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Rule of Thumbs: Koreans Reign in Texting World

By [CHOE SANG-HUN](#)

SEOUL, South Korea — Ha Mok-min is feeling like a gunslinger these days. At the English-language cram school she attends during the winter break, students jealous of her international bragging rights line up to duel with her.

“They come with their cellphones boasting they can beat me,” said Ms. Ha, 16, her deadpan manner lending her the air of a champion accustomed to — even weary of — fame. “I let them try.”

She and another young South Korean, Bae Yeong-ho, recently conquered the world with their thumbs. Their Team Korea won an international competition held in New York this month to determine who can send [text messages](#) the fastest — and most accurately — on a cellphone.

“When others watch me texting, they think I’m not that fast and they can do better,” said Mr. Bae, 17, a high school dropout who dyes his hair a light chestnut color and is studying to be an opera singer. “So far, I’ve never lost a match.”

In the New York competition he typed six characters a second. “If I can think faster I can type faster,” he said.

The inaugural [Mobile World Cup](#), hosted by the South Korean cellphone maker LG Electronics, brought together two-person teams from 13 countries who had clinched their national titles by beating a total of six million contestants. Marching behind their national flags, they gathered in New York on Jan. 14 for what was billed as an international clash of dexterous digits.

To ensure a level playing field, LG handed out identical mobile phones — one with a numeric keypad and the other with a keyboardlike QWERTY pad — weeks in advance for practice. The basic rule of the competition: copy phrases streaming across a monitor correctly, with the required capitalization and punctuation, as quickly as possible. Whichever language players chose, words were selected so that each would type the same number of characters.

Then they went thumb to lightning thumb, in five battles with names like “The Monsters’ Swamp” and “Race of Death.” When it was over, Ms. Ha and Mr. Bae were proclaimed the world’s fastest texters. An American team came in second, an Argentine team was third.

Since their return home with \$50,000 in prize money each, Ms. Ha and Mr. Bae have become something approaching heroes to what Koreans call the “thumb tribe” — youngsters who feel more comfortable texting than talking.

Until his recent immersion in music studies, Mr. Bae texted 200 to 300 messages a day. Ms. Ha averages 150 to 200.

“That’s average among my friends,” she said defensively, glancing at her mother sitting nearby. “Some send as many as 500 a day.”

In 2009, Ms. Ha won the South Korean national title against 2.8 million competitors by thumbing 7.25 characters a second. (The best score among participants in their 40s was 2.2 characters a second.) Mr. Bae, who was the 2008 national champion and has typed as many as 8 characters a second, did not compete last year.

“I text while walking, eating, watching TV,” Ms. Ha said.

During the interview, even though she was not holding her cellphone, she sat with her thumbs facing each other like a crab’s claws, as if ready to alight on an imaginary keypad.

“At school, we look and listen to the teacher while texting on our cellphones under our desks or in our pockets,” she said. “No typos.”

That behavior has gotten Ms. Ha, Mr. Bae and numerous other teenagers around the world into trouble, with angry teachers confiscating their cellphones. But Ms. Ha’s international victory has more than compensated for all that.

Ms. Ha is an almost accidental champion. Last October, she and her friends were walking through the Coex Mall, a youth hub in southern Seoul, when they saw an LG kiosk about the national competition that was under way. She entered, hoping to get free movie tickets and other gift coupons. She ended up with the top prize: \$17,000.

Mr. Bae was more calculating. “When I saw the 2008 competition announced on the Internet, I said, This is it,” he said. “It was about time that someone organized something like this. I wanted to make money and buy a car.”

For the international championship, he trained by copying billboards and anything else that came into view. He also transcribed passages from the Bible during his flight to New York. Ms. Ha trained by typing titles on her bookshelf for five minutes every night before going to bed.

“The more you text, the faster you get,” she said. “In the competition, it’s not just about the speed, though. You have to be calm and not make mistakes.”

Ms. Ha began using a cellphone in the fourth grade, and Mr. Bae began in the fifth grade. They are fervent believers in texting. They call it a far more efficient means of communication than a conversation, a telephone call or an e-mail message.

“You would rather text than dial and wait for the other person to answer,” Mr. Bae said. “It’s especially good when you say ‘hi’ to someone you haven’t seen for a while or don’t know well. You avoid the awkwardness you might feel on the phone. Texting is the modern letter, but I admit it’s not the same as talking face to face.”

Ms. Ha added: “When you talk, you often blabber. If you text, you think more coherently because you have to make yourself understood in short but logical sentences.”

Her mother, Kim Young-sook, 46, said she hoped that Ms. Ha’s world title would help her win admission to a college as an engineering major. But she still hates it when Ms. Ha texts while eating or studying.

“You should show some respect for the food you are eating and the person you are dining with,” she said, scolding her daughter. “Kids with cellphones don’t have manners and look so distracted.

“The cellphone is a great gift of civilization but also one of its pollutants,” Ms. Kim added. Shortly afterward, though, she was texting herself.

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