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BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

Korean names: History, characteristics, and trends

Korejská jména: Historie, charakteristiky, a trendy

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## **Annotation**

This thesis focuses on Korean personal names, their history, and their characteristics. The goal of this thesis is to provide a comprehensive guide on Korean personal names and to find out what topics are being discussed in South Korean online news media in regard to the topic of Korean names.

In the first chapter, the focus is on Korean family names and family clans, their origin, and their evolution through history. The distribution of Korean surnames is also explored. In the second chapter, the focus is on given names and their unique characteristics. The gender of given names is explored as well as the naming tradition and generational index character. The last chapter of this work focuses on the trending topics in South Korean news media and serves to compare several articles and the article authors' opinions.

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## Anotace

Tato práce se zaměřuje na Korejská osobní jména, jejich historii a charakteristiku. Cílem této práce je poskytnout komplexního průvodce Korejskými osobními jmény a zjistit, jaká témata jsou v souvislosti s tématem Korejských jmen diskutována v jihokorejských online médiích.

V první kapitole se práce zaměřujeme na Korejská příjmení a rodinné klany, jejich původ a jejich vývoj v historii. Distribuce Korejských příjmení je také prozkoumána. Druhá kapitola se zaměřuje na křestní jména a jejich jedinečné vlastnosti. Zkoumá se pohlaví křestních jmen, pojmenovací tradice a generační jména. Poslední kapitola této práce se zaměřuje na aktuální témata v Jihokorejských zpravodajských médiích a slouží ke srovnání několika článků a názorů autorů těchto článků.

I would like to sincerely thank my supervisor Dr. Andreas Schirmer, for his help, guidance, valuable advice, and patience throughout my writing of this thesis. My appreciation also goes to my family and friends for their encouragement and support during my studies.

## Table of contents

<b>Transcription .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>1. Introduction .....</b>	<b>8</b>
1.1 Characteristics of Korean personal names.....	9
<b>2. Korean family names .....</b>	<b>10</b>
2.1 Terminology .....	10
2.2 The history of Korean family names .....	11
2.1.1 Korea's five main clans.....	12
2.2 Distribution of Korean surnames.....	13
<b>3. Korean given names .....</b>	<b>16</b>
3.1 Characteristics of given names .....	16
3.1.1 Naming tradition and the generational index character .....	16
3.2 The gender of Korean given names .....	18
3.3 Pseudonyms .....	19
<b>4. Trends.....</b>	<b>21</b>
4.1 Foreign family names .....	21
4.1.1 Issues with foreign-origin surnames .....	22
4.2 Online real-name verification system.....	23
4.2.1 The background of the real-name system controversy .....	24
4.2.2 New versions of the internet real-name verification system.....	25
4.2.3 Authors' opinions.....	26
<b>5. Conclusion.....</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>30</b>

## **Transcription**

In this work, I will be using the Revised Romanization of Korean (국어의 로마자 표기법) which was released in 2000 by the Ministry of culture and tourism and is the official Korean language romanization system in South Korea. For the romanization of personal names, I will be using the person's preferred style of romanization which can sometimes be in conflict with the rules of the Revised Romanization of Korean.

# 1. Introduction

Names are an important part of our lives. Not only do they serve as means of identification, but they also help us to form a sense of self and our own identity.

It is common knowledge in many religious and spiritual practices around the world that a name means power and knowing a person's name means having power over them.

In the west, the occurrence of proper surnames was a slow and irregular process. If we look at England, before the Norman conquest no one possessed a surname. (Redmonds, Hey, and King 2015). The English referred to themselves only by their given names and sometimes also nicknames. Only a few of the Norman barons, who came to England during the conquest, had a proper surname. The need for surnames came most likely from the barons' desire to connect families with their estates back in Normandy and that is also why surnames began to be passed onto children from their parents. It can be said that the first people who acquired a surname were the ones of the higher social status whereas the lower folk took a longer time. A similar process could be seen in historical Korea. How exactly Korean surnames evolved throughout history will be the topic of later sections.

The native Korean word for name is ireum (이름) and it refers to both given and family names. The Sino-Korean word for name is seongmyeong (성명/姓名) and here the first syllable seong (성/姓) refers to the family name and the second syllable myeong (명/名) refers to the given name. While having a formal conversation, it is also more polite to use seongmyeong rather than ireum when referring to someone's name.

To Koreans, their names are a crucial part of the process of forming one's identity. Their family names mark their belonging to the family clan and with it comes a lot of pride and responsibility. To honor one's name means to honor one's family, family roots, and ancestors. It is needless to say that in a heavily Confucianist society such as Korea, this plays a big role in people's everyday lives.

In my thesis, I will focus on the history and evolution of both family and given names, their characteristics in comparison to the western culture and lastly, I will discuss modern-day trends and issues discussed in Korean new media in regard to Korean personal names.



## **1.1 Characteristics of Korean personal names**

Korean personal names have several characteristics that differentiate them from western personal names. These characteristics are shared with other East Asian cultures such as the Chinese or Japanese. China had a huge cultural influence on Korea throughout history and Korean personal names are thus heavily inspired by the Chinese.

Firstly, a Korean personal name is usually composed of three syllables, one being the family name and the remaining two the given name. There are cases where the last name can be two syllables long or the given name be only one syllable, however, the first format mentioned is much more common. Often times when someone's family name is two syllables long, they then have a one-syllable given name to keep the format of the three syllables. For example, someone with the surname Namgung might choose a monosyllabic given name like Cheol

Secondly, when Koreans write their full names, they put the surname first, before the given name. This is a large difference from the western format of writing personal names, where the family name is either put last or the structure is much more flexible. In the Czech Republic, for example, the last name is also often put first in official documents, but it is not a hard rule.

Thirdly, there is the problem with spacing in personal names. With western names, there is a space between the given and family name to differentiate them from each other, whereas with Korean personal names there is no such hard rule about where the space should be and if any space should be used at all. Therefore, Korean names can have a space between the monosyllabic family name and the disyllabic given name, or none at all. They can also be written together without any space or have space between each syllable. This does not however leave any space for confusion with what syllable represents what since the first syllable and then the latter two are invariably recognized as the surname and given name. (Kim, Cho, 2012, 88)

Lastly, Korean women do not tend to change their family names with marriage. In the Western tradition, the women usually change from their maiden name to their husband's name after marriage however that is not the case in Korean tradition. Since family names especially hold such importance to Koreans, women keep their surnames even after marriage to continue the legacy of their family clan. There are of course cases where women change their surnames after marriage, but it is not very common. Children are traditionally given the surname of their father to continue the patrilineal line.

## **2. Korean family names**

To honor one's name and one's family is one of the most important things to a Korean. They take pride in their names and their family roots and ancestors. This can be closely tied to the history of family names in Korea and how they came to be. Having a surname meant being somebody, belonging to the higher class, and being taken seriously as well as having a lot of other privileges.

The South Korean population census from the year 2015 recorded in total 5 582 different family names. For comparison, in the Czech Republic, there are over 300 000 different surnames, therefore it can be said that the number of Korean surnames is very small. (Novotný and Cheshire 2012). Out of those 5 582 surnames, only 1507 had Chinese characters while the other 4075 did not. (Statistics Korea, 2016) From this, we can assume that at least a third of Korean family names could have their origins in China.

In the next sections, I will focus on the history of family names in Korea and how the connection with China affected the evolution of Korean surnames.

### **2.1 Terminology**

Before thoroughly exploring the history of Korean family names, the explanation of some terminologies used in this work is in order.

Firstly, the term apical ancestor will be discussed. An apical ancestor is a figure who is at the very beginning of a family tree, the first one to carry the family name. As a lot of Korean family names originated from China, these apical ancestors were often of Chinese origin as well. The Korean founder of the clan is believed to be of the same lineage as the apical ancestor, but few clans have clear records that detail the relations between the putative apical ancestor and the founder. (Guanglin, 2014, 19)

The apical ancestors were often Chinese scholars coming to Korea during the Three kingdoms period and Unified Silla period or other members of Chinese nobility that migrated to the Korean peninsula whether they were directly dispatched by their government or running away from conflicts in their country.

In the case of Korean family names, these ancestors were not always real people from history but also mythical figures from the Korean founding myths and other legends. In these cases, it is obvious that the relation between an apical ancestor and a founder of a clan would be near to impossible to prove.

Another term I would like to explain is the ancestral seat or, in Korean, bongwan. Statistics Korea uses the term Family origin in their population census. All these terms refer to the birthplace of the putative apical ancestor of a certain family clan. They can also refer to a place that is considered the clan's hometown. Multiple ancestral seats can be recorded even within the same family name. Bongwans are then used to differentiate the clans from each other since they all carry the same family name. In South Korea today, there are almost seven times more ancestral seats than surnames. (Statistics Korea, 2016)

## 2.2 The history of Korean family names

The appearance of the first recorded Korean surnames dates back to the Three kingdoms period and Unified Silla period. Before this time the ancient Korean society referred to themselves only by given names and sometimes also their village or tribe associations.

It can be said that the formation of Korean family names began with the introduction of Chinese culture and Chinese characters in Korea. As ancient Koreans came into contact with China, they began to adopt Chinese-style family names. (Guanglin, 2014, 25) However, they didn't simply copy the Chinese surnames as they were but rather took the base and adapted it to their foundation myths and legends therefore independently creating new surnames themselves. Several founding myths in Korean culture have a common characteristic and that is a human birth from eggs. It is said that the founder of Silla, Hyeokgeose (赫居世), was born from an egg that looked like a gourd which is called *bak* in Korean, and thus he was given the surname Bak.

Owing to the influence of the Chinese system of surnames, royal families began to form new family names by connecting them to the founding myths of human births from eggs. Through this process, Silla and Gaya created the Gim and Bak surnames, which are very rare, if not entirely unused, in China. (Guanglin, 2014, 25)

If we go by period, we can say that the use of Chinese-style family names first started occurring in the latter half of the Three Kingdoms period and Unified Silla period. Before the Three kingdoms period, all rulers have been recorded by given names only. It was only with king Chansu (412-491) of Goguryeo, that the royal surname Go (高) began to appear. Royalty and the central aristocracy of Goguryeo and Baekje adopted family names between the fourth and fifth centuries, while in Silla, family names began to be used around the sixth century. (Guanglin, 2014, 25)

Aside from Goguryeo the other kingdoms also founded their own royal clans. The royal clan of Silla was the Gim (金) clan, the Bak (朴) clan, and the Sok (昔) clan. Baekje royalty belonged to the Yeo (餘) clan and in Kaya, the royals were members of the Kim (金) clan. When king Wang Geon (王建) founded the Goryeo dynasty in 918, many new family names were created. The first members of society to acquire a surname were the high-ranking officials and nobles. King Wang Geon bestowed last names on local gentry that greatly contributed to the founding of the dynasty. Those were surnames Hong (洪), Bae (裴), Sin (申), and Bok (卜).

During the rule of the Goryeo dynasty, the use of surnames spread to the common folk as well, however the lowborn were the last ones to acquire a surname. What greatly accelerated the spread of family name usage among the elite was a law from the year 1055 that allowed only those with a family name to partake in the state examinations. Common citizens began adopting family names during the first half of the Goryeo period.

At the beginning of the tenth century, lower-class citizens could obtain a family name but only after they were freed from their low social status. This could be done through marriage or by other means. The people that were at the very bottom of the social ladder began to obtain surnames in the late sixteenth century.

After the Kabo reforms in 1894 family names in Korea were spread through the whole country and with the Law of Census Registration anyone could now legally obtain a family name.

### **2.1.1 Korea's five main clans**

There are five most prominent surnames in Korea today. The surnames Gim, Lee, Choe, Chong, and Bak, are what are considered the five main clans of Korea with Gim being the most common surname in Korea today.

The history of these five clans dates back to the Unified Silla, which was a time from which most Korean family names originated. The royal clans of Silla and Gaya were Gim and Pak. The Lee, Choe, and Chong clans belonged to the Silla aristocracy.

The apical ancestors of these clans are mostly found in myths. For example, the Silla royal clan's apical ancestor is said to be Hyeokgeose (赫居世), the founding monarch of Silla. As was already mentioned above he acquired the surname Bak because according to the myths, he was born from an egg that looked like a gourd which, in Korean, is called *bak*.

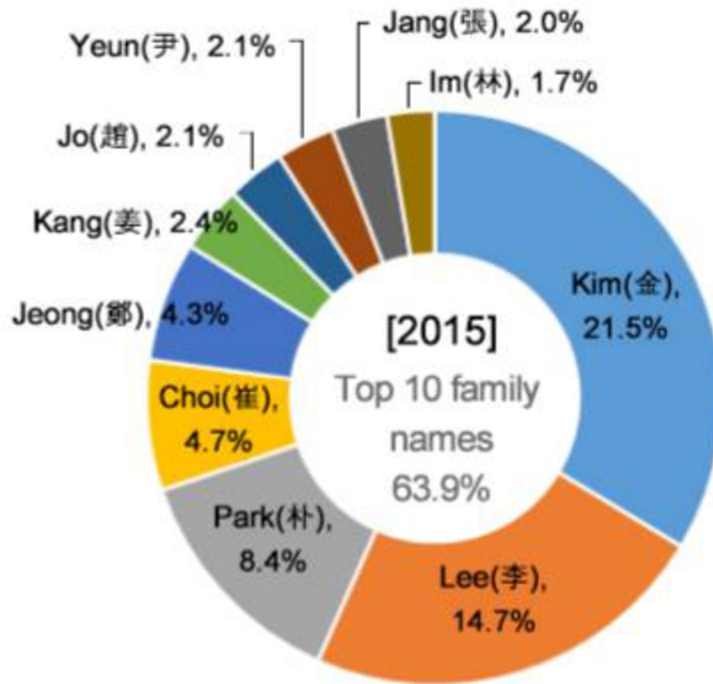
Other examples of such myths would be the apical ancestor of Gaya, Suro (首露), and another apical ancestor of Silla, Alji (閼智). Both of them acquired the surname Gim because it is that they were born from golden eggs, and *gim*, in Korean, means gold.

## **2.2 Distribution of Korean surnames**

South Korea is a country with a relatively small number of surnames even though the number of new surnames has been steadily rising over the last twenty years. In this section, I would like to look at how Korean surnames are distributed in the country today by using the latest Population and Housing census in South Korea from 2015.

There is a saying in Korea that throwing a stone from Namsan (a hill in Seoul) will surely hit a person surnamed either Gim, Lee, or Bak. (Kenneth 1964, p. 69) From this saying alone we can see how prevalent these three surnames are in South Korea today. If we look at the data provided by the latest Population and housing census from 2015, we can see that Gim, Lee, and Bak are at the top of the list followed closely by the surnames Choe and Cheong, Gang, Jo, Yun, Jang, and Im. People that carry these ten surnames take up 63.9 % of the total population of South Korea.

Out of this 63.9%, the ones surnamed Gim take 21.5 %, which means there are almost 11 million Gims in South Korea today. Lee is behind only by a little amount, taking up 14.7 % of the population. The rest of the top ten surnames take up less than 10 % each. The detailed data can be seen in the following picture taken directly from the Population and Housing Census of 2015.



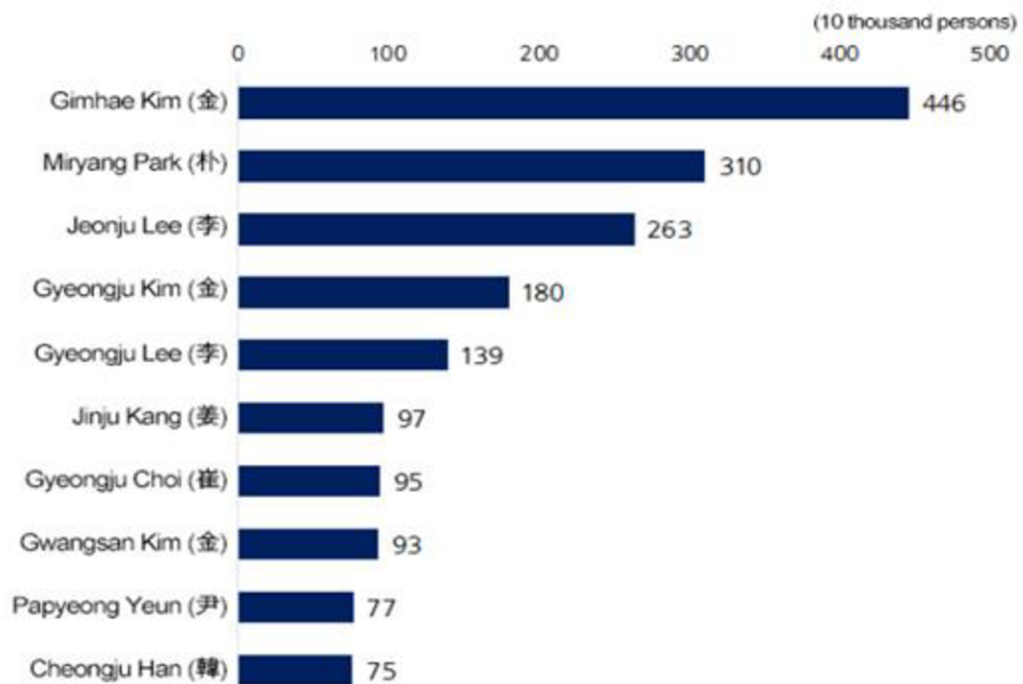
Picture 1: Top ten family names (Statistics Korea, 2016)<sup>1</sup>

As mentioned before, South Korea has been noting a rise in the number of new surnames over the last two decades. From the previous Population and housing census in 2000 the number grew from 286 registered surnames to 5582 in only fifteen years. What is an interesting fact to note is that despite this huge growth and the creation of many new surnames, the top ten family names have kept their ranking for the last two decades.

In terms of the ancestral seats, or, as the census refers to them, family origins (bongwan), the Gimhae Gim family origin is at the top with a population of 44 570 people which means that about 9 % of South Koreans belong to this family origin. Closely behind is the Miryang Park family origin with 6.2 % and the third is Jeonju Lee family origin with 5.3 % of the population. The rest of the top ten family origins including the number of persons can be seen in the following graph provided by the 2015 census.

<sup>1</sup> Data taken from the Complete Enumeration Results of the 2015 Population and Housing Census found here:

<http://kostat.go.kr/portal/eng/pressReleases/8/7/index.board?bmode=read&bSeq=&aSeq=356507&pageNo=2&rowNum=10&navCount=10&currPg=&searchInfo=&sTarget=title&sTxt=>



Picture 2: Top ten family origins (Statistics Korea, 2016)<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Data taken from the Complete Enumeration Results of the 2015 Population and Housing Census found here: <http://kostat.go.kr/portal/eng/pressReleases/8/7/index.board?bmode=read&bSeq=&aSeq=356507&pageNo=2&rowNum=10&navCount=10&currPg=&searchInfo=&sTarget=title&sTxt=>

### **3. Korean given names**

Given names have as much importance in Korean society as family names. Not only do names provide a way of differentiating and perceiving individuals, but they also help form one's sense of identity and self. (Thompson, 2006)

Family names mark a person's belonging to a certain family and clan. They are important in recognizing one's ancestors and family roots thus forming one's own personal history. This is the same with given names, just in a different sense. The way Koreans tend to create or choose first names for their children plays a significant role in their lives. In this section, I will focus on the characteristics of Korean given names, their meaning, and origins.

#### **3.1 Characteristics of given names**

Korean given names have several characteristics that are important to mention. They are usually composed of two syllables although in some cases given names can be only one syllable long.

In two-syllable names, one of those syllables is called *hangnyeol* (한결), also a generational name, which is a character that is traditionally shared by people in the same family generation. This character determines one part of the given name, while the other character is usually unique to the person.

Given names, like surnames, are typically composed of *hanja*, or Chinese characters. In 1991 the Supreme Court of Korea published the Table of Hanja for personal use, a document that summarizes all the characters that are allowed in given names. The list was updated several times over the last twenty years, the largest expansion in 2015, and it now allows 8 142 *hanja* characters to be used in given names. (Court of Korea, 2014)

##### **3.1.1 Naming tradition and the generational index character**

As mentioned above, Korean given names have a unique feature and that is the presence of a generation marker or generational index character *hangnyeolja* (行列字) or *dollimja* (돌림字). This character traditionally makes up half of a two-syllable given name and is the same within one generation of a family. (Kim, 2005 p. 13) This naming practice is native to China but can also be seen in Vietnamese culture. Traditionally in Chinese names, the generational character will be in the middle, after the family name, and following it will be the true given name. (Zhonghua and Lawson, 2002, p.4)

Since Korea is a heavily male-oriented society it is important to note that this practice was traditionally only done with the names of men. Women didn't usually have a generational



index character in their names and often times their names were not even recorded in family registers. (Kim, 2005 p. 13)

In China, there were several possibilities for women's names. They either did not have a generational name at all, or they shared it with their brothers, or they had a different generational name that they shared with their sisters. (Zhonghua and Lawson, 2002, p.4)

The generational index character can be determined according to the rules of hangyeol, that is according to the cycle of Five elements (ohaeng, 五行) in Chinese cosmology. The order is as follows: mineral (金, keum), water (水, su), wood (木, mok), fire (火, hwa), and soil (土, to). The order was established like this because minerals produce water, the water then nourishes trees, trees give fire, fire enriches the soil, and soil produces minerals. (Kim, 2005 p. 12)

Thus the generational index characters are also used in this order meaning that, for example, all males in the grandfather's generation will have a keum 金 radical in their Sino-Korean characters, e.g. 鎭, 鈞, 鉉, all males in the father's generation will have the su 水 radical in their Sino-Korean character e.g. 洙, 浩, 泰, the son's generation will have the mok 木 radical in their Sino-Korean characters e.g. 杓, 杭, 根, and so on. Due to this established order, it is actually possible to differentiate generational seniority between very distant relatives. (Kim, 2005 p. 13)

Another way to determine the generational index characters and their order is with family poems. Family poems were a string of characters that dictated which characters would be used for which generation and in what order. The order was discussed and established by either the founders of a family clan or by the family elders. Once all characters of the poem were used it was either recycled or a new poem was established. (Endymion Porter Wilkinson and Center, 2018, p. 135)

When parents expect a child, it is traditionally the grandparents who choose the generational index character with the appropriate radical. That leaves only one character for the parents to choose, and that character is thus unique to the child.

This naming practice of using a generational index character, although traditionally widespread, is now giving way to more modern naming conventions. Parents are more often giving their children pure Korean names that do not have a hanja equivalent or having only one Sino-Korean character in the name and replacing the other with a pure Korean word. The popular choices are words such as Haneul (sky/하늘), Areum (beauty/아름), or Seulgi (dew/슬기). (Kim, 2005 p. 13)

### **3.2 The gender of Korean given names**

In many languages, Czech included, most names have an assigned gender meaning that certain names are more likely to be used with girls and others with boys. In the Czech language, this difference between male and female names is made apparent by the ending -a to most female names or by adding the suffix -a to male names. For example, Petr is a given name meant for men and by adding the suffix -a thus making the name Petra, we get a female name.

In Korean, the difference between male and female names is not always as apparent. Since Koreans use Chinese characters, their names tend to be much more heavily meaning-based than for example Czech names. There are characters that are traditionally used for female and male names, but all characters can actually be completely unisex. This fact often makes it difficult for non-native speakers and learners of the Korean language to determine the gender of a person if all they have is their name.

In the Table of hanja for personal use, there is a total of 8142 Sino-Korean characters that are allowed to be used in given names. None of these characters are classified in the document as strictly masculine or feminine. (Court of Korea, 2014)

The hints for recognizing the gender of a certain name are usually in the meaning of those Sino-Korean characters. Masculine names tend to have characters with more masculine meanings such as strength, power, or courage while feminine names tend to have characters with meanings like beauty, kindness, or virtue. Thus, popular given names for men can include Sino-Korean characters like Cheol (iron, 鐵) or Yong (dragon, 龍) and female names can include characters like Mi (beauty, 美) or Ji (wisdom, 智).

When choosing a name for their child, parents do not necessarily only look at feminine or masculine hanja characters, but they choose characters with good meaning for their child's future. Characters for wealth or luck can be used in a name to bring these things into the person's life. (Wilkinson and Center, 2018, p. 118)

Another thing to note is that during the Japanese occupation of the Korean peninsula (1910-1945), the Korean language was inevitably influenced by the Japanese. One of those influences can be seen in given names as well. During the harshest time of the occupation, the Japanese banned the Korean language as a whole and forced Koreans to speak only Japanese in any official and public setting.

This came also with the order to change their Korean names to Japanese ones. Some chose to include parts of their Korean name in their new Japanese name, for example, someone with

the last name Go might have chosen the Japanese surname Goyama by keeping the character for Go the same.

After liberation in 1945 Koreans started using their original names again but the naming convention was not left without marks. This is apparent specifically with female given names. Many female names end in -ja, like Chunja (春子) or Hwaja (花子). The ending -ja corresponds with the Japanese ending -ko used in Japanese female names like Haruko or Masako. (Kim, 2005 p. 11)

In conclusion, Korean given names can be more feminine, masculine, or completely unisex and there are no strict rules dictating what characters from the Table of hanja for personal use can be used for men and for women.

### 3.3 Pseudonyms

The Korean's great interest in names is evidenced by the fact that there are many different kinds of names in Korea. (Kim, 2005, p. 14). One of these different names is for example a childhood name or, in Korean, a-myeong (兒名). This name is different from one's adult name, kwan-myeong (冠名) which is the official name recorded in birth certificates and used in official documents.

On the other hand, a childhood name is more like a nickname mostly given by parents or other family members to the child. For these childhood names, parents usually choose native Korean words. Some examples might include words like turumi (a crane) or mat-han (the eldest).

Another kind of a name is Ho (號), a pen-name that is given to established scholars, artists, or men of important social positions. Ho is given to a person usually by their mentor or colleague and is used by students and friends. Ho's can also be self-made and those tend to be more humble in nature whereas given Ho's are grander and more sumptuous-sounding. (Korean names- chiwoo) Ho's are not only for men. The ladies' equivalent is called Dang-ho (堂號) and it is given to established women scholars, writers, and artists. Their names end in -dang. A good example of this is the name of Shin-saim-dang, an important female figure from the Yi dynasty.

Serye-meyong (洗禮名) or a baptismal name is another example. This is a name received during Christian baptism.

The concept of different kinds of names is not unique only to Korean culture. Baptismal names and pen names are common in other Asian countries and also in the West. For example, in China, there used to be a concept of so-called courtesy names. A courtesy name was received

during the coming-of-age ceremony and was used in official settings and by strangers whereas people's given names were traditionally used only among family members, close friends, and spouses. A courtesy name is also being translated as a polite name further signifying that it was rude to use one's given name outside close relationships. (Wilkinson and Center, 2018, p. 136)

In Korean culture, changing one's surname is a strict social taboo and it is mostly unheard of. Due to the importance of family bloodline, Koreans do not even think about changing their surname. The same cannot be said about given names where it is much more socially acceptable. While the number of Koreans who change their last names is negligible, the number of Koreans who change their given names is expected to be much higher.

The people who change their names are often writers or artists. When a new writer publishes a literary work for the first time, he or she may want to change his or her original full name in order to distinguish himself or herself from other writers more easily or to express his or her artistic identity more effectively. (Lee and Kim, 2017, p. 5)

## **4. Trends**

Korean names as a topic are not something widely discussed in the media. For my research, I decided to put together various articles from Korean online news media to find out what topics are most often discussed regarding Korean names. I also researched academic articles to back my findings further. The Korean online news media I included in my research are as follows: The Korea Herald, Hankyoreh, Koreatimes, and Yonhap News Agency. During my research from these various media, I found several frequently discussed topics I would like to mention.

Firstly, the topic of foreign family and given names being on the rise in South Korea. With more and more foreigners coming to South Korea and gaining Korean citizenship, the trend of creating new given names and surnames is certainly prominent.

Secondly, there is the past discussion about using peoples' real names on the internet due to severe cyberbullying, and the law that was passed in 2007 and then abolished in 2012 commanding bigger websites to require peoples' personal information for verification. In the next sections, I would like to describe each of these two topics and discuss the various sources of my research.

### **4.1 Foreign family names**

The topic of foreign-origin family names rising in numbers is the center of discussion in several news articles over the last decade. The following information was taken from four articles found in The Korea Herald, Yonhap News Agency, The Hankyoreh, and The Korea Times.

Over the last twenty years, many new family names were created. According to the latest Population and housing census from 2015, South Korea has 5 582 registered family names, and out of those, 73 % don't have a corresponding Chinese character meaning they are either native Korean words that do not have a hanja equivalent or they are completely foreign words.

The number of registered family names grew remarkably over the last fifteen to twenty years. In the Population and housing census from 2000, there were only 286 registered family names, so the number is almost twenty times higher now. This closely relates to more foreigners coming to live in South Korea permanently and gaining Korean citizenship. Many of them want to register a Korean name as well, mostly to better blend in with the Korean society.

There are cases where foreigners choose to register an already existing Korean name, such as Gim or Lee, but there are also cases where they create a completely new surname or given name. It is often a direct translation of their foreign name or is inspired by it. In an article by Kim Da-sol in The Korea Herald, the interviewed Park Jung-mi from Cheongju Multicultural

Family Support Center presents an example when a Filipino woman came to register her Korean citizenship and her new Korean name. She chose to directly translate her Filipino name Rose to the Korean Jang Mi (장미) which means rose. She then chose the Korean surname Nam (남/남) to signify that she came to South Korea from the South. (Kim, Da-Sol, 2017)

Another example can be seen in an article this time in Yonhap News Agency where the author Kim Eun-jung talks about two newly registered surnames from the 2015 census data. The two new examples mentioned were Mongol Gim and Taeguk Tae, where these two people took their place of origin and registered it as their bongwan (clan name). The word Taeguk (태국) is the Korean word for Thailand. (Kim, Eun-jung, 2011) Both authors argue in their articles that the rise in foreign-origin surnames is a sign that Korean society is increasingly diversifying with the growth of its multicultural population.

#### **4.1.1 Issues with foreign-origin surnames**

Even though South Korea welcomes great influxes of foreigners every year, having a foreign-origin family name can be a source of problems, especially for children. When it comes to families with fathers of foreign descent but still having their origins in Asian countries that are using Chinese characters in their names, there can be issues when registering their surnames in South Korea. Choi Ha-yong, the author of an article in The Korea Times talks more in-depth about this issue and she interviews several women from different families that are dealing with this problem.

In South Korea, it is traditionally the father's family name that gets passed on to the children. The problem comes when the father is of foreign origin, coming from China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, or Singapore, the countries that are using Chinese characters. Even though these countries' shared naming system originates from China and uses the same characters, each country has its own pronunciation of these characters. Therefore, there is the issue of which country's pronunciation to register as the family name.

In the article by Choi Ha-yong one of the interviewed women, Cho Mi-ri, gives an example. She has two children with her husband who is of Chinese origin. His family name is Heo in the Korean pronunciation of Chinese characters. However, in Chinese, his surname is pronounced Shi, which in Korean sounds like the word for urine. The government officials refused to register the Korean pronunciation of his surname, so the mother decided to use her family name Cho instead. It is not however common for mothers to use their family name for their children, and it creates many questions in society. One of the things Cho mentions in her

interview is that she often has to explain that she is not a single mother since her using her own family name for the children leads people to believe she does not have a husband. (Choi Ha-yong, 2017)

Many families dealing with the issue of awkward surnames came together for a call for a reform of the regulations on family registration. Go Hyeon-jeong, a 31-year-old office worker with a Taiwanese husband, gathered many different examples from various international families and submitted a proposal to the Ministry of Government Legislation. However, her idea was rejected. (Choi Ha-yong, 2017)

Currently, there is a law in South Korea, which states that children must take on the father's family name at birth if the parents haven't decided otherwise at the time of their marriage registration. (Lee Hyo-jin, 2021) In an article in *The Korea Times*, the author Lee Hyo-jin talks about the plans the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family presented in April last year. The ministry said it will improve the system through discussions with the Ministry of Justice to allow couples to choose their child's surname when applying for birth registration so that it will be easier for them to use a maternal family name. (Lee Hyo-jin, 2021)

The ministry also plans to expand the definition of family to include for example unmarried cohabitating couples, roommates, and single-person households, and eradicate discrimination against newly emerging types of households. The minister of Gender Equality and Family Chung Young-ai said: "As households are expected to diversify rapidly in the post-coronavirus era, it is vital to create an environment in which all forms of families are respected without suffering social discrimination or exclusion from governmental policies." (Lee Hyo-jin, 2021)

## **4.2 Online real-name verification system**

The controversy surrounding South Korea's online real-name verification system is a topic frequently discussed in the news media. During my research of the Korean news media, I came across over 30 articles dealing with this topic in one way or another. The information in these articles often overlaps but each author still brings something unique to the discussion.

In the following sections, I will first introduce the controversy and explore the background of the situation and then introduce various different opinions and reasonings of the article authors I came across.

#### 4. 2. 1 The background of the real-name system controversy

The real-name verification system was first introduced in 2007 and required people to disclose their personal information like their real name and Resident Registration number before making a comment or a post on certain websites. The online sites required to verify people's identities before posting were sites with more than 100 000 visitors per day. This requirement was a part of the Article 44-5(1) ii of the Act on Promotion of Information and Communications Network Utilization and Data Protection (정보통신망 이용촉진 및 정보보호 등에 관한 법률/情報通信網法). (Constitutional Court of Korea, 2011)

It was established with the motive of reducing malicious comments and defamation posts on the internet. By having Korean citizens register with their real personal information, the government hoped to make people feel more responsible for their acts on the internet.

The controversy started with exempting certain sites from this requirement. In 2009 the government has decided not to apply the real-name system to YouTube, the world's largest video-sharing website. The KCC said that to apply local laws to online services, they need to be registered as domestic businesses, but in the case of YouTube, a subsidiary of Google, it would be difficult to apply those laws because it is only a part of the international company Google Korea but has no separate local legal entity.<sup>3</sup> This caused a wave of criticism towards the Korea Communications Commission (KCC) that passed this decision. People criticized KCC's poor logic when making this decision since it is inevitably discriminating against domestically registered websites.

Another wave of criticism came after a cyber-attack in 2011 that compromised website users' personal information. The websites Cyworld and Nate, both major communication portals in South Korea, were hit by hacking attacks that leaked the personal information of some 35 million users, including their names, phone numbers, and residence registration number. (Bae, Hyun-jung, 2011)

In 2012 the online real-name verification system was ruled as unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court of Korea. The Court ruled unanimously. The ruling was done based on a petition filed by a group of citizen activists and the online media company Internet Media Today, claiming the discriminatory law violates people's freedom of speech. (Bae, Hyun-jung, 2011)

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<sup>3</sup> "YouTube Korea Now Exempt from Real Name System." 2010. The Hankyoreh. Accessed June 20, 2022. [http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english\\_edition/e\\_national/414784.html](http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/414784.html).



#### **4.2.2 New versions of the internet real-name verification system**

Even though the real-name system was ruled as unconstitutional in 2012, it was not the last time Korean citizens heard about it.

In 2015 a similar system, the Public Official Election Act, was implemented during the election period, where for the 30 days of the election campaigning the news aggregators had to input and verify their identities when posting articles either supporting or countering a candidate. This was done to avoid false information and propaganda during the campaigning. (Choi Su-Hyang, 2015)

Another case of call for the internet real-name system emerged after the death of the South Korean singer and actress Sulli. Sulli's real name was Choi Jin-ri and she was active as a Kpop idol singer and actress. She was found dead in her apartment in October 2019 after committing suicide.

According to the police, Sulli was suffering from severe depression, but she was also a frequent target of online slander. Since Sulli did not always conform to the social norms, many Korean netizens criticized her on various online platforms. Sulli was criticized for things such as not wearing a bra in public, speaking about mental health issues, or publicly stating her opinion on women's rights regarding abortions. (Ock Hyun-ju, 2019)

After her death was made public many Korean netizens expressed their concerns and displeasures with how she was treated. A number of bills aimed at curbing cyberbullying have been submitted to the National Assembly, despite concerns over violations of free speech. (Ock Hyun-ju, 2019)

In a poll done by the polster Realmeter seven out of ten pollees agreed to using real names when making comments on the internet. The poll asked in total 502 Korean adults nationwide about their opinion about the real-name system. 69.5 percent were for using real names when commenting on the internet. Almost a half of them, 33.1 percent, were very much in favor. Only 24 percent of pollees were against and the remaining 6.5 percent did not want to answer or did not have an opinion. (Yoo Cheong-mo, 2019) In another survey conducted by Hankook Research, 80 percent of the respondents agreed to the introduction of a real-name system to prevent malicious comments and only 9 percent opposed it.

This public outcry also led the two biggest South Korean web portals Naver and Daum to adopt this approach. The web portal Daum temporarily closed its comments sections under entertainment news through which cyber insults frequently occur. Naver joined a year later in 2020 and in addition they announced that all usernames will be visible including the commenters profiles, comment history and profile pictures. (Shim Woo-hyun, 2020)

As with the previous real-name system from 2007, this new revised version called the quasi real-name system, also faces controversy and the concerns are much the same. People fear the possible limitations of freedom of speech in the online space.

In an article by Shin Ji-hye from last year in *The Korea Herald* there is an interview with Park Dae-chool, the representative for the People Power Party. Park Dae-chool was the one who proposed the bill on the new quasi real-name system, and this is what he said to *The Korea Herald*: “Initially, the bill was pushed forward by disclosing both Internet Protocol addresses and IDs, but it was not passed in the 20th National Assembly because there was a lot of opposition. So, we took a step back to revealing only IDs. I don’t think it violates freedom of expression much. Freedom of expression is important, but many people suffer from too many malicious comments from people hiding behind anonymity. I believe the bill ensures maximum anonymity and minimal accountability.” (Shin Ji-hye, 2021)

#### **4.2.3 Authors’ opinions**

When researching for this topic in the news media I tried to collect various editorial articles and articles from authors with different points of view. However, the opinions in the articles did not vary very strongly.

I would like to take a closer look at three articles in this section and discuss the authors’ opinions and arguments. All three articles were taken from *The Hankyoreh*, two of them being Editorials, one from the year 2006 and the other from 2010, presenting the opinions about the real-name system before it was established and three years in use, respectively.<sup>45</sup> The third article is a column by the professor of law at Korea University, Park Kyeong-sin, from 2009, where he expresses his concerns with the system and makes several comparisons to South Korea’s Criminal law. All three articles have the same overarching theme: the internet real-name verification system should be abolished.

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<sup>4</sup> “[Editorial] Government’s Internet Plan Hurts Freedom of Expression.” 2006. *The Hankyoreh*. Accessed June 20, 2022. [http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english\\_edition/e\\_national/145400.html](http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/145400.html).

<sup>5</sup> “[Editorial] No Reason to Adhere to Real Name System.” 2010. *The Hankyoreh*. Accessed June 20, 2022. [http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english\\_edition/e\\_editorial/414786.html](http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_editorial/414786.html)

## **The Hankyoreh editorials**

When comparing the two Hankyoreh editorials, the opinions and arguments from the 2006 article did not change much to the 2010 article. The authors only had more arguments to add to their already extensive list as to why abolish the real-name system.

Since the real-name system was officially established in 2007, the earlier editorial was written in reaction to what could this law mean for the public if it was passed. The article mostly focuses on criticizing politicians, stating that they are misleading the public with convincing them that there is no other way to make the online space safe. The author raises the argument that it is mostly political parties and politicians themselves that are the targets of online slander, thus using the real-name system to their own benefit.

The author also states that it is not difficult to find and punish culprits online by tracing their IP addresses thus making the real-name system pointless. Another of their arguments is that it will only hurt the healthy criticism since people who would have positive contributions in the online space will be less likely to write their opinions, not wanting to be under surveillance.

The danger is not only in freedom of speech but also in personal information safety since the leakage of people's personal data. Another point the author makes is that by giving websites the power over blocking certain people from posting and commenting the government is making them into unofficial censors of sort which could be very dangerous going forward.

Overall, the author expresses their concern over the real-name system being unconstitutional and calls for the law to be withdrawn. The later editorial only adds to these arguments and points, mostly criticizing the exemption of the video platform YouTube from the real-name verification system and focusing on the fallout of the major personal data leakage.

The author makes the point that at this point the real-name system only serves as a tool for identity theft and does not actually reduce the number of malicious comments and misinformation posts, the main reason for establishing it in the first place. At the end of the article, the author again calls for the abolishment of the system since it does not serve its original purpose.

### **The column by Professor Park Kyeong-sin**

In this column, the reader encounters in my opinion an even harsher criticism of the real-name system when comparing it to the two editorials above. Professor Park Kyeons-sin being a lawyer brings an interesting point of view to the controversy.

He makes various comparisons to South Korea's Criminal Act, stating that Korean citizens have the right to privacy and thus have the right against the government's intrusion into their privacy. As he states, the Article 215 of the Criminal Act can only force the disclosure of private life and private information only in special cases that involve the public interest and when it is "necessary for criminal investigations." (Park Kyeong-sin, 2009)

The author also argues that even the people that support the real-name system would not be happy if they were randomly approached on the street by a police officer and asked to share their personal information. He also makes an example of wearing name tags in public as a crime prevention to show how, in his opinion, ridiculous the system is. As in the two Hankyoreh editorials, the point is made that people who might have beneficial contributions to the online space will only write less, not wanting to be under surveillance.

Professor Park also makes a point by stating examples when anonymous writing showed beneficial and also crucial for certain parts of history. The domestic example he makes is all the writing that called for independence and freedom during the harshest days of Japanese colonial rule and during the military dictatorships following. He argues that writing online is no different and that requiring people to disclose their real names because reader response is explosive is like forcing authors in a given genre to use their real names because the book is selling well. (Park Kyeong-sin, 2009) His point being that it makes no sense at all. The arguments against the limitation of freedom of speech are being made again, as with the editorials and Professor Park also calls for the abolishment of the system.

## **5. Conclusion**

In this work, I focused on Korean personal names. In the first chapter, family names were explored. The history of family clans and their origins, the evolution of family names since Korea's first contact with Chinese culture and characters, and lastly also the distribution of Korean family names in the country today.

The second chapter explored the given names. Their unique characteristics, the way in which they are chosen, the naming tradition, and the generational index character. A discussion was made about the gender of Korean given names and how to determine the gender of a person from their name alone. Lastly different forms of names were introduced.

The last chapter of my work dealt with researching articles on the South Korean online news platforms, namely The Korea Herald, The Hankyoreh, Yonhap News Agency, and the Korea Times. The most discussed topics regarding Korean names were chosen and discussed. The two topics were the foreign-origin family names and the controversy regarding South Korea's Internet real-name verification system.

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