

Missionary contributions toward the revaluation of Hangeul in late nineteenth-century Korea

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Abstract

Soon after their arrival to Korea, Christian missionaries were confronted by decisions regarding how they would present written materials to the Korean people. While many Koreans used their indigenous script (Hangeul) for everyday purposes, higher status literacy materials were expected to be presented using Chinese characters (Hanja), a system unfamiliar to most but considered more prestigious by all. In deciding to publish the majority of their materials in the more accessible but lower-status script, the missionaries contributed to a revaluation of Hangeul as a fully legitimate means of written communication in a broader range of functional domains.

1. Introduction

Among the people of Korea, there are few cultural innovations as emblematic as the writing system, Hangeul (in its own script, 한글). Developed and promulgated in the 1440s by King Sejong the Great (reigned 1418–1450), Hangeul is arguably unique in its iconic representation of Korean speech gestures (cf. Ledyard 1997), but inarguably unique to the Korean people: it is the chief means of written communication among 67 million Korean speakers worldwide, 98% of whom are literate in Korean (Gordon 2005: 449). With its shapes grounded in both articulatory phonetics and Confucian cosmology (Ahn 1997; Shin et al. 1990; *inter alia*), Hangeul is infused by an ethos of practical wisdom and entrenched in the Korean cultural psyche. It is an inexorable symbol of Koreanness.

As has been documented by many scholars, however, use and acceptance of Hangeul was neither immediate nor valued by Koreans. In fact, the system of Chinese characters (Hanja) that were to be supplemented by Hangeul persisted as a vital part of the country's literacy praxis for 450 years. Official rendering of Korean in its native script, particularly in

government records, did not begin until 1894, as part of broader reforms precipitated by Korea's diplomatic and commercial opening to the West. It was also around this time that Korea experienced concerted efforts by Christian missionaries to evangelize, a process in which matters of literacy inevitably came to the fore, given the centrality of scripture to the endeavor.

Several authors have remarked upon the role of Hangeul as symbolizing Korea's nascent cultural and political independence near the turn of the twentieth century. Still others have noted the role played by missionaries in recognizing the untapped potential of Hangeul as a vehicle for promoting universal communication and education in Korea. As Kang (1997: 31) writes, "When Christian missionaries arrived in Korea, they began to use Hangeul for all their printed matter. . . . Practically all Korean Christian literature, hymnals, and Bible translations continue to be published in Hangeul." While Kang's assessment rings true, it fails to capture the complexity of the situation confronting Western missionaries, and the degree to which they deliberated upon the substance and implications of script choice.

To understand how Westerners reacted and responded to the challenges presented by competing writing systems (indigenous Hangeul and Chinese Hanja), we will examine primary source material produced by foreigners, including travelogues, reports, letters, and diaries. As this ethnological account of work written between 1885 and 1919 reveals, it was difficult for the newcomers to negotiate the relationship between their beliefs regarding literacy and learnedness and those of Koreans: although Hangeul was easy to learn and use, it lacked the prestige associated with Hanja, thereby creating a sociolinguistic dilemma. While the missionaries were ostensibly motivated to embrace Hangeul for linguistic reasons, they were also driven (in part) by a more general desire to turn Korea away from Confucian China and toward the Christian West. The result was a series of thoughtful, practical, and socially responsive solutions to a complex and sociopolitically volatile matter. In the end, Western missionaries played an important role in accomplishing what King Sejong was unable to realize: the use of Hangeul as an accepted, socially legitimate means of orthographic representation in a broader range of functional domains (http://www.korean.go.kr/eng_hangeul/supply/001.html; accessed 31 December 2006).

2. Hangeul: a brief history

Promulgated by royal decree in 1446, Hangeul was envisioned as a more widely accessible alternative to the ways in which Korean was written

since the sixth century: by adapting Chinese characters, Hanja. By all accounts, however, the use of Hanja was inappropriate to the graphic representation of Korean. Under this traditional system, for example, a Chinese character might be read for its meaning, its sound (in either Chinese or Korean), or as a loanword. Because writers were not necessarily consistent in how they chose to map their intent onto Hanja, interpreting these texts proved difficult.¹

In the opening of *Hunminjeongeum* ‘Correct Sounds to Teach the People’, King Sejong acknowledges a need for a less cumbersome strategy for written communication:

The language of this country is different from that of China, so that it is impossible (for us Koreans) to communicate by means of Chinese characters. Therefore, among the unlearned people, there have been many who, having something to put into words, have in the end been unable to express themselves. Feeling sorry for this, I have newly made twenty-eight letters only because I wish them to be easy for everyone to learn and convenient for use in daily life. (translation by Shin et al. 1990: 1)

Thus was introduced the Korean system of letter shapes and their arrangement into syllable blocks, yielding King Sejong’s innovative solution for bringing literacy to the mid-fifteenth-century Korean masses.

As has been well documented, however, the widespread use of Hangeul did not follow. Attempts to curtail the spread of Hangeul — or even revoke it altogether — began immediately after its official promulgation. As Ledyard (1988: 380–382) writes:

Whether the script was ever diffused among the common people to any meaningful extent during the 15th century is doubtful . . . in spite of the great efforts of Sejong and [his successor] Sejo to propagate the new alphabet, its influence in this early period did not go significantly beyond the walls of the palace and the large Buddhist community among the royal family.

Factions opposed to Sejong’s desire to promulgate this new means of written expression saw Hangeul as a threat to the kingdom’s rigid Confucian social order, which embodied the organizing concept of *sadae* (事大) ‘serving the greater’. Some feared that Hangeul “would lead to the collapse of public order and the overturning of their system of values” (Lee 1997: 26). Despite the fact that Hanja’s basic premise of “character = syllable = morpheme” was utterly ill-suited to the linguistic structure of Korean (an agglutinating language with polysyllabic words and layers of affixation), Hangeul opponents argued that the only proper way to write required the use of Hanja. Their arguments were not based on linguistic

principles, but rather, social conservatism. Indeed, the ability to read and write Chinese characters served as a powerful linguistic shibboleth throughout much of Korea's history: only those willing, able, and worthy enough to study the intricate forms were considered "learned," and thereby fit to assume the highest positions in society.

Given Hangeul's simplicity of learning and use, along with its having been tailor-made to meet the structural requirements of Korean, it might strike one as odd that the new system would have not been immediately embraced. The problem lay in Hangeul's lack of social prestige: Hangeul was not Hanja. Under the *sadae* system, Korea's vassalage to imperial China extended beyond the political realm and into the cultural domain, thereby bestowing upon Hanja a status that was not accorded to King Sejong's orthographic innovation. As Kim-Renaud (2004: 168) writes, Hangeul "gained little acceptance by the elite Literati and was used mainly by women and Buddhist monks until the end of the 19th century, and it was widely dismissed as *Enmun* (vernacular writing)." The script was, in fact, often pejoratively referred to as *amkhul* 'female writing' (2004: 170), an indication of its low status among those in power.

As Hangeul was employed by low-prestige users in low-prestige domains, it never successfully competed with Hanja in certain echelons of society, thereby laying the groundwork for the establishment of a digraphic community of practice: Hangeul served as the vernacular, or low ("L"), script and Hanja (or a mix of Hanja and Hangeul) functioned as the high ("H") script (Kim-Renaud 2004). This domain-driven use of Hangeul and Hanja (including mixed script uses) would persist into the late nineteenth century, a situation that the first long-term Western visitors to Korea would encounter, puzzle over, and ultimately have to reckon with.

3. Western encounters with the Korean language

Before turning to a more detailed discussion of how Westerners viewed Korea's writing systems, let us briefly consider the broader linguistic context of late nineteenth-century East–West contact. As discussed in an overview of Western attitudes expressed in published sources (Silva 2002), missionaries and diplomats wrote about a variety of linguistic "curiosities" that they encountered in Korea. Alas, many were unable to explain adequately what they observed. For example, several authors claim that Koreans used two languages. Writing in 1892, missionary George Gilmore wrote (1892: 55), "Korea is bilingual," adding the following hedge: "Not that two languages are spoken, but that two are used." A

more insightful characterization of this apparent bilingualism is presented by Horace Underwood (1890):

The idea that there are two languages in Korea is strengthened by the fact that foreigners, who are perhaps tolerably well acquainted with words purely Korean, have, when they heard conversations carried on between officials and scholars, been unable to understand what was said. They have been on their way to the houses of the officials and passing through the streets and hearing the merchants, the middle classes, and the coolies, talking among themselves, have been able to understand, while when they came into the presence of the officials, they have been unable to comprehend the meaning of statements and questions addressed directly to them. At once they have said “There are two languages” while the truth is that the officials have simply been using those Korean terms which have been derived from the Chinese. Chinese may be called the *Latin* of Korea. It is more polite and scholarly to used “*Latinized*” Korean; but among merchants, middle classes, and in common daily conversation this is not used: the learner does not hear it, hence the difficulty. (Underwood 1890: 4–5; italics in the original)

Here Underwood refers to the fact that the Korean lexicon contains vocabulary derived from both native and Chinese sources, a situation akin to that found in English, which presents lexical items derived from Anglo-Saxon sources (*cow, kingly, water, self*) alongside semantic equivalents from non-Germanic sources, such as French (*beef, royal*) and Greek (*hydro-, auto-*). Noteworthy in Underwood’s description is his mention of specific types of language users (“the merchants, the middle classes, and the coolies” versus “officials”), representative of distinct social classes and, one presumes, participants in distinct functionally defined speech networks — evidence of diglossia.

Another dichotomy upon which visitors remarked was the disparity between the effort required to master Korean grammar and the ease of learning Hangeul. The situation is summed up by Anabel Nisbet (1919: 58): “Korea has an alphabet . . . , which is extremely simple and very easily learned. . . . But for a foreigner to learn to speak the Korean language is another thing.” Underwood (1908) contributes to the discussion, writing:

The question will naturally be asked, is the language easy of acquisition? For an Occidental, we must reply in the negative. While, as has been noted, the alphabet can be mastered almost at a sitting, the train of Korean thought and method of expression are so diametrically opposed to that of the Westerner that it is no easy matter to put oneself where one can think as the native does in Korean [...].

Indeed, many Westerners made it a point to report to their constituents back home that the Korean indigenous writing system was easy to learn — perhaps, if anything, to compensate for the difficulties associated with learning the language *per se*. But the matter of reading and writing in Korea was not as simple as these Western writers suggest. (Underwood 1908: 71)

4. Western reactions to Korean digraphia

In assessing Western responses to the digraphia of late nineteenth-century Korea, one encounters two themes. First, the indigenous script, Hangeul, was praised for its ease of use but lamented for its lack of status. Second, the “borrowed” script, Hanja, was deemed too cumbersome (by comparison), but acknowledged as the dominant system in terms of its social value. As Underwood (1890) once again insightfully explains:

In the writing of Korean, two forms of characters are used, the native Ernmun [Hangeul] and the Chinese. In all official correspondence, philosophical books, and in fact in nearly all books of real value, the Chinese character is used, the native Ernmun being relegated to a few trashy love stories and fairy tales. This difference in the written language, has led to the assertion that there are two languages in Korea, and we sometimes hear foreigners talk of “speaking in the Ernmun.” There are not two languages and this expression is wrong, for the “Ernmun” is simply a system of writing, and it would be as sensible to talk of “speaking in Munson’s system of short hand.” (Underwood 1890: 4)

What, then, did other Westerners make of these two systems, “the native Ernmun and the Chinese”?

4.1. *Positive evaluations of Hangeul*

Given the cultural uniqueness of Hangeul, it garners a good deal of attention from Western visitors to Korea. The majority of their reactions explicitly reference the writing system’s ease of acquisition and use by Koreans and foreigners alike: Hangeul was variously described as “extremely simple,” “easily learned,” “perfect,” and “very ingenious” (Silva 2002). W. R. Carles (1894: 309) describes it thus: “The language is alphabetical, and contains eleven vowels and fourteen consonants. These being purely phonetic, to read and write Corean are considered feats so easy as not to require teaching.”

Despite the praise lavished upon Hangeul, its lack of standing was clear to Westerners. The irony lay in the fact that Hangeul's "cost of ease was its social debasement" (Silva 2002: 276), particularly given its primary community of users: women, children, and "the uneducated masses" (Scott 1893: xvi). Englishman A. Henry Savage-Landor (1895: 208) notes how "The Korean alphabet is rather despised by the male 'blue stockings' of Cho-sen, and is considered as fit only for poor people, children and women; in short, those whose brains are unable to undergo the strain of mastering . . . the meaning of the many thousands of Chinese characters." Carles (1894) spells out the correlation between simplicity and low status:

Owing to the great ease with which Koreans can learn to read and write their own language, as a written language, it is regarded with great contempt, and its use is in great measure confined to women and uneducated men. In official documents it is seldom employed except in proclamations to the people . . . The literature is exceedingly small, but it is worth noting that circulating libraries on an exceedingly petty scale do exist in the capital. (Carles 1894: 311)

Yet even among the "uneducated masses," it would appear that literacy in Hangeul was limited. Consider the account of a visit to the Korean countryside by Canadian Malcolm Fenwick (1911: 21): "There was no organized work in the village; so I got a class of boys together, and, as one of my hostesses, Mrs. Ann, was the only woman in the village who could read, I was proud when she promised to teach the women and girls." In a letter dated 6 December 1892, Samuel Moore recounts the following: "Our cook is the only one of the three [servants] who can read. He cannot read Chinese but does fairly well with the Enmun or lang. of the common people. We have books enough to go round & all look on while he reads aloud every morning at prayers." Such descriptions reveal that literacy even in Hangeul was far from universal. As such, evangelization efforts would need to be preceded by a campaign to teach reading and writing.

But would investing in the non-prestige writing system be worthwhile? The answer was "yes." Even though native Hangeul documents were only few in number and limited to "a comparatively few cheap, trashy, and miserably printed novelettes and books of songs" (Underwood 1908: 71–72), they had readers, nonetheless. In light of such associations between Hangeul and low-status genres, however, the missionaries had another obstacle to overcome: the cultural disconnect that would come with promoting the value of scriptural texts and religious tracts written in a script that was deemed "common" or "vulgar."

4.2. *Cultural reverence for Hanja*

For all of the admiration they accorded to Hangeul for its simplicity and scientific nature, the missionaries leveled a comparable degree of contempt toward Chinese characters. They likewise lamented the degree to which the Chinese forms were valued over the indigenous system, giving further credence to the overwhelming power of *sadae* and the accompanying centuries-long cultural adherence to the principle of *mohwa* ‘adulate China’ (Kim-Renaud 2004). For the most part, any mention of Korean digraphia (a term *not* invoked by any missionary writers) is couched in terms of incredulity or frustration. French missionary Monsigneur Ridel (as quoted in Piacentini 1890) remarks:

One asks oneself how a nation which possesses such great advantages concerning the characters used for writing [i.e., Hangeul] would impose upon itself, by its own will, the study of Chinese hieroglyphics, and consider with such a profound disdain, its [own] national language. . . . The lettered men of the country do not like [Hangeul] and pretend not to know how to read books in Korean characters. They say that they find in them no taste, and that they leave them to children [. . .]. (Piacentini 1890: 322) (translation from French original by DJS)

Anglican bishop Mark Trollope (1915: 18) expresses his frustration with Hanja in a more straightforward tone: “. . . [their] usefulness in almost every walk of life is only equaled by their difficulty and inconvenience.”

Despite what foreigners might have thought about the Koreans’ apparent “disdain” for the indigenous script, the earliest arrivals among them had no choice but to work either with (or around) Chinese, as it was the chief medium through which they were first able to evangelize using literature. Save for limited copies of Hangeul-only New Testament portions prepared by Scottish missionary John Ross in the late 1870s, there were no Korean-based written materials with which to advance the mission.² William Baird, in a 2 June 1891 letter to his brother, explains the problem, as well as the less-than-optimal fix:

We have no Bible yet in Korean, but every educated Korean understands Chinese and so we use the Chinese Scriptures. It is very peculiar. They see the Chinese character and understand it but they do not pronounce it as a Chinaman would. They pronounce the Korean word for the [. . .] same thing. As a result every one hearing, whether educated or not, can understand what is read, though perhaps they could not read it themselves. Is not this peculiarity of the nation one of God’s ways of introducing truth into this land?

Fenwick (1911: 24) provides a similar account of his evangelization praxis:

Table 1. *The accessibility–prestige matrix for Korean scripts*

		<i>Accessibility to the script</i>	
		Low	High
Prestige imparted by the script	High	Hanja	
	Low		Hangeul

My practice of the language, in Sorai, was to give the Coreans a copy of the Chinese Bible, while I took the English Bible myself. By noting the number of chapters, I was able to distinguish one book from another, and got my teacher to write in my English Bible in the Korean syllabery [*sic*], the name of each book. I next learned the words for chapter and verse. I had already learned the numerals. So, taking up an English–Chinese dictionary of the language, I found the word, for instance, for “atonement,” and asked the Coreans to turn to Leviticus 17:11 [...].

Again, several themes emerge: the primacy of Chinese in defining “literacy”; the central role of education in defining which Koreans could serve as intermediaries between the text and the people; and the potential stigma of using the indigenous script for mission work, a fact that discouraged many missionaries. As Fenwick (1911: 80) notes, “As no one is considered a scholar in Corea unless familiar with the Chinese language, I was glad to find that Mr. Son had a good education”

How might we understand the nature of this frustration? On the one hand, effective evangelization required a means of producing literature (especially scripture translations) that would be accessible to the majority of Koreans: Hangeul. On the other hand, Korea’s centuries-long cultural domination by China dictated that any literature worthy of serious consideration would (or “should”) be rendered in the high prestige script: Hanja. As the matrix in Table 1 indicates, the optimal circumstance — a script that was both highly accessible and (sufficiently) prestigious — did not exist.³

Given that success would come only by filling this empty cell, the missionaries were confronted with two options: either increase the accessibility of Hanja (e.g., through educational efforts, beginning with themselves) or increase the prestige of Hangeul (e.g., through the contemporary equivalent of a “public relations campaign”). In light of the difficulties inherent in learning thousands of Chinese characters, the choice was clear: despite its association with less prestigious users and unsavory literary genres, Hangeul had to be promoted as a credible medium for serious literature, including scripture.

5. The campaign to reevaluate Hangeul

As early as 1877, five years prior to the opening of Korea by virtue of the “Korea–U.S. treaty of commerce and amity in 1882” (Hong 1973: 161), John Ross (1877: 396) recognized the “the great superiority of Corean [script] over Chinese for the purpose of translation.” As noted in Section 4.2, Ross put this belief into action by publishing the first Hangeul portions of the New Testament in 1882, copies of which found their way to Seoul. In addition to its relative ease of acquisition, Hangeul had advantages over Hanja because of its adaptability to the rendering of non-Korean terms. As Congregationalist minister William E. Griffis (1885: 155) writes, [Hangeul] “is chiefly for the unlearned. It is, however, beautifully phonetic, and hence can be easily used to note down foreign names and words.” Hangeul would thus prove valuable in conveying decidedly un-Korean personal and place names found in Christian scripture.

Similar sentiments are amplified by Australian missionary Elizabeth Campbell (1909: 6), who supported efforts to rescue Hangeul from “the undeserved contempt in which it has been held by the men [of Korea], and to bring it into general use.” Such arguments in favor of having missionaries actively promote the wider use of Hangeul and, by extension, alleviate the stigma associated with its use in a broader range of contexts, ultimately presented themselves in unabashedly spiritual terms. Canadian missionary James Gale (1909: 137–138) attributed the resurrection of Hangeul to divine providence:

Korea’s native script . . . has come quietly down the dusty ages, waiting for, who knew what? Never used, it was looked on with contempt as being so easy. Why yes, even women could learn it in a month or little more; of what use could such a cheap script be? By one of those mysterious providences it was made ready and kept waiting for the New Testament and other Christian literature. Up to this day these have had almost exclusive use of this wonderfully simple language. This perhaps is the most remarkable providence of all, this language sleeping its long sleep of four hundred years, waiting till the hour should strike on the clock, that it might rise and tell of all Christ’s wondrous works. They call it Un-mun, the “dirty language,” because it is so simple and easy as compared with proud Chinese picture writing. God surely loves the humble things of life.⁴

The affectation of Gale’s rhetoric notwithstanding, the parallels that he draws between the risen Christ and a re-invigorated Hangeul speak to yet another emergent theme: the indigenization of Christianity in the Korean context. While Christianity was greeted as foreign element in late nineteenth-century Korean society, it was not long before church leaders were able to point to an authentically Korean version of the faith. Due

in part to the so-called Nevius method, whereby Korean churches were expected to be self-supporting, self-propagating, and self-governing (Grayson 2002: 158; Kang 1997: 30; Wells 1990: 37), the firm implantation of the church in Korea was very much hastened by the fact that there were already literacy resources in place, ready to be marshaled for the cause.

The cause, however, would have to commence with a concerted effort to promote Hangeul literacy among the Korean people, a campaign that took several forms. First and foremost were direct educational endeavors. In addition to planting churches and establishing medical facilities (D. Clark 1986: 8), Protestant missionaries founded schools for not only boys, but also girls (an innovation to Korea), several of which survive today as some of Korea's leading universities, including Yonsei University and Ehwa Womans University. Given Korea's long-established belief that education was to be equated with the learning of Chinese classical literature (*hanmun*), however, the missionaries had to develop a recruitment strategy that not only conformed to local cultural norms but also "secure[d] the foundation for the provision of universal education encompassing pupils from a broader stratum of society" (Hong 1973: 162). One strategy, explained in an 1895 letter written by William Baird about his work in Fusan (modern-day Busan), was to bait-and-switch. In describing the work at the mission school, Baird (1895: 2–3) writes:

At first we held out the classics or rather the books taught in Korean schools — as a bait — but these books have been gradually withdrawn and we have tried to make the school as much as possible simply an evangelizing agency. The teaching has been largely as follows: An hour of oral instruction in the Bible by myself in the morning. Mrs. Irwin for a time, and Mr. Adams since he came has taught them some elements of Arithmetic [*sic*]. For the rest of the time they have been taught to read Chinese and Unmoon by the Korean teacher. At first they read only the books read ordinarily in the Korean schools, but gradually Sam Cha Gung and the gospels Christian books have been introduced, and the heathen books have been largely excluded.

Similarly, in an 1893 letter to Dr. Ellinwood, Fred Miller describes changes to a mission school in Seoul:

Since Mr. Moffett took charge of the "orphanage", he has endeavored to bring it more and more directly under foreign controll [*sic*], and also to eliminate the orphanage elements and introduce more of the school element. . . . The change from English to the vernacular was one of these changes. . . . Then the most important change was the substitution of the Chinese Bible, tracts, and books on science, for the uninteresting Chinese histories & the objectionable classics. [. . .]

This change also removes from the boys much of the temptation to waste time & money on the Government examinations, a vanity & vexation of spirit. It may keep some of them from degenerating into government employees — thieves [*sic*]. This is the mental & moral side, & far above it looms the spiritual side [*sic*] vein, for the Holy Spirit in his unceasing vigilance surely must find opportunity to lodge saving truths in the minds of those who study the Word of God day by day.

Of course such radical changes at first effected [*sic*] the membership of the school, but where we have lost two applicants, or attendants [*sic*], we have gained one good one. Only one left because of the excessive Christian teaching & he is back again & comes to Sabbath school regularly [...].

Educational efforts were not limited to children; they extended to adults in the community, seeking to bring literacy to as large an audience as possible. In many letters and reports, one finds mention of women's groups being established by female missionaries, with the multiple purposes of teaching Korean women modern hygiene, basic catechism, and Hangeul literacy. Charles Allen Clark (1918: 215) confirms such efforts:

Anyone, even a woman, can learn to read the Korean native script in a month, and the strongest emphasis has been laid upon their doing so. There has been no fixed rule on the subject, but a large number of the missionaries have refused to baptise a person under 35 years of age before they have learned, and some also refuse to baptise a husband till he teaches his wife to read.

Grass-roots educational efforts presumably raised the number of literate people in Korea, and democratically so: the capacity to read and write in Hangeul was proffered as a benefit to associating with the Christian missionaries, regardless of one's social status.

In addition to establishing educational institutions in Korea, missionaries quickly set up operations for publishing printed materials, from early translations of scriptural passages to religious tracts. As Grayson (2002: 157) notes, publishing efforts in the 1890s were robust, with missionaries producing “a number of works including dictionaries, manuals of the Korean language, and translations of devotional works, such as the *Pilgrim's Progress*.”

Having established themselves as educators and publishers, missionary leaders eventually found themselves in a position to become engaged in questions of language use and policy, particularly with regard to how they would present their evangelistic materials. For example, efforts to establish a common translation of scripture began in February 1887, when a joint committee for translating the Bible into Korean was formed by missionaries. The work of the committee ultimately culminated in the eventual publication of the first widely accepted Korean Bible in 1900, a document printed exclusively in the vernacular script.

This success notwithstanding, the question of whether church materials should be printed exclusively in Hangeul persisted, particularly in light of the missionaries' desire to ensure that their materials be taken seriously. Discussions of these questions can be found in reports of the Korean Presbyterian Church, which felt it incumbent to consider language policy as it related to evangelization. At the 1903 Annual Meeting, for example, one finds a discussion of whether church materials ought to be printed in Hangeul ("unmoon") only, in Hanja only, or in the "mixed script" variant, often used today in limited domains (e.g., textbooks, certain newspapers, etc.) (Annual Meeting of the Presbyterian Mission 1903).

Dr. Moffett brought up the question of the use of the Unmoon (National alphabet characters) in all Church literature instead of the Mixed Chinese and Unmoon or the pure Chinese characters, and he asked a vote on the matter. Teacher Kim Pil Soo spoke in favor of the pure Unmoon. Yang Chun Paik, Saw Kyung Jo Elders, and Helper Han Suk Jin spoke against it. Elder Pang Keui Chang and Helper Kim Heung Kyung opposed any formal decision being taken on the matter.

C. Clark's (1918) compilation of annual meeting notes reveals a series of language-related decision over a four-year period:

- 1903: Vote against mixed script
- 1904: Discussion of "Simplified spelling of the Korean Unmoon," creation of a "Committee on Reformed Spelling"
- 1905: Reversal of mixed script ban
- 1905: Decision to drop the grapheme for "lower a" [·]⁵
- 1907: Invention of the word *kotu* 'meeting gavel'⁶

Although discussions of script and language issues at such meetings are overwhelmed by administrative matters (e.g., mission funding, property acquisition, medical concerns), they are noteworthy as they present evidence of active engagement in linguistic issues. While missionary involvement in matters of language and literacy is not unique to the Korean context, most striking is the commitment to a script that was not devised by the missionaries themselves, but rather, was extant in the community. The result was a synergistic development of an unequivocally local cultural asset by foreign stakeholders, leading ultimately to a more favorable revaluation of the indigenous resource by the indigenous people.

6. Hangeul as a reflection of emerging Korean nationalism

Missionary efforts to work squarely within the Korean cultural context by promoting more universal literacy in the nation's vernacular script all

contributed not only to the remarkably rapid spread of Christianity in Korea (where today, Christians are arguably in the majority), but also led to the repositioning of Hangeul as a legitimate means of written expression in a broader range of functional domains. It would be too easy, however, to attribute this success solely to the work of the missionaries, as Brown (1936: 445–446) mistakenly does when he writes:

... a dialect called Un-mun, or En-mun, consisting of twenty-five characters ... was regarded with contempt until the missionaries, finding that it was better adapted to their purpose than the cumbersome Chinese characters and more easily taught to the illiterate people, used it in the translation of the New Testament and in books, tracts, grammars and dictionaries.

What Brown fails to acknowledge was the birth and growth of a nationalistic movement in Korea, which emerged out of Korea's new-found independence from Chinese imperial dominance, and persisted throughout Korea's half-century of political domination by the Japanese (1905–1945). During this time, Korean patriots sought to forge a clear national identity, one distinct from that of its former political sovereign, China, and its eventual political sovereign, Japan. The founding of non-missionary Korean universities (e.g., Korea University, originally established as Bosung College in 1905), along with the establishment of the *Tongnip Hyeophoe* 'Independence Club' and the publication of the nation's first Hangeul newspaper in 1896, the *Tongnip Shinmun* 'The Independent', were all evidence of a growing sense of national pride and confidence.

There is debate regarding the degree to which Korea's indigenous nationalism movement should be viewed as independent of the arrival of Christianity. There is no doubt, however, as to a clear connection. Grayson (1985: 112) explains how "Christians took a lead in the establishment of ... schools which became the first link in the chain which bound together Korean nationalism and the new religion." Kang (1997: 30) specifically attributes the Nevius method as having directly influenced Korean patriotism: "The emphasis on *self*-support and *self*-government aroused the Korean spirit of independence long repressed under the influence of Confucian thought" (italics in the original). As a result of these efforts, Korean Christians — many of whom were educated in mission schools — figured prominently in the 1919 independence movement (D. Clark 1986: 8–10). Even *The Independent*, with its nationalistic Hangeul-only policy when printing Korean, was more than a vehicle for informing the Korean people of domestic and international events. As Wells (1990: 57) points out, the publication's "tone was Christian, and several leading

articles dealt with allegedly harmful socio-economic effects of Shamanism.” Christianity and nationalism were indisputably intertwined.

Establishing the central premises of his book, *New God, New Nation*, Wells (1990: 29) argues that grass-roots evangelization precipitated a bottom-up spread of Christianity in Korea, thereby fostering authentic ownership of the faith: “The cumulative effect . . . was to enable Protestantism to take root among the rural commoners and merchant class before noticeable interest arose in urban centres and among the higher classes.” In doing so, missionaries set important precedents for education and literacy in modern Korea, which were then embraced by new Korean converts. The result was the establishment of a Christian presence that, by the early twentieth century, was already discernibly Korean, having been presented to the Korean people in the uniquely Korean script, Hangeul.

7. Conclusions

The promotion of Hangeul by Christian missionaries as a means of fostering universal literacy was but a practical component of a larger effort to democratize and westernize Korea’s social, political, and educational institutions, thereby replacing the kingdom’s traditional Confucian framework with a more democratic, ostensibly Christian-based system. According to Hong (1973: 162), these efforts had far-reaching effects on the Korean people, leading them “to an understanding of American democracy and infused in them the will to accept and develop it.” While many sources extolling the virtues of the Korean writing system focus almost exclusively on the genius of King Sejong’s visually representing the phonetic and phonological properties of the language (Kim-Cho 2001), few — if any — have considered the socio-political factors that contributed to the eventual legitimization of Hangeul as a means of written communication among Koreans of all social strata. In this light, what we witness here is perhaps not so much a matter of “script choice” in a traditional sense, but rather, the demise of digraphia in the Korean context: the ultimate destigmatization of Hangeul neutralized the prestige imbalance precipitated by the promulgation of the new writing system in 1446, allowing the matter of accessibility to come to the fore. While Chinese characters continue to play a role in the intellectual life of many Koreans (at least in the Republic of Korea), the use of Hanja has been increasingly marginalized, typically relegated to academic and ceremonial domains.

It is perhaps ironic that King Sejong’s desire to provide his subjects with an authentic, indigenous “voice” in the written medium would

eventually realize itself (in part) through the efforts of outsiders. The timing of this positive reevaluation of Hangeul during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was fortuitous, indeed, as the encroachment of exogenous regional powers — Russia, China, and most critically, Japan — would require the Korean people to fight hard to retain their political sovereignty and cultural identity. In this struggle, language and script proved valuable defenses. As Jeong (2004: 237) argues, “the Korean language functions as a statement of independence, a memorial of both oppression and liberation.” Although Korea lost her political independence for 35 years (1910–1945), she never completely lost her voice in the face of Japanese oppression, thanks in part to the embracing of Hangeul as a fully legitimate vehicle for personal expression, national identity, and cultural survival.

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Notes

1. For more on how Chinese characters were used to represent Korean, see Kim-Renaud (2004) and Sohn (1999: 121–128).
2. Ross’s translation proved problematic for several reasons, among these the fact that the variety represented in the text is that of the Pyŏng’an province of northwest Korea. Not only was this dialect unfamiliar to Koreans living further south, it failed to capture the linguistic norms of the majority (Grayson 2002: 156) or of the Korean being acquired by the missionaries in Seoul, Inchon, Busan, and Pyongyang. H. N. Allen, the first missionary to Korea, explains his frustration in an 1885 letter: “I have done what time would allow and have nevertheless made considerable progress in the language, by getting words from the Prince and studying them . . . Unfortunately the publications of Mr. Ross were made under such disadvantages as to be worthless for study here in the Capital [*sic*].”
3. Documents produced in mixed script would be situated in the cell occupied by Hanja, i.e., high prestige/low accessibility. Given that mixed script documents would typically display content words in Chinese characters and use Hangeul to mark purely Korean forms (including, but not limited to, nominal particles and verbal suffixes), a reader literate only in Hangeul would be hard pressed to derive any sense from a mixed script text.
4. Gale’s reference to “Un-mun” as meaning “dirty language” merits comment. In this context, the morpheme “un-” denotes “common,” or “vulgar,” the latter in its purest sense. The notion that “vulgar” should be further (mis-)interpreted as “vile” or “dirty” is most likely a calculated decision on Gale’s part, but one that is not out of context. Gale’s desire to equate Hangeul with Christ’s poverty and humility is fully in line with a general perception that Hangeul was a low-prestige, undervalued cultural construct.
5. The grapheme “lower a” [·] once contrasted with its regular “a” counterpart, [+]. Lower “a” is not used in contemporary Korean orthography.
6. It appears that *kotu* never made it into common parlance.

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