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Korean Romanisation: A Response to Chris Doll

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Chris Doll challenges the continued use of the McCune-Reischauer System of Korean Romanization in his article 'Korean Rōmaniz'atiōn: Is it finally time for the Library of Congress to stop promoting Mccune Reischauer and Adopt the Revised Romanization Scheme?'.¹ My simple response to this suggestion is, 'No! They should not!' Jinwung Kim in the most recently published, in-depth survey history of Korea (2012) discusses the Romanization of East Asian names and terms used throughout his book. Stating why he uses the McCune-Reischauer system Kim says that it is the system 'now universally used' while also mentioning that he uses *pinyin* for Chinese for the same reason.²

In an article written in 2006 and cited by Mr. Doll,³ I make the point that a 'system of romanisation is a linguistic transcription system which exists in order to transcribe the words, terms, and phrases of a language which is not written in the Latin alphabet into that system of writing. Such systems, thus, have one principal purpose and one purpose only, to enable non-native speakers of a given language to pronounce these words, terms, and phrases in such a way that the native speaker of the language understands them'. That is, a system of Romanization is primarily a means for the representation of the sounds of a language not using a Latin alphabet-based script into that alphabet.

Another important consideration in the debate about Romanization is consistency. This is true on two levels. First, a system must be consistent within itself. That is, one rule of application must not contradict another. This is important when considering the Revised Romanization system, because it is inconsistent. Second, for the purpose of scholarship and general usage, a system should be adopted which has a proven track record over time, and has been widely used because of its advantages.

A system of Romanization has many uses both in scholarship and in everyday life. It may be used for teaching purposes, but it is almost never used for the purposes of language acquisition.⁴ Mr. Doll in his article focusses on the importance of Romanization systems in information retrieval. This is a valid reason, but it is not the most important purpose for any system of Romanization. A Romanization system represents sounds, and it is this representation which is retrieved. Any system of Romanization should not be adopted simply because it *might be easier* to retrieve. Technology should be adapted to help us do what we have to do, not to restrict what we do because of the limits of current technology.

In Romanizing the Korean language, a choice has to be made between the representation of the sounds of words, or the sounds of individual letters in the original script. Korean is a highly complex language both in terms of its grammar and its phonology, with a key feature being sound change between syllables. Up to the 1960s, all systems of Romanization were transcription systems and not transliteration systems. This meant that defining the parameters of words was crucial, unlike a transliteration system which substitutes one letter for a Latin letter. However, a transliteration system for Korean (which always will ignore sound changes between syllables) creates problems because the words are written in a way which distorts the sounds of the words *as they are spoken*.

In the 1960s, the Korean Government devised a letter-for-letter substitution system (MOE for Ministry of Education) because it was easy for Koreans to use. It quickly died. There was no compulsion to use it, and papers and journals used McCune-Reischauer (M-R) as did organizations and scholars outside of Korea. In the 1970s, MOE was brought out of the 'decent obscurity into which it had fallen' in the inimitable words of an eminent Koreanist, the late Bishop C. Richard Rutt. This revised MOE system was widely promoted by the Korean Government because it was suitable for the emerging 'electronic age', and because you could read back from MOE into the Korean alphabet. The problem with MOE was that it did not take into account sound change between syllables, used 'hard' consonants where the consonant was 'soft' in Korean, and used the combinations 'eo' and 'eu' for Korean vowels instead of using a diacritical mark. The problem with using 'eo' and 'eu' for the Korean letters ㅐ and ㅑ is that those combination of letters do not exist in any major European language and will always be read as two separate sounds.

Because of the resistance to using the revised MOE system, in the 1980s the Korean Government adopted a slightly revised version of M-R because M-R produced a better approximation to actual Korean sound. M-R was used officially but there was no formal compulsion over its use. However, it became the standard for Romanization both inside and outside of Korea for the next twenty years.

Then in 2000, the Korean Government introduced 'out of the blue' yet another system, the Revised Romanization System (RR). This was the fourth officially approved system (including M-R) since the foundation of the Republic. Although it is called a revised system, RR is not a revision of anything. It is a hybrid system which takes account of some features of the MOE system, such as the use of 'hard' consonants and the strange 'eo' and 'eu' forms. However, unlike MOE, RR does recognise sound changes between syllables, Because the 'hard' consonants produce surnames such as 'Gim' and words such as 'gimchi' it is no wonder people are reluctant to adopt RR.

RR also does strange things such as using a 'hard' consonant in the initial position in a word, and then a 'soft' consonant in the final position. The sound of the same Korean letter in the initial and final position in a word is the same sound in actual pronunciation. However, the same letter in the medial position in a word will be a 'hard' consonant, representing a change in sound which is not represented by the

Korean alphabet. For example, the modern Korean art song 가곡 (歌曲) is written in M-R as 'kagok', in MOE as 'gagog', and RR as 'gagok'. M-R correctly represents the sound and is consistent with its Romanisation rules. The MOE is consistent with its rules (letter for letter substitution), but misrepresents the pronunciation of the word. RR being a hybrid system is the worst of the three. It indicates that the same letter in the initial and final position in a word is pronounced differently, when it is the same sound. When the word for 'law' (법, 法) which uses the letter 'ㅃ' is Romanized using RR it becomes 'beop' and in MOE 'beob'. Both are unintelligible. M-R 'pöp', however, is close to the original sound. Contrary to what Mr. Doll suggests, the RR system is not 'more than adequate for pronunciation'.⁵ It is clearly the worst of the three (M-R, MOE and RR) because it distorts Korean pronunciation and also adds sounds which aren't there. MOE is a consistent letter-for-letter transcription system whereas RR is not consistent in its representations of the sounds of individual letters or whole words.

In terms of 'consistency', the M-R system is the most consistent, commonly used system for the representation of the sound of Korean words as affirmed by Jinwung Kim cited above. There is a very good reason why this is so. Contrary to what Mr. Doll states,⁶ M-R is NOT the creation of George McCune and Edwin O. Reischauer. They never claimed this, and moreover specifically gave credit to the three men who actually devised it. Ch'oe Hyönbae, Chöng Insöp and Kim Sön'gi were the three most important Korean phoneticians of their generation.⁷ They were very well aware of what the various problems are in transcribing Korean into the Roman alphabet. They recognised that there is no practical alternative to representing Korean vowel sounds without using diacritical marks. They recognised the issue of sound change between syllables. They recognised the need to use the apostrophe to separate the Latin letters 'n' and 'g' in cases where not to do so would result in a nasalised sound. They recognised the need to represent aspiration by an apostrophe.⁸

When these three phoneticians created their system in the 1930s, there were perhaps seven other systems which had been or were being used. The fact that their system gained almost immediate approval everywhere indicates the soundness of their judgement on difficult issues. It is important to remember that M-R was *the* system of Romanization used by *all* south Korean governments from Liberation in 1945, through the American military government period and into the period of an independent nation until the 1960s. Even in the periods when MOE was used, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs always used M-R. In the 1980s the ROK Government adopted M-R everywhere. This means that from its inception in the 1930s for over 60 years, M-R was *the* system for Romanizing Korean, and it was so because of its superiority for the purposes for which a Romanization system exists – to represent as accurately as possible the sounds of a language in the Latin script.

There is another (sentimental) reason for supporting the use of the so-called McCune-Reischauer system. This system was the only commonly used transcription system for an East Asian language until the use of *pinyin* which was created by local, not Western, scholars. The Korean case is different from the cases

of the Romanization of Chinese, Japanese or Vietnamese. This point is immensely important. These phoneticians, the most significant figures of their day, wanted a system which could accurately represent their nation's language during a period of foreign occupation – and when their language was not allowed to be used officially.

One final point can be made. Mr. Doll states that 'The Library of Congress shifting from a pronunciation based Romanization scheme to a more user-friendly scheme is not unheard.'⁹ I am not entirely sure what the distinction between a Romanization system representing the sounds of a language and a 'user-friendly' one is. I presume by 'user-friendly' that he means the absence of the use of diacritical marks. He cites the case of the adoption of the *pinyin* system from the Wade-Giles system, and refers to the omission of diacritical marks as a positive feature. However, the use of diacritics in *pinyin* is essential for distinguishing tones, a linguistic feature which is as important to Chinese as aspiration is to Korean. Likewise, it is important in transcribing Japanese to use a macron for indicating the difference between the two 'o' sounds. The use of diacritical marks in transcribing languages, such as Korean, cannot be avoided. Most European languages also have to use them such as French, German, and Polish to name a few. It is the paucity of the sounds of the Latin alphabet which is the issue, not the use of diacritical marks which compensate for this lack.

I would conclude this note by making the same suggestion as I did in my 2006 article that the system called McCune-Reischauer should be known in future as the Ch'oe-Chöng-Kim (CCK) system to honour the three phoneticians who created it. It is their monument.

¹ Doll, Chris (2017). 'Korean Rōmaniz'atiōn: Is it finally time for the Library of Congress to Stop Promoting Mccune-Reischauer and Adopt the Revised Romanization Scheme?' *Journal of East Asian Libraries*, 165: 1- 28. In writing the word 'Romanization' as 'Rōmaniz'atiōn' I believe that Mr. Doll wishes to show that the McCune-Reischauer System is eccentric and strange. In my article of 2006 (see endnote 3 below) I demonstrate why it is logical, consistent and the best system currently being used.

² Jinwung Kim (2012). *A History of Korea: From Land of the Morning Calm to States in Conflict*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana UP, p. xv.

³ Grayson, James Huntley (2006). 'The New Government Romanisation System: Why was it necessary?' *Journal of East Asian Libraries*, 140: 49-59.

⁴ Doll, p. 10. Mr. Doll has misunderstood a remark I made about using transcribed Korean phrases for teaching high school students how to greet visiting students from an exchange high school in Seoul. These secondary school students were not studying the Korean language and only needed to learn a few basic phrases so that they could welcome their visiting peers from Korea. I have never known anyone teaching students who are formally learning the Korean language who would use transcription at any stage.

⁵ Doll, p. 10.

⁶ Doll, p. 4.

⁷ George M. McCune and Edwin O. Reischauer (1939). 'Romanization of the Korean Language Based upon its Phonetic Structure', *Transactions of the Korea Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, v. 29, p. 1.

⁸ An early option to represent aspiration (not used by these scholars) was to add an 'h', to an aspirated consonant. Thus P'yŏngyang was written as Phyŏngyang. This caused confusion because the 'ph' combination would be read as an 'f'. An example of this usage may be found on the map of the Korean peninsula in Isabella Bird Bishop (1898) *Korea and Her Neighbours: A Narrative of Travel, with an Account of the Recent Vicissitudes and Present Position of the Country* (repr. Seoul: Yonsei UP, 1970), insert between pages 10 and 11.

This inappropriate use of letters to represent a sound also points up why the combinations 'eo' and 'eu' are not a good choice for representing certain Korean vowels. They will always be read as two separate sounds.

⁹ Doll, p. 12.