title : The Korean Alphabet: Its History and Structure
author : Kim-Renaud, Young-Key.
publisher :
isbn10 | asin : 0824819896
print isbn13 : 9780824819897
ebook isbn13 : 9780585351315
language :
subject
publication date :
  lcc :
  ddc :
subject : cover
The Korean Alphabet
Its History and Structure
Edited by
Young-Key Kim-Renaud

UNIVERSITY OF HAWAI'I PRESS
HONOLULU

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Printed in the United States of America

9789900010254321

The Korean alphabet: its history and structure / edited by Young-Key Rim-Renaud.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0 8248 1989 6 (alk. paper)
ISBN 0 8248 1723 0 (pbk.,: alk. paper)
1. Korean language Alphabet. 2. Korean language
Alphabet History. I. Kim-Renaud, Young-Key.
PL918.K67 1997
495.7'11dc21 96 39136
CIP

Publication of this book has been assisted by a grant from the Korea Research Foundation.

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TO KI-MOON LEE

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PREFACE

The people of Korea have long contributed to world civilization with creative work in the arts and sciences. Among their accomplishments, however, their alphabet, commonly known as han’gül, stands out as “one of the great intellectual achievements of humankind” (Sampson 1985: 144), being the script that is “perhaps the most remarkable in the world” (Ledyard 1966: 370). The world has witnessed nearly continuous technological advancement in all areas. However, most experts agree that it will be a long time before another writing system comes along that will match han’gül’s simplicity and efficiency and its elegance and intelligence.

The only alphabet completely native to East Asia, han’gül distinguishes itself among writing systems of the world with its scientific qualities and its unusual linguistic fit to the Korean language; most strikingly, its theoretical underpinnings, as well as the time and circumstances of its creation, are clearly known and well recorded. However, although this alphabet was invented in the fifteenth century, it was only following the discovery in 1940 of an original copy of the 1446 document called Hunmin ch'ŏng'um haerye (Explanations and Examples of the Correct Sounds for the Instruction of the People), which contained explicit explanations and examples of the linguistic principles used in creating different letterforms, that linguists and scholars of writing systems around the world became keen to probe into its foundations and analyze its features. The design features of han’gül succinctly expressed in this brief treatise make possible an examination of the system using modern scientific linguistic methodology.

Following this discovery, the most significant turning point in Korean linguistic history since the alphabet’s creation, there has been much vibrant research among Korean scholars on the underlying principles and the origins of han’gül. Thus, a recent survey article on research findings on han’gül by Hyŏn-hui Yi (1990) contains
213 references. Yet, no comprehensive study of this system by any Korean specialist is available in one place for those who cannot read Korean. The situation improved dramatically with a major work by the American historian and philologist Gari Ledyard (1966), one of the contributors to this volume, but Ledyard’s important doctoral dissertation remains unpublished to this day. More recently, han’gŭl seems finally to have caught the attention of non-Koreanist students of writing. The British linguist Geoffrey Sampson (1985) devotes an entire chapter of his ten-chapter book to han’gŭl and creates for it the new graphemic designation “featural system.” He uses the Korean example to revolutionize the standard conception of what a writing system is and can be, introducing to the world what Koreanists had been discussing for decades, especially the systematic correlates between graphic shapes and sound values. Han’gŭl now occupies a prominent position in serious books on writing such as those by DeFrancis (1989) and Coulmas (1989). However, none of these scholars is a specialist in the Korean language, and their theories of the Korean writing system must depend on what others have observed.

This volume seeks to fill this gap and to meet international needs by presenting a collection of essays on the cultural-historical and theoretical-linguistic background of the Korean alphabet, written by native and foreign experts on Korean phonology and philology. For this purpose a special symposium was organized in conjunction with the Eighth International Conference on Korean Linguistics, held from August 6 through 8, 1992, at George Washington University, Washington, D.C.

In producing this book, I have received invaluable assistance from many sources. First of all, I gratefully acknowledge financial support from the Korean Ministry of Culture and the Korea Research Foundation. I thank His Excellency Hong-Choo Hyun, former ambassador of the Republic of Korea to the United States, for his ardent support of Korean studies and of this conference in particular. I thank my colleagues at George Washington, especially Linda B. Salamon, dean of Columbian College and Graduate School of Arts and Sciences; Maurice East, dean of Elliott School of International Affairs; and Jonathan Chaves, chairman of the Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures, for their support and encouragement.

I should like to thank my other friends and colleagues for their
cooperation, advice, and support. The contributors to this volume graciously endured my constant requests for changes in their manuscripts either in content or in form. They have eagerly shared their ideas and opinions, whenever necessary, from the planning stage of the conference up to the publication of this volume. Ki-Moon Lee of Seoul National University was most generous in contributing his time and wisdom during his visiting year at Harvard to help make the conference a success. Sang-Oak Lee of Seoul National University, secretary-treasurer of the International Circle of Korean Linguistics (ICKL), kindly extended his cooperation and assistance in planning and carrying out the business and special projects of the Circle. John Whitman of Cornell University, newsletter editor of the ICKL, has been helpful to me in many different capacities, encouraging me always with his never-failing cheer. Samuel E. Martin of Yale University and S. Robert Ramsey of the University of Maryland kindly offered their help in reviewing manuscripts and in providing general assistance with the volume. In finalizing the manuscript for publication, Gari Ledyard of Columbia University, Chin W. Kim of the University of Illinois, Urbana, and Ross King of the University of British Columbia provided crucial criticisms and suggestions. James D. McCawley of the University of Chicago and William Poser of Stanford University gave their enthusiastic encouragement and support for the symposium, although they could not participate in the meeting because of earlier conflicting commitments. Joung Ran Kim, Joshua Margolis, Suh Y. Yoon, Joon Woo Lee, Kwang-Jun Ryu, and Sandi Inuzuka were efficient assistants in handling various administrative matters. Two anonymous reviewers of the manuscript gave extremely insightful comments and suggestions. Patricia Crosby, editor at the University of Hawai‘i Press, and Sally Serafin, managing editor of the Press, whose courteous and most professional qualities never cease to impress me, have become delightful partners in the production of the book. I am grateful to all these individuals. I am also indebted to Wan-su Choe, curator of Kansong Art Museum, who graciously allowed me to photograph pages of the Hunmin čông‘um for inclusion in this book.

Finally, we, all the contributors, wish to dedicate this volume to Professor Ki-Moon Lee, our most esteemed colleague and teacher, who has enlightened us not only on so many aspects of the Korean language and its history but also on the importance of studying it with love and sincerity.
REFERENCES

INTRODUCTION
Young-Key Kim-Renaud

The invention of the Korean alphabet, originally called *Hunmin ch'ŏng'ŭm* (Correct Sounds for the Instruction of the People), was suddenly announced at the end of the lunar year in late 1443 or January 1444, with no prior indication of its progress. The new script was promulgated in 1446 by King Sejong (r. 1418–1450), the fourth monarch and the revered ruler of the Chosŏn kingdom or Yi dynasty (1392–1910), whose reign was marked by an extraordinary level of cultural and scientific creation (see Kim-Renaud 1992). The alphabet consisted of twenty-eight letters at the time of its invention, of which twenty-four remain today, as sound change in the language has made four letters obsolete. The *Hunmin ch'ŏng'ŭm* was both a promulgation document and a handbook for learning the alphabet. This basic text was accompanied by a much longer scholarly commentary called *Hunmin ch'ŏng'ŭm haerye* (Explanations and Examples of the Correct Sounds for the Instruction of the People), often referred to simply as *Haerye*, which was compiled in 1446 by Chŏng In-ji, Sin Suk-chu, and others. This invaluable document, long missing until a copy was discovered in 1940, gives the linguistic and philosophical principles behind the invention of the alphabet and its usage, enabling scholars to study them systematically.

Before the invention of the alphabet, Koreans had already had a long tradition of transcribing their language. Korean alphabetic writing is now better known as han'gul (the Han [Korean/great] script), a new name with a nationalistic tone believed to have been coined in 1910 by Chu Si-gyŏng, a linguist-patriot and a member of the enlightenment movement. Until that time, almost half a millennium after its invention, the Korean alphabet had been pejoratively called *ŏnmun* (vernacular writing), and Chinese writing still enjoyed prestige among all intellectual and societal elites. In fact, even today,
many Koreans, particularly older people in South Korea, believe that true literacy is a function of a person’s knowledge of the Chinese classics and Chinese writing. In North Korea, only han’gul is used, although North Koreans refer to the alphabet by a different name, Chosŏn’gul (“script of Chosŏn,” Chosŏn being the Korean name for the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea) or simply uri kŭlcha (our characters). Chinese characters are learned as a separate subject in North Korea. In South Korea, newspapers and scholarly journals still incorporate Chinese characters, although their number has been drastically reduced over recent years (see Appendix 3). There continue to be heated debates among South Koreans on whether to include Chinese characters in written Korean, and it is increasingly considered an elitist idea; it may indeed be only a matter of time before the South follows the same course as the North.

In the two thousand years or more since Chinese was introduced to Korea, Koreans have had to develop a variety of ways to make reading Chinese classics as well as writing Korean vernacular easier. It was clumsy, even painful to use Chinese characters to write down Korean, a polysyllabic, agglutinative language with many grammatical suffixes, so unlike Chinese. Various efforts were made to overcome the difficulty, out of which at least three different but related systems, called hyangch’al (local letters), kugyŏl (oral formulae), and idu (clerk readings), emerged (for a succinct description of these systems, see Ledyard 1966: 29–57). In these writings, existing Chinese characters were applied phonetically to represent Korean sounds, particularly in grammatical particles and phrases but also for some lexical items. The methods used, therefore, were analogous to the ones discernible in the early Japanese poems of the Man’yōshū in Japan. This parallel development is not surprising, as Japanese syntactic structures are very similar to those of Korean. As King notes, it is natural that even some genuinely Chinese characters have gone through not only phonological but semantic shifts, given the intimate experience Koreans had with Chinese writing for such a long time (1996:218). According to Sasse, Koreans even invented more than 150 “Chinese” characters, mainly for writing native words including personal and place names (1980, cited in King 1996: 218).

The first and foremost goal of King Sejong was thus to devise something that would be easy for Koreans to learn and to use. He wanted to invent a writing system first of all for Koreans. This intention is manifest in Sejong’s preface to the Hunmin chŏng’um: “The
innunciants of our country's language are different from those of the Middle Kingdom and are not confluent with [the innunciants of] characters. Therefore, among the stupid people, there have been many who, having something to put into words, have in the end been unable to express their feelings. I have been distressed because of this, and have newly designed twenty-eight letters, which I wish to have everyone practice at their ease and make convenient for their daily use" (translated in Ledyard 1966:224).

However, Sejong was also eager and confident that the new system should be made universally applicable. Chŏng In-ji's postface to the Haerye includes the following statement: "Though only twenty-eight letters are used, their shifts and changes in function are endless; they are simple and fine, reduced to the minimum yet universally applicable. Therefore, a wise man can acquaint himself with them before the morning is over; a stupid man can learn them in the space of ten days.... There is no usage not provided for, no direction in which they do not extend. Even the sound of the winds, the cry of the crane, the cackle of fowl and the barking of dogs—all may be written" (translated in Ledyard 1966:258–259).

The alphabet and suprasegmental markers were devised to cover Chinese, the language of a country that represented the entire civilized world for Koreans at the time. Some special symbols not necessary for Korean at all were part of the original inventory. With time, however, many of the symbols unnecessary for writing Korean disappeared from texts and were forgotten, and han'gul became a writing system for Korean alone.

If an alphabet is defined as "a system of signs expressing single [distinctive] sounds of speech" (Gelb 1952:166), the Korean writing system is an alphabetic system. The Korean alphabet, however, does not consist of symbols that are arbitrarily selected to signify specific sounds, as is the case with nearly all other alphabets, but there is an iconic relationship between the letters and the sounds they represent. The system is also peculiar in that a known creator one day decided to carefully devise a set of letters, to invent what was needed—a feat supremely difficult and rarely achieved in ancient times, and even unthinkable according to some experts on writing systems (e.g., DeFrancis 1989: 215 and Coulmas 1989: 3). Furthermore, these letters reflect various articulatory traits and phonological alternations, and the underlying principles behind the design are explained with articulatory descriptions of sounds represented by