

A Study of Three Korean Family Names: *Kim*, *Seo*, and *Baek*

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Abstract: The geographical distribution patterns of three Korean family names have been studied. *Kim* was found to have uniform distribution, *Seo* southern dominant distribution, and *Baek* northern dominant distribution. *Seo* may have originated in the ancient *Xu* country in China and have a common origin with certain toponyms, and *Baek* may have common etymology with the names of the ancient countries *Goguryeo* and *Baekje*. The geographical distribution of *Baek* and the findings of some ancient bronze mirrors with multiple loops attached in certain geographical areas seem to coincide.

Key words: family name, Korean peninsular, toponym, archaeology, Old Chinese

1. Introduction

This paper aims at examining the patterns of human groups' migration based on Korean family names. In this study, the most common family name *Kim*, a southern dominant family name *Seo*, and a northern dominant name *Baek* are examined.

The primary resource used for the study was published in 1934 under the name of Chosen Sotokufu (1934), of which real name was Zensho Eisuke. It is a collection of charts showing a number of family names in each administrative unit throughout Korea. The charts reflect the initial situation in Korea before World War II. After the war, Korea was divided into two parts, which resulted in population distribution changes as a result of the Korean War (1950–1953). Zensho (1943) analyzed the census and described the relevant villages. This paper is an attempt to analyze the name distribution via a geolinguistic method. The data were input by Ms. Tomoko Kurosawa.

According to Takeda (1984), family names of kings first appeared in 2nd c. BC, and ordinary people who dwelled in big cities began to acquire family names at the end of 10th c. AD on the Korean Peninsula. In fact, the information related to ordinary people was first recorded in a chapter on geography in the *Sejong Chronicle* in 15th c. AD. It is possible that the geographical distribution of family names at the time

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reflected only the situation later. However, Suzuki (2022) revealed that the geographical patterns of Japanese family names correlated with the geographical distribution of the Y chromosome DNA haplogroups as well as that of the genomes, even though family names were inherited from fathers. Although the time stretch of the family names' occurrence was similar to that of the Korean name groups. In this study, it will be shown that the geographical patterns of different family names reflect ancient origins.

2. The name Kim

Kim is the most common family name of the 250 existing ones in Korea. It was the name of 3,821,496 families in Korea on October 1, 1930.

Figure 1 shows the geographical distribution of *Kim*. This map displays the absolute frequency as reported in each location. The frequencies are divided into 5 groups, the biggest being over 12,137 families, and the smallest just under 406. The frequency of the name occurrence is proportional to the size of each location.

Figure 2 shows the relative ratio of the frequency to the size of each location. The statistics come from the national census of 1985, 2000, and 2015 in South Korea and have been provided by the Bureau of Statistics of the Korean government: https://sgis.kostat.go.kr/statbd/family_01.vw?topBottom_onoff=OFF, accessed on July 9, 2023. The ratio in *Kimhae*, which is the assumed place of origin of this family name (depicted with a gray border in the southernmost corner of the map from 2015), equates to around 23%, although the frequency based on the three censuses slightly differs.

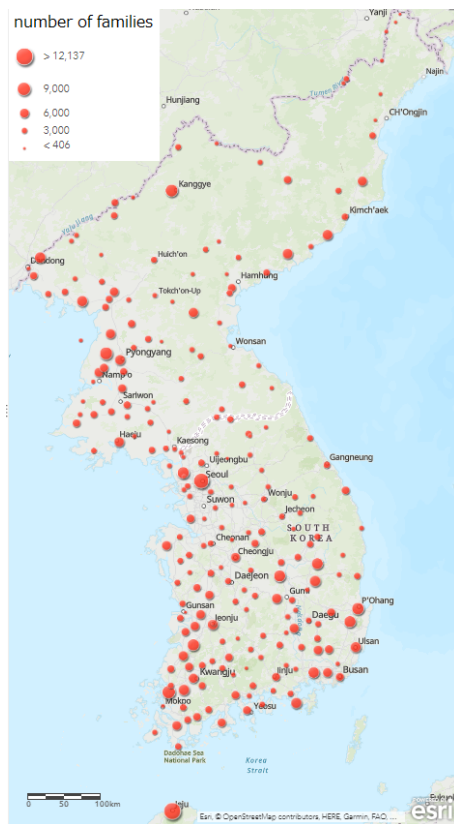


Figure 1: Map of *Kim*.

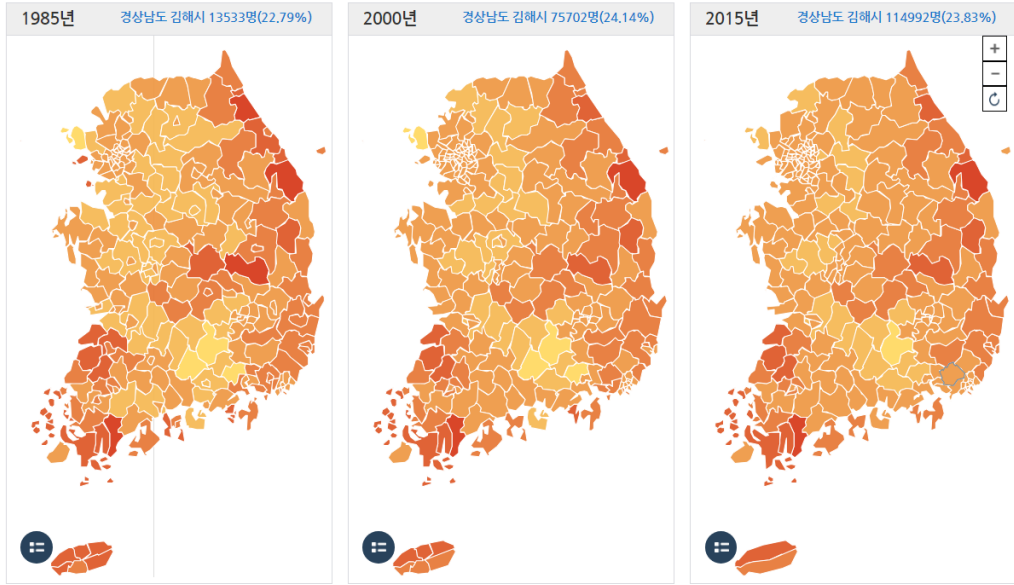


Figure 2: Relative ratio of frequency of *Kim* in each administrative unit.

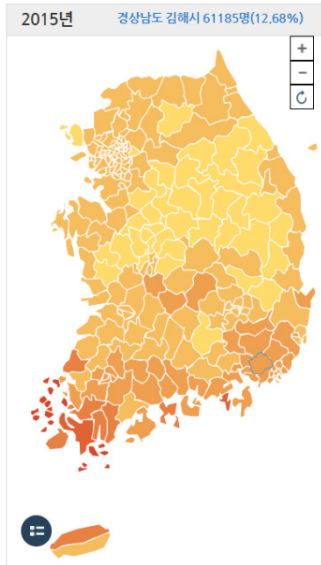


Figure 3: Kimhae *Kim*.

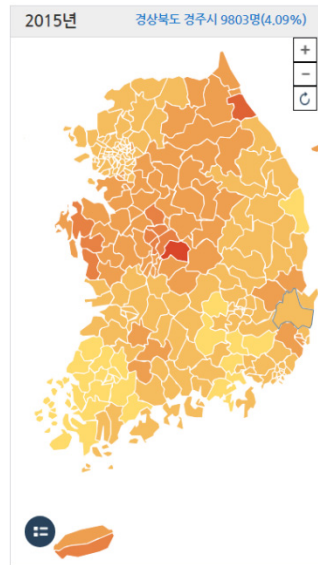


Figure 4: Kyungju *Kim*.

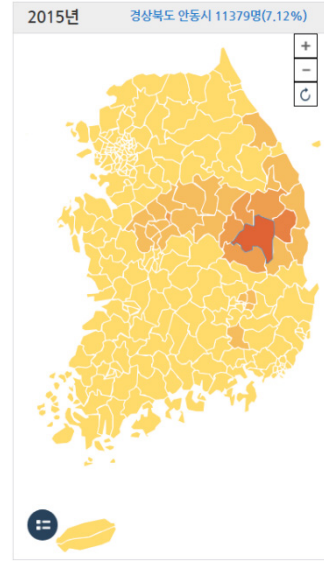


Figure 5: Andong *Kim*.

It is noteworthy that the areas (*bongwan* 本貫) from which the big clans originated are linked to family names. The Korean Bureau of Statistics provided maps of family names endemic to these places.

Figure 3 shows the relative ratio of the name *Kim* from *Kimhae*. It is dense in the southwestern part, while relatively low in the middle area. In contrast, the geographical distribution of *Kim* from *Kyungju*, as shown in Figure 4, seems to exhibit the opposite: The ratio is dense in the middle area and low in the southwestern part. This situation may reveal the migration direction of two human groups: *Kimhae*, once known as the biggest city in the Gaya kingdoms, is located in the southeast, and people migrated westward from there; while *Kyungju*, the capital of Silla, occupied an area more to the north. People migrated to the northwest, where the core area of *Baekje* used to be. Both *Kimhae* and *Kyungju*, the areas of origin of *Kim*, do not have the highest ratios of the name's occurrence.

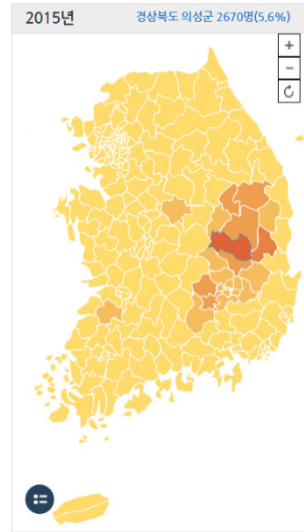


Figure 6: Uiseong *Kim*.

The distribution of *Kim* in *Andong* and *Uiseong* is shown in Figures 5 and 6, respectively. The centers are the areas of origin. Since these areas are much smaller and had less political and economic power than *Kimhae* and *Kyungju*, the areas to which the names spread from there were also smaller and easier to get hold of. In case of *Andong*, people migrated westward, possibly along the Nakdong River; while for *Uiseong*, the direction of migration seems to be northward and southward along the Geumho River, a branch of the Nakdong River.

3. The name Seo

Figure 7 shows three different types of classification based on the same data for the family name *Seo*. The first figure shows five groups with the name held by fewer than 19, 90, 150, 250, and more than 310 families, respectively, and it represents the southwestern dominant distribution. The second figure shows the areas with the name held by fewer than 19, 200, 350, 500, and more than 684 families, respectively, and it represents the southern dominant distribution. The third shows the areas with the name held by fewer than 19, 300, 600, 900, and more than 1,235 families, respectively, and it shows less of a difference in terms of the area size. Figure 8 is the relative ratio map of *Seo* provided by the Korean Bureau of Statistics. It is similar to the second map of

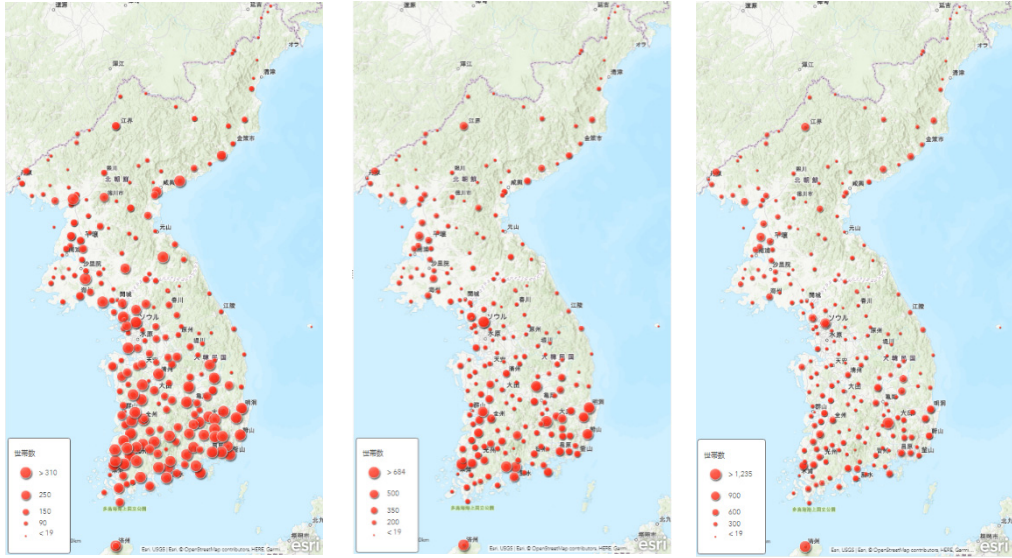


Figure 7: Map of *Seo*.

Figure 7. Here, we see the difficulty in accessing the real tendency of the name occurrence.

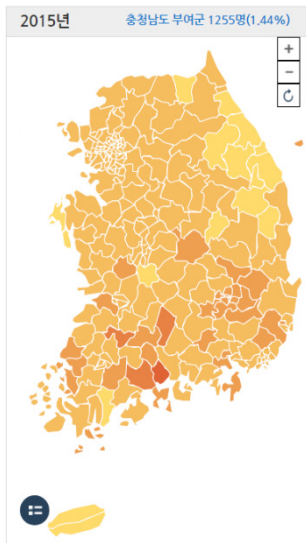


Figure 8: Relative ratio of *Seo*.

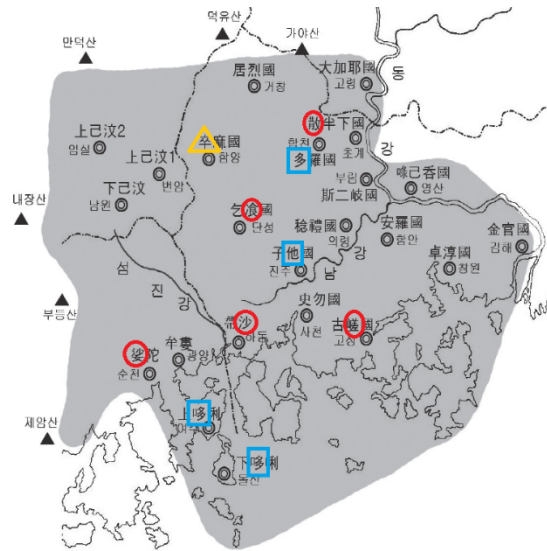


Figure 9: *Sa*, *So*, and *Ta* in Gaya.

Seo 徐 also appears in toponyms. The most famous one is 徐羅伐 *Seorabor*, which was the capital of Silla (57 BC–AD 935). *Bor* means “village” or “city” in Korean. The meaning of *ra* is “place,” or even, possibly, the second element of the Old

Chinese *sə.la for 徐, according to Baxter and Sagart (2014). Here, it served as the meaning of “capital.” The present capital name Seoul came from Middle Korean *Seoβeur*, in which the previous *ra* disappeared, at the same time when the intervocalic [b] underwent lenition to [β], and further disappeared .

Although the Chinese characters used to spell that name were different, the word could be seen frequently among ancient toponyms in the southeastern part of the Korean Peninsula. The base map in Figure 9 has been adopted from Kim (2010: 172). It shows ancient toponyms and their estimated positions in 5th to 6th c. AD, which came from *the Chronicles of Japan* 日本書紀. A red circle denotes the sound *sa, a blue square denotes the sound *ta, and a yellow triangle denotes the sound *so of the same word 徐. *sa reflects its Old Chinese pronunciation, and *so is the Middle Chinese pronunciation, while *ta reflects the result of the sound change of *sa > *a. The etymology of the word *Seo* 徐 may have come from the *Xu* 徐 country (circa 20 BC–512 BC) of China. Its migration to other places is to be discussed in a future paper.

4. The name Baek

Figure 10 shows the geographical distribution of the name *Baek* 白. It is dense near the northwestern border with China, and there are three more areas with frequent occurrence of the name from north to south: along the Taedong River, the Geum River, and the middle basin of the Nakdong River. Its distribution is similar to the geographical distribution of the bronze mirrors with multiple loops attached (see Figure 11, cited from Jeon 1991:453). Jeon (1991) inferred that this reflects the migration of King Jun 準王 from 194 BC to 180 BC.

Figure 12 has been cited from Kobayashi (2019:275). According to his chronological analysis, the original type of the mirror was found in Xiaoheishi 小黑石 in the western Liaoning area and dated back to the Upper Xiajiadian culture in the last half of the Western Zhou dynasty (until 8th c. BC). It spread to East Liaoning around 7th c. to 6th c. BC. Further, it spread to Northwest Korea before 5th c. BC. The type found in Southwest Korea spread directly from West Liaoning. Kobayashi (2009:43) infers that it arrived in the Geum River area before the first half of 4th c. BC, if not sooner, and it spread to North Kyushu almost at the same time. According to Kobayashi’s chronological analysis, the spreading does not have anything to do with the historical migration of King Jun.

The Chinese character 白 is used to represent a part of the sound of the word *maek* 貊, an ancient tribe of the ancient Korean Peninsula. 貊 can be considered as the

etymology of the first syllable of *Baekje* 百濟. There is a myth about the name *Baekje* that it came from *Goguryeo* 高句麗, which was spelled as *bökli* in the Orkhon inscription of 8th c. AD and was written in the Old Turkic alphabet 突厥文字. *Bökli* may be interpreted as composed of *Baek* 貊 and 夷 (barbarian), *gogu* stands for *bök*, while *ryeo* stands for *li*. *Baek* 貊 is also written as 貉, in which the phonetic part is 各, with the initial consonants *kr-. 百, corresponds to the Tibetan b-r-gya, hence it is thought to come from the Old Chinese or common Sino-Tibetan *pʳkʰak, rather than the Old Chinese *pʳak as claimed by Baxter and Sagart (2014). Thus, the family name *Baek* may stand for the ruler class originating from West Liaoning, which spread to the Korean Peninsula, and has a similar sound as that of the ancient countries of *Goguryeo* and *Baekje*.

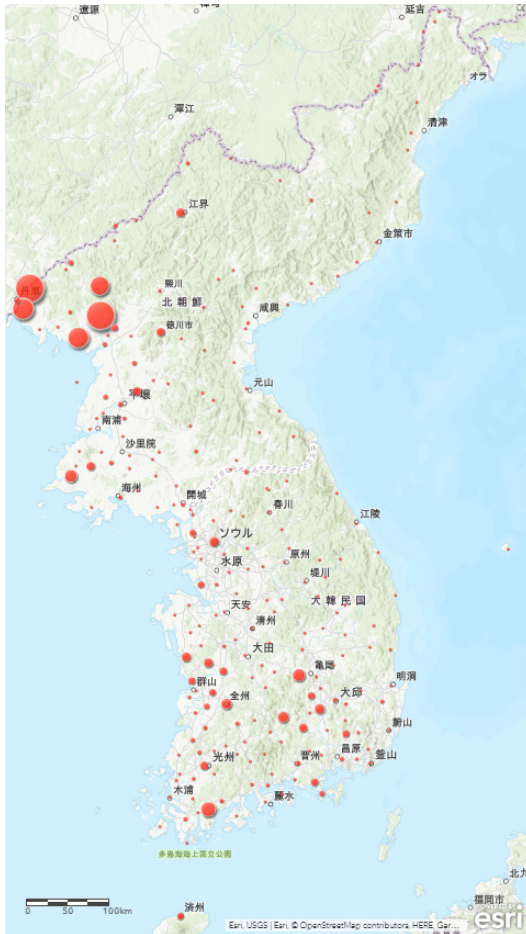


Figure 10: Map of Baek.

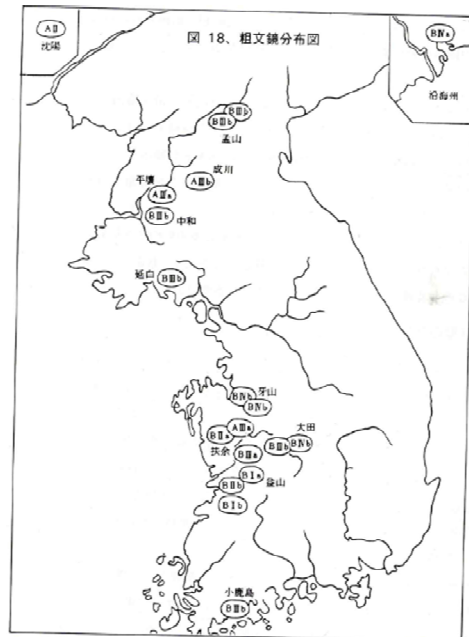


Figure 11: Geographical distribution of bronze mirrors with multiple attachment loops (adopted from Jeon 1991)

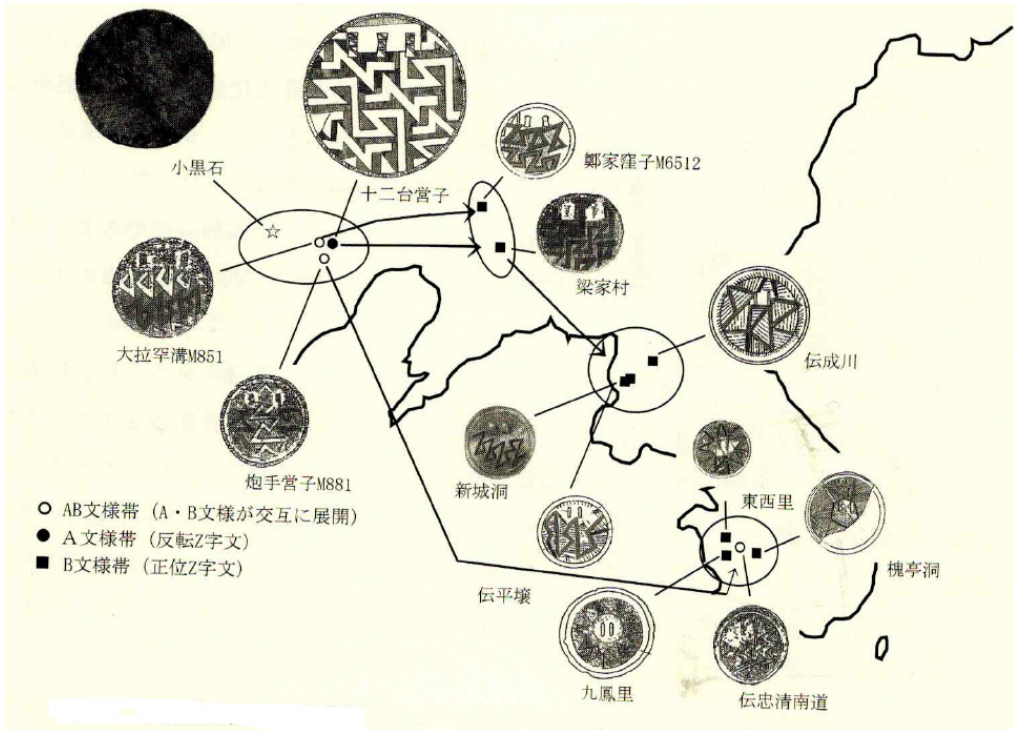


Figure 12: Geographical distribution of bronze mirrors with multiple loops attached (adopted from Kobayashi 2019).

5. Final remarks

Above is a rough sketch that shows the possible reflection of family names on human groups' migration patterns. There are many other family names to be analyzed, which may become the subject of future studies.

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