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## **Asian Onomastics – An introduction**

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## **Asian Onomastics – An introduction**

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Being the largest continent on Earth, Asia is home to 4.46 billion of the world's 7.7 billion population. It also has a great deal of cultural and linguistic diversity. Asia, as a regional name, is believed to originally refer to the eastern bank of the Aegean Sea by the Greeks, the peninsula where present-day Turkey is located. Over time, the area covered by the name Asia gradually stretched further eastward. Eventually, it encompassed a much larger land area reaching the western coast of the present-day Pacific Ocean, and became the area we think of as Asia nowadays. The original area first to use the name of Asia is today called Asia Minor.

Both the term and the area of Asia are purely of European origin and defined by Europeans. Those living within Asia may group themselves and their adjacent neighbors according to their own needs and interests. Nowadays, Asia is generally divided into several sub-regions, mainly based on the cardinal directions, as the other continentals are. Thus, we have East Asia, South Asia, North Asia, West Asia, Southeast Asia, and Central Asia to represent different parts of Asia. East Asia comprises China, Mongolia, North Korea, South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan. Southeast Asia refers to the states of Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, The Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste, and Vietnam. South Asia contains Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. West Asia includes Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Georgia, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, the Gaza Strip, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. North Asia refers to Russia. Central Asia includes Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.<sup>1</sup>

Both the outcome of the cardinal partition of Asia and their naming are the product of Cold War. However, the sub-division roughly matches up with

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<sup>1</sup> The demarcation within Asia and the terminological usage here may not be arbitrary and without challenge. For instance, some scholars would use the term “Inner Asia” instead of that of “Central Asia”, and the result of demarcation is different. For a detailed summary of the case of Central Asia, please refer to [Willem van Schendel \(2005: 297n1\)](#).

the demarcation of Asia produced by the Asians on their own terms, even though it is not completely satisfactory and without controversy.

In colloquial or popular English, the term Asia denotes different meaning than that of academic world in terms of the designated areas or peoples. The word “Asian” in both Great Britain and Ireland generally refers to the people from South Asia, because the British with Asian ancestries are predominately from South Asia. Those from East and Southeast Asia are sometimes referred to with the word “Oriental”. In contrast, the term “Asian” in Australia usually denotes those of East Asian or Southeast Asian descent. People of South Asian descent are referred to by their respective demonym such as Pakistani or Sri Lankan, but are collectively called “Indian”, if there is no explicit knowledge of a specific country or area. In the United States, the word “Asian” roughly covers people from East, Southeast, and South Asia.

The ten articles that we have for the special edition of *Onoma* 51 “Asian Onomastics” concentrate on the cases from East Asia and Southeast Asia, except one referring to the case in Indian subcontinent. Therefore, the term Asia in “Asian Onomastics” is close to the popular usage in the United States or Australia. Nevertheless, it is by no means our intention to exclude cases from the rest of Asia. As a matter of fact, we did not frame any design to encompass the so-called Asian territory, but rather based the edition on contributions received from all researchers of Asian onomastics.

In terms of the field of subject, also by accident, we achieved a balanced composition of toponymic and anthroponymic research; five toponymic and five anthroponymic. One of the articles on anthroponyms can also be viewed with a toponymic focus, due to its very nature of dealing with clan names under the influence of geographic space. Interestingly enough, one of the toponymic articles explores extra-territorial names.

Names in East Asia, either of places or of persons, cannot be properly understood without knowledge of Chinese characters (漢字), known as *Hanja* (한자) in Korean, *Kanji* (かんじ) in Japanese, *Hànzì* in Chinese and *Chữ Hán* in Vietnamese. Sungjae Choo deals with the use of these Hanja characters for the case of Korean toponyms. He investigates unique features occurring in the evolution of Hanja toponyms interactively with their Korean scripts *Hangeul* counterparts. He further argues that 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.

Two articles on street naming elaborate how political ramifications may be involved in geographical naming. Phung Thi Thanh Lam’s article takes Hanoi, the state capital, as a case and discusses how the colonial government and post-independent Vietnamese government named the streets after personal

names. Street-naming after personal names in Vietnam is a legacy from the French colonial period. After independence, Hanoi went through different Vietnamese regimes such as the immediate postwar cabinet under Trần Trọng Kim of the short-lived Empire of Vietnam in 1945 and the subsequent Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). Lam's article takes pains to draw on archival sources to illustrate the naming principle behind each stage.

Nowadays, street-naming of state capital of Taiwan, the city of Taipei, has a large number of geographical names from China. This was done by the Republic of China when it represented the victorious allied forces to receive the official surrender of Japan on this island. Very few know the short-lived version of street-naming prior to the imprint of geography of China on the street. Peter Kang's article addresses the lesser known street-naming practices in 1946 by Taiwanese under the Chinese Nationalist dominance, and the subsequent change into the current version of geography of China.

Kratochvíl, Delpada and Perono Cacciafoco convey the general shape of the landscape names of the Abui-speaking area of East Indonesia. By making hand-drawn maps and drawing on information from the oral traditions of the people, the authors succeed in tracking generic-specific naming in Abui. They track down the presence of Abui people in the Alor Islands and their migration route and thus give support for the Out of Africa Theory. Several types of toponyms are found, especially names related to agriculture and horticulture, which is common in Java. It is implied that place names found in the oral traditions can indirectly be used as proof of land ownership and kinship relations.

Xu Duoduo's article deals with lunar mansion names of the western and the eastern branches of Moso People in Yunnan and Sichuan Provinces in China. It goes further to develop into a scholarly work on the etymology of astronomical names in Moso, Pumi, and Yi peoples by looking at their connections with the Chinese and the Tibetan ones. This research succeeds in showing a world view that the people have had in naming those extra-territorial features.

Perdana, Lauder and Lauder's article is about clan (*marga*) names of the Simalungun Batak people of North Sumatra, Indonesia. It introduces how the clan and sub-clan names work. What is exceptional about Batak Simalungun society is that under some circumstances, individuals can change their clan name into a sub-clan name or use both clan and sub-clan names, or not use any clan name at all. Looking into the implications of this, the authors successfully argue that migration, as well as self-awareness of socio-cultural identity, are the main factors shaping such naming practices.

Interests in anthroponyms make up an important part of Asian onomastics. Irena Kałużńska's article on Chinese given names offers a detailed and comprehensive introduction to the Chinese naming system in the

past. To some, Chinese personal name is confusing due to its ideographic-phonemic system. Kałużyńska's article has presented various linguistic and cultural aspect of personal naming in China by various subcategories of names that have been used throughout Chinese history, their linguistic characteristics, the period of their origin, and their cultural or social functions. Thus, we have standard given names, childhood names, and styles or social names for Chinese given names, we well as assumed names, nicknames, clerical names, posthumous memorial names, posthumous temple names, reign titles, honorific titles, nobility titles, official title appellations, position and influence appellations, studio appellations, and adopted names – pseudonym for Chinese appellations. Readers who are interested in the Chinese naming practices would find Kałużyńska's article is a useful systematic enquiry into Chinese naming practices.

Marcienne Martin is conspicuous in deriving her data from a number of novels by Yasunari Kawabata (1899–1972), a Japanese novelist who won the Nobel prize for literature in 1968. She analyzes the lexico-semantics and semiotics of Kawabata's novels published between 1916 and 1961. In particular, the author looks at the names of the characters in his novels over a period of about half a century, during which Japan has undergone a great deal of social and political change. As literary works mirror society, the analysis of the names provides a fascinating insight into anthroponyms in Japan, while also giving data on toponyms.

Veronika V. Robustova addresses the trend of personal names and cultural shift by surveying several online baby name websites situated in Malaysia. The websites provide empirical evidence of which names are most popular and which are falling out of favour. The results show that there are two important categories of names: traditional and modern. Modern names are dependent upon innovations and reflect globalization.

Philippe Ramirez uses an anthropological approach to track anthroponyms, looking at clan affiliation and ethnicity in North East India. Based on data obtained from an electoral register, he produced a name map. This map makes it clear that matrilineal naming dominates over patrilineal naming, and that this centers on the Meghalaya region, with patrilineal naming found more in the north in Assam. In North-East India, surnames are important indicators of social status. There are interesting cases where in a couple, one partner's name is derived from the matrilineal group and the other from the patrilineal group. This is related to the issues of clan membership and ethnicity.

We do not believe that a wide gamut of Asian onomastics, in terms of various diversities of language, ethnicity, culture and social system may be accommodated in just one special issue. It is worthwhile, however, to draw attention to names in the Asian region as a research focus. It is the guest

editors' hope that more interest can be created in this field, which hopefully will lead to more exchange of research ideas and methodologies.

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