

# Foreign First Names in Korea

## Kwang-Sook Lie

*Department of German Language Education, Seoul National University*

### I. Introduction

In Korea it is customary to give a newborn child only one single first name. Several first names are not officially allowed. First names consist mainly of two Korean syllables which are reproduced with Chinese characters: for example, *Kwang Sook*. The two characters of the first name belong together and are used as a whole. Korean surnames and first names are often made up of three syllables: *Lie Kwang Sook*.

There are few fundamental restrictions when choosing a first name. Surnames and names of places are usually not allowed. Parents', grandparents' and near relatives' first names are not to be used for newborn children. The first name of prominent people in areas such as politics, arts, literature, sport and science etc. are also avoided if possible. Thus the identification of an individual with the first name is very important. Specific Chinese characters which are extremely difficult in structure and pronunciation are officially not recommended.

It is not necessary that the gender of the person concerned is clearly recognisable by the first name. A considerable number of women therefore have masculine first names: *Sun-chul*, *Yong-suk*; and there are also some cases where men have feminine names: *Chung-hee*, *Chin-hee*. Except for the just mentioned restrictions, one can theoretically use any letter as a first name.

Even though in Korea one has many possibilities in name-giving, the share of foreign first names is however small. In this paper foreign names are those that are not traceable back to authentic Korean names like *Na-ra* and *A-rim*, or Sino-Korean names such as *Kwang-sook* and *Dong-mi*.

Most characters of Sino-Korean first names are of Chinese origin, but with the passing of time these have been so firmly

naturalised and the Korean pronunciation and writing have adapted so well that one does not see them as foreign any more. Most of the present first names belong to this group and one can recognise their Chinese origin by the Chinese characters. With authentic Korean first names it is not the custom to use Chinese characters.

The classification of foreign names by their etymological origin yields nothing for this research because most names are not taken from their original language. Name-givers have taken the names from the language in which they are used and from which language the forms of names came into contact with Koreans.

Most are borrowed from English such as *Me-ri* (*Mary*) and *Pol* (*Paul*). The names taken from other languages are often short forms so that their original full version is difficult to identify: *Mi-mi*, *Mi-na*. Those first names that are taken from English are transliterated into Korean according to the original pronunciation and are written using the native script: 난시 (*Nan-si*), 세라 (*Se-ra*). By giving the names in such a manner it is apparent that the names are only known by their sound but the origin of the foreign language is limited (Seibicke 1982, 113). On the other hand, biblical names such as *Johannes* and *Paulus* are used as found in the Korean translation of the Bible: *Yo-han*, *Ba-ul*.

It is not clear which language such names as *An-ri*, *E-ri-si*, *E-da* derive from. Since short forms adapt rather well to the Korean spoken language, it is sometimes not easy to see the distinction between foreign and native first names: *Mi-ra*, *Ye-na*.

This research used mass-media material, especially newspapers, magazines and television as well as other printed sources such as lists of student names.<sup>1)</sup> The research base lasted from February '95 until June '96.

## II. Name Formation

Foreign language first names are mainly made up of two Korean syllables: *Ro-mi*, *Ri-na*. Just like native names, this leads to a majority of foreign names consisting of shorter forms. The so-called *short-forms* often appear in female names and these

names often end in *-a* or *-i*.

The tendency to shorten names is an interesting phenomenon when one takes into consideration that short forms in native names are not possible because of their structure (Lie 1993, 235): the two characters together make up a single unit. The omission of one therefore makes no sense. It only makes sense if the first name is composed of one single character which is traditional with certain surnames such as *Huh Jong* and *Huh Yong*. Full names like *Se-se-ri-a* (*Cecilia*) are an exception. Single syllable names like *Pol* (*Paul*) also occur rarely and three-syllable names like *A-ne-su* (*Agnes*), *E-ri-sa* (*Elisa*) are rarely given. Whether those who give the names are aware of the full foreign names is questionable and it is presumed that the name givers do not know the source of the names or that they are just ignored so that the given names fit well into the native name system.

Foreign language first names can be divided into two groups in reference to how well they adapt. One group is completely integrated so that the names no longer sound foreign and are also not noticed as such: *Su-ji*, *Ju-ri*. Yet another further assimilation is wished by the parents: that the names are sometimes written with Chinese characters: 美羅 (*Mi-na*), 美美 (*Mi-mi*). The other group includes names whose pronunciation is still recognised as foreign: *E-ma* (*Emma*), *Jo-an* (*Joan*), *An-na* (*Anna*), *Me-ri* (*Mary*).

All these given first names are officially written behind the surname as customary. It is however possible that in private the first name is used in front of the surname: *Jo-an Li*, *He -ru-man Kim*. In Korea it is now the fashion for many artists, like singers, painters, and, actors to use foreign names such as *Jek-ki* (*Jacky*), *Pe-ti* (*Patty*) as their stage or professional names. These names are often used in front of surnames but have not been taken into consideration in this research.

### III. Motive

When choosing foreign first names, religious reasons play a big role. Christian families give their children, be they boys or girls, names from the Bible. So the daughter of a vicar comes to

be called *An-na* and a professor of theology *Ba-ul*. As already mentioned such names are taken from the Korean translation of the Bible so that their pronunciation is familiar to Koreans: *Nu-ga* (*Lukas*), *Ma-da* (*Martha*). Names of saints have already been adapted to the Korean rules both in their pronunciation and script since the Bible was translated into Korean and are still in use today: *Ma-te* (*Mattheus*), *Ma-ga* (*Markus*). Korean Christians give great meaning to missionary work, and by giving their children these Christian names they certainly want their religion to spread still further. It should be asked whether the very first foreign names in Korea had something to do with Christianity as the first contact with foreigners came at the end of the eighteenth century, brought about by the European missionaries. In the writings about the history of Korean Christianity, some Koreans appear with names like *Ma-ru-ta* and *Gol-rom-ba*, who were active in persuading others of their belief in the nineteenth century.

In the choosing of foreign first names it is above all the harmonious sound which is decisive: the tendency to find a nice harmonious name which also fits with the surname is the main object. The meaning of the foreign names is not so important but the meaning of native names is seen as one of the most important motives. In the search for foreign names the impression of the sound has a great meaning which is certainly connected to the fact that the name-giver only knows the name by way of sound: they are not interested or concerned about its etymological meaning. There is also no sense in asking about the meaning of the short-form names, as with the shortening of the name the meaning is destroyed. One can therefore not trace the origin of many female names and know what they actually mean, for example, with names like *Mi-na* and *An-ri*.

Many female names end with vowels *-a* or *-i*: *Mi-na*, *Se-ri*, *Su-ji*, *Ju-ri*. As in the above mentioned examples, the preference seems to be for names with the use of specific consonants like *-m*, *-n*, *-s* or *-r*. The names sound aesthetically Korean and have simple sound structures. In the choice of foreign names a preference is also given to more simple forms which are easier to pronounce such as *Mi-mi* and *Ti-ni*. The foreign first names are also considered in relation to the families' surname. A newspaper reported that the parents whose son has a foreign name *Go-ya*

want to make an application to change their son's name on the grounds that the name *Go-ya* together with the surname *Choe* (*Choe-go-ya*) means "I'm the greatest." Because of the name their son was being ridiculed by other children at school. The government made a decree for the whole year of 1995 which allows the change of first names for children in primary school when the application is made with good reason. Over a thousand applications were made and of these 95% were accepted. Parents made a much greater demand for the change in girls' names rather than the change in boys' names. The reasons were varied: the names were hard to pronounce, they did not have a good meaning, they were identical to names of relatives, the name officially registered was different from the name by which the person was called, or the name gave a bad impression. A female student named *Ga-in*, for example, wanted to change her name as it sounds similar to the name *Cain* in the Bible and thus created a bad impression. Here, it is important to note that from all these specified reasons one can conclude that for Koreans there are various motives in choosing a first name.

Parents who had kids during their stay abroad often wish to express this connection in their children's first names. Thus, names like *U-do* (*Udo*), *Sa-bin* (*Sabine*), and *Ha-i-di* (*Heidi*) arise for children who were born in Heidelberg. First names can also be taken from foreign figures such as politicians, rulers, singers and sportsmen. A television announcer explained in an interview that she was born on the same day *Richard Nixon* won the president elections in America so her father gave her the name *Ik-son* as he wanted it to sound similar to the name *Nixon*. It is interesting to note that it was the surname and not the first name of a man that was borrowed. When one does not know the reason then the name *Ik-son* can be seen as a Korean name without hesitation, especially for boys. Another woman's reason for being named with an exotic name such as *Hal-ri* was that her father liked the song *Holly Ann* by the American rock-group Boston very much and had the idea of using the name *Hal-ri* which derived from the title of the song. From the above mentioned examples we can see that the choice of a name can be triggered by the strong emotions of the name giver, though one should be careful not to overrate the influence of mass-media, literature, cinema and television films, or music hits.

#### IV. Gender Specification

Foreign first names are used far more for girls than for boys, is although the overall figure is not big. Name-giving in Korea generally marked by tradition and even more so for boys. For boys the family tradition is still very much in use and the tradition is passed on over generations. For families of the same descent there are regulations as to which generation should use which letters in the giving of first names. For example, those belonging to the family name *Shin* have the first names *Hak-hyun*, *Jung-hyun*, etc. The next generation had first names such *Yong-chul*, *Duk-chul*, etc. The repeated letters *Hyun* and *Chul* are the results of such regulations. Many parents adhere to these rules more strictly when choosing boys' names rather than girls'. Therefore name-giving for boys is connected much more to tradition than it is for girls, which among other things is apparent in the smaller number of foreign first names.

The foreign language names can be divided into boys' and girls' names without difficulty. Girls' names end often with resonant vowels: *Mi-ra*, *Mi-mi*. Boys' names instead have the same consonant sound as those usual in native first names: *Ba-ul*, *Pi-lip*, *Da-niel*. In most foreign names of girls sound plays a big part while boys' names are chosen above all for religious reasons.

#### V. Conclusion

The earliest written sources about first names in Korea are found in chronicles of the country dating back to the tenth century when first names were already in use long before the family names came into existence. When people actually began using foreign first names in Korea is not precisely known. My opinion about when this began is connected to the fact that the Korean population came into contact with European missionaries in the nineteenth century. Along with the Christian teachings came the teachings of equal rights between higher and lower social classes which found great approval from servants,

slaves and traders. There were also intellectuals and scholars who, in spite of government persecution, strove to spread their new belief. Their effort was so great that they ended up giving their children biblical names which were probably first used as informal names.

Today religious motives are still important in the choice of foreign names for girls and boys. Awareness of tradition still strongly influences the first name-giving especially for boys, where regulations about giving specific signs for specific generations are strictly abided by. In Korea, the parents' wish to give exotic or unusual sounding first names remains however moderate, because too foreign sounding elements are not seen as pleasing and are kept under control to a certain extent by the way in which the pronunciation and writing construction is kept in accordance with the Korean language.

The research has shown that the number of foreign first names is proportionally small, though the difference between boys' and girls' names is quite big. It is not to be excluded that the number may increase when the area of research is extended even further and material is also retrievable from other sources such as church documents.

Tradition is more adhered to for boys than for girls in general.

It is nevertheless to be presumed that with time more first names will be borrowed from foreign languages due to the presently increasing freedom to travel which entails more contact with foreign countries; the inclination towards what is foreign and exotic will certainly grow, which may exert an influence on Korean name-giving. Business people who are working with foreign firms already have foreign language names<sup>2)</sup> such as *Do-nal-du* (*Donald*) and *De-i-vi-du* (*David*), which they are called for business purposes, in addition to their native name. Some firms also recommend foreign names because they are easier for the business partner to remember and to pronounce. Moreover, another point to be noticed is that consumer goods like soap, shampoo and cosmetics etc. have long been overcrowded with foreign names such as *Rodin* for milk lotion and *Rejoice* for shampoo.

Foreign first names for girls in Korea 1996 include:

A-ne-su, An-na, An-ri(?)<sup>3)</sup>

De-re-sa, Du-bo-ra  
 E-na, E-da(?), E-ri(?), E-ri-sa, E-ri-si(?), E-ma, E-su-to, E-su-do,  
 Ha-i-di, Han-na, Hal-ri, Hua-ni  
 Ik-son  
 Jem-ma, Jo-an, Ju-ri, Ju-ri-a, Ji-ni, Ji-mi, Ji-na  
 Ma-da, Mae-ri, Me-ri, Mi-na, Mi-ra, Mi-ri, Mi-mi, Ma-ri-a, Ma-ru-  
 ta  
 Na-na, Na-mi, Nan-si  
 Pho-ti-na  
 Ro-mi, Ru-da, Ri-na, Ri-ji, Ri-ya, Ru-di-a  
 Sa-bin, Sa-ra, Se-mi(?), Su-sun, Su-san, Sen-da(?), So-ri, Se-ra,  
 Se-ri(?), Se-so-ri-a, Su-ji, Su-san-na, Se-ra-pi-ne  
 Ti-na, Tschu-ri(?)  
 Ye-na(?), Yul-ri

#### Foreign first names for boys in Korea 1996

Ba-ul  
 Bo-bi  
 Da-ni-el, Da-bi-du  
 El-rim  
 Go-ya  
 Han-o(?), Han-su(?), He-ri, He-ru-man  
 Jo-hann  
 Ma-i-kul, Ma-ga, Mi-ga-el  
 Mo-se  
 Nu-a, Nu-ga  
 Pil-rip, Pol  
 U-do  
 Yo-han, Yo-sop, Yo-sep

#### Footnotes

- 1) The reseach would have been easier if a first name lexicon or similar reference work had been at hand. First names in Korea have not yet been researched as a scientific discipline.
- 2) Whether such informal names can be recognised as "contact names" is to be considered.
- 3) The question marks behind the names mean that it is not certain if they are foreign.

## References

- Drosdowski, Günter, 1974, *Duden-Lexikon der Vornamen*, Mannheim, Wien, Zürich, Duden-Taschenbuch 4.
- Kim, Chin W., 1995, "Korean names," in: *Handbücher zur Sprach- und Kommunikationswissenschaft*, hg. von E. Eichler/G. Hilty/H. Löffler/H. Steger/L. Zgusta, Bd. 11. 1, Berlin/New York, 918-925.
- Lie, Kwang-sook, 1993, "Namensystem und Namengebrauch in Korea," in: *Festschrift für Prof. Yang Ung-ju*, Seoul, 223-237.
- Naumann Horst/Schlimpert G./Schultheis, J. 1988, *Vornamen*, Leipzig.
- Seibicke, Wilfried, 1991, *Vornamen*, Frankfurt.
- Shin, P., 1971, "Überblick über koreanische Familiennamen," in: *Koreanische Familiennamen*, hg. von D. Choi, Seoul, 22-35 (in koreanischer Sprache).
- Systemy lichnyh imen u narodov mira (Personennamen-Systeme bei den Völkern der Welt), 1986, *Die Redaktion für östliche Literatur im Verlag der Wissenschaft*, Moskau (in russischer Sprache).
- Yi, S., 1977, *Koreanische Familiennamen*, Seoul (in koreanischer Sprache).