Rethinking East Asian Languages, Vernaculars, and Literacies, 1000–1919

Edited by

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The Sounds of Our Country: Interpreters, Linguistic Knowledge, and the Politics of Language in Early Chosŏn Korea

Wang Sixiang[1]

Introduction

The experiences of official interpreters illustrate the many ways that language, both spoken and written, came to be important in Chosŏn Korea (朝鮮 1392–1910). Interpreters of spoken Chinese, for example, facilitated diplomatic contact with Ming China (明 1368–1644), mediating between Chosŏn and Ming courtiers, who, despite sharing a common written heritage, could not speak each other's languages. The significant roles played by these interpreters, however, did not necessarily bring them social or political prestige. They were excluded from the center of political power and largely barred from the civil service examinations that accorded the greatest eminence at the Chosŏn court. The skill that they mastered—spoken language—came to be denigrated as an area of knowledge unfit for aristocratic pursuit.[2] These interpreters, thus, embodied a series of tensions that characterized the linguistic landscape of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. While the social obscurity of interpreters belied their political indispensability, in a context where the universality of writing was privileged over the particulars of speech, interpretation was both the mechanism of overcoming linguistic difference and the very marker that exposed it.

1 I want to thank Professor Benjamin Elman and the PIIRS-EAS research cluster for making this project possible. In addition to all the other participants at the "Rethinking East Asian Languages, Vernaculars, and Literacies" workshop, I would also like to thank Professors Pamela H. Smith, Martina Deuchler, and Ross King for their suggestions and insightful comments, which have not only greatly improved my early drafts but also rescued the work from numerous infelicities.

2 A long-term manifestation of this attitude was the gradual coalescence of families of official interpreters into specialized descent groups by the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Along with those who mastered other fields of technical knowledge such as astronomy, painting, and medicine, they made up the *chungin* 中人, groups of professional bureaucrats selected for government office in organs responsible for these areas of expertise. See Hwang 2004, 108–109, 113, 117–118.

 | DOI 10.1163/9789004279278_004

This study of interpreters seeks to examine the politics of language in diplomacy through the relationship between *spoken* Chinese and "vernacular" Korean.[3] This perspective requires a marked departure from earlier studies of language issues in Chosŏn Korea that have focused on the question of "diglossia," understood in terms of dialectics between the "vernacular" (i.e., Korean) and the "literary/classical" (i.e., Chinese).[4] Conceiving the linguistic and inscriptional space of Chosŏn Korea as diglossic, however, risks missing the connections between two different "spoken" languages: Korean and Chinese. To fully appreciate this connection, the problem of language must be rescued from two prevailing narratives: first, the alleged and often assumed teleology of inevitable "vernacularization" that has tended to dominate studies of language issues in Chosŏn Korea and, second, the privileging of written over spoken language in the diplomatic record.

The first narrative essentially sees the elevation of the Korean alphabet from a "vernacular" script (ŏ*nmun* 諺文) to the medium of a national language (*kungmun* 國文) as a natural outgrowth of the alphabet's invention in the

3 While the term "vernacular" has its problems, for the purposes of this chapter I use it generally as an equivalent to the Korean expression ŏnmun 諺文, which was used to refer to the Korean alphabet during the Chosŏn period. As for different registers of the Chinese language, I use the term "spoken Chinese" to refer generally to what appears in late Koryŏ and Chosŏn period primary sources as *hanŏ* 漢語 or *hwaŏ* 華語, which is to be contrasted with literary or classical writing. As Shang Wei's chapter in this volume, "Writing and Speech: Rethinking the Issue of Vernaculars in Early Modern China," shows, the situation becomes more complicated for textual renderings of nonliterary registers, such as oral edicts (*kouyu* 口諭), clerical writing (*liwen/imun* 吏文), oral records (*yulu* 語錄), or other texts written in so-called *baihua* 白話. For the early Chosŏn court, each of these represented some form of spoken Chinese that was the purview of specialists such as interpreters. In the case of clerical writing, the Chosŏn court received missives from Chinese bureaus in this documentary style and maintained an agency, the Office of Diplomatic Correspondence (Sŭngmunwŏn 承文院), for the drafting of these documents.

4 While recent scholarship has used the notion of "diglossia" as shorthand for Chosŏn's linguistic landscape, this idea of two, complementary but distinct, linguistic spaces has its shortcomings. For instance, Ross King (1998, 36) identifies at least four broad written traditions coexisting in Korea by the nineteenth century. The interactions between different registers, scripts, and social spaces in Chosŏn Korea suggest the existence of a sociologically complex linguistic space that needs to be further explored. Boudewijn Walraven (2011, 43–45, 47–52) has attempted to study these phenomena through shaman songs and their relationship to discourses of nation in late Chosŏn Korea. See also Wells 2011, 12–18. See Hudson 2002 for a discussion of some of the controversies surrounding the term "diglossia."

fifteenth century.[5] Taking King Sejong's 世宗 (r. 1418–1450) famous opening lines to his edict promulgating the Korean alphabet in 1446—that "the sounds of our country [i.e., Korea] are distinct from those of China and are not compatible with its written characters"—to be an indication of irreconcilable difference between Chinese and Korean, these perspectives often see the subsequent development of writing in the Korean script to be a precursor to the actualization of linguistic nationalism in the nineteenth century.[6]

To view the development of the Korean script as a precursor to an allegedly inevitable process of vernacularization contorts fifteenth- to eighteenth-century cultural phenomena to fit a late nineteenth- and twentieth-century narrative of nation building, a perspective long since incorporated within Korea's modern national imagination.[7] Besides the tinge of nationalistic overtones, such perspectives give short shrift to the dynamic ways in which language and script interacted before the nineteenth century and which are readily revealed by a cursory examination of linguistic and inscriptional practice from the period. Anxiety of cleavage from China contributed to the lukewarm attention that King Sejong's linguistic project initially received. Officials at first protested the alphabet's use. Declaring that only "barbarians . . . like the Mongols, Tanguts, Jurchens, Japanese, and Tibetans" had their own writing systems, they saw the new Korean script as a threat to Korea's own civilization.[8] Despite initial protests against the script before the sixteenth century, the alphabet did see early adopters.[9] The court also sponsored several publication projects, such as

5 For a discussion of this elevation of the Korean alphabet in the nineteenth century, see Wells 2011, 19–24.

6 *Chosŏn wangjo sillok* 朝鮮王朝實錄 (hereafter *cws*, followed by the monarch's temple name) *Sejong* 世宗 113:36b [1446.09.29/4]: 國之語音 異乎中華 與文字不相流通. Young-mee Yu Cho, for example, writes: "Although it took several centuries before the new script enjoyed the popularity it deserved, there was no better tool to start the process [of spreading literacy] when the call for modernization and nation-building finally arrived in Korea." Cho argues that the very different morphologies of Korean and Chinese contributed to the separation of classical Chinese and vernacular Korean into two separate diglossic spaces. See Cho 2002, 4, 6.

7 See Chŏng Taham 2009, 272–275, for a critique of the nationalist perspective. For an analysis of the debates surrounding language issues in late nineteenth-century Korea and how they figure into the politics of Korean identity, see King 1998. Ross King (2007, 211–234) compares language policy in modern North and South Korea and discusses the notion of "script nationalism," which has elevated the Korean script to a central symbol for patriotic sentiment.

8 *cws Sejong* 103:19b [1444.02.20/1].

9 Most notably, the royal household made use of the alphabet in discrete and private correspondence. Letters written in the alphabet also appear as evidence for criminal cases

the *Song of Flying Dragons*, a panegyric to Sejong's royal ancestors, through an institution called the Vernacular Script Office (Ŏnmunch'ŏng 諺文廳).[10]

Emphasis on the alphabet's invention as an assertion of linguistic difference conceals the significant roles that the new script took on as an instrument for mediating difference. Conceived as a universal code for the systematic representation of Sino-Korean phonology, it was also able to render the contemporary pronunciation of Chinese characters independently—that is, according to fixed phonological values instead of in relation to the phonology of other characters.[11] The alphabet's efficacy for notating Sino-Korean phonology also made it useful for many Chosŏn literati, who employed the "vernacular" for the cultivation of classical learning. These "vernacular explications" (ŏnhae 諺解) provided side-by-side classical Chinese text and Korean explication for a variety of works, including ritual handbooks, law codes, and Confucian classics.[12] Furthermore, prosody in poetic composition and the parallel prose of diplomatic memorials, both documentary genres that played crucial roles in diplomacy, demanded perfect mastery of tonality and rhyme, which phonological glosses would have aided greatly.[13] Court interpreters employed these methods in the glossaries and language textbooks they compiled as tools for learning contemporary spoken Chinese.[14] The alphabet thus came to be an integral component in the ways these interpreters acquired and maintained linguistic knowledge. These technologies of language, linguistic practices, and political concerns fostered relationships between the vernacular script, spoken language, and classical knowledge that together suggest a more complex historical trajectory than one of gradual and inevitable "vernacularization."[15]

In wresting language from the teleology of vernacularization, my aim here is not to attempt to depoliticize the historical narrative per se but to reinvestigate and resituate, in the proper historical context, how language came to matter, both as an area of knowledge and as a site of political contestation. The ready

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and conspiracies in the late fifteenth century. *CWS Sejong* 124:21b [1449.06.20/2]; *Munjong* 文宗 10:24b [1451.11.17/2]; *Tanjong* 端宗 6:21a [1453.04.02/2]; *Sejo* 世祖 13:37a [1458.08.24/1]; *Sŏngjong* 成宗 185:9b [1485.11.09/7].

10 Yi Kibaek 1984, 193. For other uses of the Korean alphabet and its relationship to printing, see Evon 2009, 10–14.

11 For the use of relative phonology in determining the phonetic values of Chinese characters, see Shang Wei's chapter in this volume; and Liu 2004, 205–206.

12 Kornicki 2008, 16–20; Park 2013, 2–10.

13 For example, there are several cases where Korean diplomats were chastised for presenting memorials with incorrect use of tones. See Chen and Sim 2010.

14 Court interpreters also compiled textbooks of Japanese, Jurchen, and Mongolian.

15 King 1998, 33–35.

adaptation of the Korean script by court interpreters demonstrated that its invention and implementation in the fifteenth century were at least partly related to the court's desire to master spoken Chinese. Ironic only if we consider the rise of national vernaculars to be inherently opposed to the use of a classical or cosmopolitan language, these linguistic projects were in turn inextricably connected to Korea's attention to the classical past and anxieties over commensurability with Ming China.[16]

The second narrative that obfuscates the relationship between spoken Chinese and Korean is the graphocentrism that emerges from the writings of the literati-envoys that dominate the diplomatic record. Korean court officials on envoy missions recorded travel diaries in classical Chinese, submitted memorials to the Ming throne in elegant prose, and exchanged Tang-style poetry with their Chinese counterparts. For them, written exchanges reinforced the notion of a civilized world, a literary and textual universe bound by a common writing system. Whereas the Ming usually employed document translators to convert the letters presented by foreign magnates into written Chinese, Korea's use of literary Chinese absolved the Ming court of this task.[17] A common expression used to describe imperial rule, and Korea's inclusion in this vision of empire, was "writing in the same script; carts with the same axle widths" 書同文 車同軌: the unification of culture that paralleled the (apparent) union of political institutions.[18] Writing and culture were thus inseparable and mutually embedded, encapsulated in the concept of *mun/wen* 文.

In a preface to accompany a poem written for envoys from the Koryŏ (高麗, 918–1392), the dynasty that preceded the Chosŏn in Korea, Song Lian 宋濂 (1310–1381), an adviser to the first Ming emperor, elaborated a vision of empire that saw the Ming's civilizing power extending to foreign states and people. He saw Korea as a civilized place, where the "legacies of the former kings" were maintained. Korea's attention to ritual placed it in a league apart from the "rulers of other countries," who were "attached to barbarian ways" and "slighted ritual and righteousness." For Song, it was "only appropriate that we [the Ming] see them [the Koreans] as among the 'Chinese'" and not "in the same category as 'foreign countries.'" Korea's acceptance of ritual principles and its literary accomplishments testified both to Korea's "civilized" status and to the

16 Chŏng Taham (2009, 271) has observed that the connection between spoken Chinese and the invention of the Korean alphabet has been largely overlooked in recent scholarship.

17 Ye 1991, 84–85.

18 For examples of this and similar expressions, see *CWS Sejong* 4:27b [1418.07.27/2], 64:1b [1434.04.02/5], 103:19b [1444.02.20/1]; Kwŏn Kŭn, *Yangch'onjip* 陽村集, vol. 1, in *Han'guk munjip ch'onggan* 韓國文集叢刊 (hereafter *HMC*), 7:15c.

effectiveness of the Ming's civilizing power. Even within this political imaginary of imperial authority and universalism, language still operated as a marker of difference. Like the "barbarians of the four directions" and despite all its unequivocal distinctiveness from them, Korea too came to court with "multiple interpreters" 重譯. Song's attitude toward linguistic difference was thus unclear. How did the issue of linguistic difference figure into this rhetoric of ritual commensurability and cultural equivalence? Was the Korean mastery of written language and ritual enough to make the differences in language irrelevant in imperial eyes?[19]

Literary exaltations of written culture, such as Song's, obscure the integral roles played by various specialists of spoken language in Korea's diplomacy with the Ming. Interpreters were, in fact, essential to the conduct of diplomacy. Understanding their role does much to illuminate the politics of language in Chosŏn Korea. Although this chapter will focus on the early Chosŏn-Ming period (1392–1550s), understanding the linguistic and political context preceding the Koryŏ dynasty's engagement with the Mongol-Yuan Empire (蒙元 1209–1368) in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries is critical. Throughout Koryŏ's engagement with the Mongol-Yuan, war, diplomacy, and finally political integration motivated the Koryŏ court to control linguistic knowledge and produced opportunities for linguistic specialists employed by the state to use their knowledge for their own, private ends. Though a polyglot Koryŏ elite emerged in this period, the dynastic transitions of the fourteenth century reoriented the relationship between diplomacy and linguistic knowledge. The early Chosŏn court no longer had ready access to speakers of Chinese and turned its efforts to the systematization of linguistic knowledge. New language manuals were developed after the invention of the Korean alphabet, which was itself derivative of linguistic technologies and practices of cosmopolitan empire. These projects of linguistic systematization were both responses to the challenge of maintaining what had once been tacit linguistic knowledge and consummations of Korea's prior integration into the Mongol imperium. In diplomatic space, however, language meant more than communicating effectively or accurately and became fundamental to a host of other processes: sociability, ritual propriety, and political power. The possessors of this knowledge during the early Chosŏn period, court-based interpreters, had to navigate between rather contradictory forces: good interpreters were as indispensable as they were scarce, as pivotal as they were marginal, and as integral to the process of diplomacy as they were suppressed from its records.

19 Song Lian, *Wenxianji* 文憲集 9:42b–44a, in *Siku quanshu* 四庫全書; see also Chang Tong'ik 1997, 379–80.

Anxieties of Language: Korea and Empire

Koryŏ's integration into the Mongol Empire in the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries exposed a broad swath of Koryŏ society to a multilingual world where both elite and non-elite alike could have learned Mongolian and Chinese for trade, politics, and prestige. The wane of Mongol power in East Asia, however, dramatically shifted the linguistic landscape. When the Ming dynasty arose in China, King Kongmin 恭愍王 (r. 1354–1374) had already severed many of the links that Koryŏ had with the Yuan, markedly transforming Korea's place in East Asia. Koryŏ-Ming relations did not feature the kinds of linkages that characterized late Koryŏ-Yuan interaction.[20] Whereas many from Koryŏ once traveled frequently between their homeland and the imperial center, early Ming restrictions on maritime trade and the strict enforcement of the tribute system limited opportunities for contact, which occurred regularly only within the limited scope of envoy missions and border markets. Once open to Koryŏ literati, imperial civil service examinations were now prohibited to them. Attempts to send sons of Koryŏ elites to study in the Ming capital were rebuffed by the first emperor, Ming Taizu 明太祖 (r. 1368–1398).[21] Although a Korean community in Liaoyang persisted through the fourteenth century, their intermediary position came to be perceived as a threat to this new, very different regional order.[22]

The experience of the Korean Confucian scholar Yi Saek 李穡 (1328–1396), who lived through these transitions, is illustrative. Although hardly a typical representative of a career bureaucrat, he did exemplify the possibilities for travel and exchange during the last years of Mongol-Yuan hegemony. Yi Saek had passed the highest-level civil service examinations at both the Koryŏ court and the Yuan court and served in the Yuan Hanlin Academy. He eventually returned to Korea and served in its bureaucracy, becoming one of the most prominent literary, intellectual, and political figures of his age.[23] When Yi returned to China for the first time in decades in 1389 as a Koryŏ envoy to the Ming, he had the following encounter with the Ming emperor:

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20 For Ming and late Koryŏ relations, see Robinson 2009, 274–284; Ye 1991.

21 During the entire Ming period, only two cohorts of Korean literati were allowed to travel to Ming China to participate in the civil service examinations, both early in the Hongwu reign. See *Ming shi lu* 明實錄 (hereafter *MSL*, followed by the monarch's temple name) *Taizu* 太祖 73:3b–4a, pp. 1340–1341 [1372.03]; 89:1b–2a, pp. 1574–1575 [1374.05]; Ye 1991, 38–40.

22 Robinson 2009, 217–218, 282–284.

23 See Yi Saek's biography in Chŏng Inji et al., *Koryŏsa* 高麗史 (hereafter *KS*), 8115:1a–28a.

> The emperor [Ming Taizu] had long heard of Yi Saek's name and summoned him forth. Speaking to him casually, he said, "You served the Yuan court as an academician—you must understand the Chinese language" 漢語.
>
> Then, Yi Saek responded in Chinese, "[My king] wishes to come to court himself."
>
> The emperor did not understand what he had meant and asked, "What did you say?" The officials of the Board of Rites then transmitted what [Yi Saek had meant]. Yi Saek had not been to court for many years, and his speech was encumbered and rough. The emperor laughed and said, "Your Chinese is just like that of [the Mongol] Naγaču!"[24]

Yi Saek's subsequent attempts to excuse his verbal fumbling only underscored the existence of barriers to communication. Even though Yi had once served as an official in China and been able to make himself understood in fluent spoken Chinese, that had been three decades ago. More importantly, the Ming emperor's difficulty with Yi's speech is possible evidence of broader, regional differences and historical shifts in spoken language. Whereas Yi had launched his official career in the northern Yuan court in Beijing, he was now in the southern early Ming court based in Nanjing.[25]

In Korea, a long period of political instability culminated in the founding of the Chosŏn dynasty in 1392. Through this transition, language became a point of controversy with the Ming. Ming Taizu's preexisting reservations regarding Koryŏ, coupled with his wariness of overpowerful generals in his own court, made him cautious toward the new regime, whose leader Yi Sŏnggye 李成桂 (T'aejo 太祖, r. 1392–1398) had come to power through a military coup d'état.[26] A series of diplomatic missives from the Chosŏn court from 1394 to 1397 incurred the ire of the Ming emperor for allegedly containing inappropriate language: insulting puns and suggestive innuendos.[27] To deflect accusations of intentional lèse-majesté, the Chosŏn court sent several missives that blamed the incompetence of their scribes and scholars. In the voice of the king, these letters excused the alleged offense through claims of ignorance: "[your] servant understands neither the Classics nor the Histories, and those who

24 *CWS T'aejo* 太祖 9:6b [1396.05.07/2]. Naγaču 納哈出 was a Mongol warlord who had recently surrendered to the Ming.

25 Chŏng Taham 2009, 281–282.

26 *CWS T'aejo* 2:14b [1392.11.27/1]. For the early Ming purges of military officials, see Dreyer 1982, 141–147.

27 Pak Wŏnho 2002, 26–30.

composed these writings [i.e., the inadvertently inflammatory letters] are all people from beyond the sea [i.e., not of China]. The sounds of their language are different; their learning is neither refined nor broad. . . . How dare we, on purpose, mock and insult?"[28] Alleged ignorance of both classical texts and the Chinese language came to be Chosŏn's defense.

Among the envoys sent by the Chosŏn court to resolve the affair, one, Kwŏn Kŭn 權近 (1352–1409), managed to impress the Ming emperor with his impromptu poetic compositions and, to a limited extent, restored the emperor's esteem for Korea. Kwŏn returned to Korea with an oral edict 口諭 from the emperor:[29]

> For a small country to serve a large country, everything should be done straight and proper. Where does the sun rise and set? Under heaven there is just one sun, and you can't hide things from the sun. When those envoys come again from that place of yours, if they understand Chinese, let them come; if they don't have a clue about Chinese, don't let them come. That time we were talking about the marriage of my grandkids to the king of Chosŏn's grandkids, you sent a prime minister who knew Chinese, and I agreed to it right then and there, and let him go home. As for those four scholars who came before, this one named Kwŏn Kŭn seemed all right, so I let him go. Go tell this to him, the Chosŏn king: I won't let any of the three who just came go free.[30]

The oral edict, presumably a verbatim repetition of the Ming emperor's words, incorporated conventions from direct speech, including its colloquialisms and plainness of expression. The issue of language was not simply a matter of written genre or form, since the edict also explicitly demanded that, in the future, only envoys who knew spoken Chinese 漢兒話 should be sent to China. A premium was placed on the ability to not just read and write in classical Chi-

28 *CWS T'aejo* 9:9b [1396.06.14/1]; for other, similar examples, see *T'aejo* 12:12a [1397.12.28/1], 14:12a [1398.06.03/1].

29 For Kwŏn Kŭn's poetry exchange with Ming Taizu, see *Yangch'onjip*, vol. 1, in *HMC* 7:14c–18a; Alston 2008.

30 *CWS T'aejo* 11:4b [1397.03.08/1]: 以小事大事事都要至誠直直正正 日頭那里起那里落天下只是一箇日頭 慢不得日頭 爾那里使臣再來時 漢兒話省的著他來 一發不省的不要來 我這裏孫兒 朝鮮國王孫兒做親肯的時節 著他漢兒話省得宰相來 我這裏説歸他 先來的四箇秀才裏頭權近看的老實 放回去 這話朝鮮國王説與他 那三箇新來的一箇饒不得.

nese but also to *speak* Chinese.[31] For the Ming emperor, who insisted on "sincere" behavior and the recognition of the one "sun" in the sky, the issue of language was more than a question of utility and convenience and belonged, rather, in the realm of the moral. If Korea's place in the civilized order, in both a political and an ideological sense, rested on the ability to communicate effectively with the imperial center, the emperor's edict directly rejected Korea's claim of cultural and political legitimacy. For Korea, which had enjoyed the prestige of being a country that, in Song Lian's words, should not be seen as "foreign" but virtually "Chinese," the Ming founder's statement challenged the notion that differences in language could be overlooked in guaranteeing Korea a special place in the imperial order.

Partly as a response to the escalation of tensions with the Ming, the Chosŏn court rehabilitated a once-disgraced courtier, Sŏl Changsu 偰長壽 (1341–1399), in 1394.[32] In accordance with Ming Taizu's demand that future Korean envoys speak Chinese, Sŏl led many of the subsequent envoy missions to the Ming from 1396 until his death, and he spoke with the Ming emperor directly, conversing in Chinese.[33] Sŏl's language skills had much to do with his personal background. Not natives of Korea but émigrés from Yuan China, his family had been classified as *semuren* 色目人 during the Yuan and belonged to an illustrious Uighur lineage, the Gaochang Xie 高昌偰, whose members served as career bureaucrats for the Yuan state.[34] A branch of the family eventually settled in Koryŏ and became noted for their fluency in both Mongolian and Chinese.[35] Along with Yi Saek, who had died in 1396, they were among the last representatives of a generation of men whose careers had been made in official service both in Korea and at the imperial court.

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31 For Ming Taizu, the directness of oral speech may have been preferable to literary prose, which he thought had a tendency to obfuscate. See *MSL Taizu* 246:5b–6a, pp. 3566–3577 [1396.07]; Chan 1997, 2–3, 20–21.

32 Sŏl had been dismissed from office and exiled in 1392 when King T'aejo ascended the throne. *CWS T'aejo* 1:43a [1392.07.28/3].

33 *CWS T'aejo* 11:9b [1397.04.17/1]; Xiao 2007, 729.

34 Xie and Sŏl are the modern Chinese and Korean readings of the character 偰. For the official careers of the Gaochang Xie family, see Brose 2005; 2007, 53–81, 148–157; Xiao 2007, 706–748.

35 As the Mongol Empire crumbled, one branch of the Sŏl/Xie family emigrated to Koryŏ. The Koryŏ ruler granted Sŏl Changsu titles of nobility. His sons began official careers in Koryŏ, taking and passing the civil service examinations. See *CWS Chŏngjong* 定宗 2:14b [1399.10.19/3]. Notably, Sŏl Changsu's uncle Xie Si 偰斯 (fl. 1369) was Ming Taizu's first envoy to Koryŏ. *MSL Taizu* 37:22a–23b, pp. 749–751 [1368.12 (Hongwu 1.12 *renchen*)].

The very same linguistic skills that contributed to Sŏl Changsu's political rehabilitation provided Sŏl with the opportunity to serve the Chosŏn dynasty as the first director of its Office of Interpreters. Upon his return from exile in 1394, Sŏl presented a plan for establishing examinations for the training of professional interpreters. Besides specific curricula, he also proposed ways to address a problem of general reluctance among potential students, who "rarely come of their own accord."[36] The concern over enrollment suggests that the Chosŏn institution was interested not only in selecting available talent through examination but also in systematically cultivating it. The Chosŏn institution, then, ought to be seen in a different light from its Koryŏ predecessor. Whereas the Koryŏ court sought to place the cultivation of interpreters under its supervision to address problems of reliability and loyalty, the Chosŏn institution faced the challenge of maintaining an increasingly rare skill, an emergent scarcity no doubt exacerbated in part by the general reluctance of court elites to acquire it.[37]

A skill set related to spoken Chinese was the mastery of "clerical writing" (*imun/liwen* 吏文), a documentary style that contained technical terminology and nonliterary prose used in the Ming bureaucracy. Master interpreters at the Chosŏn court were charged with deciphering such correspondence from the Ming and training specialists in reading and writing in this documentary style.[38] A memorial submitted by State Councilor Yu Sun 柳洵 (1441–1517) described the relationship between the mastery of spoken language and the use of clerical writing in diplomacy:

> Our country's service to the Central Court [i.e., the Ming] is not comparable to [how] other foreign countries [serve it]. All our memorials, requests, and correspondences use clerical writing. Yet, when Chinese envoys arrive, if they encounter a civil official and write words from their speech, [our officials] cannot understand the sounds and rhymes and have no way of responding. Confused and staring blankly, they are often laughed at by Chinese envoys.

36 *CWS T'aejo* 6:17a [1394.11.19/3]. These efforts included increasing salaries for instructors and the yearly conscription of one "youth, fifteen years or younger, from a good family, who was of a naturally intelligent disposition" from each region.

37 For an overview of the institutional evolution of offices related to interpretation in Korea, see Song Ch'unyong 1998, 113–118. For the establishment of the Koryŏ Office of Interpreters, see *KS* 106:12a–14a, 76:46b–47a.

38 See n. 75.

Better communication with the Ming and the avoidance of ridicule were certainly part of the motivation behind the Chosŏn court's acquisition and maintenance of this knowledge. But more importantly, the ability to operate within the linguistic and cultural sphere of the Ming court was exactly what was supposed to separate Korea from "other foreign countries" and thus made its maintenance absolutely critical. Yu Sun continued:

> If we send our students to [the Ming] for study and, returning with their understanding of clerical writing and Chinese language, they can be transferred to instruct [others], then those who comprehend Chinese sounds and understand clerical writing will increase in number. The king's intentions are quite sound. But from the previous dynasty until now, we have not sent students for generations. During the reign of King Sejong, we requested permission, citing precedents from past dynasties, but until the very end, the Central Court would not permit it.[39]

Embedded in this account is both a sense of a cultural crisis and an epistemic dilemma. Access to the very knowledge that had become integral to the Chosŏn's sense of self and to the exercise of politics vis-à-vis the empire had become increasingly difficult. Even though the anxiety over knowledge was localized in areas of technical expertise—documentary genres for diplomacy and spoken Chinese—the concern over the loss of knowledge was real.

Linguistic anxiety animated broader concerns in other areas of knowledge. The connection between clerical writing and spoken Chinese is reinforced by the persistent concern over the maintenance of technical knowledge from the founding of the Chosŏn dynasty through the sixteenth century. The erudite scholar-official Yu Hŭich'un 柳希春 (1513–1577) exhorted his king in a 1573 royal lecture to pay due attention to the training of technical specialists, including language experts, at the Chosŏn court. Disconcerted by the possibility of "incorrect" interpretations of technical terminology in legal and bureaucratic usage, Yu brought up an example of the kinds of errors that came with the neglect of such knowledge. For decades, Korean legal specialists had been misinterpreting a troublesome term in the Ming legal code, whose

39 *CWS Chungjong* 中宗 23:34a [1515.11.14/2]. Yu assumed that the Ming refused these proposals because they were keen to preserve their self-image, unwilling to let outsiders witness the empire in decline. The Ming court, however, rejected these earlier entreaties, ironically, by citing Korea's already notable achievement in Chinese learning. For example, see *MSL Xuanzong* 宣宗 107:1b–2a, 2386–2387 [1433.11 (Xuande 8.11 *yiyou*)]; Ŏ and Lee (17th cent.) 1989, 107–108.

original juridical interpretation was not recovered until a Ming envoy had been consulted on the matter in 1450. This case of misinterpretation illustrates the connection between technical knowledge, linguistic mastery, and the problem of authority. The "proper" meaning of such words was not self-evident, despite shared knowledge of the classical language.[40]

Despite numerous initiatives meant to encourage the learning of these specialist skills, the number of individuals of able talent fell short of demand. Thus, anxiety over this knowledge may have been compounded by the reliance on only a handful of key figures for its maintenance.[41] In the early sixteenth century, the court sometimes debated the selection of qualified interpreters to send with envoys to Beijing; it worried that should too many accompany an important mission, none would remain at court by the king.[42] The ideal resolution to the problem would have been to send students to China to study, but such proposals had been rebuffed repeatedly by the Ming. Officials continued to lament in 1539 that "our country's civilization, rituals, and institutions are no different from those of China; only the sounds of the language are not similar"; and "ever since the beginning of the dynasty, [we have not been able to] send students to study [in China]."[43] Such statements echoed expressions of woe spoken by their predecessors over a century before, in 1433: "henceforth our hopes of sending students to China are shattered; it remains that spoken Chinese is of utmost importance and is indeed a cause for worry."[44] In each of these instances, the encouragement of language learning in the Office of Interpreters became the second-best option, an imperfect alternative to directly accessing imperial centers of learning.

The maintenance and use of linguistic knowledge presented significant challenges for the founders of the Chosŏn dynasty. Not only instrumental in diplomacy, this knowledge was seen as a prerequisite for achieving cultural parity with the Ming and for the cultivation of Korea's status as a "civilized" country. Establishing an interpretation agency and attempting to send

40 From "Diary of the Classics Lecture" 學經筵日記 癸酉, in Yu Hŭich'un, *Miamsŏngsaengjip* 眉巖先生集, vol. 16, in *HMC* 34:464b–464c. See also *CWS Sejong* 127:26a [1450.01a.09/2].

41 *CWS Chungjong* 23:34a [1515.11.14/2].

42 *CWS Chungjong* 38:54a [1520.03.18/2].

43 *CWS Chungjong* 90:53b [1539.05.03/4]. The sending of students to foreign courts to learn languages was not without precedent. The Koryŏ court had done so for students learning Khitan, Jurchen, and Chinese. See Song Ch'unyong 1998, 102–105.

44 *CWS Sejong* 62:26a [1433.12.13/1]. For the discussions at the Chosŏn court leading to the decision to request permission to send students to China, see *CWS Sejong* 51:35b [1431.03.19/3], 61:43b [1433.08a.21/3], 61:48b [1433.08a.28/3], 61:49a [1433.08a.29/1]. For the memorial sent to the Ming on the matter, see 61:51b [1433.09.03/1].

scholars to study in the Ming capital were both court efforts to secure expertise in an essential area of knowledge. As a strategy, the training of professional interpreters in Korea was not understood as a final solution. It was instead a necessary contingency when the latter, more preferable option was no longer possible. The Chosŏn's efforts, however, went beyond diplomatic entreaties and institutional reform. To address these problems of language, the court took it upon itself to systematize and codify linguistic knowledge.

Codification of Language: Interpreters, Language Manuals, and the Korean Alphabet

The publication and promulgation of linguistic knowledge in the early Chosŏn court should be understood in this broader context of cultural anxiety and as a gradual process of institutionalization. Early Chosŏn rulers imported and implemented the use of Chinese phonological texts such as the *Correct Rhymes of the Hongwu Reign* 洪武正韻 not simply to adopt intellectual and institutional developments in the Ming court but to acquire and maintain linguistic knowledge.[45] Also, the court's efforts at training better interpreters led to the compilation of a series of important language manuals.[46] King Sejong himself took a great personal interest in learning to speak Chinese and had regular tutorial sessions with officials who had knowledge of the language. The culmination of these efforts was the promulgation in 1446 of the *Correct Sounds to Teach the People* 訓民正音: the Korean alphabet.[47]

This project was not just a codification of Korean phonology into a new, written form. One of the greatest motivations for Sejong's invention was to develop a reliable and accurate way to note the pronunciation of Chinese characters and a mechanism for the universal representation of sounds, from human languages to even the "sounds of the wind, the cries of herons, the

45 *CWS Sejo* 3:33b [1456.04.09/2]. For the importance and application of the *Correct Rhymes of the Hongwu Reign*, see Chŏng Taham 2009, 288–291

46 For a thorough tabulation of language manuals used during the Chosŏn period, see Song Kijung 2001, 51–180.

47 The argument made in this section echoes the conceptual premise of Chŏng Taham's work, which also links the invention of the Korean alphabet to the Chosŏn's relations with Ming China. Chŏng (2009, 289–301) understands King Sejong's linguistic project to be an act of cultural appropriation from the Ming that simultaneously asserted Chosŏn's autonomy as a civilized state. For an overview of the invention of the Korean alphabet, see Ledyard 1966, esp. 81–84, for King Sejong's relationship with interpreters and his interest in learning spoken Chinese.

crowing of cocks, and the barking of dogs."[48] With "twenty-eight characters that can be used in unison without exhaustion, simple yet keen, elegant and lucid," the *Correct Sounds* was developed to be a codified technological system that was meant to be transmittable, easily learned, and universally applicable.[49] Sejong's script was also a legacy of Korea's earlier engagement with the world of the Mongol Empire and its technologies of knowledge. Elements of the new Korean script not only drew from Chinese rhyme tables, dictionaries, and phonological scholarship but also demonstrated awareness of alphabetic scripts used in the Mongol Empire, such as the Mongol-Uighur script, 'Phags-pa, and the Tibetan script.[50]

The new alphabet, able to transcribe the sounds of Chinese characters, found ready use in manuals of Chinese phonology, systematizing what had once been only tacit knowledge of spoken language into a written model.[51] The alphabet could thus be applied to Chinese as it was spoken in China. One text that did so, a manual titled the *Compass for Interpretation* 譯學指南, is no longer extant, but its preface, written in 1479, remains. The author of the preface, Sŏ Kŏjŏng 徐居正 (1420–1488), wrote that Korea's "ritual and music, writing and documents, all approximate those of China," but he found "lamentable" that, because between China and Korea "the winds and material force are not the same, the languages are different as well." Crediting the establishment of the Office of Diplomatic Correspondence and the Office of Interpreters for mitigating the problem through the "study of the sounds of China," he praised the *Compass*, a new compilation, as an improvement over existing textbooks. Describing it as a glossary in which "words were divided according to [their] category," he attributed its successful completion to the collaboration of

48 The codification of pronunciation was facilitated by the promulgation of the *Correct Rhymes of the Eastern Kingdom* 東國正韻 in 1447. See *CWS Sejong* 117:22a [1447.09.29/2].

49 This is based on the preface to the *Correct Sounds to Teach the People*. See *CWS Sejong* 113:36b [1446.09.29/2]. The alphabet was eventually expanded to include letters that represented phonemes that existed only in *spoken* Chinese, not Korean. See Ledyard 1997, 45–46.

50 Gari Ledyard (1997, 31–87) has proposed that the 'Phags-pa script implemented by Qubilai Khan as a universal phonetic inscriptional system was an inspiration for the Korean script's base letter forms for the consonants. Although Song Kijung (1997, 218–220) has argued that it is unlikely the Korean alphabet was directly modeled after the 'Phags-pa alphabet, he still situates the alphabet within a broader tradition of linguistic innovation through the invention of scripts in northeast Asia.

51 For example, see the preface to the *Vernacular Manual to the Correct Rhymes of the Hongwu Reign* 洪武正韻譯訓, in Sin Sukchu, *Pohanjaejip* 保閑齋集, vol. 15, in *HMC* 10:126a–127b.

several official interpreters and court officials, who "translated into the vernacular script of this country" the "words for the names of things in China." Besides describing its efficacy as a tool for interpreters in conducting diplomacy with China, he also praised the technical innovations that the new alphabet made possible:

> His Majesty, King Sejong, whose divine inspiration and brilliant wisdom exceeded that of a hundred kings, had first created the vernacular script. In translating the language of China, with its thousand transformations and myriad combinations, it suffers no obstruction. For this reason, it was possible for the *Compass for Interpretation* to be created. Indeed! What former sages have expounded before, later sages have continued since. He established [the vernacular alphabet] in order to be reverent to the Central State and attentive to the duty of rule, not simply for use only in words and writing. For these reasons, this [vernacular alphabet] has been sought, and the rules regarding what are called the clarity and turbidity of the seven sounds and four tones in the rhyme books can be reached in their variety and depth. And all the sounds in the world and in the myriad countries can also be approximated and then understood. How marvelous indeed![52]

That this signature royal achievement is couched within an idiom of sage rulership should not detract from the literal appreciation of technical innovation. Claiming the alphabet's universal applicability and its potential to reproduce "all the sounds of the world," the preface underscored the value of this new technical knowledge for bridging linguistic differences, not just with the Ming but with all "the myriad countries."

Elsewhere in the preface, Sŏ contrasted the *Compass for Interpretation*'s innovative use of the Korean script in representing spoken Chinese with two other textbooks, the *Nogŏltae* 老乞大 and *Interpreter Pak* 朴通事.[53] While the original versions of these texts were written entirely in Chinese characters, without additional explication or annotations, subsequent editions incorpo-

52 "Preface to the *Compass for Interpretation*" 譯語指南序, in Sŏ Kŏjŏng, *Sagajip* 四佳集, vol. 4, in *HMC* 11:250b–250d.

53 The abundant references to the banalities of daily life in these texts evoke a world quite different from the Chosŏn-Ming and more characteristic of the Koryŏ-Yuan, when borders were more porous and nonofficial travel more frequent. For an English translation of *Interpreter Pak*, see Dyer 2006 (129–147 for a summary of its contents).

rated both phonological glosses and explanations in the Korean alphabet.[54] The early "vernacular" translations are attributed to an interpreter named Ch'oe Sejin 崔世珍 (?–1542), who had, on several occasions, been part of the Korean delegation to Ming China.[55] Charged with training new interpreters, Ch'oe also compiled a dictionary called the *Comprehensive Explanation of the Four Tones* 四聲通解, among other works.[56] Later interpreter manuals, such as the 1677 print edition *Vernacular Explication of "Interpreter Pak"* 朴通事諺解, followed Ch'oe's technique, using the "vernacular" Korean alphabet to note pronunciation of Chinese characters and explain their meanings. This technique of "vernacular explication" 諺解 was used, not just for language textbooks, but also for other works, most notably Buddhist sutras and Confucian classics.[57]

The examinations for selecting Chinese language interpreters required mastery of both *Interpreter Pak* and the *Nogŏltae*, which likely contributed to their continual institutional use.[58] Though the specific curricula of these examinations could vary, they generally also tested candidates in their knowledge of

54 While editions of these texts from the fifteenth century and earlier are written entirely in Chinese characters, a mid-sixteenth-century edition in the Korean alphabet does exist as well. Annotated ŏnhae 諺解 editions date from at least 1670. For *Interpreter Pak*, the earliest known text dates from 1423, a translated version is from the mid-sixteenth century, and the annotated vernacular edition is from 1677. See Song Kijung 2001, 60–71. The discovery of a fourteenth-century version of the *Nogŏltae* (along with its particular content matter, early recorded dates of use, and archaic language) firmly places it as a Koryŏ-Yuan period text. See Chŏng Kwang, Nam, and Yang 1999. This assertion is also reinforced by Chosŏn period records. For example, efforts to revise these texts cited the obsolescence of the "Yuan period language" contained in them. *cws Sŏngjong* 122:7a [1480.10.19/3]. For reprints of extant editions, see *Nogŏltae; Nogŏltae Ŏnhae* (14th–17th cents.) 2003; *Pak T'ongsa ŏnhae* 2004.

55 Song Kijung 2001, 29.

56 Song Kijung 2001, 56; *cws Yŏngsangun* 燕山君 49:25a [1503.05.08/2]. The first pages of the *Comprehensive Explanation of the Four Tones* contain consonant charts that make use of modified letter forms to represent Chinese phonemes that did not exist in Korean, illustrating how the Korean alphabet had been adapted for Chinese phonology. Ch'oe Sejin, *Sa*sŏng t'*onghae* 四聲通解, 1–5.

57 What is notable about the language textbooks given above is the use of a dual gloss: two sets of alphabetic transcriptions to notate the reading of each Chinese character. Song Kijung (2001, 56) identifies the two readings as the "correct" sounds 正音 and the "vulgar" sounds 俗音, where the latter reflected contemporary Mandarin readings. For an example, see *Pak T'ongsa ŏnhae* 2004, 66.

58 The textbook *Nogŏltae* would not just be used for Chinese instruction, but its content would be translated into Mongolian, Japanese, and Manchu as well and would serve as a basis for training in those languages. See Song Kijung 2001, 69, 87, 135.

Confucian classics such as the *Analects*, *Mencius*, and the *Doctrine of the Mean*.[59] Mastery of spoken Chinese thus had to be accompanied by at least a rudimentary familiarity with core canon texts as well. Given that interpreters had to mediate between Ming and Chosŏn envoys, generally individuals steeped in Confucian learning, such a requirement was consistent with the actual role that interpreters played, relaying in speech the formalized and ritualized language that characterized such exchanges.

It was the case, however, that *Interpreter Pak* and the *Nogŏltae* used spoken Chinese expressions that dated from the Yuan dynasty. By the mid-sixteenth century, some of their expressions and grammatical forms were already seen to be obsolete.[60] Although these texts were held to be authoritative through the nineteenth century, their contents had to be repeatedly revised throughout the duration of their use. Efforts to update linguistic knowledge motivated new publications, such as one annotated text based on the libretto of a contemporary Chinese didactic drama piece. The compilers of this text recognized not only the divergence of contemporary Chinese phonology from classical norms but also how even nonliterary language changed over time:

> In the *Comprehensive Explanation*, the pronunciation of the characters often followed what was "vulgar," and now the speech common in China has changed greatly from the "vulgar" pronunciation of the *Comprehensive Explanation*. This is because of the gradual corruption of the "correct sounds." We dare not follow it.[61]

Nevertheless, these later editions retained the earlier practice of dual glossing. By providing classical readings alongside contemporary Chinese pronunciation, these texts not only served as a repertoire of linguistic models for the training of interpreters but also preserved the authority of classical phonology. The codification and standardization of linguistic knowledge shifted the burden of preservation to the printed text; but for all its careful annotation and explication, it still struggled with the problem of linguistic change.[62]

One should be reminded, however, that for interpreters who had to cross gulfs of linguistic difference, effective mediation meant more than

59 *T'ongmun'gwan chi* 2006, 53–60; Yang 2007.

60 See n. 54.

61 *Oryun chŏnbi ŏnhae* (1721) 2005, 10.

62 The linguistic relationships between classical phonology, contemporary Chinese speech, and a variety of Korean usages were complex. See Dormels 1999 for a thorough examination of these issues.

phonological fidelity. The task of the interpreter extended beyond language in the narrow sense. It involved communicating on other levels too—the social and the cultural—requiring synaptic crossings over ascriptive social boundaries and the political borders of king and country.

The Silent Interpreter: Mediating Language in Chosŏn-Ming Diplomacy

The early Chosŏn court kept the existence of the Korean alphabet a secret from Ming officials.[63] The effacement in diplomacy of a key mechanism for crossing linguistic boundaries and a symbol of their existence discloses a tension embedded in the process of translation: the demands of commensurability required the means of traduction to be hidden. The act of interpretation, though important as a way of bridging linguistic distance, also marked the existence of difference. It too became subject to marginalization, both as an area of knowledge and as a historical phenomenon, during the early Chosŏn period.

While several notable civil officials, such as Sin Sukchu 申叔舟 (1417–1475), participated in King Sejong's linguistic projects and played the role of interpreter on various occasions, by the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, interpretation became a marginalized, specialist area of knowledge.[64] Its increasing marginality in the hierarchy of knowledge went hand in hand with the cursory way in which interpreters appear in the writings of early Chosŏn court officials.[65] Though elite writing seldom describes the discrimination of interpreters explicitly, we may infer the prevalence of such attitudes from descriptions of personal virtue and social propriety. For example, the posthumous biography of the scholar-official Yi Sŏkhyŏng 李石亨 (1415–1477) illustrates the inferior position of linguistic knowledge vis-à-vis classical learning:

63 One Chosŏn interpreter was almost punished after being accused of "showing writing in the vernacular" to a Ming envoy. See "Diary of the Royal Lecture," in Yu Hŭich'un, *Miamsŏnsaengjip*, vol. 18, in *HMC* 34:504b.

64 It should be noted that during the fifteenth century, notable scholars, especially those connected with the invention of the Korean alphabet, such as Sin Sukchu, were not interpreters per se and served as court officials. An (2001) demonstrates that during the early Chosŏn dynasty, the roles of "civil officials" 文臣 and specialist officials could overlap significantly.

65 An important exception is the *P'aegwan chapki* 稗官雜記, a miscellany written by an interpreter, Ŏ Sukkwŏn, containing numerous anecdotes about Chosŏn court life, including the activities of interpreters. This work is partially translated in Ŏ and Lee 1989.

> At the age of fourteen, he entered school in the Eastern Academy. Because he was young and bright, he was culled to be an apprentice of clerical writing. His Lordship [Yi] was angry and said, "How can a true man ape the actions of the 'tongue people' 舌人?" and he left [the school] flinging his sleeves. Because he attained the highest rank [in the preliminary civil service examinations], he enrolled in the National University.[66]

This account suggests the existence of two distinct but related phenomena. While talented individuals were encouraged to pursue career paths related to language, young men of aristocratic pedigree like Yi found the practice of clerical writing to be below their station. For him, the specialist skills involved in managing bureaucratic correspondence with the Ming was the purview of ignoble "tongue people."[67] Yi's haughtiness was taken to be cause for praise, and his ardent refusal only illustrated his commitment to greater pursuits.

As tongue people, specializing in spoken language and clerical writing, interpreters were also seen to lack moral and literary cultivation. The Chosŏn court official Kang Hŭimaeng 姜希孟 (1424–1483), in a preface to several poems of parting, encouraged a promising young scholar to learn as much as possible when he accompanied his uncle, an official envoy, to Beijing. Describing the youth as a "gentleman who loved antiquity, widely learned and elegant," Kang was sure that he would appreciate the historical sites and cultural significance of the Ming capital. In the same document, Kang denigrated the court interpreters:

> In this world there are "tongue-people" who in the morning are in Hanyang [the Chosŏn capital] and at night are in Yanjing [Beijing] and who die old as seasoned travelers. But when it comes to understanding the sights of the Greater Country [the Ming Empire], they do not. When it comes to taking up the transformative influence of civilization, they do not.

66 "Chŏhŏnjip haengjang" 樗軒集行狀, in Yi Sŏkhyŏng, *Chŏhŏnjip* 樗軒集, in *HMC* 9:440c.

67 The pejorative implications of this term for interpreters, "tongue person" (*sŏrin*), is also evident in the context of its early usage in the *Koryŏ History*. See *KS* 76:46b–47a, 106:12a–14a.

The scholar's refined knowledge of history and his cultivation in classical learning distinguished him from the interpreter, despite the latter's more regular and arguably more direct access to "China."[68]

Kang Hŭimaeng's low esteem for interpreters evidently did not extend to *all* those who served in that capacity. He held the famous interpreter Ch'oe Sejin, the very same man who compiled several language manuals that made use of King Sejong's new Korean alphabet, in particularly high regard.[69] The rest of Chosŏn officialdom was not necessarily so generous. Ch'oe, himself a son of an interpreter, was only able to take the highest *munkwa* 文科 civil service examinations with special royal permission. As an individual who crossed ascriptive social boundaries, his rare case well illustrates the limitations to personal achievement within early Chosŏn's social system. Ch'oe was impeached numerous times throughout his career. Called "immoral and base" and "unfit for high office," he was censured for overstepping sumptuary regulations, participating in commerce, and violating ritual norms.[70] A damning assessment of Ch'oe from the *Veritable Records* described him as someone who "domineered with his high position." With a "ravenous and base nature," his greed was revealed when "unscrupulous men competed with one another to pay visits to him," and "those who traveled from China would bring all the rarities and treasures they acquired to his home."[71] How Ch'oe was described fits squarely within the conventions that govern the biographical accounts in the *Koryŏ History*, which tells how upstart individuals, to enrich themselves, made use of their language skills to usurp authority reserved for the civil bureaucracy.[72] These

68 From Kang Hŭimaeng, *Sasukjaejip* 私淑齋集, vol. 8, in *HMC* 12:118a: 世有舌人。朝漢都而暮燕京。卒老于行。至訊上國之光則未也。訪文明之化則未也。

69 Kang Hŭimaeng, *Sasukjaejip*, vol. 8, in *HMC* 12:058a–58d.

70 The Censorate impeached Ch'oe Sejin in 1509 for "acquiring a concubine during mourning." His "status, base and ignoble," and his frequent engagement with commerce made him "without a doubt unfit for duty as a teacher and exemplar." These accusations targeted Ch'oe Sejin's failure to adhere to the customary regulations for *yangban* elites during this time. His participation in commerce and his failure to observe mourning put his eligibility for official status at stake. That reproof would not be the last. The *CWS* records that on the seventh day of the twelfth month of 1517, "the Censorate petitioned [again] about the earlier matter, stating that Ch'oe Sejin is immoral and base and is not fit for high office." See *CWS Chungjong* 7:42b [1509.01.04/2], 31:03a [1517.12.07/1], 39:19b [1520.04.18/2], 21a [1520.04.19/4], 23a [1520.04.21/2], 24b [1520.04.23/1], 25a [1520.04.24/3].

71 *CWS Chungjong* 31:3a [1517.12.07/1].

72 Cho I 趙彝, for example, was a former monk who, after becoming an interpreter, attempted to profiteer illicitly from the tribute horse trade. His biography is included among the "betrayers" 叛逆 in *KS* 130:27a–30a. Other interpreters from this period appear in sections reserved for "evil officials" 奸臣 and "panderers" 嬖幸. For more information

criticisms of Ch'oe seem to accord with general elite attitudes toward interpreters in early sixteenth-century Chosŏn. In a funerary inscription praising a local official of a district frequented by envoy missions to the Ming for his uprightness and incorruptibility, we find his refusal to entertain "the tongue-people," who often attempted to visit him bearing gifts, listed as evidence of his rectitude.[73]

Though interpreters were disparaged, the service of talented interpreters was still greatly valued by the Chosŏn monarchy. King Chungjong 中宗 (r. 1506–1544), for example, maintained his confidence in Ch'oe despite requests for his dismissal.[74] Ch'oe's ability to understand sensitive documents from the Ming that contained colloquial diction and nonliterary usage probably also reinforced Chungjong's faith in him.[75] Well respected by some and reviled by others, this controversial figure testifies to the complex ways in which language had become politicized in Chosŏn Korea's social space.[76]

Given the importance of linguistic knowledge for diplomacy, the low social esteem accorded to individuals who possessed it appears counterintuitive. Certainly, the debasement of linguistic skill in Chosŏn times may be attributed to existing social prejudices. Since its inauguration, it was difficult for the Office of Interpreters to attract qualified students, and highborn sons of elite families refused to participate.[77] Such perceptions may have been socially self-fulfilling: the reluctance of the aristocracy to participate in these careers reinforced their marginality. On further examination, however, the construction of social distance may in fact reveal intricate ties between language and power. Inverting the customary denigration of interpreters and linguistic

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on the social backgrounds of these interpreters, see Song Ch'unyong 1998, 109–110, 171–172, 214–215.

73 Ki Taesŭng, *Kobongjip* 高峯集, vol. 3, in *HMC* 40:111a–111b. As these examples illustrate, interpreters, through their connection to the tribute system, could profit immensely from trade. See also Ŏ and Lee (17th cent.) 1989, 141.

74 *CWS Chungjong* 38:55b [1520.03.20/1].

75 Ch'oe, for example, deftly translated a sensitive Ming missive in clerical writing (*imun*) that announced the imminent arrival of the imperial guard sent to arrest two Ming envoys who had lingered too long in Chosŏn Korea. See *CWS Chungjong* 42:36a [1521.07.06/1]. Attention to Ch'oe should not detract from the existence of other capable interpreters. See Ŏ and Lee (17th cent.) 1989, 38, 158–159.

76 The lack of a scholarly consensus on Ch'oe's social status highlights this point. For two views of the relationship between Ch'oe's social background and his bureaucratic employment, see Kim 1994, 73–85; and An 2001.

77 Secondary sons (i.e., offspring of elite men and commoner women), who were barred from other avenues of political access, did often take up specialist positions. Ŏ Sukkwŏn, a secondary son, is a case in point.

knowledge, the sixteenth-century Chosŏn interpreter Ŏ Sukkwŏn 魚叔權 wrote in his *P'aegwan chapki* on the merits of learning spoken Chinese and its importance to diplomacy.[78] He also wrote dismissively of venerable court officials who exposed their ignorance of spoken Chinese in interactions with Ming envoys by committing gaffes in diplomatic encounters or botching the prosody of poetic compositions.[79] The mastery of both literary Chinese and spoken Chinese was key to Chosŏn's political relationship with the Ming, and interpreters like Ch'oe Sejin and Ŏ Sukkwŏn had in fact mastered *both* categories of knowledge, with spoken Chinese providing a separate point of access to canonical knowledge. The very emphasis on social distance between aristocratic court officials and lower-born interpreters who had mastered an ostensibly inferior but related set of skills masked the actual proximity of their respective knowledge areas.[80]

The Chosŏn court probably recognized both the potential of linguistic knowledge for social mobility and its capacity to usurp political access, and sought to control it. David Laitin's work on African linguistic repertoires makes use of the concept of "elite closure," which describes a situation in which exclusive access to language functioned as a barrier to social mobility.[81] Applying this concept of elite closure to the politics of language in early Chosŏn, the social debasement of linguistic knowledge in relation to the mastery of classical Chinese becomes understandable. The existence of professional interpreters, especially those who also displayed literary skills or classical knowledge, could have threatened the existing social order. Without the enforcement of social boundaries in the court, the monopoly over classical learning and literary erudition exercised by the elite and by the court, and even political access to Ming China, could be usurped and the avenues of access that these skills provided easily acquired by social inferiors who secured knowledge of the spoken language.

Interpreters were discriminated against not only by their colleagues at the Chosŏn court but also by Ming envoys.[82] While Ming envoys and their Chosŏn counterparts exchanged poems of friendship that fostered a sense of social

78 Ŏ and Lee (17th cent.) 1989, 38, 92.

79 Ŏ and Lee (17th cent.) 1989, 152–153, 213–214.

80 Ŏ Sukkwŏn, for example, was a secondary son of an aristocrat. For discrimination against secondary sons, institutional origins, and relevance to Korea's social system, see Ŏ and Lee (17th cent.) 1989, 33; Deuchler 1988, 121–142.

81 Laitin 1992, 57–60.

82 The mitigation of linguistic difference may have motivated the continued use of Korean-born eunuchs by the Ming through the early sixteenth century. Ming officials also made it a point to distinguish themselves from them. For example, the 1488 envoy, the imperial

parity, the poetry that the Ming envoys wrote for the Korean interpreters exemplified the social distance between them. An excerpt from one such poem reads as follows: "who says that speech and language are base things, / not as deep as the intentions of a person's heart? / We all depended on your Lordship's three-inch tongue / to understand one another's heart."[83] Though laudatory, the poem's praise rests upon assumptions of low social esteem accorded to the masters of spoken language. The tongue was valuable only insofar as it served as a tool for building intellectual and emotional rapport.

The construction of social distance between the interpreters and the official envoys of the Chosŏn and Ming courts maintained a parallel hierarchy of knowledge between classical learning and technical expertise. Interpreters were left on the margins of a diplomacy that emphasized literary commensurability and elevated the written over the spoken, the literary over the technical. At times, even the aptitude of interpreters was scrutinized and doubted. In describing their preference for written communication over oral transmission, diplomats cited the "unreliability" of these interpreters. The 1460 emissary Zhang Ning 張寧 (1426–1496) did exactly that when he called for the use of brush and paper and dismissed the Korean interpreters, preferring to engage in written conversation with the Korean king.[84] After the successful conclusion of his mission, Zhang returned with an anthology that collected the poetry he wrote with his Chosŏn hosts.[85] In the end, it was the literary production—the poems written in classical Chinese—that was the monumental accomplishment of Zhang Ning's embassy.

Zhang Ning was not alone. When the 1537 Ming envoy Gong Yongqing 龔用卿 (1500–1563) found himself at odds on many issues with Chosŏn's ritual officials, he, "concerned that the interpreters did not transmit words honestly," chose to rely on written communication instead.[86] Gong also left extensive records of his mission to Korea and saw his own writing as helpful to future Ming emissaries. Exhorting his would-be successors, Gong wrote in the preface to his *Record of an Embassy to Chosŏn* 使朝鮮錄 that "the civilized and barbar-

tutor Dong Yue 董越 (1430–1502), when displeased by some ceremonial details, complained to his hosts, "Do you think we are just Korean eunuchs?" (De Heer 1993, 250–51).

83 Gong Yongqing, *Shi Chaoxian lu* 使朝鮮錄, 2:14a.

84 Zhang Ning, *Feng shi lu* 奉使錄, 1:1–2. Written conversations such as these, commonly known as *p'iltam* 筆談 (lit., "brush talk"), figure more prominently in later diplomatic exchanges, especially in situations where interpreters were not present.

85 The compilation is the *Hwanghwajip* 皇華集, a title it shared with a series of Ming envoy poetry compilations sponsored by the Chosŏn court from 1450 to 1633. See De Heer 1993, 247–50. For an extensive study of these compilations, see Du 2010.

86 Pak Wŏnho 2005, 61–77.

ian are one, and although Chosŏn is in the distant marches, it has long upheld ritual and respected the distinction between high and low. And so, one [should] treat them not as 'barbarian' but as Chinese."[87] Problems of spoken language remained secondary to the concerns of ritual propriety, and spoken language appeared only tangential to the problem of cultural commensurability. In both the Zhang Ning and Gong Yongqing cases, spoken language had failed to achieve its end; the burden of discourse and negotiation fell on the written word. Writing 文, emblematic of Korea's status as a civilized country, had triumphed over the spoken, which was unreliable and uncertain.

In a sense, the construction of social distance between literati envoys and interpreters was a by-product of a desire to maintain social parity between Chosŏn officials and Ming ambassadors. Despite their shared knowledge of literary Chinese and commonalities in their educational and social backgrounds, the distance created by spoken language was left to be bridged by a Korean interpreter. This mechanism of differentiation produced a paradox of historical representation in which the interpreters, though ubiquitous in diplomatic encounters and vital to effective communication, appear only tangentially in historical sources such as envoy travel writing or are mentioned only briefly as messengers and errand runners.

Despite the privileged status of the written language in this discourse, spoken language and its interpreters bore the brunt of facilitating daily interactions between the Ming ambassador and his counterparts. In his journal, Yu Hŭich'un wrote of his encounter with a Ming envoy:

> The [Ming] assistant emissary *asked the interpreter*, "Your state is a country of manifest civility. Do the learned among you include those who study things like the Cheng and Zhu schools?"
>
> [The interpreter?] *replied*, "Yes." He then asked, "What are their names?" He replied, "In the past there were Chŏng Mongju and Kwŏn Kŭn. In latter times there were Cho Kwangjo and Yi Ŏnjŏk and others. As for the rest, there are many others, but I cannot remember all of their names."
>
> The assistant emissary *asked*, "Then, there must be written works or literary collections that have been transmitted to the world."
>
> [He] *replied*, "Although there are, because their descendants may not have been worthy or because they cannot transmit or hold on [to these works] there are also those that are lost. Of those that still survive, complete editions are few."

87 Gong Yongqing, *Shi Chaoxian lu*, 1:4a–4b.

> The assistant emissary laughed and *said*, "All is the same in this world. It is like this in China as well. Some may sell the myriad volumes collected by their family, and even the writings of their ancestors get discarded. Even if you do not have a complete edition, if I can see a few pieces, that would suffice. *Please tell this to the welcoming emissary.*"
>
> *I told the interpreter to answer this way:* "Our country receives the civilizing transformations of the Central State, and generation after generation there are those who put their efforts in study. But we do not know whether what they learned is refined or flawed. Nevertheless, there often are written works. If you want to take a look, we will seek them out and present them to you."
>
> *The assistant emissary then answered,* "With so many pieces of writing, there must be something worth reading. I wanted to know the splendor of human talent and the attainment of learning, and now that I have received your reply, I am greatly thankful. I just want to take one look."[88]

The above oral exchange could not have been accomplished without the intervention of an interpreter. Presented as a conversation between Yu and the Ming emissary, the interpreter seems to serve no other purpose than to transmit faithfully the intention of the two courtiers. The illusion of seamlessness may have been a function of linguistic fidelity; but the nuances of presentation and affect––flattery, humility, and appreciation––appear on the page as transparent sentiments. The curious but courteous guest and the humble, hospitable host emerge not through direct conversation but via the mediating, but also conspicuously silent, voice of their actual interlocutor, the nameless interpreter. We cannot know, at least in this case, how much the interpreter's mediation in fact shaped the emotive contours and ritualized affects that characterize this exchange. The existence of a linguistic gulf may very well have provided an opportunity to reassert and reinvent diplomatic convention: its discourse and politesse were constructed through the mediating potential of language in translation.

The above conversation also illustrates the opportunity for self-representation that linguistic distance provided. By mediating exchanges, the process of interpretation staved off the pressures of immediacy, allowing both parties time and space to develop a carefully calculated response. In other words, the interpreter's role was not reducible to the direct conversion of spoken words from one language to the other. As constant companions to Ming envoys dur-

88 Yu Hŭich'un, *Miamsŏnsaengjip*, vol. 6, in *HMC* 34:250c–250d (my italics).

ing their sojourn in Korea, the interpreters should be understood not simply as passive conduits of information but as key actors in their own right:

> An envoy who was a famous man from Jiangnan, proud of his own literary accomplishments, came from China. He said that in the Eastern Country [i.e., Korea], there were none who could compare with him. When he reached Yangch'aek Post, he was eating gingko nuts and wrote the first line of a couplet, "inside the shell of the silver apricot [gingko] is hidden a green jade" 銀杏甲中藏碧玉, and asked the interpreter P'yo Ch'ŏngno 表廷老 to ask the welcoming emissary to come over and match the verse.

A situation in which an interpreter effected social interaction between his social superiors was not itself remarkable. The record, however, continues:

> [But instead,] he [P'yo] went over and wrote the following: "under the skin of a stone durian [i.e., pomegranate] are spotted cinnabar pebbles" 石榴皮下點朱砂. The Chinese envoy was greatly astonished and praised it immensely, saying, "If even the interpreters are [as talented as] such, I must not look down on the welcoming emissaries!"[89]

While literary exchange remained the purview of the Ming envoy and high officials in the Chosŏn court, the very functioning of their literary sociability required the mediation of these interpreters. P'yo had been called over by the Chinese emissary to communicate to his Korean counterparts. Though the Ming envoy had rather low expectations of Korean literary accomplishment, in this and similar narratives the Ming envoy recants his original calumny once his hosts demonstrate their abilities. In such situations, literary virtuosity from an erudite interpreter could go far in impressing his Chinese guest through the demonstration of not only his own talent but also the overall refinement of the country he represented.

In the context of diplomacy, the insistence on constant decorum required attention to ritual detail by all participants, including the interpreters, who alone were charged with representing Chosŏn through speech. In his record of a conversation with King Chungjong, the envoy Gong Yongqing reveals how an interpreter's minute interactions with a Ming envoy played a role in maintaining Chosŏn's image as a "civilized" country:

89 *T'ongmun'gwan chi* 2006, 7:12b–13a. This compilation contains numerous similar anecdotes.

> During the royal banquet at the Hall of Great Peace, the king commanded the interpreter to say to us, "This small country is at the edge of the sea. But, today, now that we have met you two Celestial Envoys [Gong Yongqing and his deputy], our joy and exuberance are overwhelming. It is as the *Classic of Poetry* says, 'Now that I have met the noble man, my heart is indeed glad' 既見君子 我心則喜."
>
> We [Gong and his assistant] answered back, "We live in China, upholding the upright command of the Son of Heaven, and have brought his edicts to your country. And we also have known that your country has been able to observe ritual and righteousness. We have also heard that the king lives frugally, and today we have seen these [things]. They are all truly not contrary to what we have heard."
>
> The king said again, "[You,] the two Celestial Envoys, are attendants and important officials of the Son of Heaven. If it had not been for this great cause for celebration [i.e., the emperor had just appointed a crown prince], how else could I have seen your faces?"[90]

The intertwining of politesse and elegant language produced an effect of formalism, a conversation predetermined in semantic content, rhetorical fashioning, and gesture. The language drew upon classical allusions and reiterated the tropes conventional in envoy poetry of this time. Because Gong's record is entirely in classical Chinese, we cannot be certain whether the words recorded were verbatim or a "literary summary" of actual speech. Though citing the *Classic of Poetry* could probably be achieved by any classically educated Korean at the time, the interpreter had to do so while rendering the language in a way immediately comprehensible to the Ming envoy. In this way, the ritual function of the interpreter was as much the performance of cultural literacy as the transmission of the king's sentiment. In turn, the ritual moment thus created from the utterance of these words concealed linguistic difference. A mediated exchange was performed as the expression of authentic sentiment and, through Gong's intervention as a writer documenting the affair, was inscribed in text as an idealized moment. In addition, the very construction of this ritual moment celebrated in Gong's envoy account depended not only on the careful use of language but also on the Chosŏn state's orchestration of numerous personnel and the employment of its institutional knowledge. All matters of the Ming envoy's reception had been prepared well in advance of his arrival, including the actual words to be spoken on such occasions.[91]

90 Gong Yongqing, *Shi Chaoxian lu*, 1:39a–39b.

91 A memorial describing this process is preserved in O Kŏn, *Tŏkkyesŏnsaeng munjip* 德溪先生文集, vol. 4, in *HMC* 38:126d–127a.

Chosŏn's assiduous representation of itself as a civilized state went hand in hand with exaltations of the Ming's civilizing project. Likewise, Gong's praises of Chosŏn's cultural achievements also served as encomia of the Ming: "it is because the teachings of the imperial Ming reach far that the cartwheel tracks and writing are unified with the mountains and rivers." These two rhetorical demands created a context in which it was to the advantage of both the Ming envoy and his Chosŏn hosts to produce a literary legacy of mutual commendation. Like those of his predecessors, Gong's poems in praise of his Chosŏn hosts emphasized commonality in language and culture. Whatever differences there were between the Ming and the Chosŏn were resolved through shared cultural institutions. And so, Gong was "ever happy that literature and culture are resplendent in the Eastern Vassal [i.e., Korea], [where] all those who wear caps and gowns are men who read books." Through these achievements, the classical past was revived, and the spatial distance of Chosŏn Korea from ancient China became inconsequential through temporal conflation. Gong asked, "Who says that this small place is far and obscure? I have already seen that their robes and caps follow ancient customs." And through the mastery of not just knowledge but the performance of culture, Korea became China's equal: "The rivers and streams [of Korea] do not fall short of China's greatness; its people have always been cultivated in air and bearing." In transforming Korea into a recipient of Ming "civilization" and an exemplar of classical ideals, even the embodiment of linguistic difference—interpreters, erstwhile inconvenient barriers to the communication of ritual order––was transformed into an emblem of commensurability ("Their interpreters are all selected from among the students and scholars"), buttressing Ming claims to universal civilization and moral empire.[92]

In his poetry, Gong asserted cultural commensurability over linguistic difference, largely ignoring the problems of spoken language. Both audience and participant in this ritual performance, the Ming envoy refracted experience into a model of ritual through a written account that eschewed the nitty-gritty, the mishaps, and the contentions in favor of an idealized representation. As a sign of incommensurability, linguistic difference became merely a slight inconvenience to the satisfactory communication of broader political concerns. It was, however, the act of interpretation that rendered the seam of linguistic distinction invisible. In this ritual production, the discursive marginality of interpretation belied its very centrality.

92 Zhang Ning, *Feng shi lu*, 1:45a, 45b, 52b, 53a.

Conclusion and Postscript

In positing an alternative narrative in which to situate the invention of the Korean alphabet, I have taken the opportunity to discuss the politics of language in early Chosŏn Korea. The Chosŏn court's linguistic projects––institutional efforts at training interpreters, the publication of language manuals, and even the invention of the "vernacular" Korean alphabet––were at least partly in reaction to the sense of institutional cleavage in early Chosŏn perceptions of its relationship with the Ming. Even as professional interpreters became indispensable to Korean diplomacy with the Ming, they remained marginal figures, both as social actors and as historical figures. On the one hand, facilitating social interactions with Ming envoys and, on the other, subject to exclusion and social discrimination, interpreters in the early Chosŏn straddled several social spaces. The operating logics of each of these spaces did not cohere but rather undergirded a set of anxieties and contradictions in Chosŏn attitudes toward learning and knowledge, its own identity as a civilized state, and its relationship with Ming China. Language, as a site of symbolic contestation, was intermeshed with the practice of diplomacy, in both the quotidian, routine exercise of political negotiation and the orchestrated performance of elaborate ritual.

Nevertheless, the picture that I have tried to paint is schematic at best and only outlines some of the critical issues pertaining to the politics of language during this period. For one, the "vernacular alphabet" was not the only technology of language that figured into questions of translation, cultural exchange, and knowledge. I have not discussed a wide range of linguistic practices and inscriptional conventions.[93] Neither was diplomacy the only context in which language mattered.[94] Nor were these issues exclusive to the fourteenth–sixteenth centuries. In Korea, the question of linguistic divergence also came to be connected to the issue of Chosŏn cultural legitimacy after the rise of the Qing in the mid-seventeenth century, when "barbarian" Manchu conquerors replaced the Ming in China.[95] An intellectual shift among eighteenth-century Neo-Confucian thinkers sought to reposition Korea, displacing China as center and rejecting Manchu claims to imperial legitimacy. The fall of

93 *Idu*, *hyangch'al*, and *kugyŏl* are among the other systems. See Buzo 1980.

94 Gender also played a significant role in linguistic/inscriptional practice in Chosŏn society. See Haboush 2002.

95 Haboush 2005; Sun 2007. The Manchu invasions also present an interesting period of time for studying the role of interpreters in diplomacy, and parallels can be drawn between the seventeenth century and the Mongol period.

civilization to "barbarians" allowed the Korean ruling class to see itself as the last bastion, if not a new fountainhead, of classical civilization.[96]

Intellectual rejection of the Qing did not, however, translate into political isolation. Diplomacy remained a central concern. The idea that Chosŏn Korea was now Ming China's cultural and political heir may have actually exacerbated anxieties over proper linguistic knowledge. Yu Hyŏngwŏn 柳馨遠 (1622–1673), a reform-minded scholar in official retirement, for example, called for the revival of King Sejong's linguistic projects and proposed reforms to revitalize the study of spoken Chinese among civil officials. Even though Yu called for adopting "Chinese-style" pronunciations over what had become standard Korean ones, he encouraged the use of the Korean alphabet as a mediating device for comprehending classical texts.[97]

If we keep this context in mind, we can see that even the debate over the pronunciation of a single Chinese character carried new significance. Hong Taeyong 洪大容 (1731–1783), who traveled to Beijing with a Korean embassy, questioned a Chinese scholar named Deng Shimin over his rhyming of "poverty" (*pin* 貧) and "lute" (*qin* 琴) in their poetry exchange.[98] Remarking that these two characters belonged to two separate rhyme categories, he wrote:

> Is this perhaps a mistake? Our eastern country [i.e., Korea] has a different script for the vernacular. It has sound, but no meaning. There are fewer than two hundred characters, vowels and consonants are clearly differentiated, and all the myriad sounds can be expressed with them. Women and simple folk who do not know Chinese characters use this vernacular script and write in our local language. All letters and documents written in this script are readily comprehensible, often more so than those written in the "true script" [i.e., Chinese]. Though it lacks elegance, its clarity and usefulness are also a help in cultivating the people. We transcribe the sounds of all the characters in the classical writings in this script; therefore, there are no deviant pronunciations for any of the characters

96 Haboush 1999.

97 Palais 1996, 639–640.

98 Note that while in Mandarin, the final consonants of these two characters would have merged from *-n* and *-m* into *-n* by this period, Korean orthography and pronunciation preserved this distinction. Though the poem in question probably rhymed in eighteenth-century Chinese, as it does in modern Mandarin, it does not do so in Korean readings, where *pin* 貧 is read *pin*, and *qin* 琴 is read *kŭm*. Indeed, the two different final consonants place these two characters into different rhyme categories.

> contained in the classics throughout the country, and the pronunciations do not change over time.[99]

According to Hong, the use of the Korean alphabet allowed the Koreans to successfully preserve older pronunciations of Chinese characters, "correct" according to rhyme tables, whose rules the Chinese literatus had failed to observe. By claiming that the Korean alphabet could more faithfully represent classical models, Hong was in fact demonstrating to Deng the authority of his own learning. For him, the "vernacular script" became a technology of transmission that provided an authoritative source of knowledge that was not only independent of but superior to contemporary Chinese practice. In contrast, Pak Che-ga 朴齊家 (1750–1805), in his *Discussion of Northern Learning*, saw the Korean use of "vernacular explications" and the "barrier of language" to be why Koreans, despite their dedication to literary and classical learning, supposedly fell short of the Chinese. Noting that in China even "women and children who are illiterate" speak in literary flourishes because of the similarity of spoken Chinese to the literary language, Pak even proposed that the whole country of Korea should "discard their native speech" so that they may "finally be rid of the label 'barbarian.'"[100] Though contemporaries, Pak's and Hong's opinions on the relationships between Korean, spoken Chinese, and classical learning could not have been more different.

Through the late Chosŏn period, the Office of Interpreters continued to play important roles in diplomacy. It was responsible for training not only specialists in Chinese language but, up until the end of the dynasty, experts in Japanese, Manchu, and Mongolian. In the late nineteenth century, after Chosŏn Korea had to grapple with a new diplomatic order in East Asia, the Office of Interpreters was abolished in the Kabo reforms of 1894.[101] Subsequently, many of its former members came to play pivotal roles in late Chosŏn Korea's efforts at "modernization."[102] Connecting the Office of Interpreters to the "modernizing" reforms of the nineteenth century is less an attempt to somehow locate the seeds of the modern in earlier institutions than to reframe our understandings of these historical trajectories. The elevation of the vernacular script to official status in 1894 was not a logical or inevitable development from the

99 Hong Taeyong, "Letter to Wenxuan," in *Tamhŏnsŏoejip* 湛軒書外集, vol. 2, in *HMC* 248:127c; translated by Marion Eggert in Haboush 2009, 209.

100 Pak Che-ga and Kuksa p'yŏnch'an wiwŏnhoe, *Chŏngyujip: Pu Pukhagŭi* 貞蕤集 : 附北學議, 412.

101 Song Kijung 2001, 9–10.

102 Hwang 2004, 106–160.

script's earlier invention but was shaped by the particular political pressures, intellectual shifts, and changing cultural attitudes that characterized the last decades of the Chosŏn dynasty.[103] On the other hand, neither does the vernacular script owe its preferment simply to the convulsions of the nineteenth century. As this chapter has shown, the vernacular script already had important institutional and political uses and had become an integral medium for knowledge production and the exercise of diplomacy. Although an awareness of Korea's distinct language figured in the discourse of both King Sejong's court and nineteenth-century language reformers, revealing shared concerns about the commensurability of speech and text, the moment of the alphabet's promulgation in 1446 and its eventual apotheosis after 1894 were informed by rather different political and ideological motivations. And between them lay a complex negotiation between language, politics, and culture that I have attempted to reveal. Beyond the practice of diplomacy, language and script were central to politics and society in Chosŏn Korea, and these connections deserve closer study.

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