

North Korea

Country name	North Korea
State title	Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK)
Name of citizen	North Korean
Official language	Korean (<i>kor</i> ¹)
Country name in official language	조선민주주의인민공화국 (Chosŏn Minjujuŭi Inmin Konghwaguk) <i>or informally</i> 조선 (Chosŏn)
State title in official language	<i>As country name</i>
Script	Hangul (romanized <i>Han'gŭl</i> in North Korea)
Romanization System	McCune-Reischauer system, adopted (with adaptations) for use by PCGN and BGN
ISO-3166 code (alpha-2/alpha-3)	(KP/PRK)
Capital	P'yŏngyang (Pyongyang)
Capital in official language	평양 (P'yŏngyang)
Population/Area	26 million (UN data) / 120,540 km ²

Introduction

North Korea forms the northern part of the Korean peninsula and shares land borders with South Korea, China and Russia. The *Koryŏ* dynasty, from where the country name Korea is drawn, was the first dynasty to unify the Korean peninsula in 918. The dynastic tradition continued until Japan annexed the peninsula in 1910, control which lasted until the conclusion of the Second World War when the Korean peninsula was divided into two occupation zones along the 38th parallel.

In 1950, North Korean forces invaded South Korea, starting the Korean War; the war did not conclude until 1953 at which time the gains and losses resulted in a dividing line between the two countries little different from the post WW2 division. At the resulting truce line, a demilitarized zone (commonly DMZ) of 238 km became the *de facto* boundary between the countries.

Since the Korean War, North Korea has been a totalitarian dictatorship run by successive members of one family; the regime is characterized by its global isolation and repression within the country.

¹ ISO 639 codes are given for the languages mentioned in this Factfile.

Geographical names policy

PCGN policy for geographical names in North Korea is to apply the approved romanization system (see detail below) to Korean names written in Hangul script.

There are few, if any, available official geographical names sources produced by North Korea. South Korea produces mapping over North Korea in both Korean and in romanized form (romanized according to the South Korean national romanization system, so the spellings on this mapping needs alteration to reflect the BGN/PCGN approved romanization system (contact PCGN for further information or assistance with this conversion). The US Board on Geographic Names (BGN) Geographic Names Server: [GNS Search & Download WebApp \(nga.mil\)](https://www.nga.mil) is a reasonable source of names for North Korea.

Language

North Korea’s official language is Korean (ISO language code *kor*) and given its isolation, the country is highly ethnically and linguistically homogenous: there are no known minority languages spoken by any significant numbers. The language has diverged somewhat from that spoken in South Korea, with unsurprisingly far fewer foreign loan words.

Korean is written in Hangul script, a script that was developed in the 15th century, and in North Korea this has entirely replaced the use of Sino-Japanese characters (called Hanja in Korean)².

Hangul is alphabetic but letters are grouped together into syllables, as Chinese characters are (e.g. Haeju is written 해주 = ‘Hae-ju’ (i.e. consonant-vowel; consonant-vowel)).

There are a number of different romanization systems that may be applied to Hangul. The most linguistically complete system is the [McCune-Reischauer system](#), developed in 1939, and it is this system that PCGN and BGN use for place names in North Korea, in the absence of a widely employed official system from the country itself³. Additionally, the McCune-Reischauer system is in fact similar to the system promoted by North Korea (the most notable difference being the use of /h/ in the North Korean system instead of an apostrophe to mark aspiration, e.g. *Nampho* rather than *Namp’o*)⁴.

² Hanja continues to be used in some contexts in South Korea.

³ The South Korean national system is used for place names in South Korea.

⁴ The romanization system used by North Korea has been presented to the United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names reporting that it “was adopted in 1992 and has been compulsorily in use for transcribing Korean including the geographical names and personal names into Roman alphabet since then”. The system was reaffirmed to UNGEGN in 2012:

https://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/ungegn/docs/10th-uncsgn-docs/crp/E_Conf.101_CRP15_Rules%20of%20Latin%20Alphabetic%20Transcription%20of%20Korean.pdf

Nevertheless PCGN has still seen very few North Korean sources applying this system.

Certain modifications to the original 1939 system have been made for modern UK and US purposes, including use of the word-initial ㄹ ('r') (which is not used in South Korea), which is reflected in the romanization system for North Korea (e.g. 라선 (Rasŏn), and see footnote 9).

Inventory of characters (and their Unicode encodings⁵):

The [BGN/PCGN Romanization system for Korean in North Korea](#) contains the following letter-diacritic combinations in addition to the unmodified letters of the basic Roman script (shown with the appropriate Unicode encoding):

All apostrophes appearing in the romanization of Korean are U+2019.

Upper-case character	Unicode encoding	Lower-case character	Unicode encoding
Ŏ	014E	ŏ	014F
Ů	016C	ů	016D

⁵ See www.unicode.org

Administrative structure

It is unquestionably very difficult to be certain of the status of the administrative divisions in North Korea. BGN and PCGN’s current view is that there are 9 provinces (*do* or *to* (*namdo* = south province; *bukto* = north province) and 4 special cities that exist alongside the 9 provinces at the first-order (ADM1) level. More information is given in the PCGN [North Korea Information Paper](#). The list of first-order administrative divisions is believed to be:

<i>Administrative division (romanization)</i>	<i>Administrative division (Korean)</i>	<i>ISO 3166-2 code</i>	<i>Administrative Centre (romanization)</i>	<i>Administrative Centre (Korean)</i>	<i>Coordinates of administrative centre</i>
Chagang-do	자강도	KP-04	Kanggye	강계	40°58'N 126°35'E
Hamgyŏng-bukto	함경북도	KP-09	Ch’ŏngjin	청진	41°47'N 129°46'E
Hamgyŏng-namdo	함경남도	KP-08	Hamhŭng	함흥	39°54'N 127°32'E
Hwanghae-bukto	황해북도	KP-06	Sariwŏn	사리원	38°30'N 125°45'E
Hwanghae-namdo	황해남도	KP-05	Haeju	해주	38°02'N 125°42'E
Kangwŏn-do	강원도	KP-07	Wŏnsan	원산	39°09'N 127°26'E
Kaesŏng-t’ŭkpyŏlsi	개성특별시	KP-15	Kaesŏng	개성	38°44'N 125°24'E
Namp’o-t’ŭkpyŏlsi ⁶	남포특별시	KP-14	Namp’o	남포	38°43'N 125°24'E
P’yŏngan-bukto	평안북도	KP-03	Sinŭiju ⁷	신의주	40°06'N 124°23'E
P’yŏngan-namdo	평안남도	KP-02	P’yŏngsŏng	평성	39°15'N 125°51'E

⁶ Namp’o-si had been a special city between 1993 and 2004, but at this time was subsumed into the neighbouring P’yŏngan-namdo province. It is understood that a certain level of special status was reinstated in 2010 and is believed now to be **Namp’o-t’ŭkpyŏlsi** (i.e. metropolitan city. It may be of interest that **t’ŭkpyŏlsi**, is translated as "metropolitan city" in North Korea but "special metropolitan city" in South Korea. "t’ŭk" usually translates as "special" in English, but North Korea chooses not to use this word, perhaps because it has taken on a different connotation in the North Korean dialect. BGN and PCGN reflect the form used by the country itself, and feel, since the difference is minor, this should not present a significant problem to users.

⁷ Sinŭiju had been declared a “special administrative region” in September 2002. Imitating Hong Kong Special Administrative Region in structure, the area was to be walled off from the rest of North Korea with the intention that foreigners, including South Koreans, would be able to visit the zone (on the border with China) without visas. However, in 2003, the appointed governor of the region, Yang Bin, was arrested on tax evasion and other charges, and the implementation of this special zone never happened.

TOPONYMIC FACTFILE

<i>Administrative division (romanization)</i>	<i>Administrative division (Korean)</i>	<i>ISO 3166-2 code</i>	<i>Administrative Centre (romanization)</i>	<i>Administrative Centre (Korean)</i>	<i>Coordinates of administrative centre</i>
P'yŏngyang-jikhalsi ⁸	평양직할시	KP-01	P'yŏngyang (Pyongyang)	평양	39°04'N 125°50'E
Rasŏn-t'ŭkpyŏlsi ⁹	라선특별시	KP-13	Rasŏn ¹⁰	라선	42° 15'N 130°16'E
Ryganggang-do ¹¹	량강도	KP-10	Hyesan	혜산	41°23'N 128°10'E

⁸ Previously P'yŏngyang-t'ŭkpyŏlsi, this is now more commonly seen as **P'yŏngyang-jikhalsi** (i.e. directly controlled city). The Korean form, 직할시, romanized chikhalsi, becomes '-jikhalsi' with the euphonic change that occurs from the preceding consonant 'ng' in P'yŏngyang.

⁹ This special economic zone, created in 1993, continues to exist and is a contraction of the city names Rajin and Sŏnbong. Sometimes seen as Najin, in 2016 BGN and PCGN decided to reflect this initial letter as 'r' in North Korean contexts. This pronunciation has fallen out of use in South Korea but still pertains in the North, so this metropolitan city should now be labelled **Rasŏn-t'ŭkpyŏlsi**.

¹⁰ Some sources record the centre as Rajin, as this is the principal urban area in the composite of Rajin and Sŏnbong.

¹¹ Previously recorded as Yanggang-do, this altered spelling reflects the BGN/PCGN decision to reflect the initial 'r' in North Korea (as for Rasŏn, above).

Other Significant Locations

PCGN Approved Name	Name in Korean	Conventional Name	Location	Feature Type
Amnok/Yalu (labelled as appropriate)	압록강 (Amnok-gang) [Yalu Jiang <i>China</i>]	-	39°55'56"N 124°19'16"E	River forming part of China/North Korea boundary
Demilitarized Zone (DMZ)	한반도 비무장 지대 (Hanbando Bimujang jidae)	Demilitarized Zone (DMZ)	38°19'44"N 127°15'0"E	Border/buffer zone
Kūmgang-san ¹²	금강산 (Kūmgang-san)	Kūmgang-san (sometimes Diamond Mountain)	38°39'06"N 128°06'44"E	Mountain
Paektu-san	백두산 (Paektu-san) [Changbai Shan <i>China</i>]	Paektu-san or Mount Paektu	41°59'37"N 128°04'35"E	Mountain on North Korea/China boundary
Sea of Japan*	조선 동해 (Chosŏn Donghae, meaning 'east sea of Korea')	Sea of Japan		Sea, littoral states: North Korea, South Korea, Japan, Russia
Tumen River	두만강 (Tuman-gang) [Tumen Jiang <i>China</i> and Tumannaya <i>Russia</i>]	Tumen River	42°17'41 N 130°41'45"E	River (forming part of North Korea, China, Russia boundary)
Yellow Sea	서해 (Sohae, meaning 'west sea') or 황해 Hwanghae ('yellow sea')	Yellow Sea	36°00'00"N 124°00'00"E	Sea, littoral states: North Korea, South Korea, China

*The subject of a significant diplomatic issue since North and South Korea joined the United Nations in 1991, North Korea desires that a translation of its preferred Korean name, Chosŏn Donghae (so East Sea of Korea in English) be used for this sea. PCGN policy is to use the established English conventional name for this body of water, which is Sea of Japan. More information can be supplied on request.

¹² Known for its scenic beauty, Kūmgang-san kwan'gwang chigu (i.e. Kūmgang-san tourism zone) had been designated a tax-free 'tourism zone' in October 2002 allowing South Korean tourist access. However, since the shooting in 2008 of a South Korean tourist there have been no South Korean tours to the zone, and it is believed no longer to be functioning as a special region.

Useful references

- BBC country profile: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-15256929>
- BGN/PCGN Romanization Agreement for Korean in North Korea:
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/693725/ROMANIZATION_OF_KOREAN- MR_for DPRK.pdf
- Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) Travel Advice
<https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice>
- International Organization for Standardization (ISO): <http://www.iso.org>
- ISO Online Browsing Platform (OBP): <https://www.iso.org/obp/ui>
- PCGN Country Names list: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/country-names>
- PCGN [North Korea Information Paper](#)
- Unicode www.unicode.org
- US Board on Geographic Names (BGN) Geographic Names Server: [GNS Search & Download WebApp \(nga.mil\)](#)

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