

The rebirth of Hangeul

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1. Introduction

Japan has the most complex character systems in the world. Hiragana, katakana, kanji are using together in Japanese. Kanji is hard to read because it has its own kundoku (訓讀, interpretative reading) which is different from Chinese pronunciation. Most of the Japanese kanji are imported from China, some via Korea, so their pronunciations are different according to the periods they were imported.

By contrast, Korean has the simplest letters in the world. Hangeul is easy to read, only 24 letters and its pronunciation also one to one correspondence. Except for a handful of elderly Koreans, every Korean enjoys Hangeul in one's daily life. It is so easy that even the children before entering elementary school, they have already learned. The letters invented by Sejong the Great were at first named 'Hunminjeongeum (訓民正音, standard pronunciations for teaching people)' and it worked as Eonmun (諺文, private characters), not as Gungmun (國文, official characters)

at those days. As you know, Kanji was the official character in Korea until the year of 1894.

Though Hangeul was invented in 1444, Kanji was still commonly used as the official character during 450 years. So the aspect of Korean's daily life of using letters did not much differ from those of Japanese. Korean the same as Japanese, had very complex writing systems including Kanji, Idu (吏讀, simplified Kanji for writing Korean), Gugyeol (口訣, letters for notating the grammatical morphemes of Korean), etc. In 1894, Prime Minister Kim Hong-jip suggested the reform on Hangeul as Gungmun. And king Gojong accepted it, and thereafter, Hangeul became the official letters of Korean. I will call the moment, 'Rebirth of Hangeul'.

2. Duality of Hangeul

Korean have dual attitude toward Hangeul. One is that Korean take pride in Hangeul, the other is that Hangeul is thought to be still unfinished letters and not refined one comparing with Kanji. If Hangeul had been the official letters of Korea at the time of the invention, it could have been continuously refined for more than 600 years, the result of it Hangeul might have been orthodox. But in reality, Hangeul did not acquire the official position of the country until the year of 1894, the periods are too short for Hangeul to be orthodox just over 100 years since then.

Nevertheless Korean love Hangeul very much. Hangeul is considered to be the greatest cultural heritages in Korea. And the day when Sejong the inventor of Hangeul first officially announced it to his people, Korean made it as a national anniversary, as you know, Hangeul day.

Kana has long tradition. It was invented more than 500 years ahead of Hangeul. But there is no national anniversary to celebrate for the invention

in Japan. In so far as I know, there is no country in the world except Korea to celebrate the invention of its own ethnic letters.

Koreans are so proud of Hangeul, some Korean tried to expel Kanji which was continuously used more than 2,000 years. In fact, more than half of the total lists of Korean vocabulary are kanji words (漢字語, words originated from Chinese). It is hard to understand Kanji words if he does not know the basic Kanji actually used in Korea now. But the purists tried to expel Kanji with a reason that it was imported from China. Before the year of 1894, there was no one who insisted to expel Kanji from Korea.

Japanese are different from Korean in that point. Although two peoples are the same culture of Kanji, they did not try to expel Kanji, rather, they tried to read Kanji their own way and insistently tried to think it as their own characters.

What is the reason of the difference between two peoples? Recently, an ethnic society in Indonesia used Hangeul as the letters for notating their language. As soon as the news arrived in Korea, the Koreans expressed their interest in it and all supported it. All the media sent their compliments to the people who contributed to the spread of Hangeul. The politicians, whether they are the ruling party or the opposition, all praised them, so called 'Hangeul nationalism' in Korea is still alive. Koreans think Hangeul as the symbol of Korea.

In contrast to that kind of nationalism, Korean also have negative attitude to Hangeul. For example, in a class room at the university, most Korean professors write on their classroom board with English alphabet or Kanji rather than Hangeul to convey their ideas to the students. They think that Hangeul is not enough for teaching the abstract concepts or academic terminologies.

And Korean doubt the established Hangeul orthography and sometimes they try to resist it. For example, one of Korean's favorite Chinese dish is 'jajangmyeon (noodles with bean sauce)'. According to the Hangeul

orthography, ‘자장면/jajangmyeon’ was right, 짜장면/jjajangmyeon was wrong. However, some writers and Chinese restaurant owners, many of the ordinary people resisted it. They insisted that 짜장면/jjajangmyeon should be right emotionally. At first, it was not accepted by the National Institute of Korean language where the orthography was established. But the resistance continued during 25 years from 1986 to 2011. The resistance was stronger year after year until the authorities surrendered. At last, there are two standard forms ‘자장면/jajangmyeon’ and ‘짜장면/jjajangmyeon’ for the same Chinese dish in Korea!

I think that it is unnatural that someone does not like a notation for a word, personally or emotionally, and so he tries to reform it. In so far as I know, changing the orthography because of that kind of emotional reason is hardly accepted by the authorities, for example, in case of English or Japanese. Why do Koreans distrust the established Hangeul orthography? I will find the answer from the historical event in 1894, the rebirth of Hangeul.

3. From Eonmun to Gungmun

Because of a political event, Eonmun turned into Gungmun. Hangeul was not the official letter until Kim Hong-jip the prime minister suggested the reform named Hongbeom 14 articles (洪範 14 條, Great Standards 14 articles) and king Gojong accepted it. In the Annals of Gojong, we can find the record at the day of November 21, 1894 according to the lunar calendar¹.

Among the articles, the 14th article was related with Gungmun, the Hangeul first policy. January 5, 1895, in Annals of Gojong, we can see

¹ ……第十四條 法律勅令總以國文爲本漢文附譯或混用漢文…… (高宗實錄 卷 32, 65p)

many sentences written by mixed style, Hangeul and Kanji². The events recorded here was that the king and his crown prince, his important government officials went together to Jongmyo (宗廟, a great shrine of Joseon Dynasty), the king declared Independence of Joseon (朝鮮, a dynasty of Korea), he also announced Hongbeom 14 articles to his people at that place. The first article of it was to break the relationship between Joseon and Qing (淸, a dynasty of China).³

As you know, the relationship between Joseon and Qing is a kind of political issue. On the surface, it seems not to be connected with Hangeul first policy, writing and reading with Hangeul is basically educational and cultural issue. However, it is hard to say that the Hangeul policy had no relation with any political issue of those days. If you look at the record in the Annals, you can understand that it was deeply related with the liquidation of China culture heritages. At those days, Joseon was rapidly changing and the political situations in Joseon also unstable, the Sino-Japanese war (淸日戰爭, 1894~5) in Korea peninsular. If Hangeul first policy was purely educational issue without any political intention, King Gojong would not announce it to the people at the time.

Hangeul must have been recognized as a political issue by the reformers including Kim Hong-jip the prime minister. They predicted that Japan would be the winner of the Sino-Japanese war, and after the war, Japan would force Joseon to remove the influence of Qing. And the prime minister was a pro-Japanese, he willingly accepted Japanese culture which had been deeply influenced by European culture. And he thought Hangeul was good for translating Japanese books where included European culture rather than Kanji.

² “ 十二月十二日 我聖上陛下 啓我國家의 獨立自主의 基業으로 宗廟에 誓告하시며
..... 訛言煽動하는 國賊이 有하거든 共攻하기를 跂望하노라 (高宗實錄 卷 33, 1p)

³ 洪範 一 割斷附依淸國慮念 確建自主獨立基礎..... (高宗實錄 卷 32, 69p)

As you know, Kanji was first class but Hangeul was secondary in Joseon society until 1894. The society was based on Sadae (事大, a basic relationship between countries established by Mencius, a sage of ancient China) ideology so they respected Kanji in which the words of the sages. So to speak, Kanji reflected China's advanced culture. Because of Sadae ideology, the ruling class of the Joseon Dynasty had no idea of repelling Kanji.

But in 1894, King Gojong declared Hangeul first policy, as you know, the famous phrase, "Hangeul first and Kanji second (國文爲本漢文附譯//gungmunyibon-hanmunbuyeok)". What is the reason of the declaration? I think there are two reasons. One is external, the other is internal. The one is the policy of liquidating China from Korea initiated by the Japanese who defeated China. The other is the policy of enlightening Korea people initiated by the reformers including Kim Hong-jip who might be influenced by Fukuzawa Yukichi (福澤諭吉, a sage of Japan who established the theory of 'From Asia to Europe (脫亞入口/tal-a-ip-gu)').

4. The rebirth of Hangeul

I think that the main reason of the rebirth of Hangeul was not Korean's nationalism but the force of Japanese. The late 19th century, the ruling class of Joseon was divided into two parts. One was the conservatives (守舊黨/sugudang, party for old orders), another was the reformers (維新黨/yusindang, party for new orders). But these two parties did not have any color of nationalism⁴. The conservatives were pro-Chinese and the reformers pro-Japanese.

⁴“……朝鮮維新黨亂作 初朝鮮自立約通商後 國中新進輕躁喜事 號維新黨 目政府爲守舊黨 相水火 維新黨首金玉均洪英植朴泳孝徐光範徐載弼 謀殺執政代之 五人常游日本 暱日人 至是倚爲外援…… (清史稿, 朝鮮列傳)”

Kim, the prime minister suggested the Hangeul first article, the king willingly accepted it because Japanese forces were his side. The Japanese political ambitions in Korea were involved with the article. As you know, the first step of Japanese's Korean annexation policy was to liquidate Chinese shadow from Korea peninsula. According to the treaty of Shimonoseki in 1895, China had to admit independence of Korea. As Japan won the war with China, the Japanese had the force to dominate Korea politically. But they had no ability to dominate Korean mentally.

The Japanese wanted to annex Korea not only politically but also mentally. So they thought that it was important to get rid of the traditional ideas from Korean. For thousands of years, Kanji existed everywhere in Korea, the old scriptures, in books, records of Korean history, etc., and all of them were basically pro-Chinese. There seemed to be no room for the Japanese to dominate the Korean mentally if they did not deprive the people of Kanji.

5. Modern textbooks written by Hangeul

According to the Japanese points of view, it seemed to be the sources of spreading China-centric ideology that the traditional schools, for example, Seodang (書堂, school for children) and the systems of recruiting civil servants, Gwageo (科擧, test for civil servants), etc. They wanted to eliminate the traditional schools and the traditional systems. Instead of it, Japanese modernized educational systems were introduced into Korea and they had to infuse the modern Europe-centric ideas into the new generations. East Asian should learn Western civilization, as Fukuzawa Yukichi's motto represented it⁵.

⁵ From Asia to Europe (脫亞入口/tal·a·ip·gu, a movement for learning European civilization)

As a result, modernized educational systems were started. The reforms were co-work of the reformers and the Japanese. Though Korea's educational reforms did have the idea of independence, the main motivation of it was a strong intention of Japan to rule out China from Korea. By restructuring the content and curriculum of the China-centric traditional systems, they tried to change Korean. While Hangeul as well as education reform began to start, China was losing its influence in the peninsula gradually.

Sejong the Great is the Korean nation's hero who the Koreans are most proud of. The statue of him is located in the middle of Gwanghwamun (光化門, door for enlightening people) plaza to be honor of inventing Hangeul. However, he was not the most honorable person in all the Korean people until the rebirth of Hangeul in 1894. Before the year, the ideal leader of Joseon society was not king Sejong but the legendary Emperors of ancient China named 'yosun (堯舜, two leaders yo, sun who governed morally their country)'. Yosun was depicted greater than Sejong by any textbooks or sacred books written in Kanji. However, the situation was dramatically changed after the year. We can find the evidences in the textbooks written by Hangeul published at those days which sponsored by the Japanese.

We can notice the change in a glance over a textbook named 'Gungmin sohak dokbon' (國民小學讀本, public elementary school reader) published in 1895.

“ 支那의堯舜禹湯이아모리聖人이라도我世宗大王的聖神하신德을엇지當하리오..... (國民小學讀本)”

..... Though China's Yo Sun Wu Tang are sages, they are not superior to Sejong the Great in virtue of moral excellence (Gungmin sohak dokbon).

The politics of Yosun was deeply located in the hearts of Koreans' as the ideal of politics what it should be. It worked continually during thousands

of years. But the belief cracked gradually after the educational reform since 1894. The China-centric contents disappeared in the textbooks written by Hangeul at the time.

It was in Japan on behalf of the vacuum. For example, the pictures for praising Japanese illustrated in a textbook named 'Simsang sohak' (尋常小學, reader for elementary school students) published by Japanese in 1896. One is a picture of the Japanese colonies near Seoul's Namsan⁶, another is a picture that Japanese soldiers are fighting bravely with their national flag⁷.

6. Hangeul and Nationalism

The textbooks were not the only reason of wide spreading of Hangeul at those days. There was another important reason why Hangeul was rapidly distributed among the Korean people. As soon as the king declared Hangeul first policy, many scholars of Joseon accepted it and they began to use Hangeul voluntarily in their books. We can find the evidence from the famous book named Seoyugyeonmun (西遊見聞, book of travel in Europe, published in 1895) written by Yu Gil-jun which was the first book written with a mixed style, so called Gukhanmun Honyongche (國漢文混用體, a writing style mixed with Hangeul and Kanji)⁸. Yu was the first writer who wrote his book with that style at those days. He wrote the book for the purpose of introducing European civilization into Korean.

He was also the reformer, pro-Japanese. When he stayed in Japan the year of 1881, he contacted with Japanese intellectual Fukuzawa (福澤諭吉) who could have made the impact on him about the motivation for such a style.

⁶ 尋常小學 3 卷 30 張.

⁷ 尋常小學 2 卷 1 張.

⁸ “.....一은語意의平順함을取하여文字를畧解하는者라도易知하기爲함이오, 二는余가書를讀함이小하여 作文하는法에未熟한故로記寫의便宜함을爲함이오, 三은我邦七書諺解의法을大略效則하여詳明함을爲함이라 (西遊見聞, 1895)”

And another motivation for it was as shown in his book to keep up with the tradition of Eonhae (諺解, translation sacred books written with Chinese into Korean language) which began to start as soon as Hangeul was invented. So there existed 450 years tradition of Eonhae in Joseon society, Hangeul and Kanji was mixed in the style, most of the cases, Kanji for the lexical parts of sentences and Hangeul for the grammatical parts of sentences. But the style was not popular among the intellectuals of Joseon society until the book was published.

Besides Yu, Ju Si-gyeong organized “Gungmun dongsikhoe (國文同式會, society for Hangeul orthography)” in 1896. And the age of 22, he wrote his first paper “Gungmunnon (國文論, a theory for Gungmun)” in 1897⁹. In the paper, he said that we, Korean, should follow the king’s Hangeul first policy to be strong enough for Korean’s independence from European imperialism. He was a proponent of Hangeul nationalism. He was an editor of the Independence newspaper which is written by Hangeul only, besides the English editions. The unification of language notation was current issue for editing newspapers, but he thought further. He believed that it was one of best way of Independence Korea.

7. Conclusion

Korea and Japan belong to the same area of Kanji culture. The two countries have their own letters. However, the difference between the two countries is bigger than it seems to be. Korean rejected Kanji but Japanese

⁹ “.....큰 聖人께서 만드신 글자는 배우기가 쉽고 쓰기도 쉬우니 이 글자들로 모든 일을 記錄하고 사람마다 젊었을 때 餘暇를 얻어 實相事業에 有益한 學問을 익혀 각기 할 만한 職業을 지켜서 우리나라 獨立에 基礎와 柱礎가 되어 우리 大君主陛下께서 남의 나라 임군과 같이 튼튼하시게 保護하여 드리며 또 우리나라의 富強한 威嚴과 文明한 名譽가 世界에 빛나게 하는 것이 마땅하도다. (獨立新聞, 1897, 李賢熙 譯)”

did not, Korean has the simplest character in the world, Japanese the most complex.

Why are they different from each other? Hangeul was invented in 1444, but Korean could not fully enjoy the simplicity of the letters until 450 years passed since then. Korean used Kanji, Idu (吏讀, simplified Kanji for writing Korean) with Hangeul by their ways of long tradition, their official character was Kanji, partly Idu, Hangeul was personal. As you know, Kanji was hard to learn so Korean had difficulties in communicating with each other.

The year 1894, this situation was dramatically changed. At the moment, I would call it “Rebirth of Hangeul”. Since then, Hangeul met the new horizons. Standard notation movement was initiated by Sir. Ju (周時經 先生/ Ju Si-gyeong seonsaeng) in 1896. Koreans had started to reject Kanji since 1894, king Sejong was looked up as Sejong the Great. Hangeul nationalism also sprouted thereafter, scientific researches on Hangeul began thereafter.

However, the change in 1894 was initiated by a foreign policy of Japanese who intended to annex Korea. The Hangeul first policy was suggested by Kim who was supported by Japanese. To remove China-centric ideas from Korean, Japanese supported it, the reforms of Korean’s traditional education systems and they induced to make Korean people reject Kanji, but Japanese never did. Now, as a result, Korean have the simplest writing system in the world, Japanese still use the most complicated writing systems in the world. It is an irony of East Asian history.

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Discussion: The rebirth of Hangeul

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Over the years, Koreans had no letters to express their own feelings and attitudes. Only they had adopted Chinese letters since the three-dynasty era. Although the King Sejong invented the Korean alphabet which was an unique writing system in the world, most of the Koreans utilized the Chinese writing system to write the official documents. In the end of 19th century, Korean was established as an official language in this country.

Hangeul deserves our admiration for the clarity and simplicity of the letters, in that Hangeul has an originality and scientific rule which we could not find in any other languages over the world, as well as easiness to read and write, especially comparing with Chinese and Japanese.

I think the aim of this study is to give the reader a logically, lucid, unembellished account of the main historical events and backgrounds in the history of Korea, focusing on the important domestic and international political shifts in Korea in the late of 19th century. Therefore, the author makes an effort to make a clear why Korean was established as an official language in this country, providing us with the discerning analysis of historical materials. With regard to this, this study sheds new light on the moment which Hangeul became the official letters in the country, as 'the rebirth of Hangeul'. In this study's conclusion, the author also named this period as the new horizon of Hangeul.

The author's ideas and views deserve our full attention. And this study takes also an important initial step in exploring the future of Hangeul in the Age of Information and Globalization.

In this conference, I will ask the presenter two questions as an appointed panelist. One is an internal of this study. The other is an external.

First, I found the inexplicable part that was not fully explained in the end of chapter 2. In chapter 2, the Korean orthography was changed by reason of emotional motivation, illustrating the 'jajangmyeon/jjajangmyeon'. And then the author says that "Why do Korean distrust the established Hangeul orthography? I will find the answer from the historical event in 1894." Unfortunately, this study leaves unanswered the question "Why do Koreans distrust the established Hangeul orthography? I will find the answer from the historical event in 1894." I think the reader is still left to wonder about this sentence.

Second, mentioned in this study, whereas Chinese letters had long been used in this country, it is very short period that Korean has been adopted as an official language. In the coming days, it is our duty to preserve, refine, and develop our writing system, which is to say, Hangeul. Within the context of modern times, the status of Hangeul has been rapidly changed. In the Age of Globalization, whereas the foreigners of learning Korean have rapidly increased with the tendency of Hallyu (Korean Culture), the consciousness of importance of mother language has been diminished in domestic because the importance of foreign language, especially English and Chinese. Also, within the Information society, Hangeul becomes a very important tool to convey our thoughts and to communicate with other people in the cyber world.

I think that there remains a range of problems to become a genuinely rebirth of Hangeul in modern world. Clearly, more research is needed to illuminate the originality of Hangeul, and to develop and refine the letters

Discussion: The rebirth of Hangeul

in the coming generation. Which subject or method do you think about further research on Hangeul?

