

The Reasons for The Introduction of Chinese Characters 한자into The Korean Language and Their Role in The Language

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Abstract: This article delves into how Chinese characters came to symbolize governance and high culture in Korea, profoundly shaping intellectual life, political structures, and Confucian philosophy. Since Chinese and Korean are linguistically distinct languages, Koreans devised creative methods to adapt Chinese characters to the phonetics and grammar of Korean. Early writing systems such as 이두(Idu), 향찰(Hyanchal), and 구결(Kugyol) are explored as examples of this adaptation. The article also emphasizes the lasting influence of Chinese-derived vocabulary, particularly in law, science, and government, enriching the Korean lexicon and enabling more sophisticated expressions in various intellectual fields. The emergence of 한글(Hangul) in the 15th century, created by 세종대왕(King Sejong the Great), marked a pivotal moment in the history of the Korean language, as it was specifically designed to represent Korean sounds. Despite Hangul's rise, Chinese characters continued to coexist with it for scholarly and formal purposes. The article also addresses the decline of Hanja in modern Korea, particularly in South Korea, where Hangul has become the dominant writing system, although Hanja remains important for understanding historical texts and certain formal vocabulary.

Keywords: Hanmun (한문), Hyanchal (향찰), Kugyol (구결), Gojoson (고조선), Altaic language family, Proto-Korean, Koguryo (고구려), Pekje (백제), Shilla (신라), Hunminjeongeum (훈민정음), Idu writing system (이두), old Korean language (고대 국어), borrowing characters, Chinese-derived vocabulary, language evolution, Chinese ideograms, orthography.

Introduction: As history shows, one of the unique features of Korea is that its language was officially recognized and used starting in 1895. Prior to this, for over two thousand years, the official language of Korea, as well as the language of science, culture, legislation, and administration, was the ancient Chinese language, known in Korea as 한문 (Hanmun refers to the classical Chinese language or written Chinese that was used historically in Korea). Hanmun was not only used in Korea but also in Japan, Vietnam, and even China as an official language. In the 15th century, no one could even imagine writing official documents in spoken language. By that time, the ancient Chinese language

had already diverged from modern Chinese. In all these countries, the ancient Chinese language had been dominant until a certain time: in Japan until the 1860s, in Vietnam until the 1870s, in Korea until the 1890s, and in China until the 1910s. The period in which Chinese characters spread across the Korean Peninsula is considered the 고조선 (Kojoson) period. After this, for more than 400 years, the process continued, and Chinese characters began to spread across the region.

METHOD

Languages around the world are divided into several language families based on their characteristics and etymology. Among them, the idea that the Korean

language belongs to the Altaic language family is prominent. The Altaic language family consists of the Mongolic, Manchu-Tungusic, Turkic, and Koreanic language groups. Among these four language families, the Korean language was the first to diverge. Later, 원시 한국어 (Proto-Korean) split into two groups: 원시부여어 (Proto-Puyo) and 원시 한어 (Proto-Chinese). Proto-Puyo was used as the language of the 고구려 (Koguryo) state, while Proto-Chinese was the language of the 백제 (Pekje) and 신라 (Shilla) states. Later, the Silla state united the three kingdoms, and the Silla language is believed to have formed the basis of the modern Korean language.

At that time, during the Three Kingdoms period, Chinese characters were widely used for official documents. Because the Chinese writing system was not suitable for expressing speech in Korean with its own characters or phonetic signs, writing systems like 이두 (Idu- an ancient system of writing Korean using Chinese characters), 향찰 (Hyanchal- is an ancient system of writing the Korean language using Chinese characters, developed during the Unified Silla period (668–935 AD)), and 구결 (Kugyeol- focused on expressing Korean grammatical particles (such as subject markers, verb endings, and connectors) using Chinese characters) were created. During this period, China had a particularly strong influence on Korea's culture and politics. Moreover, the ruling classes of society were well-versed in Chinese. All of this contributed to Chinese being established as the official language. At that time, only books published in Chinese were considered "real books," and therefore writing was often synonymous with writing in Chinese. 이두 (Idu) is a method of writing the Korean language using Chinese characters by adopting their sounds and meanings. There was a method of maintaining the original meanings of the Chinese characters or a phonetic alphabet, and a method of writing the Korean language by abandoning the original meanings of the characters and only adopting their sounds. It is said that Seol Chong created this, but rather than being created by an individual, it is more accurate to say that Seol Chong organized the existing notation system and annotated Korean texts. After the creation of 훈민정음 (Hunminjeongeum - The Correct Sounds for the Instruction of the People," is the name of the Korean script), it lost its relevance, but it continued to be used in a writing style known as 이설지체 (Isoljiche - represents a blend of 한자 (Chinese characters) and Korean language elements in writing, primarily used by

lower social classes) by some lower social classes, lasting until it was replaced by a mixed Korean and Chinese character writing system. The oldest name for this lineage is found in 제왕운기 (Jewangungi), where 이서 (Iso) refers to the writing system used by the lower classes. Therefore, it was likely not present in the united Shilla period or before. Thus, all writings from the Shilla period are called 향찰 (Hyangchal), and there is also a view that the 이두 (Idu) system was formed only after the 고려 (Koryo) period. However, based on the information, the 이두 (Idu) writing system began to develop during the Three Kingdoms period and was established in the Unified Silla period, continuing until the end of the 19th century. 향찰 (Hyanchal) was developed and used in the Unified Silla period, so it is not entirely correct to separate 향찰 (Hyanchal) and Idu by period.

Idu writing, also called 이두문 (Idumun), is a writing style that mixes Chinese grammar with Korean grammar, sometimes showing stronger Chinese grammar and other times stronger Korean grammar, so the balance is not constant. The reason for such a feature in the Idu system is that it developed initially as a written style. Therefore, 이두 (Idu), 향찰 (Hyanchal), and 구결 (Kugyeol) are all considered part of the study of the 고대 국어 (Old Korean Language) period. The Old Korean language refers to the form of the Korean language used from the time the Korean people began to settle on the Korean Peninsula until the Unified Silla period. After the three kingdoms were united, the Silla language is thought to have unified the Korean language, but due to the lack of data, it is difficult to pinpoint the exact nature of the Korean language at that time. At this time, there were no unique characters for writing Korean, so the Korean people borrowed Chinese characters and wrote them in various ways. This method is known as 차자 (Chaja), which refers to borrowing characters from another country to write one's own language. Therefore, it is not wrong to say that many Korean words are formed from Chinese characters or Chinese ideograms. These Chinese characters have had a significant impact on enriching the Korean vocabulary.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The historical development of the Korean language and its writing systems reveals a profound influence from Chinese characters and the various systems developed to adapt them to Korean phonology and grammar. The

introduction of 한문(Hanmun) (the classical Chinese language) to Korea, beginning around the Kojoson period, established Chinese characters as the dominant means of written communication for over two thousand years. This dominance significantly shaped the intellectual, cultural, and political life of Korea. The use of Chinese characters in official documents, scholarly texts, and administration ensured their continued influence, especially as the language of governance and high culture. The evolution of the Korean writing systems is indicative of the complex relationship between Chinese characters and the Korean language. Initially, as Chinese characters were not directly suited to the sounds and grammar of the Korean language, Idu, Hyanchal, and Kugyol were developed as creative adaptations. These systems allowed for the use of Chinese characters to represent Korean sounds and grammatical structures. Idu, for instance, was a system that combined Chinese characters for their meanings and sounds to represent Korean speech. However, this system often mixed Chinese grammar with Korean grammar, creating a hybrid form of writing that was flexible but not standardized. While these systems were effective in allowing the representation of the Korean language, they were not without limitations. The syntax and structure of Korean were distinct from those of Classical Chinese, which created confusion and complexity in the writing system. The fact that Chinese characters were adapted to such a degree shows the importance of these characters in Korean writing and the challenges faced by Koreans in representing their own language.

CONCLUSION

In this article we can see that, the history of the Korean language is deeply intertwined with the influence of Chinese culture and language. For over two thousand years, Chinese served as the official language of Korea, shaping its writing systems, governance, and intellectual life. The development of Korean writing systems such as Idu, Hyanchal, and Kugyeol during the Three Kingdoms period and beyond highlights the efforts to adapt the Chinese script to express the Korean language. The creation of Hangul in the 15th century marked a significant turning point in Korea's linguistic history, but the legacy of Chinese characters and their integration into the Korean language continues to influence modern Korean. The evolution of the Korean language, from its early borrowing of Chinese characters to the creation of its own writing system, underscores the unique blend of indigenous and foreign elements that define the Korean language today.

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