



SYMPOSIUM COMMENTARY

“10th International Conference on Geographic Naming and Geographic Education”,

June 28, 2019, Seoul, South Korea

Nina Scholten

As part of a five-day study visit, a delegation of thirteen American and three European Geography teachers attended this summer a conference in South Korea organized by the Northeast Asian History Foundation (NHAF)—a think tank for Northeast Asian history research. The delegation was led by Dr. Joseph Stoltman from Western Michigan University and Siyoung Park, Professor Emerita at Western Illinois University. In his keynote address to the 10th International Conference on Geographic Naming and Geographic Education, Stoltman analyzed the history of the name *East Sea* in U.S. textbook maps and student atlases. Also known as the *Sea of Japan*, this refers to the body of water between the Korean Peninsula and Japan. Stoltman’s analysis revealed a significant increase since the beginning of the twenty-first century in the number of maps that use dual naming in the form *Sea of Japan (East Sea)*. He appealed to Geography teachers to encourage critical thinking among their students by looking beyond the bare location and questioning the reasons behind geographical names.

Most of the subsequent contributions, including some by South Korean academics, focused on the rich and varied issues of geographical naming, with examples from South Korea, the United States of America, and Europe. It was interesting to see how these issues change across different contexts. In New York City, for instance, street toponyms may change as a consequence of gentrification while beaches in Florida are renamed to combat racism; more generally, geopolitical interests can impact toponyms. Where names are contested, Prof. Choo of Kyung Hee University proposed that dual naming offers a possible solution because it respects both names and makes it visible that there is an issue concerning the names.

The program also included a visit to Ewha Girls` High School in Seoul. Located in the city’s Central Business District, this private school for girls has about 1,270 students and 60 teachers. The delegation was invited to attend a Geography lesson on Urban Geography with about 20 students; a senior student translated the content into English. The lesson explored reasons for spatial differentiation (rent, accessibility) and functional division (CBD, subcenters, greenbelts) in cities, based on the example of Seoul. The teacher, a man of about 30, seemed very popular with the students. Although the lesson was delivered in lecture style, using a PowerPoint presentation comprising video clips, news items, maps, statistics, and definitions, he emphasized that the observed teaching is not necessarily representative of Korean teaching. The students listened carefully and seemed very attentive. During the presentation, each student made notes in their Geography book. When asked a question, students immediately responded in an engaged way, stopping when the teacher continued his lecture. This was an excellent opportunity to experience a Geography lesson in another country, and the visit prompted professional reflection and exchange among the delegates.

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The program also included a number of field-trips to explore the Human and Physical Geography of South Korea. The delegation visited the Demilitarized Zone that divides the Korean Peninsula into North and South. The delegates also went to Suwon, a city 30 km south of Seoul, which has expanded dramatically over the last few decades. Suwon is home to the National Geographic Information Institute, where the oldest surviving map of South Korea is displayed. It was also exciting to explore Seoul, the country’s political, economic, cultural, and transportation center, which is a vibrant and densely populated city of more than 10 million inhabitants.

This 2019 visit was the tenth time that the NAHF has hosted a delegation of Geography teachers from the United States. Eurogeo (<http://www.eurogeography.eu/>) is also now sending a delegation, and it is to be hoped that the program will continue to thrive, as it represents a unique opportunity to experience South Korea and to reflect on approaches to Geography teaching.

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