

UNIVERZITA PALACKÉHO V OLOMOUCI

Filozofická fakulta

Katedra asijských studií

**BAKALÁRSKA PRÁCA**

Etymology of selected Korean location names

Olomouc 2024 Alena Buřovská

Vedúci bakalárskej práce: Dr. Andreas Schirmer

### **Vyhlasenie**

Vyhlasujem, že som túto bakalársku prácu vypracovala samostatne s použitím uvedených zdrojov a literatúry.

V Olomouci dňa 8.12.2024

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## Anotácia

- Meno a priezvisko:** Alena Buřovská
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Cieľom tejto práce je preskúmať prítomnosť etymologických informácií a identifikovať možné nedostatky v záznamoch o kórejských toponymách na populárnom portáli NamuWiki. Etymológia, ako štúdium pôvodu a vývoja slov, sa zameriava na to, ako slová vznikali a menili sa v priebehu času. Toponomastika, ktorá sa zaoberá výskumom názvov miest a geografických označení, je úzko spätá s etymológiou, pretože skúma históriu a pôvod týchto názvov.

Kórejský lexikón možno rozdeliť na slová domáceho, tzv. „čistého“ kórejského pôvodu, sino-kórejské slová čínskeho pôvodu a slová vypožičané z iných jazykov, ako je japončina či angličtina. Sino-kórejské slová sa ďalej delia na výrazy priamo prevzaté z čínštiny a na tie, ktoré boli vytvorené z čínskych znakov, ale v čínštine neexistujú.

Kórejské toponymá majú pestrý pôvod, pričom čerpajú zo starokórejštiny, čínštiny a japončiny. Názvy miest môžu nadobúdať rôzne významy v závislosti od toho, ako sa znaky interpretujú v kórejskom alebo čínskom jazyku. Táto práca preto skúma, ako sú názvy miest prezentované na NamuWiki, a snaží sa pochopiť, prečo niektoré etymologické informácie môžu chýbať.

## Abstract

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This thesis aims to assess the etymological information and representation of Korean toponyms in the popular encyclopaedia NamuWiki. Etymology, the study of how words originated and evolved over time, is the relevant bigger field here. Toponomastics is the study of toponyms (the names of places, or geographic names) and thereby includes etymological aspects, as it researches the origin and history of place names.

As for Korean, the lexicon can be generally divided into words of “pure” Korean origin, words of Chinese origin (thus Sino-Korean) or words borrowed from other languages such as Japanese or English. Sino-Korean words can be further divided into words directly taken from the Chinese language, and words created from Chinese characters that don’t exist in Chinese. Likewise, Korean toponyms have a diverse background originating from Old Korean, Chinese and Japanese. Places can also have multiple names, with different meanings.

The starting point of this thesis was the observation that entries on place names in the NamuWiki seem to care less about the origins and underlying meaning of the toponym than I am used to from Western (English, Czech, Slovak) encyclopaedias. To which degree do the contributors dwell on the origin of the names of places (towns, villages), rivers, mountains, temples? The underlying assumption is that this tells us something about how Koreans relate to etymology in general.

Rada by som touto cestou poďakovala Dr. Andreas Schirmerovi za jeho cenné rady, trpezlivosť a vedenie pri písaní bakalárskej práce.

I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to Dr. Andreas Schirmer for his valuable advice, patience and guidance with writing this bachelor's thesis.

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The biggest thank you belongs to my family, my parents and sisters, Miriam and Zuzana. Thank you for standing by me. I could not make it without your support.

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## Notes

In this thesis I use the Revised Romanization of Korean (the official romanization system used in South Korea) to represent Korean terms and names in English. The romanized version always follows the original Hangeul word and is written in italics (e.g., 한글; *hangeul*).

In this thesis, the adjective “Korean” is used to address the language, culture and history of the Republic of Korea (ROK), unless stated otherwise. Likewise, the word “Korea” means ROK (e.g, the Korean language: the language spoken in the Republic of Korea).

# **1 Introduction and thesis hypothesis**

## **1.1 Background**

Toponyms, or place names, serve as linguistic records that preserve the history, culture, and traditions of a region. They often keep record of stories, significant events, and the collective memory of communities. By studying toponyms, we can uncover valuable insights into the past, shedding light on how places were perceived, used, and valued by their inhabitants over time. For linguists, toponyms are a rich source of data. They offer clues about the linguistic evolution, language contact, and the spreading of languages. The study of toponyms can reveal patterns of language change, the influence of different languages on one another, and the effect of ancient linguistic features in modern place names.

Especially in Korea, toponyms can reveal cultural, political and historical nuances that reflect country's rich cultural and historical background. Korean language and Korean history are known to be influenced by number of outside and inside factors, such as spreading of Chinese writing system and religious and philosophical movements (Buddhism and Confucianism), later development of writing system Hangul, Japanese colonization and even current cultural exchange with Western world.

## **1.2 Thesis organization**

This thesis is divided into two parts. The first part lays out relevant knowledge. After summarizing some basics about the history of Korean language that are relevant for our topic, I provide a short introduction into the study of etymology in general, of toponomastics in general as well as a literature review of existing research in etymology of Korean toponyms in Old Korean, Sino-Korean and Japanese is also part of Chapter 2. Chapter 3 lays out the methodology and then analyses how Korean toponyms (a representative choice of names from different categories such as names of mountains, cities, rivers and such) are explained in the NamuWiki, contrasting this with how comparable Western names are explained in Wikipedia. In Chapter 4 I summarize my results and discuss the implications.

## **1.3 Research hypothesis**

The origins of Korean place names are significantly underrepresented in Korean community driven digital encyclopaedias, such as NamuWiki and Korean version of

Wikipedia, compared to the detailed inclusion of etymology in entries about Western geographical names on platforms like Wikipedia. This disparity may reflect differences in cultural priorities regarding historical linguistic documentation and global accessibility of such information.

Analysing a sample of Korean and Western place name entries from encyclopaedias and search engines, this thesis discusses the prevalence of etymological information and highlight potential gaps in the representation of Korean toponyms.

## 2 Literature review

### 2.1 Introduction to Korean language

The Korean language is a language from the Altaic language family, spoken mainly by the native people of Korean peninsula. The linguistic homeland of Korean is estimated to be somewhere in present day Manchuria.<sup>1</sup>

However, some scholars argue that the definite origin of Korean is still unknown. Modern Korean developed from Middle Korean, which descended from Old Korean, which ultimately has its roots in old Proto-Koreanic language. In first recorded historical texts, Korean was mentioned as a spoken language, any written documents were written using classical Chinese (*Hanmun*). Later Korean annals were maintained using Hanja, Chinese characters specifically adapted for recording Korean. This changed in the 15th century (1443), when King Sejong the Great commissioned creation of writing system Hangul, which unlike Hanja represents Korean language phonetically, and with just 24 letters is much easier to learn.

### 2.2 Brief history of Korean language

#### Early Origins and Proto-Korean

The origins of the Korean language are not precisely documented, but it is generally believed to have developed from Proto-Korean, spoken in prehistoric times. This period includes the early settlement of the Korean Peninsula and the establishment of ancient kingdoms such as Gojoseon (2333 BCE – 108 BCE). The linguistic landscape of this time was likely influenced by interactions with neighbouring cultures and languages.

#### The Three Kingdoms Period (Old Korean)

The Three Kingdoms Period (57 BCE–668 CE) saw the rise of Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla. During this era, the Korean language began to take on distinct regional characteristics. We differentiate between the languages spoken in the three kingdoms as if they were separate entities, however not many records of them were preserved. The Silla language is considered the direct ancestor of Middle Korean and is therefore most accurately referred to as “Old Korean” (Lee & Ramsey 2011: 48). The use of Chinese characters

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter is based on Lee and Ramsey (2011).

(Hanja) became prominent as Korean elites adopted Chinese writing for administrative and literary purposes. Despite the dominance of Hanja, the spoken Korean language retained its unique phonological and grammatical features.

### **Unified Silla and Goryeo Dynasties**

The unification of the Korean Peninsula under the Silla dynasty (668–935) and later the Goryeo dynasty (918–1392) facilitated greater linguistic cohesion. Lee and Ramsey (2011) argue that Silla's unification of the Korean peninsula was pivotal in the development of the Korean language. This political and cultural consolidation facilitated the unification of the Korean language, evolving from Old Korean through Middle Korean and Early Modern Korean to become the language spoken on the peninsula today. Chinese culture and language continued to exert a strong influence, particularly in the realms of government, literature, and education. However, the Korean language maintained its distinct identity, with oral traditions and vernacular literature thriving alongside classical Chinese texts.

### **The Creation of Hangul**

One of the most significant milestones in Korean linguistic history was the creation of Hangeul in the 15th century. Commissioned by King Sejong the Great and introduced in 1443, Hangul was designed to be a simple and accessible writing system for the Korean language. Unlike Hanja, which was difficult for common people to learn, Hangul's phonetic nature allowed for straightforward representation of Korean sounds. The introduction of Hangul democratized literacy and facilitated the spread of written Korean (Lee & Ramsey 2011: 77).

### **Joseon Dynasty and Modernization**

The Joseon dynasty (1392–1897) saw the gradual spread of Hangul, although Hanja remained dominant in official and scholarly contexts for several centuries. The use of Hangul in literature, however, continued to blossom, with notable works such as *The Songs of Flying Dragons* (1447) and *The Tale of Hong Gildong* (17th century). The late 19th and early 20th centuries brought significant challenges and changes, including Japanese colonization (1910–1945), which imposed the Japanese language on Koreans and sought to suppress Korean linguistic and cultural identity (Lewin 1976: 402).

## 2.3 Etymological research of toponyms

Etymological research generally employs a variety of methodologies to uncover the intricate pathways through which languages evolve. One primary approach involves the comparative method, where linguists compare similar words across related languages to reconstruct the proto-forms from which these words descended (Durkin 2009: 43). This technique is instrumental in identifying common roots and patterns of sound changes. Another methodology is internal reconstruction, which focuses on irregularities within a single language to hypothesize about earlier forms and stages (Durkin 2009: 44). Historical documents and literary texts also play a crucial role, providing evidence of how words were used and evolved over time. Apart from that, etymologists often use interdisciplinary tools, incorporating insights from anthropology and history to contextualize linguistic changes within broader cultural and societal shifts (Durkin 2009: 31).

Toponymic research can be approached in two fundamental ways: one focusing on the etymology, meaning, and origin of place names, and the other concentrating on the toponyms within a specific region to analyse naming patterns. Typically, this distinction is not explicitly acknowledged. With these two distinctions, Tent (2015) argues that the research in toponymy should be divided into intensive and extensive categories.

Intensive research in toponymy generally includes asking the “w” questions: Who named the place? When was the place named? Why was it given this particular name? This kind of research forms the foundation for extensive toponymy and typically precedes it. However, extensive toponymy can still be conducted independently of intensive toponymy (Tent 2015: 67).

Extensive research involves broader and more comprehensive research compared to intensive toponymy, using datasets or corpora of place names, gazetteers, maps, atlases, and similar resources. In many ways, we can say that it is simpler to conduct research in extensive toponymy rather than intensive toponymy. In extensive toponymy, place names serve as independent variables that can be analysed against dependent variables such as region, toponym type, or feature type (Tent 2015: 71).

However, there is a common idea in intensive or extensive research, and that is that the name, the toponym, has the power to uncover past, culture, and even geographical information of a particular region. To an extent, toponyms reflect minds and experiences of people who use them (Radding & Western 2010: 397). Lisa Radding writes, “Names differ from other words because they are intentionally given to highlight specific connotations, rather than being assigned arbitrarily” (Radding 2010: 410).

### 2.3.1 Avenues of Korean toponymic research

Phonetic Variations and Toponymic Changes: Ryu (2008) examined how phonetic shifts have led to variations in place names over time, including adaptations to local dialects and phonological rules.

Confucian Influence on Toponyms: Researchers have explored the transformation of native place names into Confucian ones during the Joseon dynasty, analysing the processes and coexistence of contested toponyms (Kim 2012) (Kim 2010).

Hanja in Korean Toponyms: Choo (2016, 2015) has investigated the use of Hanja (Chinese characters) in Korean place names, discussing practices and issues related to their application, even after the invention of Hangeul.

Toponymic Practices in Cultural Heritage Management: Scholars such as Kim (2013), To (2003) and Choo (2015) have examined the value of toponyms as intangible cultural heritage and suggested methods for their application in governing tangible cultural heritage (Kim 2021).

Postcolonial Urbanization and Vernacular Toponyms: Kim (2008, 2012) has analysed how postcolonial urbanization has affected vernacular place names, particularly around areas like Bupyeong-gu in Incheon, reflecting historical and cultural changes.

## 2.4 Old Korean Toponyms

Old Korean was the language used in Silla during the Three Kingdoms and later, the Unified Silla period. Our knowledge of the Three Kingdoms period is based on descriptions from the *Samguk Sagi* (History of Three Kingdoms). Compiled by Kim Pusik in 1145, it stands as Korea's oldest surviving history record. Although Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla each had their own national histories, none of these documents have survived. The information we have from those, and other earlier historical sources has been incorporated into the *Samguk Sagi*, and, in some cases, into Japanese histories.<sup>2</sup>

Writing two hundred years after the fall of Unified Silla, Kim Pusik modelled his work on the retrospective style of imperial Chinese histories. He divided the fifty volumes into four parts: narrative histories or annals for each of the three kingdoms, tables of dates and events, monographs or essays on various topics, and biographies.

The majority of place names histories are found in Volumes 35 and 37 of *Samguk Sagi*. However, it is important to note that the *Samguk Sagi* exhibits a noticeable bias on Silla throughout its various sections. This bias is particularly evident in mentioned

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<sup>2</sup> Lee and Ramsey 2011.

volumes on geography, where the volumes dedicated to Silla receive more extensive coverage. In volume 37, for instance, the discussion of Goguryeo place names is limited to those areas of Goguryeo that were later integrated into territory of Silla.

In volume 37, Goguryeo place names are often transcribed in two different ways: one that transcribes the Old Korean phonemes using Chinese characters as phonograms (representing sound of the place name), and another that translates the Old Korean morphemes using Chinese characters as logograms (representing meaning of the place name) (DeFrancis 1984: 30).

It is important to understand that the two transcriptions in volume 37 represented two different ways of writing the same name. Volume 35, however, is different. Unlike the names in volume 37, the names in volume 35 reflect historical developments after the Three Kingdoms period, specifically during the Unified Silla and Goryeo periods. During the Three Kingdoms period, place names often varied significantly from one location to another, and this diversity persisted even after Silla unified the peninsula.

However, in 757, King Gyeongdeok of Silla implemented a reform to standardize all place names within the kingdom. From then on, every significant place in Korea was assigned a Chinese style name, composed of two Chinese characters, which were to be read with standardized Sino-Korean pronunciations.<sup>3</sup>

## **2.5 Sino-Korean Toponyms**

Toponyms in Korean that originate from Chinese characters are referred to as Sino-Korean toponyms. The enduring incorporation of Chinese characters into the Korean writing system has resulted in a vast array of vocabulary in Korean that traces its origins to Chinese, encompassing proper nouns such as place names and personal names, as well as common nouns and adjectives. Ryu (2012: 8) argues that the early use of Sino-Korean characters, known to transcribe native toponyms has complicated the evolution of Korean place names. It was only in the late nineteenth century that all native toponyms began to be publicly expressed using the Korean alphabet, Hangul. Even after the adoption of Hangul, continuous interactions with China across political, societal, and cultural realms continued to influence the preservation and even expansion of Sino-Korean vocabulary. Both the nobility and the government preferred using Hanja characters in their written communications. Many place names in Korea derive from Chinese characters and can therefore be expressed using Hanja. Hanja characters are used across all types of toponym naming, reflecting human interpretations of geographical features (Pucek 2000: 209).

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<sup>3</sup> Lee and Ramsey 2011: 37–38.

Hanja characters representing cardinal directions or specific positions are frequently used in Korean toponyms. Examples:<sup>4</sup>

Namsan (남산, 南山) derives from its location to the south of residential area (남 nam meaning “south” and 山 san meaning “mountain”)

Bukchon (북촌, 北村) indicates its location to the north of urban settlements (북 buk meaning “north” and 촌 chon meaning “village”)

Gangnam (강남, 江南, “south of the river”)

Gangseo (강서, 江西, “west of the river”)

Seongdong (성동, 城東, “east of the fortress”) and Seongbuk (성북, 城北, “north of the fortress”). Here, 강 gang means “river”, 성 seong means “fortress” 동 dong means “east”, and 서 seo means “west”.

Commonly used syllables are:<sup>5</sup>

상 (上, sang, “upper”)

중 (中, jung, “center” or “middle”)

하 (下, ha, “lower”)

전 (前, jeon, “front”)

후 (後, hu, “back”)

Natural features often receive descriptive names incorporating Hanja words with specific meanings. For example, Gwanaksan (관악산) describes its peak shaped like a Korean traditional hat (“gwan” meaning “crown” and “ak” meaning “peak”). Doksan (독산) signifies its sharp shape (“dok” meaning “sharp”). Seoraksan (설악산) derives from the “snow” (“seol” meaning “snow”) covering its summit, while Baekdusan (백두산) translates to “white-headed mountain” (“baekdu” meaning “white head”). Modern urban areas often adopt names like Sinchon (신촌, 新村, “new village”) or Sinseol-dong (신설동, 新設洞, “newly established district”). It is noted that Buramsan (불암산) was named due to the rock formations resembling Buddha (“bul” meaning “Buddha”), reflecting both its physical characteristics and a cultural wish to uphold Buddhist ideals. (Choo 2016)

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<sup>4</sup> Examples taken from Choo (2016)

<sup>5</sup> Examples taken from Choo (2016)

Interestingly, Hanja elements commonly found in Korean place and personal names often embody idealized concepts. Those who chose the names wanted to associate their locations or individuals with the meanings and values represented by the characters chosen. This is a prevalent practice involving characters that symbolize Confucian virtues. Examples of such syllables are:<sup>6</sup>

benevolence (仁, 인, in)

righteousness (義, 의, ui)

propriety (禮, 예, ye)

wisdom (智, 지, ji)

loyalty (忠, 충, chung)

devotion (孝, 효, hyo)

trust (信, 신, sin)

Examples of how these syllables were used include Inui-dong (인의동, 仁義洞) (where “dong” means “village” or “small administrative unit”), Yeji-dong (예지동, 禮智洞), Chungsin-dong (충신동, 忠信洞), and Hyoja-dong (효자동, 孝子洞) (Choo 2016).

Taking this into account, to understand Korean toponyms we need to consider them alongside their corresponding Hanja characters, as Hanja often reflect people’s perceptions of places through their names. Choo (2016: 17) argues that simply associating Hanja characters with similar sounds in Hangeul can lead to a misunderstanding of the true meaning and identity embedded in the name. Therefore, it can be said that the essence of a Korean toponym truly resides in its Hanja form.

### **2.5.1 Different means of creating Hanja toponyms**

There are several means of creating a Sino-Korean toponym. The process is based on both logographic and phonetic properties of Hanja characters, the meaning of the place name, etc. By studying how the Sino-Korean place name came into existence we can uncover a piece of history and culture as well, for instance the well documented Korean aversion to negative symbolic names.

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<sup>6</sup> Examples taken from Choo (2016)

### **Combining Hanja characters to create composite toponyms**

Combining Hanja characters from multiple toponyms, is a common practice in creating composite place names. One important example happened during the Goryeo dynasty when names for higher administrative units were devised. Gyeongsang-do (慶尙道, 경상도; where “do” means “province”) was formed by merging characters from the two largest cities in the area, Gyeongju (慶州, 경주) and Sangju (尙州, 상주). Similarly, Chungcheong-do (忠淸道, 충청도) combined Chungju (忠州, 충주) and Cheongju (淸州, 청주). These units were later subdivided into buk-do (北道, 북도) and nam-do (南道, 남도), meaning “northern” and “southern” provinces, respectively.

The practice of combining initial characters from two names was also employed to create new names for places. For example, during the Japanese colonial period, the name Hannam-dong (漢南洞, 한남동; where “dong” means “small administrative unit”) was coined by merging “han” from Hangang (漢江, 한강, where “gang” means “river”) and “nam” from Namsan (南山, 남산; where “san” means “mountain”), for a larger administrative unit located between the Hangang and Namsan.

A significant restructuring of administrative units in 1914 during the early Japanese colonial period led to the adoption of composite names by taking one character from each of two existing names (Lewin, 1976). Insa-dong (仁寺洞, 인사동), a renowned traditional district in Seoul, originated from “in” in Gwaninbang and “sa” in Daesa-dong. Similarly, Changsin-dong (昌信洞, 창신동) came from “chang” in Inchang-myeon and “sin” in Sungsin-myeon, while Sungin-dong (崇仁洞, 송인동) combined “sung” in Sungsin-myeon and “in” in Inchang-myeon.

However, interpreting composite names solely based on the meanings of Hanja characters can sometimes be misleading. For instance, the township name Ikseon-dong (益善洞, 익선동), which literally means “virtue adding” might appear meaningful as a place name. However, in reality, it was created by combining “ik” from Iknang-gol and “seon” from Jeongseon-dong, rather than directly representing its apparent meaning (Choo 2016: 19).

### **Replacing the original Hanja character by a homophonous character**

It is a common occurrence to substitute a Hanja character with a homophone (Choo 2016: 19). One instance is the following. One character in the name Inwangsan (仁旺山, a mountain in Jongno, Seoul) was changed due to public sentiment about the colonial era. The middle character (meaning “vigorous”) was suspicioned as having been intentionally changed from originally 王 (king), supposedly to connote “Japan” (日), using the fact

that both 旺 and 王 are pronounced “wang”. Although historical evidence supporting this argument was lacking, the Korea Committee on Geographical Names (KCGN) had no choice but to accept the proposal to change the Chinese character writing (Choo 2016: 21).

Another case with a more noticeable shift in meaning concerns Wontongsan, a mountain in the center of the Korean Peninsula. In Chinese characters the name was 怨慟山, which translates as “mountain of resentment and sorrow”. A proposal was made to write it rather as 圓通山, maintaining the same pronunciation and writing in Hangul, that is 원통산, but with the meaning “mountain of smoothly getting across”. This new name garnered unanimous approval from the KCGN, supported by historical evidence of a prior usage. These examples show that for Korean toponyms the sound might be more stable than the meaning.

We can also glean from these examples the tendencies that Chinese characters are expected to convey positive connotations when used for toponym (Choo 2016: 21).

### **Same sound, different Hanja character meaning toponyms (not replaced)**

Using only Hangul for communication can lead to confusion due to the large number of homophones (Choo 2016: 20). An example of this situation are the three townships in Seoul that are named Sinsa-dong (신사동). They are perfectly well distinguishable by the different Chinese characters behind: 新沙洞, 新寺洞, and 新土洞. In spoken language, the phonetic ambiguity requires additional information to establish which specific location is being referenced.

These place names sometimes become associated with other words sharing the same sound, resulting in amusing or confusing situations. In instances where these associations carry negative connotations, requests for renaming may arise. For instance, the case of Gosa-dong illustrates this scenario. Originally derived from “storage” (庫, 고품, go) and “shelters” (舍, 사, sa) historically present in the area, its phonetic similarity to 枯死, meaning “dried” (枯, 고품, go) and “die” (死, 사, sa), prompted residents to seek a change due to its unintended negative meaning. Consequently, a new name, Odong- (*odong* in Korean) was adopted.

Near Busan, the port village of Daebyeon offers an example where its Hanja name, 大邊港, is derived from its location, surrounded by a “storage” called 大同庫 (Daedong-go). The name coincidentally resembles 大便 (大便), which means “human feces” in Korean. This derogatory implication when written solely in Hangul prompted a proposal for renaming. Despite this, the name retains cultural significance and there are efforts to preserve it (Choo 2016: 22).

### Toponyms from general Hanja character borrowing

The original purpose of borrowing Chinese characters was to phonetically represent Korean names, with or without the characters' meanings (Choo 2011: 17). For example, the stream called *Beodeunae* (버드내), meaning “stream” (nae) with “willow trees” (beodeu), was written in Hanja as 柳等川 (Yudeungcheon). Here, 柳 (yu) represents the sound “yu” for “willow tree” in Chinese, 等 (deung) phonetically approximates “deu” in Korean, and 川 (cheon) signifies “stream” in Chinese. Thus, while the original Korean meaning was retained, the phonetic sound is different. Similarly, the place *Godan* (곶안), named for its location “inside” (an) of a “cape” (god), adopted the Hanja 古棧 (고잔, Gojan). In this case, 古 (go) and 棧 (jan) were chosen to approximate the Korean sound “go” and “jan” respectively, without conveying their original meanings of “old” and “branch”. A notable example of name evolution is *Gongju* in central Korea. Originally known as *Gomanaru* (고마나루), where “goma” likely meant “bear” and “naru” meant “ferry” it became *Ungjin* (熊津, 응진) when it was chosen as the capital of the Baekje Kingdom. This name had a meaning of “gom” (곰, bear) and “naru” (나루, ferry) in Hanja. Subsequently, in the unified Silla Dynasty, it changed to *Ungju* (熊州, 응주), incorporating “ju” (州) meaning “village” or “city”. Under the Goryeo dynasty, it evolved into *Gongju* (公州, 공주), with “gong” presumed to modify “gom”, now associated with meanings like “fair”, or “public position”. Over time, *Gongju* developed into a prominent educational centre with renowned universities and high schools, solidifying its identity.

The interplay between Hanja and Hangeul continues in modern toponymy. For instance, a subway station in metropolitan Seoul changed its native Korean name *Beolmal* (별말) to *Pyeongchon* (坪村, 평촌), both meaning “spacious village” reportedly due to local resident’s desire to enhance property values. Conversely, according to Choo (2016: 18) native Korean names like *Seoripul*, meaning “auspicious grass”, are strategically used for place marketing in districts such as *Seocho-gu* in Seoul’s Gangnam area, aiming to enhance their brand value.

### Places named by reversing Hanja characters

Another method of avoiding unattractive or negative sounds was to reverse the order of Hanja characters (Choo 2016: 20). A notable example is the name *Jugi-myeon* (竹二面, 죽이면; “myeon” refers to a rural administrative unit). This name, along with *Jugil-myeon* (竹一面, 죽일면) and *Juksam-myeon* (竹三面, 죽삼면), originated from *Juksangun* (竹山郡, 죽산군; “gun” means a larger administrative unit equivalent to a county). “Juk” means “bamboo” while “il” (一, 일), “i” (二, 이), and “sam” (三, 삼) are the numbers “one”, “two”, and “three” respectively. The name *Jugi-myeon* sounded like “if I

kill you” (“to kill” in Korean is 죽이다, *jugida*), which obviously had a negative connotation. As a result, the name was changed to *Ijuk-myeon* (二竹面, 이죽면) by reversing the two Hanja characters. Following this change, *Jugil-myeon* and *Juksam-myeon* were also renamed to *Iljuk-myeon* (一竹面, 일죽면) and *Samjuk-myeon* (三竹面, 삼죽면). Today, *Iljuk-myeon* and *Samjuk-myeon* still exist, but *Ijuk-myeon* has been replaced by *Juksan-myeon* (竹山面, 죽산면), a condensed name from *Juksan-gun* (竹山郡, 죽산군), which existed until the 1910s.

The aversion to using toponyms with negative meanings in Korea contrasts with naming practices in other cultures. For instance, the Danish toponym *Helvede*, meaning “hell”, does not provoke any objections from Danes. Choo (2016: 20) hypothesizes that this Korean uniqueness developed during the process of transposing toponyms between Hanja and Hangeul, which are logographic and phonetic scripts, respectively.

### **New Hanja toponyms**

There is a notable instance where a new Hanja toponym was created in Korea specifically for Chinese speakers. The capital city, Seoul, previously lacked a Hanja name (until today, Seoul remains one of the few Korean toponyms with pure Korean origin) and was referred to as *Hancheng* (汉城) in Chinese. The metropolitan government of Seoul recognized that *Hancheng* did not reflect the Korean pronunciation of the city and was effectively an exonym, even though it derived from the Joseon dynasty name *Hanseong* (漢城, 한성).

To address this, the city government proposed a new name, 首尔, which closely resembled the sound of Seoul and carried the meaning “head city”. When the renaming was requested in early 2005, the Chinese government noted that it would take time to transition from the old name due to its long history of use. However, by October 2005, the Chinese government had officially adopted the new name in their documents and public facilities (Choo 2016: 22).

This case highlights the unique situation of creating new Hanja toponyms for use beyond linguistic boundaries. Choo (2016: 22) suggests that if the aim is for Korean names to be used by outsiders as closely as possible to how Koreans use them, new Hanja toponyms may continue to be developed.

## **2.6 Toponyms influenced by Japanese language**

The influence of the Japanese language on Korean toponyms is a notable aspect of Korea's history, especially during the period of Japanese colonial rule from 1910 to 1945. During this time, many Korean place names were altered to align with Japanese pronunciation and administrative preferences (Kim, Chin, Tak, & Kwak 2023: 93). Some of the changes introduced by Japanese were renaming, altering pronunciation or changing the name of place altogether. In this subchapter, I would like to discuss the influence of Japanese language on Korean toponyms from linguistic, cultural and political point of view.

### **2.6.1 Korean and Japanese from linguistic point of view**

The geographical proximity and cultural similarities between the Japanese and Korean people have led to frequent comparisons of their languages (Lewin 1976: 389). Both languages share several similarities, which has led linguists to compare them and suggest their shared origin. However, both languages also display significant differences which make the process of potential kinship debate challenging and not at all straightforward.

In the past, the discussion about both languages being from the same language family (or, potentially, of them having different origins) was influenced by events such as Japanese colonization and subsequent Korean independence. Interestingly, the narrative of Korean being from Altaic language group and thus not being related to Japanese was widely studied first twenty years after the end of World War II (Lewin 1976: 394).

## 2.6.2 Changes during Japanese rule over Korea

The impact of Japanese on Korean toponyms is a reminder of the historical complexities between the two nations and how language and place names can reflect broader socio-political dynamics. Imperial Japan's efforts to eradicate Korean cultural heritage including Korean language reflected its will to expand territories and force its identity on Korean people. Stolz (2016) claims, that naming often accompanies ownership. That means that by the means of (re)naming places, governments or interested sides try to exercise their claims to respective areas and territories.

An important factor of the changes introduced by the Japanese was the use of Chinese characters for both Korean and Japanese. As said, Chinese characters are “behind” many Korean place names. Now, one way by which Imperial Japan tried to extend its cultural influence in Korea was reading the Chinese characters found in Korean toponyms based on Japanese pronunciation, rather than Korean. Additionally, the regime replaced some Chinese characters to better align the name with the Japanese administrative system.

For instance, the term “dong” (洞, 동) which means “small administrative unit” was changed to Japanese 町 (*machi / cho*). This way, *Myeongdong* (명동), one of the busiest parts of Seoul turned into *Meiji-cho* (Kim, Chin, Tak, & Kwak 2023: 93). Seoul itself underwent a change, when the Japanese used the name 京城 (*Keijo* in Japanese, and *Geongsang* in Korean) (Britannica, s.v. “Seoul” [last verification on 9 December 2024]). It is apparent that names of places hold sentiments such as cultural and personal identity and their manipulation may add into influence of political climate (Kim, Chin, Tak, & Kwak 2023: 94).

### 3 Methodology and elements of the case study

In Chapter 2, I explored the diverse origins and historical contexts of Korean toponyms. Existing research has revealed number of intriguing nuances associated with Korean place names, including their connections to significant political and cultural events throughout Korean history. In this chapter, I will conduct an analysis of the extent to which Korean toponyms are explained within the context of a popular Korean search platform, NamuWiki.

#### 3.1 Method

The initial step involves compiling a table of Czech place names and assessing the extent to which their etymological origins are explained in the Czech, English, and German versions of Wikipedia. This table will serve as a foundational dataset for following comparisons with the treatment of place name explanations in the Korean platform, NamuWiki.

The next phase employs an AI generator to randomly select ten Korean geographical and cultural entities, including rivers, mountains, small and large cities, and temples. Each selected entry will undergo an analysis based on its corresponding NamuWiki article. The results of this analysis will ultimately confirm or refute the proposed research hypothesis.

#### 3.2 Czech toponyms in English and German Wikipedia

The following table visualizes how common it is that etymological information is provided in encyclopedic articles on places:

Place name	Czech	English	German
Prague (capital)	O	O	0
Krkonoše (mountain range)	O	O	O
Olomouc (midsize city)	O	O	0
Luční hora (mountain)	X	X	X
Vltava (river)	O	O	O
Znojmo (smaller city)	O	O	X
Labe (river)	O	O	O
Sněžka (mountain)	U	U	U
Šumava (mountain range)	O	O	O
Ústí nad Labe (midsize city)	O	O	U

*Table 1:* A comparison table showing how various Czech place names are explained in Czech, English, and German Wikipedia. O: A whole section on Etymology, (Nazev, Name ...). U: No separate section, some etymology explained under different section. X: Etymology is not explained at all.

### 3.3 Analysis

In this chapter, I examine how etymology of selected Korean toponyms, categorized into five groups, is interpreted and presented on the popular online platform NamuWiki. To choose the toponyms included in the study, I utilized an AI-based approach to select the names. The specific demand to ChatGPT was: “Please choose at random ten “X” across the Korean Peninsula, big and small. Provide the Hangul spelling plus the English name in Revised Romanization”. In each request, “X” substitutes for rivers, cities, smaller towns and counties, temples and mountains respectively.

In a similar way to the Czech toponyms listed in the comparison table on page 24, I categorize the extent to which the etymology of the given toponyms is presented on NamuWiki into three groups: etymology is cohesive and provided in a separate section, etymology is briefly mentioned within a different section, and etymology is not provided. In cases where etymology is at least partially provided, I will summarize the information as found on NamuWiki.<sup>7</sup>

#### 3.3.1 Rivers

##### 3.3.1.1 Etymology is cohesive and provided in a separate section

###### 1. 한강 (Han River)

The name “Han River” (한강) originates from the Korean term “Han-garam”, where “han” means “great” or “prominent”, and garam refers to a river, meaning “great river”. The Chinese character 漢 is a phonetic transcription unrelated to China. Historically, the river had various names: *Daesu* (帶水) in the early Three Kingdoms period, *Arisu* (阿利水) on King Gwanggaeto's stele, *Ungrira* (郁利河) in Baekje, and *Hansanha* (漢山河) or *Bukdok* (北瀆) in the *Samguk Sagi*. The name “Han River” (“Hangang” or “Hansu”) became common when Baekje began trading with the Eastern Jin dynasty of China.

###### 2. 낙동강 (Nakdong River)

During the Three Kingdoms and Unified Silla periods, the river was known as “Hwangsangang”. The current name, “Nakdonggang”, has two main origin theories. One suggests it refers to the river flowing east of “Garak” (Garakguk), another name for Geumgwan Gaya in Gimhae. The other theory links it to “Nakyang” (an old name for Sangju in Gyeongsang-buk Province), meaning “the

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<sup>7</sup> Entries from NamuWiki, last verified on December 1, 2024. Translated from the Korean originals by the author (A.B.) and partly shorted and summarized.

river east of Nakyang”. This connection is still visible today, as Sangju has a district called Nakyang-dong and a region named Nakdong-myeon.

### 3. 금강 (Geum River)

The Geum River has been known by various names throughout history, reflecting the characteristics of its regions. In Geumsan-gun, it was called “Jeokbyeokgang” (“Red Cliff River”) due to its surrounding red cliffs. In Okcheon-gun, names like “Jeokdeungjingang”, “Chatangang”, and “Hwainjingang” were used. Around Gongju, it was “Ungjingang”, while in Buyeo-gun, it became “Baengmagang” (“White Horse River”). In Seochon-gun and Gunsan, it was referred to as “Jingang” or “Goseongjingang”. Historical texts like the *Dongguk Yeoji Seungnam* also mention names such as “Ungcheonha” and “Sabisu”.

The name “Baengmagang” is still commonly used for the mid-to-lower reaches of the river and has inspired cultural works and legends. One story tells of a Tang general who used a white horse as bait to catch a dragon symbolizing Baekje’s King Uija. During Unified Silla, the Geum River, known as “Ungcheonha”, was designated one of the Four Great Rivers (“Sadok”) used for national rites, alongside the Han River (“Hansanha”), Nakdong River (“Hwangsanha”), and Gokgangcheon (“Tojiha”).

The river’s lower section was also called “Baekgang” or “Baekchon River”, prominently featured in the Battle of Baekgang during Baekje's restoration movement. Some scholars associate these names with the Dongjin River or Asan Bay, while the *Nihon Shoki* refers to it as “Hakusukinoe”.

The name “Hogang” (“Lake River”) also appears, attributed to its calm, lake-like waters. This name may have influenced the regional terms “Hoseo” and “Honam”, though some believe the reverse is true.

### 4. 영산강 (Yeongsan River)

In Damyang, the river was historically called “Juknokcheon” (“Bamboo Green Stream”), while in Gwangju, it was known as “Geungnagang” (“River of Paradise”) or “Chilcheon”. In Naju, it was referred to as “Geumgang”, deriving from the Unified Silla-era name “Geumseong” (“Silk City”). The modern name of the river, “Yeongsangang”, originates from Yeongsanpo, a port village in Naju.

In Gwangju, the name “Geungnagang” has largely fallen out of use in the 21st century, leaving many residents unaware of its historical significance. However, remnants of the name persist in places such as Geungnagang Station, Gwangju Geungnak Elementary School, Geungnagyo Bridge, and Geungnak Riverside Park. Before its incorporation into Gwangju in 1955, Geungnak-myeon was an administrative district covering parts of present-day Seo-gu and Buk-gu.

Interestingly, the name “Geungnak Elementary School” comes from “Geungnakcheon”, a nearby covered stream that merges with Gwangjucheon, and is not directly related to “Geungnakgang”.

## 5. 두만강 (Tumen River)

The origin of the name “Tumen River” is uncertain, though it is mentioned in historical texts like the *Hancheongmungan* (漢淸文鑑) and *Manju Jimyonggo* (滿洲地名考). One theory suggests it derives from the Jurchen word “Dumun”, meaning “a valley where many birds gather,” while another links it to the area's reputation as the birthplace of soybeans, interpreting the name as “the river of the land full of soybeans.” Over time, the river has been referred to by various names, including “Goryeogang” (高麗江), “Domungang” (圖們江), and “Tongmungang” (統們江).

Another explanation from the *Hancheongmungan's* Dongmunyuhae (同文類解) ties the name to the Yuan dynasty's administrative system. Local titles such as “Manho” (萬戶) were pronounced as “Duman” in Jurchen, and this term was later written as “Dumangang”.

The name “Tumen River” (图们江) is the standard term in Chinese, and the English transliteration is “Tumen River”. In Russian, the river is now called “Tumannaya” (Туманная), meaning “foggy river.” Before 1972, it was known as “Tumen-Ula” (Тюмень-Ула), based on its Manchu name. However, following the Sino-Soviet border disputes of the 1970s, Russian authorities replaced Chinese and Manchu place names in the region, leading to the adoption of “Tumannaya”.

### 3.3.1.2 Etymology is not provided

오십천 (Osipcheon River)

동강 (Dong River)

청천강 (Cheongcheon River)

대동강 (Daedong River)

북한강 (Bukhan River)

### 3.3.2 Cities

#### 3.3.2.1 Etymology is extensive and provided in a separate section

##### 6. 서울 (Seoul)

NamuWiki provides following information about the etymology of the name “Seoul”. The name “Seoul” originally referred to a common noun in Korean, meaning “capital city” or “national capital”. It was used to describe the capital of any nation, not just South Korea’s. Over time, however, the term evolved into a proper noun and became specifically associated with the capital city of South Korea after it was officially named Seoul in 1946.

“Seoul” is the only native Korean place name used for a major administrative district in South Korea. Its origin is debated, with the most popular theory suggesting that it comes from “Seorabeol” (서라벌), the capital of the ancient Silla kingdom. Some scholars believe “Seorabeol” may have originated from “Geumseong” (금성), meaning “Golden City”. Another theory ties the name to the Baekje kingdom's capital, “Sabi” (사비), which might have transformed into “Seoul”.

Other theories suggest links to the Goryeo and Koguryo kingdoms, where names like “Seobul” and “Seowol” referred to capitals or storehouses. Despite these theories, the exact origin of “Seoul” remains unclear, and today the name is firmly associated with South Korea’s capital city.

##### 7. 춘천 (Chuncheon)

Many people believe that “Bomgoeul” or “Bomnae” are traditional Korean ways of referring to “Chuncheon” (춘천), but this is not correct. In the past, Chuncheon was known as “Sucha-yak” and “Ogunne” during the Three Kingdoms period. One theory suggests the name originated from the shape of Udu Mountain, which resembles an ox's head. Another theory suggests that “Chuncheon” was named after the ox (a leading animal) and “head” to indicate its significance as a capital, like a central region in the Yeongseo area or the capital of the Maek people. The name “Ogunne” refers to a place where a small kingdom once existed. The name “Sucha-yak” could have derived from the old Korean word for “ox”, which was “sut”.

During the reign of Queen Seondeok of Silla, the name was written in Chinese characters as “Usuju” (牛首州) or “Udusu” (牛頭州), meaning “ox head region”. The name evolved over time, eventually changing to “Sakju” (朔州) during the Unified Silla period. Later, it became “Gwanghaeju” (光海州), and during the Goryeo Dynasty, it was renamed “Chunju” (春州) due to the meaning of “spring” in the name, aligning it with the Goryeo capital, Gaegyeong. Under Joseon King Taejong, “Chunju” was changed to “Chuncheon” (춘천), with “cheon” replacing

“ju”. Therefore, “Bomgoeul” or “Bomnae” are not traditional names, but modern interpretations of the name “Chuncheon” based on its Chinese characters. Despite this, many Chuncheon residents still use “Bomnae” because of its pleasant and intuitive sound.

## 8. 인천 (Incheon)

Incheon was originally referred to as “Michuhol” (彌鄒忽) in historical records, with the term “hol” (忽) meaning a city or fortress, which can also be written as “seong” (城). The Gwanggaeto Stele refers to the area as “Michuseong” (彌鄒城). Over time, Goguryeo called it “Maesohol” (買召忽), a variant of “Michuhol”, with the pronunciation estimated as “mit-kol”. In Silla, after unification, the area was called Maesohol-hyeon and later renamed “Soseong-hyeon” (邵城縣) under King Gyeongdeok’s Hanification policies.

During the Goryeo Dynasty, the region underwent several name changes, becoming “Gyeongwon-gun” (慶源郡) under King Sukjong and “Inju” (仁州) under King Injong. It was later elevated to “Gyeongwon-bu” (慶源府) in 1390 due to its historical significance, having produced many queens. However, during the Joseon Dynasty, it was renamed “Incheon” in 1413 by King Taejong to reflect the region's new status. The name “Incheon” is derived from the characters “In” (仁), meaning “benevolent”, and “cheon” (川), meaning “river”.

While “Incheon” can be interpreted as “Eojinnae” (어질내) in native Korean, this term is rarely used. Instead, “Michuhol” is more commonly used to refer to the city, particularly in its historical context, although it can also specifically refer to Michuhol-gu (formerly Nam-gu) within Incheon.

## 9. 광주 (Gwangju)

The term “Gwangju” can refer to two different places in Korea: Gwangju Metropolitan City and Gwangju City in Gyeonggi Province. Though both are written the same in Korean and Romanized form, the meanings differ. Gwangju Metropolitan City is pronounced with a short vowel sound (광주광역시), while Gwangju City in Gyeonggi is pronounced with a long vowel sound (경기도 광주시). However, the distinction is often hard to make because modern Korean has almost lost the difference between long and short vowels. A helpful tip is to remember that “Gwangju” (빛 광) refers to light and is pronounced with a short sound, and “Gwangju” (넓을 광) in Gyeonggi refers to something wide, so it's pronounced with a long sound.

In the media, Gwangju Metropolitan City is usually referred to as just “Gwangju” or “Gwangju City”. To distinguish it from Gyeonggi’s Gwangju, terms like “Jeollado Gwangju” or “Gwangju·Jeonnam” are used. Meanwhile, Gyeonggi’s Gwangju

is often called “Gyeonggi Gwangju”. Despite some debates over the term “Jeolla-do Gwangju”, it is considered acceptable in regional discussions, as “Jeolla-do” is used conventionally to refer to the broader area. However, referring to Gwangju as part of Jeonnam is incorrect, as Gwangju is now a separate metropolitan entity.

In the past, the area around Gwangju was characterized by many swamps due to the small streams flowing from the Gwangju Stream and Mudeung Mountain. One notable feature, the Gyeongyang bangjuk, was an irrigation system built to drain these swamplands. The area came to be known as “Muldeul”, meaning a “field with water”. Over time, this name evolved into “Mudeul” and later “Mudeung” for convenience in pronunciation.

As part of a national effort to standardize place names using Chinese characters, “Muldeul” was written as “Mujoo” 無州, which later became “Mujinju” 無珍珠 or simply “Mujin”.

The name changed to Gwangju during the Goryeo Dynasty. This change is often attributed to the influence of Buddhism, as the Yeongsan River, which separates the old Gwangju city from the surrounding area, was called the “Gugnak River” or “River to Paradise”. Crossing this river symbolized entering a sacred land, leading to the adoption of the name “Gwangju” 光州, meaning “land of light”, representing a Buddhist paradise beneath Mudeung Mountain.

### 3.3.2.2 Etymology is briefly mentioned within a different section

#### 10. 속초 (Sokcho)

The native Korean name for Sokcho is “Pulmukkeum”, which is still used by some people today. This is a direct translation of Sokcho (束草), where the character 束 (sok) means “to bind” and 草 (cho) means “grass” or “plant”. The reason Sokcho is referred to as “Pulmukkeum” is linked to the legend of Ulsanbawi (Ulsan Rock) on Seoraksan Mountain.

#### 11. 부산 (Busan)

The name “Busan” (釜山) first appeared during the early Joseon period, and there are two main theories about its origin. One theory suggests it comes from Jeongsan (甑山) in the Dong-gu district, while another links it to Jasongdae in Beomil-dong. The name “Busan” refers to a mountain shaped like an overturned cauldron. Before the name “Busan” was used, the area was known by various names such as “Dongnae” and “Dongnoguk”, with some of these names still present in modern Busan’s districts. Another historical name for the area was “Gamamoe”.

### 3.3.2.3 Etymology is not provided

경주 (Gyeongju)  
목포 (Mokpo)  
강릉 (Gangneung)  
전주 (Jeonju)

### 3.3.3 Smaller towns and counties

#### 3.3.3.1 Etymology is briefly mentioned within a different section

##### 12. 화천군 (Hwacheon-gnn)

During the Goguryeo period, the area was called Saengcheon-gun (牲川郡) or Yashimae (也尸買). Later, during the Unified Silla period, it became part of the territory of Sakju (朔州, now Chuncheon). In 757, King Gyeongdeok of Silla changed its name to Nangcheon-gun (狼川郡). During the Joseon Dynasty, it was separated from Yanggu and became a distinct county with various name changes. In 1645, it was merged with Gimhwa-gun, but in 1653, it was restored as a county. In 1869, it was renamed Hwacheon-hyeon, and in 1895, it became Nangcheon-gun again. Finally, in 1902, it was permanently renamed Hwacheon, a name it retains to this day.

#### 3.3.3.2 Etymology is not provided

산청 (Sancheong)  
문경 (Mungyeong)  
함양 (Hamyang)  
청도 (Cheongdo)  
홍천 (Hongcheon)  
영양 (Yeongyang)  
고성 (Goseong)  
밀양 (Miryang)  
구례 (Gurye)

### 3.3.4 Temples

#### 3.3.4.1 Etymology is briefly mentioned within a different section

##### 13. 별어사 (Beomeosa)

The name of the temple is “Beomeosa” (梵魚寺). The name comes from a legend in which a golden fish descended from the sky and played in a well, leading to the mountain being named Geumjeongsan (金井山) and the establishment of the temple. The name of the “Beomeo” temple is derived from the characters 梵魚, whereby “梵” refers to Buddhist term of “highest principle of life” and “魚” means fish, reflecting the legend involving the golden fish.

##### 14. 화엄사 (Hwaeomsa)

The temple’s name was derived from the Avatamsaka Sutra (화엄경).

##### 15. 낙산사 (Naksansa)

The temple’s name, “Naksansa” (落山寺), is derived from the term “Naksan”, which is shortened from *Botarakgasan* (陀落迦山), the mythical mountain where Avalokitesvara (Bodhisattva of Compassion) is believed to dwell. While the exact location of Botarakgasan is unknown, it is traditionally said to be either on the southeast coast of India or on an island. Inspired by this legend, monk Uisang established the temple at Mount Obong, overlooking the East Sea, and enshrined Avalokitesvara as the main deity, naming it “Naksansa” to symbolize the sacred mountain.

##### 16. 신륵사 (Silleuksa)

The temple’s name, “Shinreuk” (神勒), carries the meaning of “divine bridle” or “harness”. According to legend, during the Goryeo dynasty under King Woo, a dragon horse (*yongma*, 龍馬) emerged from a nearby rock formation known as Maam (馬巖) and caused havoc. The myth states that a miraculous bridle was used to subdue the creature, attributed to either Maitreya Buddha or the revered monk Bojejonja Naong. This event is said to have inspired the temple's name, reflecting its connection to the legend.

##### 17. 송광사 (Songgwangsa)

The temple’s modern name, “Songgwangsa”. has multiple proposed origins. One legend suggests that monk Jinul released a carved wooden kite, which landed on

what is now the temple's *Guksajeon* ridge. The location was named *Chirakdae*, and the temple came to be associated with the kite (*solgae*), interpreted as a dialectal form of "Songgwang".

Another explanation attributes the name to the abundance of pine trees (*sol*) on Jogyesan, which locals referred to as "Solme". This evolved into "Songgwangsan" and subsequently lent its name to the temple.

#### 18. 쌍계사 (Ssanggyesa)

During King Heongang's reign, confusion arose because another temple with the same name existed. To differentiate, the temple was renamed "Ssanggyesa", meaning "Twin Streams Temple", after the streams flowing through its grounds. Scholar Choe Chiwon inscribed the name "Ssanggyeseokmun (雙礮石門)" on a rock, marking the change.

#### 3.3.4.2 Etymology is not provided

봉선사 (Bongseonsa)

마곡사 (Magoksa)

선운사 (Seonunsa)

월정사 (Woljeongsa)

### 3.3.5 Mountains

#### 3.3.5.1 Etymology is extensive and provided in a separate section

#### 19. 치악산 (Chiaksan)

The old name of the mountain was Jeogak Mountain (赤岳山), which means "Red Rock Mountain". It was named so because the entire mountain turns red during autumn. The name later changed to Chiak Mountain (치악산 雉岳山) based on a legend about a pheasant that repaid its life to a traveler who saved it from a snake. According to the legend, a young man traveling over Jeogak Mountain to take the civil service exam encountered a pheasant about to be eaten by a snake. He shot the snake with an arrow, saving the pheasant. As night fell, the young man found a tile-roofed house in the mountains and was offered food by a young woman. He fell into a deep sleep, but later, the snake appeared and wrapped around him, saying it would avenge its husband's death by taking the young man's life. The snake warned that the young man could survive if the bell at an empty temple rang three times at dawn. Being in a remote area where no bell would likely ring, the young man waited for his death. To his surprise, the bell rang three times at dawn, and when he regained his senses, the snake and the house had disappeared.

Grateful for his miraculous escape, the young man went to the temple and found three pheasants dead with broken necks under the bell. Touched by the pheasant's sacrifice, the young man buried the birds in a sunny spot and decided to give up his exam journey. Instead, he built a temple to honor the pheasant's spirit. This temple became known as the Sangwon Temple on Jeogak Mountain. The name of the mountain later changed from "Jeogak Mountain" to "Chiak Mountain", with the "chi" character for "pheasant" replacing the "cheok" character. The Sangwon Temple is now located in the Sillim-myeon area.

## 20. 주왕산 (Juwangsan)

The name Juwangsan is linked to a legend from the Tang Dynasty in China. A man named Zhou Wang (周王), who declared himself the "Post-Zhou King" after fleeing from a failed rebellion against the Tang Dynasty, sought refuge in the Seokbyeongsan Mountain of the Korean Peninsula. Zhou Wang built a fortress in the Juwangcheon Valley and attempted to regain his power. When the Tang Dynasty requested his capture, the Silla Kingdom sent troops led by General Ma Il-seong to defeat Zhou Wang and his forces. After being defeated, Zhou Wang hid in the Juwang Cave but was eventually captured and executed in the Tang capital.

### 3.3.5.2 Etymology is briefly mentioned under a different section

## 21. 남산 (Namsan)

The character "南" in Namsan (South Mountain) also means "front", as traditional directions were based on a southern orientation (specifically, slightly southeast or southwest). The phrase "left Blue Dragon, right White Tiger" originates from this, as facing south makes the left side east and the right side west. Because of this, Namsan is used to refer to "front mountains" not only in Seoul but also in other regions like Gyeongju. All "Namsan" mountains in Korea share this meaning, symbolizing the front mountain. In the past and even today, houses and villages are typically oriented to face south, and the mountain in front of such a house is naturally referred to as "Namsan" (front mountain).

## 22. 월출산 (Wolchulsan)

The name of Mount Wolchul has a long history, dating back to the Three Kingdoms period. In the 7th century, it was called "Dalnasan" (達拏山) in Baekje, and after the fall of Baekje, it was referred to as "Welnak" (月奈岳) in Unified Silla, both of which mean "the mountain where the moon rises". Later, during the Goryeo period, the name was translated into Chinese characters as "Wolsaengsan" (月生山) or

“Wolchulsan” (月出山), and the name “Wolchulsan” eventually became the established term, which has continued to the present day.

### 23. 청계산(Cheonggyesan)<sup>8</sup>

The mountain was historically referred to as “Cheongnyongsan” (“Blue Dragon Mountain”), its name evolved due to its significance in geomancy as the “blue dragon” mountain to the left of Gwanaksan, considered Seoul’s guardian peak.

#### 3.3.5.3 Etymology is not provided

덕유산 (Deogyusan)

속리산 (Songnisan)

함백산 (Hambaeksan)

소백산 (Sobaeksan)

관악산 (Gwanaksan)

## 3.4 Results

The results reveal a significant disparity in the documentation of toponymic history, highlighting a broader trend in the representation of etymology in Korea.

### 11 Entries with separate etymology sections (22%):

These entries provide a dedicated focus on the origins and linguistic history of the place name, suggesting that in these cases, the etymology represents a significant part of the entry. In five cases (Han River, Seoul, Chuncheon, Incheon, and Gwangju), historically native (“pure”) Korean names are discussed, providing a rare glimpse into how these native Korean toponyms were transformed into Sino-Korean ones.

As for one telling case, in the entry for Busan, Gamamoe is mentioned as an alternative name without caring to explain that this would in fact correspond to the literal meaning (“cauldron mountain”). An interesting footnote is attached there (to the name Gamamoe), mentioning that a foreigner living in Korea translated the names of Korean locations literally, rendering Busan as “Cauldron Mountain”. This again is translated back into sotsan (솥산) and not *gamamoe*, seemingly assuming that this is self-understood. In

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<sup>8</sup> Cheonggye Mountain in Seoul.

the cases of the mountains Chiak and Juwang, local legends connected to the names are explained. This is especially interesting as it connects etymology to Korean folk culture.

Having etymological information does not mean that everything is explained. In the entry on Hwacheon we learn that its name was changed to Nangcheon-gun (狼川郡), but we do not learn why. Also, the meaning is then probably to be self understood from the Hanja, while certainly this is not the case for many users.

Notably, these cases are significant as they represent either the longest river, the capital city, or other prominent locations. This suggests that Koreans tend to care about the etymology of toponyms the more the locations themselves are considered to be of eminent importance.

### **12 Entries with mention of etymology (24%):**

These entries acknowledge etymology but place it in a broader context, often within general information or historical sections. This suggests that while etymology is considered relevant, it is not prioritized or given its own focused section. For the city of Seokcho, its old Korean name is provided. However, there are cases where in fact the information about previous names does not actually explain the name as such, as in the case of Hwacheon-gun. Seemingly, the assumption is that anyone knows that this is about *binnal* (“shining”) *hwa* and *nae* (“river“) *cheon*.

Interestingly, temple names in this category often carry legends or Buddhist sentiments that inspired their naming. This aspect is particularly intriguing for those interested in Korea’s Buddhist traditions and cultural heritage.

For mountain names, the geographical location of the mountain often plays a significant role in shaping the name, along with poetic concepts such as “the mountain where the moon rises”.

### **27 Entries without any mention of etymology (54%):**

More than half of the entries completely lack any mention of an etymological background. Obviously, as discussion the origin of a toponym is not standard. This raises the question of why the literal meaning and the concept behind the mere sound is deemed dispensable. Does it truly reflect the absence of detailed linguistic or historic research, or does it simply reflect a popular attitude? Deciding this question is beyond the scope of this thesis, however.

### 3.4.1 NamuWiki versus Wikipedia

An interesting observation is that while searches for the etymology of the names of small towns or counties on NamuWiki often yielded no results, the English version of Wikipedia frequently provided etymological entries. This suggests that contributors to English Wikipedia prioritize including information on toponymy more than those on NamuWiki. The etymological explanations found on Wikipedia follow an established pattern, with consistent etymological explanation featured in a separate section. The encyclopaedic entry on the town of *Miryang* serves as a notable example of this disparity.

#### Toponymy [\[edit\]](#)

Its name is originated from the tribal country named *Miri midong guk* (彌離彌凍國).<sup>[2]</sup> Its name was previously perhaps pronounced as **Milbeol** using [Idu script](#)<sup>[3]</sup><sup>[4]</sup> formerly also spelled as 推火郡 (probably pronounced as **Milbeol** or **Miribeol** using Idu script), **Milbeol** (密伐) and **Milseong** (密城),<sup>[5]</sup> There are various hypotheses as to the meaning of Miryang, such as Milky Way, Galaxy, dragon's field, Wheat Field and the watery field.<sup>[3][4][6]</sup>

*Figure 1:* The entry about the town Miryang in the English Wikipedia contains a separate section, titled “toponymy”, about the etymology of the place name.

기원전부터 6세기까지 가야에 속하였으나 법흥왕 시기에 신라에 병합되어 추화군(推火郡, 미리벌)<sup>[8]</sup>이 되었다. 757년(경덕왕 16)에 전국 지명을 한화할 때 밀성군(密城郡)으로 개칭하였다. 밀성군 휘하의 다섯 영현으로 밀진현(密津縣, 삼랑진읍), 상약현(尙藥縣, 창녕군 영산면), 오구산현(烏丘山縣, 청도군 청도읍), 형산현(荊山縣, 청도군 화양읍), 소산현(蘇山縣)을 거느린 지역 중심지였다. 고려 시대 995년(성종 14)에는 밀주군이 되었다. 이후 농민 반란에 휩쓸려 잠시 천민 지역인 향·소·부곡으로 격하되고 마는데, 이 때 이름은 '귀화부곡'이었다. 현재도 바로 옆동네 창녕의 부곡은천으로 유명한 부곡면이란 지명으로 흔적이 남아있다.

*Figure 2:* The NamuWiki entry about Miryang contains plenty of historical information but nothing on the meaning and origin of the name.

## 4 Conclusion

The results of the analysis confirm a significant gap in the availability of etymological entries for Korean toponyms on popular search platforms. Compared to encyclopaedic articles on Czech places, and thus on the toponyms, the comparable Korean articles frequently lack proper or any etymological explanation. This finding directly supports the hypothesis of this thesis. The places with comprehensive entries are likely those with significant historical, cultural, or linguistic importance, suggesting selective prioritization in the documentation process. Although the Czech and German Wikipedia are similar to NamuWiki in being community-driven online platforms, the big difference regarding the level of interest in etymology is striking. Is it simply because Korean contributors (and Korean people in general) do not care what is in the place name?

One of the reasons for these missing sections on etymology might be complexity of Korean etymological research. Many place names are derived from older, often obscure, forms of Korean or Classical Chinese. The etymology of these names requires a deeper understanding of historical linguistics, which might not be readily available or easily researched by average contributors. As a result, the complexity and potential lack of resources could lead to an omission of etymological discussions in place name entries.

Also, while Korean toponyms are the subject of academic research, this type of research itself is probably not as widespread and extensive as in other cultures. Place names derived from Chinese characters or local legends often lack clear or easily traceable linguistic origins, making them challenging for the average NamuWiki editor to interpret.

Arguably, the Korean approach to etymology, particularly among the general public, often reflects a practical and historical perspective rather than a deeply analytical or linguistical focus.

This perspective differs from cultures where English, German, or Slavic languages are spoken, as etymology plays a significant role in popular culture and education in these regions. In these societies, the origins of words are often explored in mainstream media and literature, making the subject more relatable and engaging for the general public.

In Korea, however, the interest in the etymology of toponyms lies more on the practical use than delving into its linguistic roots. As a result, etymology tends to be less prominent in everyday discourse. Place names and terms are valued primarily for their functionality, leaving the detailed study of word origins largely to academics or dedicated enthusiasts.

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