



Three Strands of Asia
Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat Lecture Series

Lecture One

Written Languages of China, Japan and Korea
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Written Languages of China, Japan and Korea

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Among the various common cultural assets of the three countries, the first lecture of the Three Strands of Asia featured on written scripts. The lecture was delivered by Professor Emmanuel Pastreich of Kyung Hee University on February 13. The lecture by Professor Pastreich, a well-known expert of the classical novels in China, Japan and Korea, illustrated historical background for similarities and differences among written scripts of the three countries. Through the lecture, he emphasized that written scripts of the three countries were not developed separately from one another but under the influence of diverse cultural strands in and outside of the region.

The East Asian Region is tied together by many cultural strands going back for thousands of years that serve as a basis for mutual understanding and have contributed greatly to world culture. The written scripts of East Asia in particular form a fascinating continuous history that provides insights into the distinct cultural codes that have played such an important role in the cultural and economic development of the region. Although the scripts are distinct, there is of course both much overlap and a subtle mutual awareness that has informed much of the evolution of language in the region.

The ideographs, are the oldest written script in East Asia, dating back to 14th century BC and known best from a lot of bones and turtle shells that had been carved with ideographs as part of divination by ancient scholars. These ideographs were found in the 1920s by scholars and have been the subject of extensive research. They date back to the Shang Dynasty. Anyang is located in Hebei, China. How far these ancient ideographs were distributed at the time is unknown as only those inscribed on bone survived and there may have been other texts at the time distributed far more broadly.

The ideographs in their simplest form are a pictorial representation of what they symbolize. “Fish” (“yu” 魚) is shaped like a fish. However, many ideographs were also used for their sound value, because there were many homophones in ancient Chinese. As a result, a system developed wherein one ideograph was employed to represent the sound and the other to represent the general significance (the radical, or 部首). Ideographs were the first written language in East Asia and the first other script to be introduced was Sanskrit in the 4th century or so. So they are not exclusively Chinese in any real sense. Of course the oldest versions were

found in Anyang, China, but that is not that far from Korea, and rather far from Beijing or Gwangzhou. Moreover, although the characters were clearly linked to a proto-Chinese language that was spoken broadly in the area at the time, it is also clear that there were peoples all throughout what we consider China today who spoke rather different languages, including languages more akin to modern Korean and Japanese.

There existed a wide range of ideographs from the ancient zhuan script of the Zhou and the Li script used in the Han dynasty. A cursive form also developed. Since 1949 a simplified system has been employed in China (and in Japan, but with far fewer simplifications).

We have texts from Korea that employ a system known as the idu reading wherein ideographs are selected to represent the sounds of a proto-Korean language. Thus the characters were used for their purely phonetic value, often without a one-to-one correspondence of one character representing one object, idea or verb. Rather the more complex phrasing of Korean was sounded out with Chinese characters.

We have precious little documentation about the development of the idu system, but it was clearly related to, and in some cases the source for the system in Japan whereby Chinese characters were used entirely phonetically from ancient times. The oldest example surviving in Japan is found on the Inariyama Sword excavated at the Inariyama Kofun (A.D. 471). This early form of what would later be called hiragana, is known as manyogana. The ideographs were abbreviated in a form that became essentially a script of its own and today the original ideographs are not obvious. Hiragana was considered a script for women, although many men also wrote in hiragana as well. The height of hiragana literature was the Heian period. However, there continued to be extensive use of ideographs, Chinese characters, in many texts. Today hiragana is the most common script, although it is often mixed with Chinese characters, or *kanji* in Japanese.

The katakana system is a more fully simplified form of script, kana, also derived from the ideographs that developed in the Heian period (8th century) by Buddhist monks. The katakana system has a complex relationship with the hiragana system throughout history, but in the last 100 years katakana are used primarily for foreign words or for emphasis or for certain onomato poetic expressions.

Finally, Korea developed the hangul script under the leadership of King Sejong in 1441-1446. It is an entirely original alphabet which carefully represents each sound scientifically and is one of the few modern scripts to survive. Although it is not related to Chinese, it was clear that Koreans were aware of alternative scripts for phonetic representation from their exposure to other peoples during the Mongol occupation.

Hangul had mixed success. It was used with increasing frequency by women (who were required to use it from the 16th century on) but also by less educated Koreans. At the same time, we find that most intellectuals composed exclusively in Chinese characters, although they used

Hangul to write to wives and mothers. Hangul did not have the status of the hiragana until the late 19th century.

Koreans have moved solidly away from Chinese characters since the 1980s. Before it was common to see Chinese characters in books and newspapers. In general Koreans came to see the ideographs as a foreign language—something that had not been true before. Today hangul has tremendous advantages in terms of ease of input for computers and is increasingly becoming a global language.

The loss of proficiency for Koreans in Chinese characters has had many negative consequences, however, in terms of their understanding of their own language and alienation from their own tradition.

Sanskrit continues to be an important script in China, Japan and Korea employed in Buddhist circles, but also employed by scholars in certain cases.

Finally, the Latin alphabet, which is made up of characters from Greek “Cumaean alphabet” and related to Egyptian hieroglyphs, has also entered Asia as a major script.

Q & A

1. The Jia Jia tribe in Indonesia picked Hangul as their official written script. If the people who do not have their original written script are to select their official script among the characters of China, Japan and Korea, which one would you recommend?

Hangul has many advantages in inputting messages quickly and compressively, and many people around the globe are interested in learning Hangul. Yet I believe the important thing is to think of ways to harmonize and combine the advantage of Hangul to that of other languages. Then we can come up with the English input system that is more convenient than the present version and vice versa.

2. You told me there are increasing numbers of Chinese signboards in Korea nowadays. Considering the rise of China as world’s superpower, do you think Chinese language will replace the position of English as the world’s most popular language?

It’s a good question. When I entered the university in 1983, the kind of view you suggested was prevalent, and I believe people share the similar opinion even now. It will take long time for Chinese to become the world’s most popular language. However, as for Korea, I see the rapid replacement of English signboards into Chinese ones when I visit such places as Dongdaemun. Chinese will definitely become one of the important languages in the future.

3. (Discussion) Hangul as a phonogram has some difficulties in expressing and distinguishing meanings. Professor PASTRIECH argued that the use of Hangul and Chinese characters in

combination as in early Korean newspapers is more convenient to understand the meaning. Many participants actively expressed their opinions regarding this characteristic of Hangul.

Pros A: Hangul is a phonogram optimized for Korean people. It does not express particular meaning by itself as Chinese characters do, or do not differentiate the various meanings of the sound as the 6 intonations in Vietnamese. It is why foreigners feel difficulty in learning Korean language.

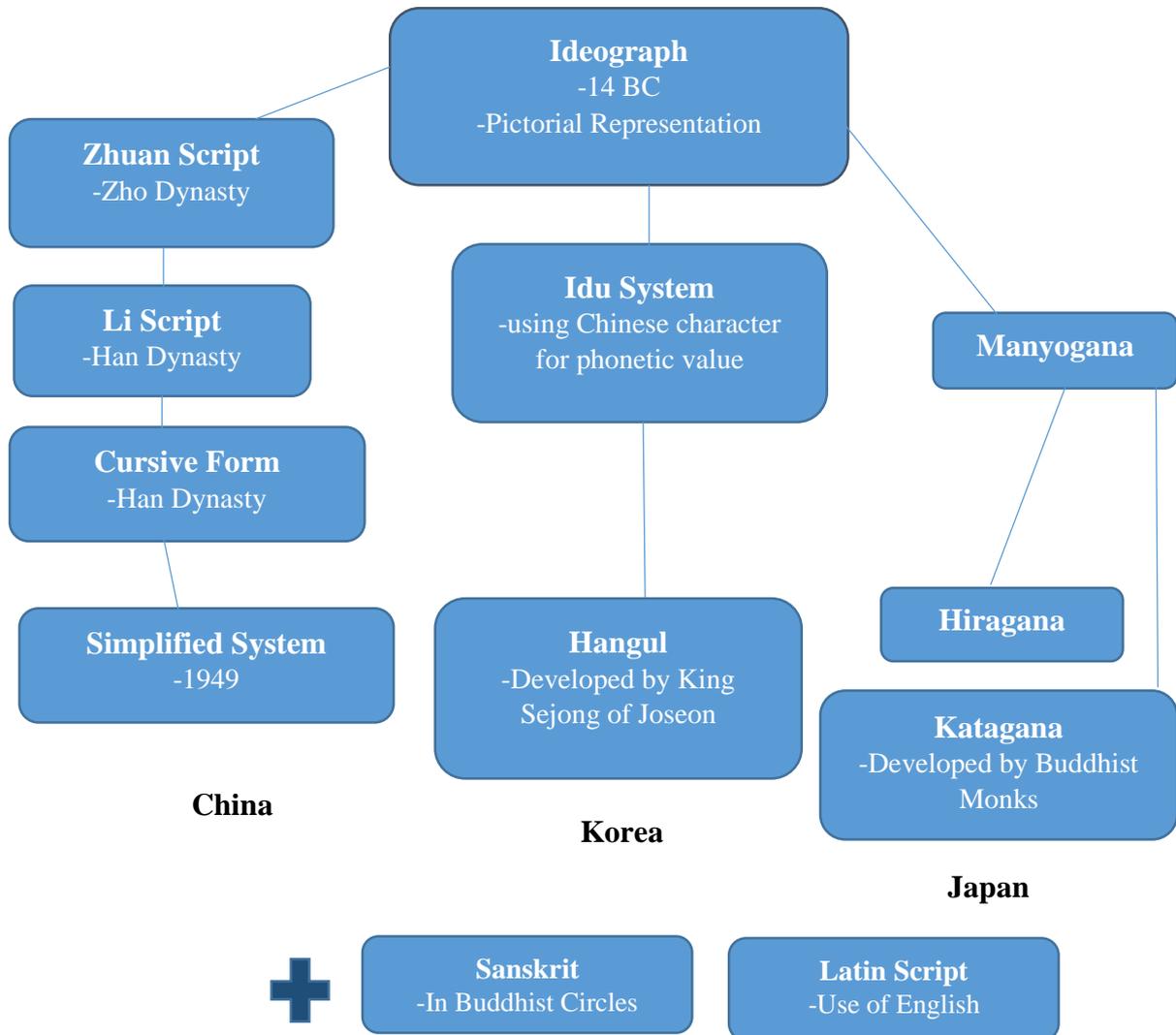
Pros B: I went to the university in the 1980s when the Korean society abandoned the use of Chinese characters in writings. At first it was very convenient because I no longer had to learn those complex Chinese characters. Yet after I started studying law at the military, I found out that most of the legal terminologies were based on Chinese characters, and began to learn the character once again. Come to think of it, learning Chinese characters has deepened my understanding in Korean language, and helped me with training my reasoning skills.

Cons A: I do not think people face difficulty in comprehending the meaning of Korean language because Hangul only expresses the sound. It is rather related to the characteristic of the Korean language itself that could be understood only when people listen the whole sentence.

Cons B: As for English, the verb comes right after the subject. It is why we can understand the core meaning without listening to the whole sentence. The verb in Korean language appears at the last, and the listener needs to understand the context of the whole sentence. Hangul as an optimized script for expressing Korean may reflect such feature of the Korean language. I believe both Korean language and Hangul have more chance to develop in the years to come.

Lecture One at a Glance

Scripts in Northeast Asia



Professor Emmanuel Pastreich is a renowned expert in classic novels of China, Japan and Korea with abundant experience in both Eastern and Western academic tradition. He currently works as the director of the Asia Institute and associate professor of the College of International Studies at Kyung Hee University. He also writes news columns on various Korean newspapers including Donga Ilbo. During his high school years, Professor Pastreich started to have interest in East Asia and pursued his undergraduate study about Chinese at Yale University (1987), obtaining his MA in Comparative Literature at University of Tokyo (1992) and Ph. D in East Asian Studies at Harvard University (1997).

Three Strands of Asia Overview

	Date	Theme	Speaker
Lecture One	2014.2.13	Written Scripts	Professor Emmanuel Pastreich Kyung Hee University
Lecture Two	2014.3.13	Housings	Mr. Kim Kyung Eun Editor of Kyunghayng Shinmun
Special Lecture	2014.4.14	The Making of Northeast Asia	Professor Kent Calder Johns Hopkins University
Lecture Three	2014.5.20	Court Music	Professor Song Hye Jin Sookmyung Womens' University
Lecture Four	2014.6.25	Implication of Confucianism	Professor Shing Jung Geun, Sunkyunkwan University
Lecture Five	2014.7.17	Tea Cultures	Ms. Muramatsu Kanako Chief Representative, Urasenke Seoul Branch
Lecture Six	2014.9.23	Calligraphy	Mr. Ye Xin Board member, Chinese Culture Center at Seoul



Three Strands of Asia is the monthly lecture series by the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat (TCS) started from February, 2014. This lecture series brings together experts of China, Japan and Korea to explain various aspects of the cultures and societies of the three countries from a comparative perspective. This event is aimed at encouraging balanced and thoughtful understanding of the three countries by investigating similarities and differences.

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