

# Korean Language and Literature

## Spoken Language

The Korean spoken language is related to both Altaic — which includes the Turkish, Mongolian, and Manchu-Tungus language groups — and Japanese. (Although Chinese belongs to a separate linguistic family, because of a long history of contact, the Korean language has absorbed a large number of Chinese words.) In general, words in Korean are pronounced without accent and flat in tone. Seven main dialects are spoken on the peninsula; the dialect of the inhabitants of Seoul, Korea's capital, is considered Standard Korean.

Some basic rules of pronunciation follow.

Consonants are pronounced as in English. The vowels are largely regular in pronunciation and resemble those of Italian and Spanish.

- a = ah, as in father
- o = oh or aw (rounded sound), as in call
- u = oo, as in roof, soup
- i = ee, as in kimchi, he, me, thee
- e = eh (short sound), as in get, set
- ae = eh, as in bed
- oe = eh, but slightly rounded at the outset, similar to well

Short vowels, which are usually romanized with a breve (˘) are pronounced:

- ö = uh, as in onion
- ü = uh, close to cut, but shorter

Romanized consonants such as *k*, *t*, *p*, and *ch* are pronounced as they appear (voiced) when they occur between vowels or follow nasals (*n*, *m*, *ng*). When these letters are in the initial or final positions of a word, they are pronounced as *g*, *d*, *b*, or *j* (voiceless). For example, Paekche and Koryö are properly pronounced Behk-cheh and Guh-ryuh, respectively, with the *b* and *g* pronounced more softly than in English.

## Written Language

Koreans adopted the Chinese written system sometime between the first century B.C. and the second century A.D. Characters were used either to convey meaning, as in China, or phonetic information, when required to accommodate the Korean language. All books and documents were written with Chinese characters, much as Latin was employed in Europe, until the mid-fifteenth century. In 1446, at the order of King Sejong (r. 1418–50), the Korean phonetic alphabet, originally called *hunmin jōngūm* (“the correct sounds to teach people”), was developed. This unique system is based on symbols, clustered into syllable blocks, derived from the shape of various parts of the mouth when speaking the specific sound. For example, the *han’gŭl* letter *n* suggests the tongue touching the upper teeth when pronouncing that sound. The modern alphabet, which is comprised of twenty-four characters, is called *han’gŭl* (see table below). While Chinese characters combined with Korean pronunciation are still found in some instances in proper names, *han’gŭl* is used almost exclusively. The invention of *han’gŭl* is celebrated annually on October 9.

Vowels Consonants	ㅏ (a)	ㅑ (ya)	ㅓ (ó)	ㅕ (yó)	ㅗ (o)	ㅛ (yo)	ㅜ (u)	ㅠ (yu)	ㅡ (ü)	ㅣ (i)
ㄱ (k,g)	가	가	거	겨	고	교	구	규	그	기
ㄴ (n)	나	나	너	녀	노	뇨	누	뉴	느	니
ㄷ (t,d)	다	다	더	더	도	도	두	듀	드	디
ㄹ (r,l)	라	랴	러	려	로	료	루	류	르	리
ㅁ (m)	마	먀	머	며	모	묘	무	뮤	므	미
ㅂ (p,b)	바	뵤	버	뵤	보	뵤	부	뷰	브	비
ㅅ (s,sh)	사	샤	서	셔	소	쇼	수	슈	스	시
ㅇ *	아	야	어	여	오	요	우	유	으	이
ㅈ (ch,j)	자	쟈	저	져	조	죠	주	쥬	즈	지
ㅊ (ch')	차	챤	쳐	춰	초	쵸	추	쥬	츠	치
ㅋ (k')	카	카	커	겨	코	교	쿠	규	크	키
ㅌ (t')	타	타	터	터	토	토	투	튜	트	티
ㅍ (p')	파	파	퍼	퍼	포	표	푸	퓨	프	피
ㅎ (h)	하	하	허	허	호	효	후	휴	흐	히

## Romanization

The Metropolitan Museum follows the McCune-Reischauer romanization system for Korean names and terms, with the use of apostrophes following the conventions of the *Basic Glossary of Korean Studies* (Seoul: The Korea Foundation, 1993, [www.kofo.or.kr/english](http://www.kofo.or.kr/english)). Conveying the Korean language with the Roman alphabet is problematic, and there are a number of romanization methods. Furthermore, newspapers and nonacademic texts frequently omit the breve and apostrophes. (For example, the proper McCune-Reischauer romanization of “spicy pickles” is *kimch’i*, although *kimchee* and *kimchi* are commonly used.)

The apostrophe is used for two purposes: to show aspiration (*k’*, *t’*, *p’*, and *ch’*) and to indicate the difference between a syllable ending in *-ng* and a syllable that ends with an *n’* followed by one that begins with a *g*. For example, the fantastic animal *haet’ae* is pronounced heh-teh, and the Korean pronunciation of Han’guk (Korea) is Hahn-gook (with a softened final *k*). *Si* is sounded as *shee*; for instance, Silla kingdom is pronounced Sheel-la.

In the year 2000, the government of the Republic of Korea introduced a revised romanization system for the Korean language, designed in part to eliminate the reliance on the breve and the apostrophe to differentiate vowels and consonants. For a description of this system, see *The Revised Romanization of Korean* (Seoul: National Academy of the Korean Language, Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2000).

## Korean Traditional Literature

Korea has a long tradition of orally transmitted literature, which probably owes its roots to religious communal ceremonies. Popular plays performed by masked actors and puppets, dramatically sung arias (*p’ansori*), and legends, all of which are often combined with music and dance, are literary forms that derive from the ancient oral tradition.

Poetry constitutes the earliest documented form of Korean literature. The oldest Korean poems date to the Silla period (57 B.C.–668 A.D.) and are in a form known as *hyangga* (native songs). Strongly religious in character, these poems consist of four, eight, or ten lines and have a melodic quality suggesting that they were sung. *Changga*, or “long poems,” were popular during the Koryŏ period (918–1392), especially among female performers known as *kisaeng* (skilled entertainers similar to the Japanese geisha). Each stanza of a *changga* concludes with a refrain that sets the mood of the poem, which most often is about romantic love. The most enduring poetic form in Korean literature

is the *sijo* (popular melody), which was especially appreciated in the Chosŏn era (1392–1910) and was composed by both Confucian scholars and *kisaeng*. Typically made up of three lines of fourteen to sixteen syllables each, *sijo* treat a range of themes, from Confucian morality to nature and love. Coincident with Korea's dominant philosophies, poems often contain a sense of the transitory quality of life and the importance of nature. Because many were composed spontaneously, as part of social gatherings, personal encounters, or seasonal celebrations, Korean poetry often conveys a sense of immediacy and improvisation.

The earliest Korean narratives are myths and folk tales, such as the creation legend of Tan'gun (see **Lesson Plan 3: Illustrated Manuscript**, p. 126) and the lives of ancient kings recorded in the standard history *Samguk yusa* (Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms), compiled in the thirteenth century. Like poetry, native Korean prose was written in Chinese characters adapted phonetically to the Korean language, until *han'gŭl* became widely used in the nineteenth century. Korean scholars of the Chosŏn period frequently wrote moralizing fiction set in China, reflecting their professional interests and Confucian education. Similarly, their nonfiction writings included historical accounts, biographies, autobiographies, and travel notes. Stories written by commoners often were inspired by older tales and recorded events.

### References

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## Symbols in Korean Art and Culture

<b>Animals</b>	Bat	good fortune
	Butterfly	wedded bliss, longevity
	Carp	success in career; courage, endurance, vigor; wish for sons
	Crane	longevity, dignity
	Deer	longevity
	Dragon	water spirit; power, authority, good luck, success; controls rain and fire, fertility; royalty; symbol of king
	Duck	marital happiness
	Fish	peaceful, leisurely life, fertility
	Magpie	good news
	Ox	peaceful life (living in seclusion), composure
	Phoenix	uprightness, benevolence, justice, peace, royalty; symbol of queen
	Tiger	mountain spirit; strength, bravery, protection, gratitude (repayment of kindness)
	Turtle	good luck, longevity, protection
Wild goose	good luck, marital happiness	

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<b>Plants</b>	Bamboo	integrity, moral principles
	Grape	fertility
	Lotus	fertility (lotus blossom); brotherhood (root and stem)
	Maehwa	(Japanese apricot tree) eternal youth
	Peach	longevity, marital happiness
	Peony	wealth, glory
	Pine	integrity, longevity
	Pomegranate	wealth, fertility

## Colors

Blue	east	wood	a sour taste	pleasure	spring	perfect virtue
White	west	metal	a spicy taste	anger	fall	righteousness
Red	south	fire	a bitter taste	joy	summer	propriety
Black	north	water	a salty taste	sadness	winter	intelligence
Yellow	center	earth	a sweet taste	greed		faith

Blue positive element in nature (expels evil spirits); birth, life, vitality, longevity, good luck, dignity; color of the humble

White holiness, integrity, innocence, fidelity, naïveté; the abode of perfect bliss; Korean people often describe themselves as the “white-clad folk”

Red positive element in nature (expels evil spirits); sun, the beginning, youth, desire, success, love, beauty, authority, property

Black negative element in nature (sign of evil); death, despair, gloominess, naïveté

Yellow abundance, good luck, power, authority, wealth, bravery, integrity, peace; color of the king