Intro

This paper introduces the development of Hangul and covers and serves as a basic introduction to the unique system of writing. Hangul is the unique Korean alphabet, created by King Sejong the Great of the Yi Dynasty on October 9, 1443 C.E. in an attempt to increase literacy amongst his people. 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 rise of Hangul as the dominant way to write Korean. And covers the basics of the alphabet, writing, and inspiration for the letters of Hangul.

To understand Hangul, it is important to look back at earlier methods of writing in Korea. The first system of writing used to record Korean was classical Chinese. The use of Chinese characters is called Hanmun. Modern Chinese script used to write Korean is known as Hanja, or Han’s letters. Koreans adopted Chinese characters during the Han Dynasty, just as the name implies (Kongbogwan, 1973).

Chinese characters evolved over time staring 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). 37 different strokes go into the creation of Chinese characters; 8 basic strokes and 29 complex strokes. Generally, horizontal strokes are made from left to right, while perpendicular strokes are made 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 are written first when they cross perpendicular strokes. A calligrapher makes a center stroke first, then the left and then the right. A calligrapher draws an enclosing stroke before the strokes inside the character. Diagonal lines going to the left drawn before diagonal lines going to the right. A perpendicular stroke which pierces through the character is done last. Perpendicular piercing strokes are written before piercing horizontal strokes (Grant, 1982).

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 unique 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 reader. 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 have survived to modern times (Lee & Ramsey, 2011). Even though Hyangchal could only be understood a purely Korean script, it still used Hanmun characters, so only people skilled in Chinese characters could write it (Kongbogwan, 1973).

Less of a system, Gugyeol served as a tool to translate classical Chinese to a script which would be understandable in Korean. Translations of classic Chinese texts into Gugyeol began in the early Goryeo Dynasty. Eventually King Taejong 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. One of his greatest achievements is the creation of the Korean alphabet, Hangul (Kongbogwan, 1973).

King Sejong pursued with great motivation to create a system of writing accessible by all of his subjects. He recognized that the Korean language fundamentally differered 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 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. 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 disease 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 well being (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 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 all of the culture, history, and laws written in I-du would be lost. 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 convicts, 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 Hangul. With such unwavering support from the king, Hangul quickly spread throughout the country. 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. Price 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 Annuls 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 Yeongsangun 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 punishment (Kongbogwan, 1973). After the persecution of Hangul by Prince Yeongsangun, Hangul remained underground, written by educated commoners. In 1506 C.E., King Jungjong 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).

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 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 practioners 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 Hangul has twenty-four jamo, four jamo than King Sejong included in his original alphabet. The twenty-four jamo in current use include fourteen consonants and ten vowels.

Bibligraphy

Jeongsu, K. (2005). *The history and future of hangeul: Korea’s indigenous script*. (R. King). Kent: Global Oriental. (Original work published in 1990).

Grant, B. K. (1982). *A guide to Korean characters: Reading and writing Hangul and Hanmun.*  Elizabeth, N.J.: Hollym International Corp.

Kongbogwan, H. (1973). *Hangul*. Seoul: Korean Overseas Information Service.

Moore, O. (2000). *Chinese.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Lee, K., & Ramsey, S. R. (2011). *A history of the korean language*. New York: Cambridge University Press.