

# Always mangle Korean names? It might not be your fault

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The Associated Press

**S**EOUL, South Korea — Impeached President Park Geun-hye's surname is "Park," right? Nope. In Korean it's closer to "Bahk." Park's allegedly corrupt confidante, Choi Soon-sil, pronounces her name more like "Chwey" than the way it's rendered in English. And Samsung's ailing chairman, Lee Kun-hee? That English "Lee" is more like "Yi" or "Li" in Korean.

There is a gulf, often a wide one, between the way Koreans write their names in English and the way they actually sound.

Even the ubiquitous "Kim" — the moniker of beloved South Korean Olympic figure skating champion Yuna Kim and North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un — belies: It's pronounced "Ghim" in Korean.

While the flubs of foreigners who take the Romanized spellings literally cause smirks for the bilingual, the mispronunciations can also create confusion and embarrassment among visiting politicians, tourists, and business people.

The disputed reasons behind the discrepancies are linked to a complex mix of history, American influence, herd mentality, and individual quirks.

Here's a brief look:

## The History

South Korea's guidelines for converting the Korean language into the Roman alphabet were last revised in 2000 to try to get road signs, places, internet domain names, guidebooks, and surnames closer to their actual Korean pronunciations.

When those rules are applied to surnames, "Lee" should be "I" (pronounced "Ii"), "Kim" should be "Gim," "Park" should be "Bak," and "Choi" should be "Choe." But because people can decide how to spell their own names, many simply go with the way everyone else does it, which means they follow what their families have favored for generations.

So Kim, Park, and Lee still dominate.

Experts differ about the origins of these English spellings of Korean surnames.

Some think that when South Korea was briefly under U.S. military rule following the end of Japan's 1910-1945 colonial occupation, Americans chose existing English names or words — such as Kim, Lee, and Park — for Korean pronunciations that sounded similar. Others say it was South Koreans who started borrowing those recognizable English words.

When there wasn't any easy match in English, South Koreans simply settled for spellings that "felt O.K.," according to



**KOREAN CONUNDRUM.** A boy (top photo) sits on a screen showing Korean traditional characters at the National Hangeul Museum in Seoul, South Korea. Impeached President Park Geun-hye's surname is "Park," right? Nope. In Korean, it's closer to "Bahk." Park's allegedly corrupt confidante, Choi Soon-sil, pronounces her name more like "Chwey" than the way it's rendered in English. There is a gulf, often a wide one, between the way Koreans write their names in English and the way they actually sound. In the bottom photo, a dual-language traffic sign written in Korean and English is displayed over a road in Seoul, South Korea. (AP Photos/Ahn Young-joon)



Brother Anthony of Taize, a British-born scholar and prolific translator of Korean literature.

The spellings of some names are linked to a 1939 Romanization system invented by two Americans that was widely used before the 2000 revision.

Isolated, proud Pyongyang uses a variant of the old system. "Kim" is the same in both Koreas, but the southern "Lee" and "Park" are "Ri and "Pak" in the North.

## The mistakes

English mispronunciation, of course, happens in many languages that don't use the Roman alphabet, but the list of foul-ups by foreigners relying on the confusing Korean system is long.

During a joint news conference with South Korean President Park Geun-hye in Washington in October 2015, President Barack Obama called her "Park," just as it sounds in English, not "Bahk." When he held another joint press conference with Park's predecessor, Lee Myung-bak, in

2012, he pronounced his name as "Lee," not "Ii."

If Obama, who has a staff of Korean experts, couldn't get it right, your average visitor to South Korea is doomed.

In some ways, the new Romanization rules are as bad as the old ones.

For instance, an affluent southern area in Seoul, and the inspiration for the world-dominating 2012 song by South Korean rapper PSY, is spelled "Gangnam." The first part of this word will look to many English speakers without any Korean like the first syllable of the word "gangster." But a better spelling is "Gahngnam."

A southern town famous for traditional red pepper paste is spelled "Sunchang." Many English speakers pronounce the first part of the word as "sun" from "sunshine;" it's actually "soonchahng."

The rules are simply too far off from the reality, according to Yaang Byungsun, a linguist at South Korea's Jeonju University. "It's a system that no one, except for South Koreans, can pronounce," he said.

## Uprooted by war, fearing troops, Myanmar girls learn karate

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sexual violence.

The Kachin Women's Association of Thailand and the Legal Aid Network last year released a report on the lack of progress of investigators in the brutal 2015 rape and murder of two Kachin volunteer teachers. Dozens of soldiers were housed close to the rape scene, and several left shortly before the bodies were discovered, but no suspects have been identified.

Prosecutions have been few. In 2014, a soldier was sentenced to seven years in prison for raping a seven-year-old Kachin girl in northern Shan state. Accused Myanmar soldiers normally face a military tribunal, but in that case, lawyers successfully pressed for a civilian trial.

Ethnic minorities overwhelmingly voted for Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy party last year, helping it replace an elected but military-dominated government. But many are now

disappointed with her government's efforts to resolve a host of ethnic conflicts and what they see as the military's impunity.

"Without talking about human-rights violations and ignoring the truth and justice for the victims, there won't be a real peace and national reconciliation in our country," said Julia Marip, secretary of the Women's League of Burma.

With little confidence that soldiers will be held to account for misdeeds, the girls in the karate class hope to at least deter them from committing any to begin with. They compete with each other, and some have dreams of fighting professionally.

"Our instructor said we can go abroad to learn more skills, and I want to go overseas and be a professional fighter," said 14-year-old Nu Ja.

"When they know how to defend themselves," said Hkun Naw, the instructor, "they will be able to protect their families, their people, and their country."

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