Why learn Romanization?

One of the first things Korean Studies students and scholars outside of Korea need to learn is romanization. While most Korean-literate people find it awkward and cumbersome at best, romanization has been historically necessary in order to make the Korean characters fit in the roman-based bibliographic environment of the west. Only through the vehicle (or bridge) of romanization, Han’gŭl characters could be integrated into the rest of the bibliographic world. With the advent of Unicode, we now can search by Korean characters (Hangul and Hancha) on library catalogs and internet search engines. However, it is still important for Korean Studies students and scholars outside of Korea need to learn Romanization rules for various practical reasons (e.g. Hangul and Hancha not linked, inefficient indexing mechanism for Hangul/Hancha, etc.).

While there have been much debate over romanization rules in the Korean studies community, and the Korean government has changed from one system to another several times in the past, the bibliographic standard in the western world has been consistently the McCune-Reischauer Romanization System (McR). The Library of Congress developed additional rules in order to address the many bibliographically important issues that are not covered by the McR rules. These two set of romanization rules form the very basic foundation of all aspects of Korean studies bibliographic communication, and thus must be taken seriously.

If you are motivated, you can teach yourself the basics of Hangul Romanization with the materials provided in this guide. However, I encourage you to make an appointment with Korean Studies librarians who can show you some tricks and important points, which will help you to learn it within minutes.
A Step-by-Step Guide to McCune-Reischauer Romanization

1. Consulting the tables on p. 2, romanize each character separately using the initial (the top two lines), final (the leftmost two columns), and the vowels tables (at the bottom). The initial and final elements are noted in the parenthesis below.

한 → han (in which ㅎ is the initial element, ㄴ is the final)
국 → kук (ㄱ is both initial and final)

박 → pak (ㄹ, ㄱ)
람 → ram (ㄹ, ㅁ)
회 → hoe (ㄹ, ㅚ)

2. Combine the single characters and/or syllables to form words. Now there are medial letters between each syllable (as indicated in underlined bold below) where sound changes usually (though not always) occur.

한국 → Hankuk (ㅌ is the initial, ㄱ & ㄱ are medial, and ㄱ is the final)
박람회 → pakramhoe (ㄹ is the initial, ㅋ+ㅌ, ㅁ+ㅌ are medial, and ㅎ is the final)

3. Convert the medial letters as prescribed in the first Table A.

In the example of <Hankuk>:

First, locate ㄱ in the “Final” column. Next, locate ㄱ in the “Initial” line. Locate the cell at the intersection of the line ㄱ and the column ㄱ. ㄱ. Replace the original medial letters (nк) with the letters in the cell (ng), thus <Hankuk> becomes <Han'guk>. Note the sound change (from voiceless to voiced).

In the example of the three-syllable word <Pakramhoe>, there are two medial positions, as indicated in bold:

Locate the cell at the intersection of the line ㄱ and the column ㄹ. Replace the first original medial letters kr with the letters in the cell (ngn). Proceed the same way for the next medial. The cell at line ㅁ + column ㅎ is blank, which means no sound change, hence no replacement necessary. Thus <Pakramhoe> becomes <Pangnhoe>. Note the sound change to 방남회.
McCune-Reischauer Romanization Tables

Table A: Expanded Simplified Table for Changes Between Syllables Within Words

Note 1: The filled cells below represent changed pronunciations. When blank, use the final and initial values (in the two left most columns and the top two rows, respectively).

Note 2: Substitute the “+” signs in the “Vowels” column and the “Vowels” row with an appropriate vowel.

Note 3: When more than one possibility exist, the more common usage is followed by the alternate (in a smaller font).

Note 4: Consult the Comprehensive Chart by John Harvey on p. 6 for letters not covered in this table.

| Initial | ㄱ | ㄴ | ㄷ | ㄹ | ㅁ | ㅂ | ㅅ | ㅇ | ㅈ | ㅊ | ㅋ | ㅌ | ㅍ | ㅎ | ㄲ | ㄸ | ㅃ | ㅆ | ㅉ |
| ㄱ | k | n | T | n (r) | M | p | s | Vowels | ch | ch’ | k’ | t’ | p’ | h | kk | tt | pp | ss | tch |
| ㄴ | n’g | nd | ll | nn | nb | np | nj |
| ㅁ | t | nn | nm | d+4 | tt |
| ㅂ | l | lg | ll | ll | lb | r+ | lj | lch | rh |
| ㅅ | m | mg | mk | md | mt | mn | mb | mj |
| ㅇ | p | mm | mn | mm | b+ | pp |
| ㅈ | t | nn | nn | nm | s+ |
| ㅊ | ng | ngg | ngd | ngn | ngb | ngj |
| ㅋ | t | nn | nm | j+ |
| ㅌ | k | ngn | ngn | ngm |
| ㅍ | t | nn | nn | nm | t’+5 |
| ㅎ | p | nn | nm | p’+ | pp |
| ㄲ | h | k’ | t’ | ch’ |

Table B: Vowels

| ㅏ | ㅑ | ㅓ | ㅕ | ㅗ | ㅛ | ㅜ | ㅠ | ㅡ | ㅣ | ㅐ | ㅒ | ㅔ | ㅖ | ㅘ | ㅙ | ㅚ | ㅝ | ㅞ | ㅟ | ㅢ |
| a | ya | o | yo | o | yu | ü | i | ae | yae | e | ye | wa | wae | oe | wó | we | wi | ūi |

1. As a word initial, normally not romanized before ㅗ or a palatalized vowel.
2. As a word initial, normally not romanized before ㅗ or a palatalized vowel; romanized as ㅏ before other vowels.
3. When followed by ㅏ, ㅐ is romanized ㅑ.
4. When followed by the vowel ㅏ or palatalized vowels, 씨 is romanized ㅈ.
5. When followed by the vowel ㅗ or palatalized vowels, 씨 is romanized ch’.
Simple Romanization Exercises
Romanize the following words using the steps above. “Answers” are on the next page.

1. 문학
2. 현대화
3. 바가지
4. 정리
5. 국민
6. 신라
7. 철학
8. 잇몸
9. 심표
10. 작곡기
11. 입문론
12. 언어
13. 도교
14. 총론
15. 도움말
16. 박류
17. 평준화
18. 난중일기
19. 약물
20. 그늘
21. 왜소
22. 외국어
23. 의심
24. 원근법
25. 의궤
26. 완자탕
27. 동방예의지국
28. 박사학위논문
### “Answers” to Simple Romanization Exercises

1. 문학  
   **Munhak**

2. 현대화  
   **Hyŏndaehwa**

3. 바가지  
   **Pagaji**

4. 정리  
   **Chŏngni**

5. 국민  
   **Kungmin**

6. 신라  
   **Silla**

7. 철학  
   **Chŏl'hrak**

8. 잇몸  
   **Inmom**

9. 박사학위논문  
   **Paksa hagwi nonmun**

10. 도움말  
    **Toummal**

11. 약물  
   **Yangmul**

12. 입문론  
   **Immunnon**

13. 언어  
   **Ŏnŏ**

14. 침서  
   **Shwimp’yo**

15. 읽기  
   **Kkakttugi**

16. 탁류  
   **T’angnyu**

17. 정리  
   **Chŏl’hrak**

18. 입문론  
   **Immunnon**

19. 신라  
   **Silla**

20. 그늘  
   **Kŭnŭl**

21. 왜소  
   **Waeso**

22. 외국어  
   **Oegugŏ**

23. 의심  
   **Ŭisim**

24. 원근법  
   **Wŏngunpŏp**

25. 의궤  
   **Ŭigwe**

26. 완자탕  
   **Wanjat’ang**

27. 동방예의지국  
   **Tongbang yeŭi chiguk**

28. 문학  
   **Munhak**