentiated perception of places reflected in each track of toponyms, perceived importance of semantics contained in each name, etc.

The discussion of exonyms created by writing Chinese and Japanese toponyms in Hangeul with Korean reading motivates us to extend future research into the practices of using toponyms reciprocally to the other language groups in East Asia; Korean use of Chinese and Japanese toponyms, Chinese use of Korean and Japanese toponyms, and Japanese use of Korean and Chinese toponyms. This comparative perspective is believed to allow us to figure out common elements and specific differences found in these three major language groups.

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