



The use of Korean Writing in Taekwon-Do

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Introduction

As we all know, Taekwon-Do is a Korean martial art. We all know its history and how it was founded by a Korean General called Choi Hong Hi who was the first president of the Korean Taekwon-Do Association and the International Taekwon-Do Federation. We know that most of the 24 patterns are named after significant Korean historical figures, and three of them after Korean philosophies. For our gradings we need to know the Korean for all the techniques we perform. But have you noticed that we almost never encounter the Korean words in their native form, aside from the 'Tae Kwon Do' symbols that form the trunk of the 'Taekwon-Do Tree' on the back of our doboks¹?

My original reason for writing this article was the pronunciation of the names of the patterns, but as my research progressed, the scope of the article grew. It now covers not only the correct pronunciation of the pattern names, but also how to write them in Korean, the standard ITF spelling of the patterns, the Korean alphabet, the pronunciation of the Korean letters, and a brief history and explanation of Korean writing.

A Brief Description of Korean Writing

The Korean system of writing is called 'Han-gŭl', which means "Korean script" or "Korean writing". It was founded by a Korean King called Se-Jong in the 15th century - indeed, one of the 5th degree patterns is named after Se-Jong².

Unlike Chinese, which has a different symbol for every word, Han-gŭl has an alphabet consisting of 24 letters, or 'Jamo'. Of these 24 Jamo, 14 are consonants and 10 are vowels. Many of the consonants are graphical representations of the shape of the mouth and tongue when pronouncing them. The vowel symbols are based on three elements: a horizontal line

¹ 'Dobok' - there's another Korean word with which we are all familiar.

² A more in-depth history of King Se-Jong can be found here: <http://www.visiontkd.co.uk/patterns/patternhist2.htm>

(representing the Earth); a vertical line (representing mankind); and a dot (representing the Sun), although this dot has become a short dash in modern Han-gŭl.

The 5th dan TKD pattern called Se-Jong has a corresponding 24 moves. Each of those 24 moves is a different technique (i.e. none is repeated), and I believe it was deliberately designed this way such that each technique represents a different letter in Han-gŭl.

There are a further five double consonants and 11 compound vowels.

The Jamo are then fitted into square blocks to form syllables. These syllables can then form words and sentences by writing from left to right (just as in European languages).

Han-gŭl Jamo (Korean Letters)

In the tables below are listed the Han-gŭl Jamo (the Korean letters, as they appear in their native form), along with their rendering into the Roman letters used in most European languages.

Some of the pronunciations have no exact mapping into English pronunciations, hence there are several systems in use for rendering Han-gŭl into the Roman alphabet. The most common system for much of the 20th century was the McCune-Reischauer system, developed in the 1930s. While it uses strange accents/characters, it is good at faithfully reproducing sounds. The other common system was developed more recently by the government of South Korea (formally known as the Republic Of Korea - ROK). It doesn't use any strange accents/characters, but it is less good at faithfully reproducing sounds. Because of this, I will use the McCune-Reischauer system (you can see an example of why I haven't used the ROK system after the letter tables below).

The two consonant tables below each contain the following:

- Column 1: the Han-gŭl letter;
- Column 2: the Roman equivalent letter using the McCune-Reischauer system:
 - a - At the start of a syllable;
 - b - in the middle of a syllable;
 - c - at the end of a syllable.
- Column 3: Other notes on pronunciation.

The first table contains the 14 basic consonants.

1. Han-gŭl (consonants)	2. Roman letter from McR method			3. Notes
	a. Start	b. Middle	c. Final	
ㄱ	k	g	k*	* the letter is unaspirated
ㅋ	k'	k'	k*	* the letter is unaspirated
ㄴ	n	n	n	
ㄷ	t	d	t*	* the letter is unaspirated
ㅌ	t'	t'	t*	* the letter is unaspirated
ㄹ	r	r	l	
ㅁ	m	m	m	
ㅂ	p	p	p*	* the letter is unaspirated
ㅃ	p'	p'	p*	* the letter is unaspirated
ㅅ	s	s	t*	* the letter is unaspirated
ㅇ	silent	silent	ng	
ㅈ	ch	j	t*	* the letter is unaspirated
ㅉ	ch'	ch'	t*	* the letter is unaspirated
ㅎ	h	h	t*	* the letter is unaspirated

Table 1 - Han-gŭl consonants

The next table shows the five compound, or double, consonants.

1. Han-gŭl (compound consonants)	2. Roman letter from McR method			3. Notes
	a. Start	b. Middle	c. Final	
ㄲ	kk	kk	k*	* the letter is unaspirated
ㄸ	tt	tt	-	
ㅃ	pp	pp	-	
ㅆ	ss	ss	t*	* the letter is unaspirated
ㅈㅈ	tch	tch	-	Sometimes written as 'jj'

Table 2 - Han-gŭl double consonants

The two vowel tables below each contain the following:

- Column 1: the Han-gǔl letter;
- Column 2: the Roman equivalent letter using the McCune-Reischauer system;
- Column 3: Pronunciation;
- Column 4: Pronunciation notes.

The first table contains the ten basic vowels, while the second table contains the compound vowels.

1. Han-gǔl (basic vowels)	2. Roman letter from McR method	3. Pronunciation example	4. Pronunciation notes
ㅏ	a	f <u>a</u> ther	
ㅓ	ǒ	pu <u>tt</u> , cu <u>t</u>	Sort of between pu <u>tt</u> and po <u>t</u>
ㅗ	o	no <u>t</u> e, gro <u>w</u>	
ㅜ	u	zo <u>o</u>	
ㅡ	ǔ	go <u>o</u> d / pu <u>t</u>	
ㅣ	i	ea <u>s</u> y	
ㅑ	ya	ya <u>r</u> d	
ㅕ	yǒ	y <u>u</u> m	Sort of between y <u>u</u> m and y <u>o</u> nder
ㅛ	yo	y <u>o</u> ke	
ㅠ	yu	y <u>o</u>	

Table 3 - Han-gǔl vowels

1. Han-gǔl (basic vowels)	2. Roman letter from McR method	3. Pronunciation example	4. Pronunciation notes
ㅘ	wa	Gu <u>a</u> m	
ㅙ	wǒ	w <u>o</u> nder	Sort of between w <u>o</u> nder and w <u>o</u> mbat
ㅚ	e	se <u>t</u>	
ㅜ	ae	ca <u>t</u>	
ㅟ	ǔi	sue <u>y</u>	

1. Han-gŭl (basic vowels)	2. Roman letter from McR method	3. Pronunciation example	4. Pronunciation notes
ㅟ	wi	<u>w</u> ee <u>k</u>	
ㅟ	ye	<u>y</u> ee <u>s</u>	
ㅟ	we	<u>w</u> ee <u>t</u>	
ㅟ	yae	<u>y</u> aa <u>m</u>	
ㅟ	wae	<u>w</u> aa <u>g</u>	
ㅟ	oe	<u>w</u> ee <u>t</u> (but with a slight 'oo' sound before)	

Table 4 - Han-gŭl compound vowels

So, why am I not using the ROK system of Romanization? Well, look at the letter in the second row of Table 3 (ㅟ). In the McCune-Reischauer system it is Romanized as 'ŏ', but in the ROK system it is Romanized as 'eo'. This is clearly nowhere near the pronunciation we aiming for (looking at columns 3 and 4). It is inaccurate.

- An example: the capital of South Korea is usually written as 'Seoul', and is usually pronounced as "Soul". In Han-gŭl it is written as 서울, and using the McCune-Reischauer system we get "Sŏ-ul". We can see that it has two syllables and should be pronounced as "Suh-ool".
- Another example: the official ITF term for a Grandmaster (9th degree) is 사성, or 'Sa-sŏng'. It is pronounced pretty much as it is spelt. But, if we use the ROK system we get 'Sa-seong', which seems to introduce an erroneous third syllable (Sa-see-ong).

We must note, however, that like many languages, pronunciations can vary or mutate when combined with other letters, and presumably differ according to Korean region or accents.

For some Korean words, when they are written in the Roman alphabet, I will add a hyphen between syllables to make clearer their pronunciation. For example, I will write "Han-gŭl" with a hyphen, as writing it without (as Hangŭl) may produce an incorrect 'ng' sound from English speakers, i.e. "hang-gŭl".

So, let's use the above tables of letters, and write 'Tae Kwon Do' in Han-gŭl:

T	AE	K	WO	N	D	O
ㅌ	ㅏ	ㄱ	ㅎ	ㄴ	ㄷ	ㅇ

Thus, Taekwon-Do = 태 권 도

This should look familiar to all students, since it is on the back of the dobok tops, and the observant will notice that it would be written as "Tae-Kwŏn-Do" using the McR system.

And we can write 'Han-gŭl' in Han-gŭl:

H	A	N	G	U	L
ㅎ	ㅏ	ㄴ	ㄱ	ㅌ	ㄹ

Thus, Han-gŭl = 한 굴

The Numbers

We can also move to the numbers 1-10 often used in TKD classes and how they should be pronounced. I include this because some TKD literature has mis-spelt the numbers (see column 3 in Table 5 below), causing many students to mis-pronounce them. Note especially the first vowel in the Korean for numbers 6 and 8.

1. Numeral	2. Han-gŭl	3. The spelling/pronunciation we may be used to in TKD	4. The correct spelling using the McR method
1	하 나	hana	ha-na
2	둘	dool	tul
3	셋	set	set
4	넷	net	net
5	다섯	dasut	ta-sŏt

1. Numeral	2. Han-gŭl	3. The spelling/pronunciation we may be used to in TKD	4. The correct spelling using the McR method
6	여섯	yasut	yŏ-sŏt
7	일곱	ilgop	ilgop
8	여덟	yadol	yŏ-dŏl
9	아홉	ahop	a-hop
10	열	yol / yaul	yŏl

Table 5 - Numbers

For those numbers ending with a ‘t’ (set, net, tasŏt, yŏsŏt), note that the t is all but dropped; it is more like a faint glottal stop, and not a full ‘t’ sound.

For those numbers ending with a ‘p’ (ilgop, ahop), note that the p is swallowed, i.e. is virtually non-existent.

The Patterns

We now get to the original purpose of this article - the correct spelling and pronunciations of the ITF patterns. Table 6 below shows the variation in spelling of the patterns.

The table shows:

- Column 1: the spelling of the patterns in Han-gŭl;
- Column 2: the common and standard spelling used by the ITF of the patterns;
- Column 3: the spelling of the patterns as written in General Choi Hong Hi’s first English book on Taekwon-Do from 1965;
- Column 4: the correct spelling.

1. Han-gŭl	2. Standard ITF spelling	3. Original Spelling (1965)	4. Correct spelling
천지	Chon-Ji	Ch’ŏn-Ji	Ch’ŏn-Ji
단군	Dan-Gun	Tan-Gun	Tan-Gun
도산	Do-San	To-San	To-San
원효	Won-Hyo	Wŏn-Hyo	Wŏn-Hyo

1. Han-gŭl	2. Standard ITF spelling	3. Original Spelling (1965)	4. Correct spelling
율 곡	Yul-Gok	Yul-Kok	Yul-Gok
중 근	Joong-Gun	Chung-Gŭn	Chung-Gŭn
퇴 계	Toi-Gye	T'oi-Gye	T'oi-Gye
화 랑	Hwa-Rang	Hwa-Rang	Hwa-Rang
총 무	Choong-Moo	Ch'ung-Moo	Ch'ung-Mu
광 개	Kwang-Gae	Kwang-Gae	Kwang-Gae
포 은	Po-Eun	P'o-Ŭn	P'o-Ŭn
계 백	Ge-Baek	Kae-Baek	Gye-Baek
의 암	Eui-Am	(1)	Ŭi-Am
총 장	Choong-Jang	Ch'ung-Jang	Ch'ung-Jang
고 당	Ko-Dang (2)	Ko-Dang	Ko-Dang
주 체	Juche (2)	(1)	Ju-Ch'e
삼 일	Sam-Il	Sam-Il	Sam-Il
유 신	Yoo-Sin	Yu-Sin	Yu-Sin
최 영	Choi-Yong	Ch'oi-Yŏng	Ch'oi-Yŏng
연 개	Yon-Gae	(1)	Yŏn-Gae
을 지	Ul-Ji	Ŭl-Ji	Ŭl-Ji
문 무	Moon-Moo	(1)	Mun-Mu
서 산	So-San	(1)	Sŏ-San
세 종	Se-Jong	Se-Jong	Se-Jong
통 일	Tong-Il	T'ong-Il	T'ong-Il

Table 6 - The TKD patterns in Han-gŭl

(1) These patterns had not yet been created in 1965.

(2) Ko-Dang was one of the original patterns, but was later replaced by Juche.

Let's start with some observations from looking at the Han-gŭl:

- The 'Gun' of Dan-Gun and Joong-Gŭn are different - in Dan-Gun, it has a longer 'oo' sound (refer back to Table 3 - row 4 for Dan-Gun and row 5 for Joong-Gŭn);
- The 'Ji' (지) in Chon-Ji and Ul-Ji are identical;
- The 'Il' (일) in Sam-Il and Tong-Il are identical;
- The 'San' (산) in Do-San and So-San are identical;
- The 'Choong' (충) in Choong-Jang and Choong-Moo are identical;
- The 'Moo' (무) in Choong-Moo and Moon-Moo are identical;
- The 'Gae' (개) in Kwang-Gae and Yon-Gae are identical;
- And finally, Ge-Baek should be spelled as Gye-Baek (note that in Han-gŭl the 'Gye' (계) is the same as in Toi-Gye).

We can see from Table 3 that a simple 'u' is pronounced as 'oo', and we can see this pronunciation reflected in the spelling of most of the relevant pattern names (e.g. Mun-Mu re-spelt as Moon-Moo). Dan-Gun is, however, a notable exception. This is a shame, since many students mis-pronounce the second syllable, by saying the English word 'gun'. The correct pronunciation is Dan-Goon.

So let's now move on to the pronunciation of all the pattern names.

The pronunciations can be found in the table below, noting that for many there is not quite an exact replica sound in English. I have also re-written some of the pattern names to give a better pronunciation.

Pattern	Pronunciation of first syllable	Pronunciation of second syllable
Chŏn-Ji	Chon - vowel sound is somewhere between <u>pu</u> tt and p <u>o</u> t	Jee, but with a shortened vowel sound
Dan-Gun	Dan	Goon
Do-San	Doh	San
Wŏn-Hyo	Won - vowel sound is somewhere between <u>pu</u> tt and p <u>o</u> t	Hyo
Yul-Gok	Yool	Gok
Joong-Gŭn	Joong	The vowel is pronounced like the vowel in the English word 'put'. (Not 'gun' to mean firearm)

Pattern	Pronunciation of first syllable	Pronunciation of second syllable
Toi-Gye	Almost two syllables, splitting the o and i. Almost like 'tway'. (Not 'tay' or 'toy').	Almost like 'gyay', but a shortened vowel sound.
Hwa-Rang	Hwah	Rang, but a rolled r, like in Spanish.
Choong-Moo	Choong	Moo
Kwang-Gae	Kwang	Almost like 'gay', but a shortened vowel sound.
Po-Ŭn	Po	Like the 'Gun' in Joong-Gun and but without the g.
Gye-Baek	Almost like 'gyay', but a shortened vowel sound.	Beck
Ŭi-Am	Like 'wee'	Am
Choong-Jang	Choong	Jang
Ju-Che	Joo	Almost like 'chay', but a shortened vowel sound.
Sam-Il	Sam	Between the English words 'ill' and 'eel'.
Yoo-Sin	Yoo	Sin
Choi-Yŏng	Almost like 'Chwey'; or the 'Toi' in Toi-Gye, but a ch instead of a t. (Not 'Choy').	Yong
Yŏn-Gae	Yon - vowel sound is somewhere between pu <u>tt</u> and po <u>t</u>	Almost like 'gay', but a shortened vowel sound.
Ŭl-Ji	Like 'pull' but without the p.	Jee, but with a shortened vowel sound
Moon-Moo	Moon	Moo
Sŏ-San	Like the English word 'sock' but without the ck.	San
Se-Jong	Almost like 'say' but a shortened vowel sound.	Jong
Tong-Il	Tong	Between the English words 'ill' and 'eel'.

Table 7 - Pronunciation of the patterns

We can see that most of the standard ITF spellings for the pattern names are okay when pronounced, but a few are misleading. Common mis-pronunciations that I hear make me think that some pattern names would be better spelt by the ITF as follows:

- Ge-Baek should actually be spelt as Gye-Baek (as previously explained);
- Dan-Gun would be better spelt as Dan-Goon;
- Yul-Gok would be better as Yool-Gok;
- Po-Eun would be better spelt without the E.

The standard ITF spelling of Po-Eun (and Eui-Am) comes from the ROK system of Romanization, which uses ‘eu’ for the Han-gŭl letter “—” instead of the more accurate ‘ŭ’. Again, using the ROK system here may (and sometimes does) cause mis-pronunciation.

Other points to take note of:

- Chon, Won, and Yon all rhyme with each other and are pronounced pretty much as spelt;
- Toi and Choi rhyme with each other and are closer to ‘tway’ and ‘chwey’ (not toy or choy).

To listen to the pronunciations, please follow this link:

<http://www.taekwondo-legacy.com/patterns.php>

The Founder’s Name

I want to finish this article with a slight detour to General Choi’s name in Han-gŭl, for two reasons:

1. Many people pronounce the surname (Choi) incorrectly;
2. There is a minor mystery in the spelling. Read on:

Choi Hong Hi is written in Han-gŭl as: 최 홍 회

First, the minor mystery. Notice that the last syllable contains three letters: ㅎ (h), — (ŭ), and ㅣ (i). I have not, however, been able to determine the reason for the exclusion of the ŭ when the General’s name is written in Roman characters.

Now the pronunciation. If we look back to the last row in table 4 (the compound vowels), we can see that the combination of o (ㅜ) and i (ㅣ) give a compound vowel of oe (ㅟ), and Table 4 suggests that another spelling of the founder’s surname is ‘Choe’. And if we look at how oe (ㅟ) is

pronounced (in the last row of Table 4), we can see why Choi is not pronounced as “Choy”, and why “Chey” or “Chwey” would be more accurate (see the pronunciation of Choi-Yŏng in Table 7).

Summary

Unlike other oriental languages, such as Chinese, written Korean has an alphabet. Each letter has a unique pronunciation and is pronounced as written, much like Spanish. In TKD, we learn the Korean terms for all our techniques, but unless we learn how to pronounce the words correctly, it seems almost pointless. This article has hopefully demonstrated how easy Korean words are to pronounce, providing they are spelt correctly. I hope that all VTA members read this article and learn from it, so that beginners can start to pronounce the words correctly, and that senior members can get out of bad-pronunciation habits.