



The History of Han-gül

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Before there was writing, human beings used signs to mark significant locations and as aids to counting and memory; examples include rocks used to mark graves and caches, tally sticks and strings, and messenger sticks composed of marks meaningful only to the carrier. These signs, while conceptual precursors of writing, were not written language as understood today, in that they did not convey linguistic information comprehensible to any person familiar with the system. Over time, these signs and symbols came to be represented by drawings rather than objects; this type of graphical representation was not yet writing, but it was closer to writing than use of objects that preceded it, and was often inscribed on portable media. As these graphical symbols became more widespread, they began to become more conventionalized and simplified, leading to agreed-upon meanings for specific graphical units: the beginning of writing. Many cultures have created written language in this fashion, which continue to evolve over time, eventually reaching the final stage in which a phonetic link is forged between a pictorial icon and a linguistic unit. The ultimate outcome of such phonetic linking is an alphabetic writing system; such systems, once created, tend to spread to nearby countries and be adapted for the language of the area. In the vast majority of cases, this process is a slow evolution over centuries.

Before the creation of Han-gŭl, the Korean people used other writing systems, most notably Chinese ideograms, first adopted for Korean usage as early as the second century A.D. Written Chinese of the time used ideograms, a system in which individual symbols are created for each word. This individualization meant that written Chinese could not be adapted to other languages in the same way that alphabetic systems were, with the result that Koreans who wished to be literate had to learn Chinese. Given the time commitment involved, and the prestige associated with learning Chinese, this resulted in only the higher classes having the time and leisure in which to learn Chinese, leaving the majority of the population without access to literacy. In an attempt to modify Chinese ideograms to better suit the Korean language, some ideograms were arbitrarily assigned Korean meanings based on

sound, in an attempt to create phonetic linking. When this proved ineffective, Korean meanings were assigned to Chinese ideograms based on the original meaning of the ideogram, regardless of the spoken word the ideogram currently referred to; this Korean invention, while ineffective on the scale attempted, was later replicated and significantly expanded by the Japanese. While an improvement, this attempt was also insufficient, because it did not allow for the fundamental grammatical differences between Chinese and Korean. During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries A.D., Ido attempted to account for this difficulty by writing Chinese characters in Korean grammatical order; ultimately, however, this attempt also proved ineffective, again due to fundamental structural differences between the two languages. The use of Chinese ideograms was declared “too complicated, imperfect, and inconvenient a system for Koreans to use freely in expressing their own ideas and thinking, because too many Chinese characters are involved in it” (Coulmas 118), a pronouncement credited to King Sejong of the Yi dynasty.

King Sejong, who reigned from 1418-1450, did more than proclaim the use of Chinese to record Korean thoughts inappropriate; he went on to commission the creation of a uniquely Korean writing system. While most writing systems are the work of slow evolution over centuries of time, King Sejong commissioned the creation of one of the few instances – some say the only instance – of an alphabet created deliberately and independently of this process. To create this system, King Sejong first reestablished the Royal Academy, called the Jade Hall (Chip-hyon-jon), charging the scholars assigned to the Jade Hall to conduct a variety of studies to improve the lives of the Korean people. The original ten scholars, later expanded to twenty, conducted research into a wide variety of topics in addition to the creation of the Korean alphabet; monographs of their research were later produced in the new alphabet. In 1443, the new created system, called Hun-min-chong-un, “the correct pronunciation of letters for the instruction of the people”, was used to translate a wide variety of texts into written Korean, to test the efficacy of the system before it was introduced for general usage. Once Han-gŭl was

presented to the Korean people, King Sejong began using it to distribute various monographs that he had ordered written, on subjects ranging from medicine to farming to atlases. Over time, texts on various subjects, including Confucianism and Buddhism, were published in the new script.

Unlike Chinese, which required years of study to learn, the new alphabet could be learned in a morning; the scholars who created it paid careful attention to the sounds in the Korean language, and studied phonetics with Huang Tsan, an exiled Chinese linguist. The completed alphabet contained seventeen consonants and eleven vowels, which were reduced over time to fourteen consonants and ten vowels of modern Han-gŭl (“Great Letters” or simply “Korean writing”). In contrast to evolved alphabets, in which characters resulted from simplifications of pictograms, the symbols of the newly-created Hun-min-chong-un were designed with phonetics in mind, to the extent that the shape of the consonants represented the shape of the mouth when various sounds were produced. Not all sounds are represented by individual letters; sounds which were determined to be variations on basic sounds (e.g. aspirated consonants were considered variations of non-aspirated consonants) were indicated by additional markings. This method was so precise that one author stated that “as a result of the depth of its underlying phonological analysis, Han-gŭl has been called the ‘most rational of all writing systems’” (Coulmas 120); the alphabetic symbols are stacked in units representing syllables (morphemes) rather than sounds (phonemes), in square frames resembling Chinese characters, each of which contains vowel and consonant elements.

Despite its ease of use, Han-gŭl, called ōn-mun (“vulgar script”) by the aristocracy, did not gain widespread acceptance among the Korean people. The ability to speak and write Chinese was considered a mark of aristocracy, and therefore

“Han’gul soon acquired class associations and was relegated pretty much to the use of ignorant persons and women. A compromise was eventually reached in which Chinese characters were used in association with Han’gul to write the Korean language. This has been the practice ever since, and the Chinese characters have never lost their prestige” (Woo-keun 294).

To help provide a philosophical justification for those who were opposed to Han-gŭl, elements of Han-gŭl were aligned with metaphysical categories of Chinese philosophy, which often occurred in groups of five. For examples, there are five primary vowels; it was believed that all other vowels could be represented by these five.

Along with Han-gŭl, King Sejong also ordered the development of a notation system for Korean and Chinese music, and directed his subject, Bak Yeon, to improve Korean instruments and write music for Korean musicians. While Han-gŭl is an amazing legacy of King Sejong's reign, it should also be noted that he ordered the development of other advances to improve the lives of the Korean people, including, but not limited to, sun dials, water clocks, orreries of the solar system, celestial globes, astronomical maps, and pluviometers (rain gauges). He also ordered the compilation and printing of several medical books of both Chinese and Korean origin, including one on the use of local materials for medicinal purposes. While the scholars of the Jade Hall were researching these and other inventions, King Sejong also reinforced the northern border by building six new fortresses, improved trade with Japan, and created and added four counties to Korea's northern border as a defense against the Jurchen invaders.

Unfortunately, King Sejong's health declined toward the end of his reign, especially after the death of his queen, and he abdicated his throne to his son, King Munjong, in 1450; his two-year reign was followed by another eight kings over the next century, including King Yonsan'gun, who ended many of the reforms begun by King Sejong. One of the reforms that fell to King Yonsan'gun was the use of Han-gŭl; upon receipt of a letter critical of his reign written in Han-gŭl, King Yonsan-gun "banned the use of Han-gŭl and ordered the destruction of all documents written in it" (Woo-keun 265). This action, along with the prestige associated with anything Chinese, including the ability to speak, read, and write Chinese, contributed to Han-gŭl remaining the province of the lower classes among the Korean people for the next several centuries.

Late in the seventeenth century and into the eighteenth century, interest in Han-gŭl among Korean scholars experienced a resurgence, spurred in large part by two scholarly studies produced on Han-gŭl, one by Sin Kyong-jun on the proper use of Han-gŭl in representing sounds, and one by Yu Hui, *Mulmyong-go* (“On the Names of Things”), a book on Korean vocabulary produced in Han-gŭl. Following the production of these two works, other scholars began to use Han-gŭl instead of Chinese as well, producing encyclopedias, historical studies, and scientific observations. Over time, the preference for Han-gŭl over Chinese spread to the yangban class of civil and military officials for fiction, first using Chinese novels as a template, and then expanding to social satire and newspapers. The *Hwangsong News*, begun in 1898, was originally published in a mixture of Chinese and Han-gŭl; during the same year, the *Imperial News* was first published entirely in Han-gŭl. Christian missionaries also translated the Bible into Han-gŭl in 1882, followed by works of Western fiction, mostly juvenile fiction such as Aesop’s Fables, Robinson Crusoe, and Gulliver’s Travels, which influenced Korean literature. Unfortunately, this trend toward the use of Han-gŭl was disrupted from outside.

In 1905, Japanese invaders began suppressing newspapers as a means of limiting freedom of speech for the subject Korean peoples; this was part of a multi-pronged attempt by the Japanese to suppress Korean culture as a means of reducing or even preventing rebellion against Japanese rule. The Japanese also took over all Korean public schools, and required private school to followed a specific curriculum, geared toward further suppressing Korean culture as well as Korean history and national pride; toward this end, more than ninety percent of Korean children were denied the opportunity to attend school at all, leaving them illiterate. In addition, in 1910 the Japanese also confiscated and burned between 200,000 and 300,000 books on Korean history, geography, and biographies of national heroes.

Despite the restrictions placed on the Korean people by the occupying Japanese, the Korean Language Society was established in 1921 to study the Korean language for the benefit of the next

generations. Periodicals published daily and weekly, Dong-A Ilbo and Chosun Ilbo, cooperated fully with the Korean Language Society; the latter created Han-gŭl Day, which it celebrated by publishing works by scholars studying the Korean language. In 1932, a journal devoted to the study of Han-gŭl was established, and provided financial assistance to scholars studying Han-gŭl. The Korean Language Society undertook the publication of a Korean dictionary in 1929, and in 1933 standardized Korean spelling and the transcription of words from other languages, which were adopted and publicized by Dong-A Ilbo and Chosun Ilbo in the same year. As the decade progressed, the Japanese restricted Korean publications more and more, until the last two Korean literary publications were suppressed in 1941. Korean resistance notwithstanding, or more likely because of it, Japanese suppression of Korean culture and history continued to intensify until the Japanese surrendered in 1945, at the end of World War II.

Shortly after the end of World War II, when the Korean War began, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea completely abolished the use of Chinese characters in published works. South Koreans continue to use such characters, called Hanzi, for Chinese loan-words; their use is considered a mark of worldliness, as is the use of Latin- and Greek-based loan words. Given the current availability of Han-gŭl, however, lack of knowledge of Chinese characters is no longer a bar to literacy, and the use of Han-gŭl is no longer limited to lower class and undereducated.

In conclusion, it can be seen that Han-gŭl holds an unusual place within the history of writing. As a created rather than evolved script, it is a rarity; as a scientifically-devised, phonetically accurate alphabet, it is unique; indeed, "[s]ome scholars consider it as the most perfect phonetic system 'that has been called upon to stand the test of time and of actual use'" (Diringer 443-4). Over time, the use of Han-gŭl has evolved from the province of the poor and undereducated to the primary script used by an entire people, a different evolution than that followed by most alphabets. It is truly unique among the scripts of the planet.

Appendix: Phonetic qualities of Han-gŭl

Han-gŭl was created artificially rather than evolving over time. Indeed, “some scholars consider it as the most perfect phonetic system ‘that has been called upon to stand the test of time and of actual use’”. This led to an alphabet that is extremely easy to learn and apply, with letters designed using phonetic principles. Han-gŭl characters were designed to be combined into syllables and written in blocks combining consonants and vowels, making capitalization impossible. Han-gŭl can be written left-to-right, top-to-bottom as seen in English, as well as top-to-bottom, right-to-left as seen in Chinese.

The original twenty-eight letters of the Han-gŭl script have been further simplified over time to twenty-four letters, consisting of fourteen basic consonants and ten basic vowels (Fig. 1). The shapes of basic consonant are based on the shape of the mouth and tongue when the sound is produced; for example, “the letter shi-ot (ㅅ) is the shape of the tongue touching the teeth and has the sound that is made by moving air past the teeth” (Mitchell, Breiting and Hayward 10). Sounds that cannot be represented by these twenty-four characters are indicated by the use of systematically- applied diacritical marks; for example, the basic consonants indicate non-aspirated consonants, while the aspirated version of the same consonant is indicated by a bar to the consonant symbol. Certain consonant sounds are indicated by a doubling of the consonant within the syllable; these sounds do not exist in English and can only be approximated using the Latin alphabet, generally by a doubled letter. Similarly, compound vowel sounds are formed by combining pairs of basic vowels to indicate the precise sound being written. This system allows for incredible specificity when writing sounds, but does cause problems for those attempting to transliterate Korean into scripts which lack this level of flexibility.

It is possible to write Han-gŭl in a strictly linear fashion, as is seen in alphabetic scripts such as English; however, the scholars who created the Han-gŭl script recognized the importance of the syllable as a basic unit, and Han-gŭl is designed to be written in stacked characters forming a rectangle

containing vowels and consonants (Fig. 2). The consonant is written first, and then the vowel or vowels are added based on their shape; vertical vowels, such as ㅣ , are written to the right of the consonant, while horizontal vowels, such as ㅡ , are written below the consonant. Compound vowels are written in syllable blocks by combining both of these rules. While some syllables contain only vowel sounds, writing a syllable block containing only vowels would be unaesthetic; therefore, such syllables are written with the consonant sign ㅇ (/j/), which is silent when it is in the initial position of a syllable.

Those interested in more in-depth information on the creation and pronunciation of Han-gŭl, especially in a martial arts context, are encouraged to refer to [A Martial Artist's Guide to Korean Terms, Translation, and Han-gŭl](#) (Mitchell, Breiting and Hayward), which was used extensively in creating this appendix.



Figure 1
Korean Alphabet Chart

<u>CONSONANTS</u>			<u>VOWELS</u>		
Sounds in the initial and final positions.			Romanization		
	INITIAL	FINAL			
ㄱ	G/K(1)	K	ㅏ	A	as in <u>F</u> ather
ㄴ	N	N	ㅑ	AE	<u>P</u> ay
ㄷ	D	T	ㅓ	YA	<u>Y</u> acht
ㄹ	R/L(2)	L	ㅕ	YAE	<u>Y</u> ea!
ㅁ	M	M	ㅗ	EO	<u>Y</u> oung
ㅂ	B	P(3)	ㅛ	E	<u>S</u> et
ㅅ	S	T	ㅜ	YEO	<u>Y</u> oung
ㅇ	silent(4)	NG	ㅠ	YE	<u>Y</u> et
ㅈ	J	T	ㅡ	O	<u>Y</u> o Yo
ㅊ	CH	T	ㅜㅏ	WA	<u>W</u> ater
ㅋ	K	K	ㅜㅑ	WAE	<u>W</u> aiter
ㅌ	T	T	ㅜㅓ	OI	<u>W</u> ait
ㅍ	P	P	ㅜㅕ	YO	<u>Y</u> O YO
ㅎ	H	T	ㅜㅗ	U	<u>C</u> ool
ㄱㄱ	GG(5)	K	ㅜㅛ	WEO	<u>W</u> on
ㄷㄷ	DD	T	ㅜㅜ	WE	<u>W</u> et
ㅂㅂ	BB	PP	ㅜㅛ	UI	<u>W</u> e
ㅅㅅ	SS	T	ㅜㅕ	YU	<u>Y</u> ou
ㅈㅈ	JJ	T	ㅡ	U	<u>G</u> ood
			ㅣ	UI	<u>U</u>
			ㅣ	I(6)	<u>S</u> heep

1. Sounds like a cross between a G and a K.
2. Sounds like a cross between an R and an L.
3. When this character (in the final position) is directly followed by a "ㄴ" in the next syllable it's sound changes to an M.
4. Because every syllable must start with a consonant the silent "ㅇ" is sometimes used. In syllables that begin with this consonant the first sound pronounced is the vowel.
5. All the double consonants have a harder sound than their single counterparts and are pronounced with no expulsion of air.
6. Except when preceded by an "ㅅ" in which case it sounds like I as in it.

(Korean-Arts)

Figure 2
Han-gül consonant-vowel combinations

Vowels	ㅏ	ㅑ	ㅓ	ㅕ	ㅗ	ㅛ	ㅜ	ㅠ	ㅡ	ㅣ
Consonants	[a]	[ya]	[ɔ]	[yɔ]	[o]	[yo]	[u]	[yu]	[ɯ]	[i]
ㄱ [k, g]	가	야	거	겨	고	교	구	규	크	기
ㄴ [n]	나	냐	너	녀	노	뇨	누	뉴	느	니
ㄷ [t, d]	다	댜	더	더	도	됴	두	듀	드	디
ㄹ [r, l]	라	랴	러	려	로	료	루	류	르	리
ㅁ [m]	마	먜	머	며	모	묘	무	뮤	므	미
ㅂ [p, b]	바	뵜	버	벼	보	뵤	부	뷰	브	비
ㅅ [s, sh]	사	샤	서	셔	소	쇼	수	슈	스	시
ㅇ [ɰ]	아	야	어	여	오	요	우	유	으	이
ㅈ [ch, j]	자	쟜	저	져	조	죠	주	쥬	즈	지
ㅊ [ch']	차	챜	쳐	쳐	초	쵸	추	쥬	츠	치
ㅋ [k']	카	카	케	켜	코	코	쿠	쿠	크	키
ㅌ [t']	타	타	터	터	토	토	투	투	트	티
ㅍ [p']	파	파	퍼	퍼	포	포	푸	푸	프	피
ㅎ [h]	하	하	허	허	호	호	후	후	흐	히

(Koreainfo)



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