

A Basic Introduction to Hangul: The Development and Use Korea's National Script

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Intro

This paper introduces the development of Hangul into the twenty first century and serves as a basic introduction to the unique system of writing. In an attempt to increase literacy amongst his people, King Sejong the Great of Yi Dynasty created Hangul, the unique Korean alphabet on October 9, 1446 C.E. Several methods of writing developed out of Chinese characters to write Korean, however none of the methods could accommodate for the vast differences between the Chinese and Korean languages. Writing Korean remained cumbersome and difficult for centuries. This paper begins by looking at early Korean systems of writing leading up to the development of modern Hangul. Furthermore, this paper covers the rise of Hangul as the dominant form of written Korean, and introduces the basics of the alphabet, writing, and inspiration for the letters of Hangul.

[illegible]

Hangul, **한** contains three individual letters: **ㅎ** (h), **ㅏ** (a), and **ㄴ** (n). Each block of Hangul has two to five letters, with at least one vowel and one consonant. Linguists consider Hangul one of the easiest systems of writing to learn in the world. Over the centuries Koreans knew Hangul by such epithets as the language that a person learns in one morning. Owing to the ease of use of Hangul, North Korea and South Korea both boast a literacy rate of ninety nine percent. Koreans find Hangul so easy to learn and so befitting of their language, many kids know how to read and write before even entering school. Koreans revere Hangul as a national treasure and symbol. Even though Koreans read and write in Hangul today, in the past other methods for writing Korean dominated Korea. Hangul remained in the shadows of Korean literature for nearly five hundred years. Hangul's dominance in Korean writing did not occur until the twentieth century. Writing systems based on Chinese characters remained the chosen method to write in Korean for centuries. The intellectual elite looked down on Hangul until modern times, preferring to maintain use of Chinese characters. Hanmun, Chinese characters used to write Korean served the purpose of writing Korean for over a thousand years.

Several methods of writing Korean predate Hangul. These earlier systems greatly influenced Hangul. Koreans first used classical Chinese characters to record their language. Korean speakers call Korean written in ancient Chinese character Hanmun. With the spread of Buddhism, Monks introduced Korean speakers to Chinese characters during the Han dynasty. Consequently, Hanja means Han's letters¹. Koreans adopted Chinese characters during the Han Dynasty, just as the name implies (Kongbogwan, 1973).

Chinese characters evolved over time beginning as markings on oracle bones (Moore, 2000). They began as pictograms and becoming ever increasingly complex. Eventually the courts of the Chinese emperors standardized the Chinese characters (Grant, 1982). As the largest country, and greatest power in the region, China's overwhelming presence held great influence over the neighboring countries. Chinese neighbors from Vietnam all the way to Japan adapted the Chinese characters as writing systems for their own languages (Moore, 2000).

Chinese characters consist of strokes that fit in an imaginary square. Each character stands for a sound and a meaning. Chinese is a logographic written language; one symbol represents one word (Moore, 2000). Thirty-seven different strokes go into the creation of Chinese characters, 8 basic strokes and twenty-nine complex strokes. Generally, writers make horizontal strokes from left to right, while they make perpendicular strokes from top to bottom. Based on the rules of calligraphy concerning writing in Chinese characters, the calligrapher makes each without lifting the brush or pen, even when it includes an angle. Usually, horizontal strokes come first when they cross perpendicular strokes. The calligrapher makes a center stroke first, then the left and then the right. The writer draws an enclosing stroke before the strokes inside the character. The calligrapher makes diagonal lines going to the left before diagonal lines going to the right. The calligrapher makes the perpendicular stroke that pierces through the character last. The calligrapher makes perpendicular piercing strokes before piercing horizontal strokes (Grant, 1982).

¹ Hanja is the name for the modern use of Chinese characters to write Korean.

Ancient Koreans faced many difficulties when trying to learn Hanmun, well beyond the demands of learning thousands of characters. Korean and Chinese languages differ in many regards, belonging to distinct language families (Jeongsu, 2005). Chinese is tonal and monosyllabic. Chinese is almost entirely uninflected. Korean is polysynthetic (Grant, 1982). Hanmun simply failed to accommodate the vast differences between the two languages. According to Grant (1982), “So different, in fact, are the two languages that Chinese and English have more in common than do Chinese and Korean... Literate Koreans wrote one language, classical Chinese, and spoke another, Korean” (p. 11). Because of the difficulty of learning the foreign script, literacy remained in aristocratic circles (Kongbogwan, 1973).

Over the centuries, three different methods of writing Korean based on modified Hanmun developed: I-du, Hyangchal, and Gugyeol. I-du, the oldest of the three systems came into widespread use during the Silla Dynasty. I-du uses the Chinese characters of the Hanmun writing system. However, unlike Hanmun, I-du includes additional characters unique to expressing the Korean language. These original characters included Korean participles and verb endings that the Hanmun characters lacked. In Hanmun, writers write characters in an order intelligible to a Chinese reader yet not logical to a Korean reader². I-du addressed this problem by changing the order of characters to match the syntax of the Korean language (Lee & Ramsey, 2011). The chungin social class of Korea primarily used I-du. Chungin represented the ancient Korean middle class, mostly consisting of local beaurucratic administrators (Kongbogwan, 1973).

Monks used Hyangchal, a writing system sometimes considered a subgroup of I-du, to write native poetry during the Goryeo Dynasty. Each Hanmun character had a Korean pronunciation based on the Chinese syllable associated with the character. Next, the monks wrote the characters according to syntax of the Korean language. Though not widely used, 25 poems written in Hyangchal survived to modern times (Lee & Ramsey, 2011). Even though only Koreans understood Hyangchal, it still used Hanmun characters, so only people skilled in Chinese characters could write it (Kongbogwan, 1973).

² I-du maintains Chinese language word order

Less of a system, scribes used Gugyeol as a tool to translate classical Chinese to a script that Koreans more readily understood. Translations of classic Chinese texts into Gugyeol began in the early Goryeo Dynasty. Eventually King Taejong³ of the early Joseon Dynasty standardized Gugyeol. Under the Gugyeol system, scribes added unique symbols and specific Hanmun characters, based on their sounds, throughout the Chinese text to make it intelligible to Koreans without altering the original meaning (Lee & Ramsey, 2011).

After the development of three more Korean friendly forms of writing, Hanmun continued to prevail as the dominant form of writing. Korean history has a long tradition of conflict between pro Korean and pro Chinese politics. By the 12th century, these two rival factions reached armed conflict. The pro-Chinese side prevailed, leading to suppression of more Korean forms of writing. I-du, however continued in use in a much more watered down and much more of a traditional Chinese form by local government officials (Kongbogwan, 1973).

By the time King Sejong arose to the throne, Korea existed as a subservient state of China and had been suffering through a generation of internal strife. His people know him as King Sejong the Great. He made incredible reforms throughout all aspects of Korean life. Simply put, Koreans recognize King Sejong as one of the greatest rulers in human history and the greatest ruler in Korean history. Historians consider the creation of the Korean alphabet, Hangul one of King Sejong's greatest achievements amongst his many public work projects⁴ (Kongbogwan, 1973).

King Sejong pursued creating a system of writing accessible by all of his subjects with great motivation. He recognized the Korean language fundamentally differed from the Chinese languages that also used the Chinese characters. King Sejong also acknowledged that along with the difficulty of learning Hanmun, learned Koreans continued to find difficulty in freely expressing their thoughts and feelings when writing (Kongbogwan, 1973). Kongbogwan (1973) found one of King Sejong's greatest

³ Father of King Sejong the Great

⁴ Another innovative project was King Sejong's allowance of fluctuation in taxes based on crop yield instead of a flat tax on farming.

concerns about the failure of the foreign characters in court, ““Since the people suffer much from false charges, if they cannot express their situation fully in a trial or law suit, letters that can be learned easily must be devised and used in order to ensure justice for the citizenry.”” King Sejong desired to create Hangul out of a love for his people. He wanted a literate population, not just a literate aristocracy (Lee & Ramsey, 2011).

In 1440 C.E., King Sejong began to encourage scholarly research in systems of writing. He began a royally appointed think tank called the Jeong-eumcheong, the Bureau of Correct Sounds. The members of the Jeong-eumcheong collaborated with King Sejong who personally took leadership in the creation of Hangul. The king even sent some of the members to on a journey to consult an exiled Chinese linguist thirteen times. By December of 1442 C.E., they completed their work in creating the new Korean alphabet (Jeongsu, 2005). Within the year, King Sejong finishes the *Hunmin jeong-eum*, his book that introduced the world to Hangul. When he contracted an eye disease⁵ and went on a retreat to the Chojeong mineral spring in Cheongju to recuperate, he left his ministers in charge of everything, so he could focus on Hangul. King Sejong created a new institute called the Ohnmunchong in December of 1443 C.E. to begin translating works into Hangul. The Ohnmunchong consisted of 8 influential scholars and officials; even the king’s son active participated as a member. Over the course of three years, the institute translated such documents as a Chinese character dictionary and poems praising kings of the past (Kongbogwan, 1973).

King Sejong took the creation of Hangul so seriously; his opponents worried that he and the Crown Prince failed to focus enough on state affairs and their own wellbeing⁶ (Jeongsu, 2005). Even though the creation of a new purely Korean alphabet had many clear benefits, the creation of a new alphabet meet great resistance from the pro-Chinese aristocracy. The age-old struggle of pro-Chinese versus pro-Korean politics continued. Choe Man-li, the most outspoken opponent of the creation of Hangul sent a letter of protest to King Sejong in of February of 1444 C.E. Choe Man-li argued the creation of a new alphabet would disrespect China a country to which they owed great

⁵ King Sejong had diabetes

⁶ Tradition dictated a learned man should be well rounded, not just focused on letters

respect as a Suzerain state (Jeongsu, 2005). Furthermore, no country under the dominion of China had ever strayed from the Chinese characters, the chosen system of writing. Choe Man-li did not want China to consider Korea barbaric like Mongolia, Japan, and Tibetan who had their own written languages, different from the Chinese characters. He believed that I-du served quite adequately the purpose of making Hanmun more understandable for the less educated while not straying too far from the “noble characters of China.” Choe Man-li felt a new system of writing would take over I-du, and King Sejong by creating Hangul risked the lose of all of the culture, history, and laws written in I-du. He even made an exceptionally valid argument against King Sejong’s example of how the new alphabet could aid justice in the court system. He pointed out how even in China the government still falsely convicted its own citizens, and how false convictions depended more on the competency of the judge and less on the words used in arguing a case. Even though dissenters like Choe Man-li arguing strongly against the creation of a Korean alphabet, King Sejong successfully suppressed all opposition by throwing the leaders of the disgruntled aristocracy into jail for a night (Kongbogwan, 1973).

The publicizing of Hangul began in September of 1446 C.E. By this time, the strong conservative opposition to Hangul receded (Kongbogwan, 1973). On October 9 1446 C.E., King Sejong published the *Hunmin jeong-eum*. Written in Hanmun, the *Hunmin jeong-eum* contains a preface, the 28 original letters, jamo of the Hangul alphabet, and their sounds. The king hoped the *Hunmin jeong-eum* would serve as a tool for all Koreans to learn Hangul. A second version later published, the *Hunmin jeong-eum* Haerye contains an extensive analysis of the phonological and philosophical reasons for the creation of each letter (Lee & Ramsey, 2011).

King Sejong commissioned many literary works in Hangul to encourage the widespread use of his creation by his people. *Unhoe*; a book of Chinese rhymes became the first book translated into Hangul distributed throughout Korea. So excited about Hangul, King Sejong and his second son each wrote books in Hangul⁷. With such unwavering support from the king, Hangul quickly spread throughout the country.

⁷ In dedication of the recently diseased Queen

Hangul successfully quickly grew in popular with the people of Korea, fulfilling King Sejong's vision a purely Korean alphabet easily understood and utilized by all of his subjects (Kongbogwan, 1973).

For nearly thirty years, the kings of Korea supported and encouraged the use of Hangul as a means of written communication in Korea. The literacy rate in Korea increased exponentially. However, the dissemination of Hangul amongst the common people of Korea eventually lead to its suppression. Prince Yeonsangun, the tenth ruler of Korea of the Yi Dynasty initially, like his predecessors supported Hangul. He even authorized the publication of a translation of the Royal Annals into Hangul. Prince Yeonsangun's support of Hangul came to a grinding halt in the tenth year of his reign. Prince Yeonsangun, a true tyrant, killed many dissenters, court officials, and forced hundreds of Koreans into labor for his own pleasure. In 1504 C.E., angry protesters threw letters of accusation of cruel rule into the home of his mistress and placed signs exposing the poor conduct of the king in busy streets. Because the commoners wrote their messages in Hangul, Prince Yeonsangun concluded the commoners learned of his ill nature by rumors spread about the country written in Hangul, so he banned the use of Hangul. He ordered the burning of all material written in Hangul, demanded the end of its use, and wanted all people who knew how to write Hangul to turn themselves into authorities for punishment⁸ (Kongbogwan, 1973). After the persecution of Hangul by Prince Yeonsangun, Hangul remained underground written by educated commoners. In 1506 C.E., King Jungjong⁹ abolished the Eonmucheong, the Office of Vulgar script, ending the monarchies official support of Hangul (Jeongsu, 2005). Interest in Hangul ebbed and flowed throughout the next four hundred years. Chinese characters remained the standard form of writing in Korea (Lee & Ramsey, 2011).

Hangeul came back into importance with the introduction of Christianity to Korea. Much like Buddhism centuries before, Christianity initially traveled to Korea from China. The publishers of the earliest Korean Bibles wrote in Hanmun. Even

⁸ He was overthrown shortly afterwards

⁹ Half-brother of Prince Yeonsangun

though Bibles already existed in Hanmun, Western Christian missionaries choose to bring bibles written exclusively in Hangul¹⁰. With the help of Koreans in Manchuria, Scottish Presbyterian minister John Ross translated the New Testament into Korean in 1887. Called the *Yesyu syeonggyo jyeonsyeo*, the Hangul only New Testament spread successfully throughout Korea (Jeongsu, 2005). Jeongsu (2005) concludes the *Yesyu syeonggyo jyeonsyeo* “demonstrates without a shadow of a doubt the efficacy of Hangul — the fact that this work was in the ‘vulgar script’ rather than the ‘true script’ (Hanmun) had not the slightest negative effect on its impact” (p. 46). Christian spread amongst the common people, written in the common language. Buddhism stayed in Hanmun, written in the language of prestige. The missionaries could have published the Bible in a mixture of Hanmun and Hangul, however they chose to stick with simple Hangul. Christianity spread like wildfire in Korea. Even women and children could read the words written in the missionary’s holy books. Without a doubt, Christian missionaries brought about the resurgence of interest in Hangul in Korea (Jeongsu, 2005).

At the end of the 19th century, with the spread of Korean nationalism, a renewed interest in Hangul permeated the educated elite and the Chungin bureaucrats. As part of the Gabo Reforms passed by King Gojong, Hangul replaced Hanmun as the official script of the Korean government in 1894 C.E. (Jeongsu, 2005). Jeongsu (2005) explains, “The Korean expression *gug-mun*, meaning literally ‘national script,’ conferred a status upon Hangul incomparably higher than the former terms *eonmun* (vulgar script), *amkeul* (women’s script), *banjeol* (fanqie), and the like” (p. 35). The respect for Hangul as a writing system in Korea made a complete one hundred eighty degree turn. Previously no administrator would dare write an official document in Korean. Mandated by the edict, all government officials wrote in Hangul, as required by law. Later in the same year, an author named Yu Gil-Jun published the first nonfiction book in mixed Hangul and Chinese characters. He received much criticism because at the time all authors wrote

¹⁰ At the time, a holy document was expected to be written in Hanmun, the most dignified of Korean writing systems. The missionaries wanted to spread the words of Jesus Christ amongst the common people, so they chose to use the lowest of scripts, Hangul, the vulgar script in an attempt to spread the word to all the people of Korea

nonfiction books in Hanmun. Yu Gil-Jun argued for the need to write in Korean, claiming he needed the Hangul characters to freely and accurately recant his trip to the United States of America. He even told his critics of his regrets for not writing the book entirely in Hangul. On April 7 1895 C.E., a civilian group called the Independence Club published the *Independent*, the first all Hangul newspaper. The editors of the *Independent* began the practice of word spacing when writing in Hangul. The members of the Independence club all received education in the United States of America or received western educations. The innovation of word spacing clearly came about from influence from written English. American and western thought definitely influenced the reintroduction of Hangul to the masses of Koreans. In 1908, a group of leading Hangul scholars and practitioners establish the Korean Language Society. In 1933 the society officially standardized modern Hangul when it published Hangul *machumbeob Togil-an* (Jeongsu, 2005).

Even with such a great resurgence of interest in Hangul, the unique Korean system of writing still faced another great purge. In 1910 C.E., Japan annexed Korea. Hangul lost status as the national script, and in 1938 C.E. public schools began teaching Japanese and forbade instruction in Korean (Jeongsu, 2005). On October 1, 1942 C.E. the Korean Language Society incident occurs; the ruling Japanese government imprisoned many officials of the Korean Language Society and seized all documents and booklets relating to and written in Hangul. Two of the society's leaders died in prison. Luckily, enough research papers and most of the scholars survived, allowing for modern Hangul to develop freely after the end of World War II (Kongbogwan, 1973).

Modern Hangul¹¹ has twenty-four jamo, four jamo less than King Sejong included in his original alphabet. The jamo of Hangul follow Chinese character calligraphy stroke order rules. The twenty-four jamo in current use include fourteen consonants and ten vowels. The fourteen consonant jamo consist of 1. ㄱ (giyeok); 2. ㄴ (nieun); 3. ㄷ (digeut); 4. ㄹ (rieul); 5. ㅁ (mieum); 6. ㅂ (bieup); 7. ㅅ (siot); 8. ㅇ (ieung); 9. ㅈ (jjeut); 10. ㅊ (chieut); 11. ㅋ (kieuk); 12. ㅌ (tieut); 13. ㅍ (pieup); 14. ㅎ (hieut). 1. ㅏ (a); 2. ㅑ

¹¹ Slight differences exist between Hangul in North Korea and South Korea. This paper uses the South Korean Standard

(eo); 3. ㅑ (o); 4. ㅓ (u); 5. ㅕ (eu); 6. ㅣ (i) 7. ㅗ (ya); 8. ㅛ (yeo); 9. ㅜ (yo); 10. ㅠ (yu) make the ten vowel jamo¹² in modern Hangul. 1. ㅏ, 2. ㅓ, 3. ㅗ, and 4. comprise the three consonant jamo, and one vowel jamo rendered obsolete in Hangul use in the twenty-first century. The twenty-four jamo do not produce all syllables in Korean. Hangul in practice uses forty letters, nineteen consonants and twenty-one vowels. To create the necessary additional consonants, a writer doubles specific jamo. 1. ㅂ (ssanggiyeok); 2. ㅃ (ssandgidut); 3. ㅆ (ssang bieup); 4. ㅈ (ssangsiot); 5. ㅉ (sangjieut) make the consonants not expressed by the sole letters. Diphthongs take the place of the extra vowels: 1. ㅑ (ae); 2. ㅓ (yae); 3. ㅕ (e); 4. ㅗ (ye); 5. ㅜ (wa); 6. ㅜ (wae); 7. ㅟ (oe); 8. ㅠ (wo); 9. ㅡ (we); 10. ㅢ (wi); 11. ㅣ (yi). Resulting from Koreans pronouncing a couple of vowels different ways, twenty-three spoken vowels exist in the Korean language (Kyonbogwan, 1973).

Each jamo in Hangul has its own unique inspiration as explained in the *Hunmin Jong-eum*. Particular philosophical concepts present in East Asian culture influenced the creation of the vowels (Kongbogwan, 1973). Kongbogwan (1973) discovered, “Vowels form the basis of speech... In oriental philosophy, the universe is described as ‘a round heaven and an angular earth’” (p. 31). King Sejong made the vowel ㅏ round to represent the sun in the heavens, yang, the vowel ㅓ horizontal to represent the earth, yin, and the vowel ㅣ vertical to represent an upright man, the neutral between the heavens and earth. The other vowels contain a combination of these three basic vowels, each with their own meaning. The writer creates these iotized vowels by adding a second stroke on certain vowels (Kongbogwan, 1973).

The consonant jamo derive their shapes from the organs of the body the Korean speaker uses when producing each specific sound. The articulation point for the velar sound exists near the molars. Koreans call velar consonants a-eum, molar sounds. According to the *Hunmin Jong-eum*, the velar sound represents the root of the tongue closing the epiglottis. The consonant jamo, ㄱ (g), incites the velar sound. ㄱ

¹² Each vowel jamo in Hangul has ㅑ serving as a consonant placeholder either above or to the left of the character.

matches the same shape the tongue makes as it closes the epiglottis and touches the soft palate in the mouth. ㄱ (k) makes a tougher velar sound. Logically, the writer adds another stroke to indicate the tougher sound. ㅇ makes for the only voiced phoneme among the velar sounds. King Sejong made ㅇ to look like a tree shoot sprouting above water for its tender sound. The ㅇ stands for water, taking its shape from the throat. The ‘ on top of the circle represents water (Kongbogwan, 1973).

ㅇ (no sound, ng) and ㅎ (h) produce the dorsal sounds. In the Korean language, dorsal consonants take the name of hueum, throat sounds. Unsurprisingly, ㅇ has the shape of the throat¹³. ㅎ has extra lines to show a glottal stop with increased aspiration (Kyonbogwan, 1973).

Speakers of the Korean language call sibilant consonants chieum, dental sounds. ㄷ (s), ㅈ (z/j), and ㅊ (ch) encompass the sibilant sounds. ㄷ takes its shape from human canine teeth. Once again, more lines mean increasingly tougher sounds. Even the obsolete semi-sibilant ㄸ maintain the shape of teeth (Kyonbogwan, 1973).

The speaker of Korean makes the coronal sound when the tongue touches the hard plate in the mouth, taking the shape of ㄴ (n). Koreans know coronal consonants as seoreum, lingual sounds. As King Sejong added a bar to create a tougher velar sound, he added bars to create tougher coronal sounds. ㄴ (n) → ㄷ (d) → ㅌ (t) → ㄹ (l/r). The line stroke top of ㄷ depicts firm contact with the roof of the mouth which produces the associated sound. The middle line in ㅌ represents the increased aspiration. The top of ㄹ shows the flap of the tongue. ㅁ (m), ㅂ (p), ㅍ (p) comprise the three bilabial consonants of Hangul. ㅁ evokes the shape of the mouth. ㅁ also closely resembles the Chinese character for mouth. As with the previous jamo, King Sejong decided to increase the number of lines to indicate tougher sounds (Kyonbogwan, 1973).

Initially written vertically, writing Hangul horizontally grew in popularity in the late twentieth century. Even with the flexibility of writing in different directions, words

¹³ Also serving as the basis of ㅇ

written in Hangul follow specific rules. Hangul utilizes the syllabic method of spelling. When writing in Hangul, the writer spells the phonemes in either consonant + vowel, consonant + vowel + consonant, or consonant + vowel + consonant + consonant order to make blocks. Each Hangul block contains two to five letters, consisting of at least one consonant and one vowel. The writer then arranges these blocks either horizontally from left to right or vertically from top to bottom. Linguists calculate the existence of 11,172 possible blocks, however in practice, Koreans use far less. The spelling of the word always matches the pronunciation of the word, however mute vowels and consonants still exist. Vowels with horizontal lines like ㅏ , ㅑ , ㅓ , ㅕ , and ㅡ carry consonants above them. The vowels, ㅓ , ㅗ , ㅛ , ㅜ , ㅠ , ㅡ , ㅣ , and ㅚ carry consonants to the left. While ㅓ , ㅕ , ㅗ , ㅛ , ㅜ , ㅠ , ㅣ , and ㅚ carry consonants above and to the left. In syllables ending in consonants and compound consonants, the ending consonant goes beneath the syllable. ㅇ makes no sound when used unless used as an ending consonant (Kyonbogwan, 1973).

Hangeul clearly stands alone as the simplest writing system in the world. No other method of writing can match Hangul in ease of writing and reading¹⁴. Hangul perfectly fits the Korean language. Koreans find Hangul so easy to learn that in the past, Hangul has held two interesting epithets; *achmigeul* — the script that could be learned in a morning's sitting and *amkeul* — a script to be learned by women with no need for scholarship and learning (Jeongsu, 2005). Jeongsu (2005) noticed, "Hangeul seems to have played a similar role even in overseas Korean communities in China and the former USSR, where Koreans are among the socially better-off of the ethnic minority groups. What other countries are there in the world besides Korea where children already know the writing system before starting their first day of school?" (p. 150). With increased literacy comes increased education. With increased education comes a better job. With better jobs comes more money.

¹⁴ Hangul is designed specifically to be used with the Korean language. No archaic spellings exist in words. For example, English uses Roman letters that are not a perfect match for the sounds being produced when reading the word. Many exceptions to rules plague English spelling.

Though since its resurgence within the past one hundred years Hangul serves Koreans as a great system of writing, Hangul still faces challenges adapting to modern technology. Computers pose a particular problem to Hangul and Koreans. English speaking people invented the basis for much of modern computers. Because the inventors of modern computers and modern computer programming speak English, programmers code in English. Coders who speak languages which use roman letters as their native script saw no problem in adapting the standard¹⁵, however coders whose native tongues do not use roman letters, found great difficulty in adapting the English based coding systems (Jeongsu, 2005). In order to code, Koreans need to learn sixty-eight foreign characters. Coding continues to pose a problem because no foreseeable method to code in Hangul exists.

Beyond coding, word processing poses a problem for Hangul. Roman letters natural flow from left to right. Korean letters form blocks. Hangul, though originally a vertical script, has been modified for horizontal writing. HTML and many other computer programming invites remain unfriendly with respect to vertical script. Now Koreans commonly write Hangul from left to right especially due to influence from Western writing systems and computers (Jeongsu, 2005). To address the issue the Korean government standardized the Dubeolsik keyboard for typing Hangul letters. Tech companies developed a couple of methods for processing Hangul input on Korean language computers. The most common way to type Korean works by typing a string of Hangul letters in sequence, after the user enters the string, the software forms the block. For example, **ㅎ** **ㅏ** **ㄴ** → **한**. The other though less popular method involves typing Korean in Roman letters, which the computer software then converts into Hangul blocks. For example, han → **한**. Jeongsu (2005) recognizes computing still poses a problem to Hangul and believes, “If, despite its long cultural addiction to primitive Chinese characters, the Korean race had the potential to invent a miracle of human cultural history like Hangul, then we should not feel embarrassed to set the invention of ‘the most Korean computer’ as our highest goal in order to spur our own creative efforts” (p. 106- 107). Koreans need to produce a more Hangul friendly computer and computing

¹⁵ French and German speakers readily adopted the standard

environment in the twenty first century to facilitate the continued use of Hangul in Korea and abroad.

In 2009, the town of Bau-Bau came under international attention for teaching Hangul as the modern script for Cia-Cia¹⁶, the ethnic group's native language. Cia-Cia became the first language outside of Korean to adopt Hangul¹⁷. The town began a pilot project to teach a class of fifty third-grade students the Korean alphabet using textbooks created by Korea's Hunminjeongeum Society. The program began in 2007 when Professor Chun Tai-hyun Nicholas T. Dammen and Nicholas T. Danmen the Indonesian Ambassador to Korea presented the idea to the mayor of Bau-bau¹⁸. Due to a mistranslation and media hype, rumor spread claiming the ethnic group adopted Hangul as its official script. However as of 2010, Hangul does not serve the role of the official script of the Cia-Cia language. Adoption of Hangul as the official alphabet for Cia-Cia remains unlikely because Indonesia's Basic Law requires all tribal languages to use Roman letters to preserve national unity. However the Mayor hopes to convince the national government to make an exception to the law. Now, over one hundred ninety students enrolled in schools in Bau-bau continue to learn Hangul as the alphabet for the Cia-Cia language ("Hangul didn't become," 2010). Many Hangul specialists dream of the internationalization of Hangul (Jeongsu, 2005). Pai Chai University in Korea promised to donate books and build a Korean-language center in one of the colleges in Bau-bau to promote the program.

King Sejong invented Hangul in Korea out of necessity. Originally Koreans used foreign Chinese characters to write their language. The use of ancient Chinese characters to write Korean, Hanmun served as the most prestigious and dominant writing system in Korea for centuries. The great differences between the Chinese and Korean languages made Hanmun far from the perfect system. Only the educated wealthy aristocracy could learn Hanmun. Over time, three different scripts developed out of Hanmun: I-du,

¹⁶ Cia-Cia is also known as South Bhutanese

¹⁷ Cia-Cia is an Austronesian language

¹⁸ Bau-bau is located on the southern tip of Buton Island off the southeast coast of Sulawesi in Indonesia

Hyangchal, and Gugyeol. Local bureaucrats, the ancient Korean middle class adopted I-du as the standard script for documents. I-du added specialized Korean characters to Hanmun to indicate verb endings and participles. I-du also changed the order of the Chinese characters to match the Korean language. Korean Monks used Hyangchal to record poetry. Hyangchal matched Chinese characters with Korean syllables and followed Korean language syntax. Gugyeol helped translate ancient Chinese scripts into a text Koreans understood. Gugyeol works by adding special characters to Chinese texts. Even though all three scripts improved upon Hanmun, all continued to use Chinese characters and remained difficult to learn for Koreans. King Sejong saw illiteracy plaguing his people. He decided to personally dedicate his time to the creation of an alphabet suitable for the Korean Language. He made the creation of Hangul the most important matter of the state. However, conservative aristocrats openly resisted and complained about the project. He met his dissenters with a swift rebuttal; he arrested them and put them in jail for a night. When King Sejong published his book, *Hunmin jeong-eum*, he gave birth to Hangul on October 9, 1446 C.E. With the full support of the King, Hangul quickly spread throughout Korea. Now even the common people could read and write. Initially the Korean monarchs succeeding King Sejong encouraged the use of Hangul. However by 1504 C.E., the government began to suppress the use of Hangul. Until the late nineteenth century, Hangul remained in the background and Hanmun remained as the governing script to write the Korean language. With the aid of Western thought and religion, Hangul came back into the foreground of Korean culture. In both North Korea and South Korea, Hangul maintains status as the official alphabet. Koreans take great pride in their unique system of writing, even celebrating its birth with a holiday, Hangul day. Hangul now the dominant method for writing in Korean faces modern problems. Hangul remains an unfriendly language for computing. However Korean linguists have high hopes for the future of Hangul and wish to introduce the alphabet to the rest of the world. In 2009, the mayor of Bau-Bau began the first program to use Hangul for use outside of the Korean Language. Along with the aid of Korean scholars, elementary school kids began to learn how to write the Cia-Cia language in Hangul. The twenty-six letters of modern Hangul create a simplistic writing system that even children readily learn. With a past of being ridiculed by the academic

elite, Hangul now has the potential to become a worldly alphabet much like the roman letters and Chinese characters before it. Though Hangul still faces problems with modernization, the future looks bright for the special Korean alphabet and with the help of specialists may one day may find its way as the official alphabet for other languages.

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Footnotes

- ¹ Hanja is the name for the modern use of Chinese characters to write Korean.
- ² I-du maintains Chinese language word order
- ³ Father of King Sejong the Great
- ⁴ Another innovative project was King Sejong's allowance of fluctuation in taxes based on crop yield instead of a flat tax on farming.
- ⁵ King Sejong had diabetes
- ⁶ Tradition dictated a learned man should be well rounded, not just focused on letters
- ⁷ In dedication of the recently diseased Queen
- ⁸ He was overthrown shortly afterwards
- ⁹ Half-brother of Prince Yeongsangun
- ¹⁰ At the time, a holy document was expected to be written in Hanmun, the most dignified of Korean writing systems. The missionaries wanted to spread the words of Jesus Christ amongst the common people, so they chose to use the lowest of scripts, Hangul, the vulgar script in an attempt to spread the word to all the people of Korea
- ¹¹ Slight differences exist between Hangul in North Korea and South Korea. This paper uses the South Korean Standard
- ¹² Each vowel jamo in Hangul has ◯ serving as a consonant placeholder either above or to the left of the character.
- ¹³ Also serving as the basis of ◯
- ¹ Hangul is designed specifically to be used with the Korean language. No archaic spellings exist in words. For example, English uses Roman letters that are not a perfect match for the sounds being produced when reading the word. Many exceptions to rules plague English spelling.
- ¹⁵ French and German speakers readily adopted the standard
- ¹⁶ Cia-Cia is also known as South Butonese
- ¹⁷ Cia-Cia is an Austronesian language
- ¹⁸ Bau-bau is located on the southern tip of Buton Island off the southeast coast of Sulawesi in Indonesia