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**Writing systems: Romanization**

**Romanization of Korean Geographical Names:  
Current Practices and the Way Ahead**

Submitted by the Republic of Korea\*\*

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## **Romanization of Korean Geographical Names**

### **: Current Practices and the Way Ahead**

The official language of the Republic of Korea (ROK) is Korean, and the Korean alphabet is known as *Hangeul*. Invented in the 15th century by Sejong the Great (the fourth king of the Joseon Dynasty), *Hangeul* is the native script of Koreans. Its scientific excellence and originality is highly acclaimed around the world.

Although *Hangeul* is the official Korean alphabet, geographical names are generally transliterated into the Roman alphabet for the convenience of non-Koreans. A set of rules that define the transliteration of *Hangeul* into the Roman alphabet has been created : this process is known as “the romanization of Korean.” Since its inception in 1948, the system has been revised three times by the Government of the Republic of Korea. After two revisions in 1959 and 1984, the current system was officially announced by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism in 2000.

#### **- Practices in the ROK and Abroad**

Since the newly revised romanization of Korean was adopted in 2000, several steps have been taken to put the new system into practice. On road signs along expressways, as well as national and local roads, the transliteration of geographical names was updated to reflect the revised romanization system. Today, almost all road signs throughout the ROK use the new romanization system when transcribing geographical names, and very few road signs still follow the old system. Names of national railway and subway stations, airports and ports are also romanized in accordance with the new system.

Of the three English daily newspapers published in the ROK, two began to adopt the new romanization system shortly after it was introduced in 2000. Only one newspaper still employs the system of the 1950s. The current romanization of Korean is also meticulously applied on various maps of Korea printed in English.

In addition, the new romanization system is being applied when referring to Korean geographical names on webpages run by local governments. Domain names and the URL of local government websites of Korea include the names of regions where each of these local governments are situated, and the revised romanization system is consistently used to cite the names of these regions.

Only a few cases do not follow the newly revised romanization of Korean, and these include proper nouns which include a reference to a geographical name such as Pusan National University and Cheju National University. Under the new system, "Pusan" and "Cheju" should be transcribed as "Busan" and "Jeju". However, these universities continue to use "Pusan" and "Cheju" in their titles because of the likely confusion that might be caused by changing the long-established and widely known names of their institutions. A similar situation exists with the name of the regional broadcaster, Taegu Broadcasting System based in Daegu. Of course, the name of the city itself is transcribed as "Daegu" following the new romanization system, but the broadcasting company still uses TBS as its name. Another example is the Pusan International Film Festival (PIFF) held

annually in Busan. Although the city name is firmly established as "Busan" in accordance with the revised system in most instances, it is transcribed as "Pusan" in the name of this film festival.

While within the ROK there is widespread consistency in the romanization of geographical names in following the revised system, this is not the case in other countries. Although some books follow the latest romanization system adopted by the Korean government when citing Korean geographical names, others use different systems. This is also the situation in the case of English language maps as well as electronic maps available on some websites. In both types of encyclopedias - hard and electronic - examples that follow the Korean government's romanization system, and also those that do not, can be found.

### - Our Goals

The lack of consistency outside Korea in romanizing Korean geographical names is a problem which requires immediate attention. The main reason why Korean geographical names are transcribed in different ways outside Korea is that the formerly used McCune-Reischauer Romanization system is still commonly applied around the world. Romanizing Korean geographical names according to the McCune-Reischauer system dates back a considerable time. The system was created by two Americans, George M. McCune and Edwin O. Reischauer, in 1939. It has been used extensively in the West since then. Westerners knowledgeable about Korea are therefore familiar with the system and are not readily willing to abandon it.

However, its continued use is not recommended as romanizing geographical names using the McCune-Reischauer system poses a serious problem in a number of respects. The reasons are as follows: The McCune-Reischauer system uses scripts such as "p", "t", "k", and "ch" as well as symbols like "ö" and "ü". Using these symbols is very difficult and sometimes even impossible. It is extremely inconvenient to display "ö" or "ü" on the Internet and moreover, it is impossible to use these diacritical marks in domain names. There is therefore no choice but to instead transcribe "ö" and "ü" as "o" and "u". However, if "o" is used in place of "ö", then "ㅑ" and "ㅓ", two vowels in the Korean alphabet, are not distinguishable from each other and are transcribed in the same way. For instance, as a result of following the above principle, "신천" and "신촌," two geographical names pronounced quite differently in Korean, would be transliterated identically in Roman letters and become indistinguishable. "신천" and "신촌" are different stations on Seoul Subway Line 2 and it is absolutely necessary for these names to be transliterated differently. In Korean, "ㅑ" and "ㅓ" are two completely separate vowels and must be distinguished from each other. Therefore, a system transliterating "ㅑ" into "ö" and "ㅓ" into "o" is undesirable and even creates a risk of confusion. The same situation is encountered in the case of "ㅡ" and "ㅓ". Under the old system, "ㅡ" should be transcribed as "ü" and "ㅓ" as "u". However, since inscribing "ü" itself is difficult, it is likely to be written as simply "u". This results in using the same Roman alphabet for both "ㅡ" and "ㅓ". However, "ㅡ" and "ㅓ" are very different Korean vowel sounds and it is important that they always be clearly distinguished from each other in Korean.

The revised romanization of Korean introduced by the government in 2000 completely resolves these problems inherent in the McCune-Reischauer system. With the translation of "ㅑ" and "ㅓ" into "eo" and "o", respectively, as well as "ㅡ" and "ㅓ" into "eu" and "u," respectively, each of

these vowels become distinguishable to those who don't read Korean script. Moreover, in this new romanization system, "ㅋ," "ㆁ," "ㅈ," and "ㅊ" are transcribed as "k", "t", "p", and "ch", respectively, instead of the formerly used "k'", "t'", "p'", and "ch'". It is therefore no longer necessary to use the symbol " ' " (apostrophe). In the McCune-Reischauer system, "ㄱ", "ㄷ", "ㅍ", and "ㅈ" were transcribed as "k", "t", "p", and "ch", respectively, and not distinguished clearly from "k'," "t'," "p'," and "ch'," which were the romanization of "ㅋ", "ㆁ", "ㅈ", and "ㅊ". In the revised romanization of 2000, "ㄱ", "ㄷ", "ㅍ", and "ㅈ" are transcribed as "g", "d", "b", and "j" and are well distinguished from "ㅋ", "ㆁ", "ㅈ", and "ㅊ".

It is important that the romanization of Korean geographical names be standardized as soon as possible. In fact, the foundation for this is already in place. The romanization of Korean proclaimed in 2000 is a very convenient system to use, and well reflects the features of the Korean language. Under the McCune-Reischauer Romanization system still being widely followed in the West, breves and apostrophes are inconvenient to use on the Internet and computer. On the other hand, such problems are not encountered in the romanization of Korean applied by the ROK government.

#### **- Pending Issue : Unifying Romanization Systems Used in the Republic of Korea and Democratic People's Republic of Korea**

Korea was divided into two countries in 1945. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and the Republic of Korea (ROK) have two different systems of romanization. The use of two different romanization systems for a single language clearly presents a problem. The systems should be unified into one. In particular, assuming that the two countries will be unified into one country some day, it would be desirable for the romanization systems to be standardized prior to the unification of the two countries. However, given that the two countries are separated as of yet, unifying the romanization systems poses a challenge.

Linguists of North and South Korea have been discussing the matter of unifying the languages of the two countries since the 1990s. Especially since 2001, leading organizations in both countries in the field of language policies, the National Institute of the Korean Language in South Korea and the Linguistic Research Center of the Academy of Social Sciences in North Korea, have met to discuss linguistic standards. As a result, the two parties reached an agreement in 2005 to publish a 'unified dictionary,' merging the languages of the two countries. They are conducting joint research projects on various dialects and engaging in detailed discussions on the matter of unifying standards for the compilation of the dictionary. No detailed agreement has been reached between the two Koreas regarding the Roman orthography as yet, but it is envisaged that continued discussions between the two parties will lead to a well-defined and reasonable method for linguistic standards.

#### **- General Opinions on Romanization of Geographical Names in Non-Roman Characters.**

All languages using non-Roman characters have romanization systems. Not only Korean, but Russian, Greek, Hebrew, Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, and Thai languages all have systems for romanizing their alphabets. However, just as in the ROK, the systems used within a country are often different from those used overseas. This quickly leads to confusion. In selecting a system for

standardization, convenience should be the top priority. The matter of how easy it is to use should be the paramount consideration, rather than how extensively a system has been used around the world. Throughout the globe, since the late 20th century, the Internet has become an integral part of our daily lives. Romanization should not be inconvenient to use in the age of the Internet.

Another requirement in selecting a system for standardization is that the system should be designed to well-reflect phonological features of the language. Phonological contrasts of a language should also be clearly discerned through Roman characters. User-friendliness and representation of unique features of a language should be more significant considerations, rather than years of habit, in deciding how to romanize a language.

### <References>

#### Examples of romanization of Korean geographical names

서울 Seoul  
부산 Busan  
대구 Daegu

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