Hunmin jeongeum: Dissemination Policy and Education

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Hunmin jeongeum 訓民正音 is one of the most important elements that characterize the Korean people and nation. This article examines the process in which Hunmin jeongeum had been disseminated and taught since its invention through the late nineteenth.

In terms of dissemination policy during the reign of King Sejong 世宗, he wrote and published important official documents and literary books in Hunmin jeongeum. He also had major books including the Four Books of Chinese Classics translated into Hangeul.

For education, King Sejong ordered the court ministers and princes to learn Hangeul. Hunmin jeongeum was also included in the official state examinations during the reign of King Sejong. In addition, many significant efforts for the spreading of Hunmin jeongeum were made after King Sejong.

As a result of the King Sejong’s dissemination policies and ensuing efforts by many of his successors, Hunmin jeongeum spread widely among the Korean people during the Choseon 朝鮮 dynasty. It is also due to Hangeul’s own merit that this official script reform was so successful that it had been persistently used and taught in the everyday life of ordinary people from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries.

Keywords: Choseon dynasty, Hunmin jeongeum, King Sejong, Education and Dissemination Policy of Hunmin jeongeum, Textbooks for Teaching Hangul

1. Introduction

Hunmin jeongeum¹ 訓民正音 is a script characterized by three major qualities.

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¹ Hunmin jeongeum, aka Hangeul, is the Korean vernacular script invented in 1443 during the Choseon dynasty.
First, it is democratic. King Sejong ordered scholars to invent this script in order to help his “illiterate subjects” who could not read or write because they had not had the opportunity to learn Chinese characters. Second, Hunminjeongeum is a phonetically scientific script whose letters were devised to reflect the shapes of human vocal organs and their movements, a historically unique scheme with no precedent in the history of world scripts. Third, Hunmin jeongeum is a script based on philosophical concepts, namely the Principle of Three Elements 三才 — Heaven, Earth, and Human Beings — and that of Yin-Yang 陰陽. The Principle of Three Elements is embodied in the three-phoneme syllabic composition made up of the initial, middle, and final phonemes, as well as in the three basic components of the middle phoneme (ㅏ – ㅣ); the Principle of Yin-Yang is reflected in the two sets of vowels, called Yin vowels and Yang vowels.

Hunmin jeongeum is the sign that most powerfully symbolizes Korea as a political and cultural entity. Together with the Korean language, Hunmin jeongeum is one of the most essential elements that characterize the Korean people. Its creation and dissemination was a highly significant political and cultural event in Korean history. In this article, I examine the process by which Hunmin jeongeum was disseminated and taught from its invention through the late nineteenth century.

2. Dissemination Policy during the Reign of King Sejong

King Sejong decided to invent the Korean vernacular script in order to help his illiterate subjects, who had not learned how to read and write Chinese, express their thoughts in writing. The King’s Preface to Hunmin jeongeum explicitly states this intention: “It is impossible for many of my illiterate subjects to express their thoughts when they have something to say. We took pity on this and created twenty-eight letters, so that whoever has the will can easily learn and conveniently use them in his everyday life.” As Ramsey (2010) points out, historically, no other script has ever been created by a king for the sake of his subjects. The invention of Hunmin jeongeum was a particularly significant event in the history of human civilization, especially because a new script was created for the use of ordinary people even while a major script, i.e. Chinese, already existed and was widely used by the literati. King Sejong adopted a wide variety of
policies in order to spread this new script.

2.1 Policies within the Court

1) The Establishment of the Office of Vernacular Script and the Addition of Yongbieocheonga to the Annals of King Taejo

According to the Annals of King Sejong, King Sejong gave an order on the eighth day of the eleventh lunar month in the 28th reign year (1446) to “finally establish the Office of Vernacular Script and add the epic Yongbieocheonga to the Annals of King Taejo.” The king established this office and had the office take charge of the task of adding the 125 chapters of Yongbieocheonga written in Hunmin jeongeum to the Annals of King Taejo. In other words, it was only through the king’s order that Yongbieocheonga, the epic history of the Choseon dynasty, the history of the most venerable royal ancestors, was written in Hunmin jeongeum and belatedly added to the Annals of King Taejo, the most authoritative historical record. It is obvious that King Sejong took this special measure in order to elevate the authority of Hunmin jeongeum. He must have wanted to make sure that the yangban literati, who had respected only Chinese up until that point, did not ignore the new Hunmin jeongeum script.

In addition, there is a record in the entry for the first day of the seventh lunar month in the 29th reign year of King Sejong (1447) in the Annals of King Sejong showing that the King granted special gifts to the officials of the Office of Vernacular Script for their scribal efforts. The Office was also mentioned repeatedly in the entries for the 31st reign year of King Sejong (1449) in the Annals of King Sejong. The Office of Vernacular Script played an important role in spreading Hunmin jeongeum. We can safely assume that it is thanks to the Office that books written in Hangeul were published throughout the reigns of King Sejong, King Danjong, and King Sejo.

2) Compelling Court Ministers to Learn Hangeul

Chinese was the only script that most court officials and intellectuals

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2 Yongbieocheonga 龍飛御天歌 is an epic poem, written in Hunmin jeongeum during the reign of King Sejong, which praises royal ancestors and justifies the founding of the Choseon dynasty.

3 Yangban is the highest social class and ruling class of the Choseon dynasty, consisting of both munban, or civilian officials, and muban, or military officials.
knew during the reign of King Sejong. They could not even imagine using another script. This was especially true because paying respects to the Ming dynasty in China was an essential element in diplomatic policy at the Choseon court. When King Sejong prepared the creation of a new script for his subjects, he was fully aware that he was going against this environment. In today’s terms, King Sejong could well be described as one of the most progressive intellectuals of his time.

In the tenth lunar month in the 28th reign year of King Sejong (1446), one month after the proclamation of the creation of Hunmin jeongeum, an interesting incident occurred in his court. Ministers and officials belonging to the Saheonbu deceived the king instead of being forthright with him as their offices required. Furious, King Sejong sent a document that he wrote in Hangeul and in which he listed charges against the officials to the Ministry of Justice and the Office of the Royal Secretary. In response, ministers and officials presented a memorial to the king, which they wrote in Chinese. King Sejong again wrote an instruction in Hunmin jeongeum, obliging the officials to read the document written in the newly invented vernacular script. On the 13th day of the tenth lunar month, King Sejong showed a few pages of his letter in vernacular script to the ministers, and said, “as you came without understanding the meaning of my words, you shall read this letter and understand it.” As it would have been unimaginable for an official not to be able to execute the king’s injunction because he could not read the vernacular script, we can safely assume that the king wrote his letters in Hangeul in order to teach Hangeul to his ministers and officials.

3) Including a Course on Hunmin jeongeum in the Education of the Crown Prince

On the 14th day of the eleventh lunar month in the 29th reign year of King Sejong, Yi Seok-hyeong submitted a proposal for the education of the Crown Prince. This proposal included a course on the vernacular script. The Seoyeon School for the Crown Prince was one of the most important educational institutions in the kingdom. Therefore, it is likely that this inclusion of the vernacular script in the curriculum for the Crown Prince’s

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4 Saheonbu is an administrative entity that is responsible for auditing administrative offices and officials during the Choseon dynasty.
education greatly influenced the dissemination of Hunmin jeongeum. If the Crown Prince learned Hunmin jeongeum, we can safely assume that Confucian scholars at Seonggyungwan,⁵ the most important educational institution of the era, must have learned it as well.

4) Translation of the Four Books of Ancient China into Hunmin jeongeum
The Four Books 四書 of Ancient China – the Analects of Confucius, the Works of Mencius, the Doctrine of the Mean, and the Great Learning — were basic texts for the study of Confucianism at that time. Immediately after the creation of Hunmin jeongeum, King Sejong initiated a project translating the Four Books of Ancient China into Hunmin jeongeum. Kim Mun 金汶, a high-level government official, was working on this translation project under the king’s direct order when he died. Consequently, King Sejong summoned Kim Gu 金鈎, the Governor of Sangju 尙州 Province, to Jiphyeonjeon⁶ so that he could continue the translation project. This project was completed during the reign of King Seonjo. By having the Four Books of Ancient China translated into Hunmin jeongeum, King Sejong aimed to make it easy for scholars studying Confucianism to learn the teachings of the Four Books. He must also have intended to spread Hunmin jeongeum among Confucian literati who studied the Four Books.

The four policies I have discussed so far share the same goal, i.e. educating the class of yangban intellectuals including the Crown Prince and court officials.

2.2 Policies Related to the Gwageo Examination, i.e. the High-level State Examination to Recruit Ranking Officials

1) Inclusion of the Subject of Hunmin jeongeum in the State Examination to Recruit Clerical Officials⁷
After the creation of Hunmin jeongeum, King Sejong ordered ten or so

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⁵ Seonggyungwan 成均館 is an educational institution, established in 1398 to offer prayers and memorials to Confucius and his disciples and to promote the study of the Confucian canon. It was the foremost institution of higher learning under the Choseon dynasty educational system.

⁶ A royal advisory office, equivalent to today’s presidential advisory committees.

⁷ Clerical Officials: Clerical officials were called Iseo 司胥 during the Choseon dynasty and they belonged to the jung-in 中人 middle class.
clerical officials to learn it (cf. A memorial submitted to the king by Choe Manri in the 26th reign year of King Sejong). After the proclamation of the creation of Hangeul, the king also ordered Hunmin jeongeum to be included in the state examination to recruit clerical officials (on the 26th day of the twelfth lunar month in the 28th reign year of King Sejong). Later, he ordered that applicants for the position of regional official should first pass the Hunmin jeongeum examination to qualify for the other examinations (on the 20th day of the fourth lunar month in the 29th reign year of King Sejong). King Sejong intended to replace Idu script with Hangeul in official documents by teaching Hangeul to clerical officials. This effort fizzled out after the demise of King Sejong, and consequently Hunmin jeongeum failed to become established as the official script of the country.

2) Introduction of Hunmin jeongeum to the First Level Examination in the State Examination to Recruit Civil Servants

In the 6th reign year of King Sejo (1460), the Ministry of Culture and Education submitted a proposal to the king requesting that Hunmin jeongeum be included in the First Level Examination at the State Examination to Recruit Civil Servants. Hunmin jeongeum here means the text that explained Hunmin jeongeum through annotation. Although this was a very significant policy decision, it is unclear how long the policy lasted, as no further record about it remains. However, it is probably not too far-fetched to assume that this policy did not last very long, considering that worship of the Chinese language was prevalent among intellectuals at the time.

2.3 At Seonggyungwan

In the 29th reign year of King Sejong, the Ministry of Culture and Education submitted to the king a proposal for the curriculum for Seonggyungwan

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8 Choe Manri 裴萬理 (?-1445) is a senior scholar who presented a petition to King Sejong that criticized Hunmin jeongeum.

9 Idu 令讀 is a script system used since the Silla 新羅 period on the Korean peninsula; it adopts Chinese script and uses it with Korean sentence structure.
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scholars. This proposal includes *Hunmin jeongeum* and *Donggukjeongun*\(^{10}\) as well as the Four Books of Ancient China among subjects for the examination of scholars, which means that Seonggyungwan scholars were taught about and tested on Hunmin jeongeum and its principles. We can safely assume that this curricular decision for Seonggyungwan could have influenced the curriculum at other educational institutions including Hyang-gyo.\(^{11}\) However, it is also unclear how long this practice lasted, as no further record about it remains.

King Sejong included Hunmin jeongeum in the state examination to recruit clerical officials in order to spread Hunmin jeongeum among people in the *jung-in* class.\(^{12}\) He also introduced Hunmin jeongeum to the curriculum at Seonggyungwan Institute. King Sejo included the subject of Hunmin jeongeum in the high-level state examination to recruit ranking civil servants. These two measures aimed to teach Hunmin jeongeum both to low-level clerical officials and to high-level civil servants, confirming that the teaching of Hunmin jeongeum was executed as a national policy.

2.4 Publication of Documents in Hangeul and Creation of Gasa Poetry in Hangeul\(^{13}\)

1) Writing and Publishing Yongbieocheonga

King Sejong initiated a national publication project using Hunmin jeongeum to test the usefulness of the script and elevate its intellectual standing. A representative product of this project is *Yongbieocheonga*. An epic poem written in Hangeul and translated into prose in Chinese, it chronicles the lives and achievements of six generations of royal ancestors and kings — Mokjo, Ikjo, Dojo, Hwanjo, Taejo, and Taejong — of the Choseon dynasty, in a fashion paralleling the lives and achievements of ancient Chinese kings. It consists of the main body, including 125 chapters

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\(^{10}\) *Donggukjeongun* 東國正韻 is a dictionary published in 1448 in order to standardize the pronunciation of Chinese characters in Korea.

\(^{11}\) Hyang-gyo 鄉校 is the Confucian temple and school where scholars educated local students during the Choseon dynasty.

\(^{12}\) *Jung-in* 中人 is the class between *yangban* aristocrats and commoners during the Choseon dynasty.

\(^{13}\) Gasa 歌詞 is a verse form, commonly understood to be an intermediate form between poetry and prose.
of epic poetry written in Hangeul, a translation of this poem into Chinese, and Chinese annotations added at the end of each chapter that explain historical incidents. Yongbieocheonga was written between 1443, the year Hunmin jeongeum was created, and 1446, the year Hunmin jeongeum’s creation was proclaimed. It was published in 1447.

Publishing a book about the historical authenticity of the Choseon dynasty in newly created Hunmin jeongeum was a significant historical action. By making a connection between Hunmin jeongeum and the authority of the dynasty, King Sejong clearly intended to communicate the importance of Hunmin jeongeum to his people.

2) Writing Seokbosangjeol, a Book about Buddhism, in Hangeul and Composing Worincheongangjigok

When Queen Soheon died in 1446, King Sejong had his son Prince Suyang write Seokbosangjeol as a way of praying for her soul. Written in Hangeul, Seokbosangjeol is a narrative describing the life of the Buddha. After reading this book, King Sejong himself wrote a poetic verse in Hangeul, Worincheongangjigok, a hymn praising the good deeds of the Buddha, and had music composed to accompany it so that people could sing it. These two books were probably published in 1447.

Although the Choseon dynasty officially adopted the policy of suppressing Buddhism and worshiping Confucianism, Buddhism continued to enjoy widespread popularity among ordinary people. King Sejong had a book about the life of the Buddha, the most important religious figure for ordinary people, published in Hangeul as well as a hymn praising Buddha. It is very likely that these publications influenced the dissemination of Hangeul. By providing people with these Hangeul texts, the king offered them opportunities to learn and familiarize themselves with the newly invented script.

3. The Actual Dissemination of Hangeul

In this section, I first look into how Hangeul was used in the court by examining entries in the Annals of the Choseon Dynasty. I then discuss the ways in which Hangeul was disseminated throughout the country by looking at local documents published in Hangeul. Last, I discuss
the dissemination of Hangeul from the high to the lower classes.

3.1 Expansion of the Usage of Hangeul in Court

Let us look at the ways in which Hangeul was used in court by examining entries from the reign of King Sejong to that of Prince Yeonsan (1494-1506) in the *Annals of Choseon Dynasty*.

1) Prince Yangnyeong’s Letter in Hangeul

The first record of the usage of Hangeul after the reign of King Sejong in the *Annals of Choseon Dynasty* relates to Prince Yangnyeong. According to the entry for the 17th day of the eleventh lunar month in the first reign year of King Munjong (文宗 1451), Prince Yangnyeong wrote a letter in the vernacular script to his nephew, King Munjong. In this letter, Prince Yangnyeong appeals to King Munjong to allow Kim Gyeongjae to return to Seoul from exile so that he could attend his daughter’s wedding. This is a significant example showing that Hangeul was used between male royals.

2) Court Ladies’ Love Letters

Women were important agents in spreading Hangeul during the Choseon dynasty. The first record of a woman’s use of Hangeul is found in an entry in the first reign year of King Danjong (端宗 1453). A lady-in-waiting called Myodan told Royal Concubine Hyebin in a letter written in Hangeul that another lady-in-waiting had an affair with a royal guard. The court forwarded the letter to the Office of the Royal Secretary so that they could investigate the matter. It is interesting that the first record of a woman’s use of Hangeul relates to “an affair” between a lady-in-waiting and a royal guard. In any event, based on this record, it should be safe to assume that most court ladies were able to read and write Hangeul.

The above incident happened about six and a half years after the proclamation of the creation of Hunmin jeongeum. The fact that it took such a short time for court ladies to use Hangeul in their letters suggests that women must have welcomed this new script. To people who had never been able to express their thoughts in writing, Hangeul must have been a very novel and amazing gift. To people who belonged to classes excluded from letters because they had not learned Chinese, the invention of Hangeul was an extraordinary event offering them novel opportunities
to enjoy a life of letters. The invention of Hangeul was a historically significant event, allowing more people to enjoy culture and knowledge.

There is also a record in the *Annals* that, on the 4th day of the ninth lunar month in the eleventh reign year of King Sejo (1465), a court lady called Deokjung wrote a love letter in Hangeul to Yi Jun, a royal family member, and delivered it through a eunuch named Choe Ho. The fact that people used Hangeul to write love letters indicates that they found it suitable for expressing their finest and most delicate emotions. According to an entry for the 4th day of the ninth lunar month in the eleventh reign year of King Sejo (1465), “At the Sajeong Palace, the King gave eight official entertainment girls a lyric written in the vernacular script, i.e. that of *Worincheongangi* written by King Sejong, so that they could sing the song.” This suggests that even humble entertainment girls in the palace could read the vernacular script.

3) Letters by the Queen and the Queen Dowager
The earliest letter on record written in Hangeul by a queen or queen dowager was written by the queen to King Sejo on the 24th day of the eighth lunar month in the fourth reign year of King Sejo (1458) regarding the imprisonment of Kim Bun and Kim Lin. According to an entry for the 9th day of the third lunar month in the first reign year of King Seongjong (1470), “A letter written in the vernacular script by the queen described how Princess Gyeongsin behaved rudely to her mother and how King Sejo settled the matter.” Overall, there are nineteen entries mentioning use of the vernacular script in the *Annals of King Seongjong*. Most are letters in which the queen and the queen dowager express their opinions about the disposal of Queen Yun or letters in which Queen Yun’s ladies-in-waiting and private domestic servants discuss the same matter. Together with these letters, an anonymous letter of accusation against Prince Yeonsan (the seventh lunar month in the tenth reign year of Prince Yeonsan (1504)) brought about the Ban on Vernacular Script during the reign of Prince Yeonsan.

4) Setback During the Reign of Prince Yeonsan
When an anonymous letter of accusation, written in Hangeul, against Prince Yeonsan’s tyranny was found at court during the prince’s reign, Hangeul suffered a great setback: The handwriting was analyzed, and books written in the vernacular script were burned. However, there is
substantial evidence indicating that Hangeul continued to be used during this time: According to entries in the Annals, an almanac was translated into the vernacular script (the tenth day of the twelfth lunar month in the tenth reign year of Prince Yeonsan); a funeral address for a court lady was translated into Hangeul (the 15th day of the ninth lunar month in the eleventh reign year of Prince Yeonsan); a letter sent to the queen dowager on her birthday was translated into the vernacular script (the 24th day of the sixth lunar month in the twelfth reign year of Prince Yeonsan); and a woman who knew the vernacular script was selected as a court lady (the 29th day of the fifth lunar month in the twelfth reign year of Prince Yeonsan).

5) The Use of Hangeul by Buddhist Monks
According to the Annals of the Choseon dynasty, the first monk who used Hangeul was Monk Sinmi. According to an entry for the 27th day of the sixth lunar month in the first reign year of King Yejong 睿宗 (1469), Monk Sinmi 信眉 wrote a secret letter to the king in the vernacular script after he learned about the court’s decision to test every monk on the subjects of the Diamond Sutra and the Lotus Sutra and to send those who failed back to a secular life: “There are a few monks who can recite sutras by heart, but there would be only a couple of monks out of a thousand or ten who can explain them. Please test them only on their ability to recite.”

These records indicate that Hangeul was used for many different purposes in the court across the boundaries of the caste system. In particular, we can presume that women at court enthusiastically embraced Hangeul because it was a script easy to learn and appropriate for the honest expression of feelings.

3.2 Regional Spread of the Use of Hangeul

1) Documents in Hangeul Published in Seoul
Regarding the dissemination of Hunmin jeongeum, we need to pay attention to books in Chinese that were translated into this script. During the reign of King Sejong, Hunmin jeongeum 訓民正音, Yongbieocheonga 龍飛御天歌, Seokbosangjeol 釋譜詳節, and Worincheongangjigok 月印千江之曲 were published originally in Hangeul. During the reign of King Sejo, about ten translations of Chinese classics, including the Shurangama Sutra
and the *Lotus Sutra* were published. During the reign of King Seongjong, books in translation such as *Du Fu’s Poetry in Hangeul*, *A Handbook for First-Aid in Hangeul*, and *Biographies of Morally Exemplary Men and Women* were published. Together with the publication of medical and moral books, the publication of Sutras in Hangeul, which the kings initiated in support of Buddhism, contributed greatly to the dissemination of Hunmin jeongeum. Thanks to these publications, Hunmin jeongeum may have been spreading rapidly among the literate in Seoul.

2) Local Documents in Hangeul

Hunmin jeongeum probably spread more rapidly among residents of Seoul than among rural residents. Given the method of publishing at the time, it would have been hard for books in Hangeul to reach people living outside of Seoul. Although it is difficult to know exactly how Hunmin jeongeum had been spreading throughout the entire country, it is possible to estimate a rough timeline, based on the following information.

According to the *Annals*, King Seongjong used Hangeul when he issued a royal declaration in the third year of his reign (1472), sending it to Seoul and other major towns in every province of the country. This declaration, in which King Seongjong encouraged his subjects to be diligent and frugal by citing his own resolution, may have been a momentous event in the dissemination of the new script, familiarizing people all over the country with its specific shape. In 1472, twenty-five years after the proclamation of the creation of Hangeul, people in the countryside might have been reminded of its existence through this royal declaration.

Documents in Hangeul began to be published locally after 1500, proving that the use of Hangeul had spread throughout the entire country. Documents in Hangeul, published locally during the sixteenth century, are divided into the following three categories.

The first category is Buddhist books. The first book in Hangeul published outside Seoul is *Mogujasimyeoreonhae*，a book published at the Bongseosa Temple in Hapchoen, Gyeongsang Province, in 1500. Although this book was merely a copy of the *Gangyeongdogam* edition, it indicates that there were people

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14 Gangyeongdogam was an office established in 1461 (the 7th reign year of King Sejo) in
(including monks) in the provinces who could read and write Hangeul. After Gangyeongdogam was abolished, temples in the provinces assumed its role in the publication of Buddhist scriptures. After the sixteenth century, Buddhist scriptures translated into Hangeul were published at many local temples. For example, there are many reprints of *Sabeobeoeonhae* — the Gounsa edition from Chungcheong Province (1517), the Simwonsa edition from Hwanghae Province (1525), and the Songgwangsa edition from Jeolla Province (1577) — as well as many more Buddhist books published in the provinces.

The second category is books in Hangeul that deal with agriculture, manners and customs, and medicine. In 1518, *Iryunhaengsildo* (Book of Two Virtues), *Yeossihyangyageonhae* (Village Regulations by the Yeo Brothers in Korean), *Jeongsogeonhae* (Book of Correct Customs in Korean), *Jameseooneonhae* (Book of Sericulture in Korean), *Nongseoeonhae* (Book of Agriculture in Korean), and *Byeogonbangeonhae* (Book of Medicine in Korean) were published in Gyeongsang Province. In addition, medical books such as *Ganibyeogonbang* (Treatment of Infectious Diseases, 1525), *Chongagugeupbang* (Book of First Aid for Ordinary Households, 1538), and *Bunmunonyeogihaebang* (Treatment of Febrile Diseases) were published in Hangeul.

The third category is the publication of Chinese textbooks, accompanied by Hangeul translations. The format of *Hunmongjahoe* (1527), *Cheonjjamun* (1529), *Yuhap* (1529), and *Gwangju Cheonjjamun* (1575) indicates that beginning learners of Chinese characters would have learned Hangeul as well. There is no doubt that these textbooks contributed to the dissemination of Hangeul. They attest that Hangeul proved useful in educating beginners in Chinese, especially children.

It can be presumed that these three types of documents in Hangeul greatly influenced the dissemination of Hangeul among people in the provinces. These books began being published locally from the early sixteenth century and became quite widespread by the mid-sixteenth century. This means that Hangeul was actively spreading during the early

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order to translate Buddhist scriptures into Hangeul. It was abolished in 1471.

15 *Hunmongjahoe*, *Cheonjjamun*, *Yuhap*, and *Gwangju Cheonjjamun* are all textbooks that teach Chinese characters to children.
sixteenth century in the provinces and by the mid-sixteenth century people all over the country could read and write Hangeul. The existence of letters written in the vernacular script, which I will discuss later, also supports this assessment. Over all, it seems safe to assume that Hangeul had spread substantially in the provinces by the mid-sixteenth century.

3.3 Cross-class Dissemination of Hangeul

In this section, I examine the dissemination of Hangeul across all social classes.

1) Women in the Nobility

Since the creation of Hangeul, people used this script most frequently for letter writing. A letter in Hangeul was called eongan (諺簡), meaning a letter in the vernacular script. Unlike a letter in Chinese, which was almost the exclusive property of men, a letter in Hangeul was an ordinary tool used by both men and women. People today tend to presume that it was mostly women who wrote in the vernacular script, but the reality was different. According to an examination of the writers and receivers of existing letters in Hangeul, a very high percentage were in fact written by men to women.

From the early stages of the dissemination of Hangeul, there are a number of extant letters written in Hangeul by a private person. “Suncheon Kimssi Eongan 順天金氏諺簡 (Letters of Lady Kim of the Suncheon Kim descent group)” was a collection of letters written mostly by Lady Kim of the Suncheon Kim descent group and her daughter during the 1560’s–1580’s (Cho, Hangbeom 1998: 23). There are seven letters from the family of Song-gang Jeong Cheol 鄭澈 three letters (1571, 1572) written by the Lady Ahn of Juksan Ahn 竹山安氏 descent group (1495-1573) to her son, Song-gang; three letters (1571, 1573, 1593) written by Song-gang to his wife; and a letter (year unknown), written by his wife to her son. There is also a letter, written by the wife of Yi Eung-tae 李應台 (1556-1586) while mourning his death after he died suddenly at age thirty, that she put into his casket. Kim Seong-il 金誠一 left a letter to his wife, which he wrote on the battlefield during the Japanese invasion of Korea in 1592. “Hyeonpung Kwakssi Eongan 玄風郭氏諺簡 (Letters of the Gwak Family of the Hyeonpung Gwak descendent group)” is a collection of 176 letters, 105 of which were written by Gwak Ju 郭樹 (1569-1617). Most of these letters were written to
his wife, Lady Ha 河氏, from 1602–1652.

Given these letters, we can safely assume that many noble women as well as men who lived in the provinces were well versed in Hangeul.

2) The Use of Hangeul Among the Jung-in 中人, or Middle Class

Presumably Hangeul would have been disseminated among lower-class people later than among the nobility. In antiquity and the Middle Ages, and in all countries of the world, scripts were the exclusive property of rulers and the intellectuals who served their interests. Hangeul, however, was different. Although only a few documents written in Hangeul by people belonging to subjugated classes have descended to us, documents exist showing that lower-class people were not excluded from the use of Hangeul. The following are a few examples of documentary evidence of Hangeul usage by people of the lower class.

In the seventh reign year of King Seongjong (1476) there was an incident in which some merchants in Seoul secretly sent a letter in Hangeul to the house of Yi Deokryang 李德良, a younger brother of the minister of finance, in order to complain about the minister and vice-minister’s decision to move a marketplace. This incident indicates that Hangeul was used among people of the merchant class.

An example of Hangeul usage by the jung-in middle class is found in the “Haenam Yunssi Documents 海南尹氏文書 (Documents Belonging to the Yun Family of the Haenam Yun Descendant Group).” Yun Seondo 尹善道 was a tutor to Prince Bongrim and Prince Inpyeong. When Yun Seondo was sick, one of them sent him a care package. “Haenam Yunssi Documents” include a dispatch note for this package, written in Hangeul by Yi Chung-sin, a jangmu 掌務 official, in 1665. Because jangmu was an office usually taken by jung-in or a military official, this note is an example of the use of Hangeul by the jung-in middle class.

3) People in the Lower Class, Including Servants

We can get a glimpse of Hangeul usage by the lower class by examining documents given to them, including servants, by their yangban masters. A Collection of Antique Documents, Volume III includes 3 baeji’s 牌旨 kept in the Yun 尹 Family of the Haenam Yun descendent group.16 We cannot

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16 Baeji is power of attorney, given to servants by their yangban masters.
definitely conclude that servants were able to read and write Hangeul based solely on the fact that they received a document in Hangeul. However, considering two factors, i.e. the importance of sales contract for farmland and the ease of learning Hangeul, such a conclusion would not seem so far-fetched. Documents in Hangeul, kept in the Song Family of the Eunjin Song descendant group from Hoedeok 懷德, Chungcheong 忠清 Province, also include a letter that Song Gyuryeom (1630-1709) wrote in Hangeul to his servant Guityugi 姜郁伊, which strongly suggests that his servant could read and write Hangeul.

There is other evidence suggesting the use of Hangeul by the lower class. According to a manuscript of *Jaejobeonbangji* 再造蕃邦誌 in Hangeul, an entertainer from Jeolla Province who came to Choseon as a Japanese general during Jeongyujaeran 定西再亂 was on the lookout for an opportunity to surrender, and, upon failing to find one, went to his hometown and wrote his feelings in Hangeul on the foundation stone of his old house. The same book also includes the story of a man named Ni Sin-tyung 妮申彥 who was sent to the enemy camp to spy and wrote his report in Hangeul. These records indicate that at least some lower-class people could read and write Hangeul at that time, because Ni Sin-tyung was most likely a common soldier. All the above evidence suggests that, by the end of the sixteenth century, Hangeul usage was not limited to *yangban* aristocrats but had spread to the lower class. There is a letter in which Gwak Ju, a *yangban*, orders his servant Gwaksyangi to have his sick horse treated, in the *Gwaksii Eongan* (Letters of Mr. Kwak 郭). This means that at least some servants could read and write Hangeul.

4) Publication of Buddhist Missionary Books

*Yeombulbogwonmun* 念佛普勸文 (*A Compilation of Prayers*), published at the Yongmun Temple 龍門寺, Yecheon 醴泉, in 1704, is an important document that tells us how widespread Hangeul was among the lower class. Buddhist books published in the fifteenth century were mostly sutras and those published in the sixteenth century were mostly books explaining religious doctrines, such as *Sabeobeo* 四法語 (published in the early sixteenth century at Songgwang Temple), *Mongsanhwasonguyukdoboseol* 蒙山和尙六道普說.

*Jaejobeonbangji* is a historical record of the Japanese Invasion of Choseon in 1592. Jeongyujaeran is the second phase of the Japanese Invasion of Choseon, which began in 1597.
Hunmin jeongeum

and Childaemanbeop 七大萬法 (published in the late sixteenth century). Unlike these books, whose intended readers were not commoners, Yeombulbogwonmun was designed for the common people. For this reason Yeombulbogwonmun reflects the dialect of the region in which it was published. Considering that this missionary book for commoners was published in a remote place like Yecheon, Gyeongsang Province in 1704, we can presume that Hangeul must have been spread quite widely among commoners by then. Yeombulbogwonmun’s publication is a significant event in the cultural history of Korea in terms of both the popularization of Buddhism that espouses the ideal of pure land and the dissemination of Hangeul.

4. The Establishment of Hangeul as the Official National Script

Although the creation of Hangeul was proclaimed in 1446, it was not adopted as the official national script for a very long time. Chinese characters remained the most authoritative official national script during the Choson dynasty. As time went by, the respect for Hangeul that existed during the reign of King Sejong and King Sejo declined, and Hangeul became a script for women, while Chinese remained a script for men. Only during the Gabogachyeok Reform 18 of 1894 did Hangeul become the official national script.

After the issuing of both the edict by King Gojong 高宗 on November 21st, 1894 and the 14th chapter of the rule for the official document, Hangeul appeared in officially printed documents as the official national script. No matter how independent from China Choson became, if there had not been a popular foundation for such a practice, an edict or a rule for an official document would not have had much impact. Hangeul could become the major script of the country in the late nineteenth century after Choson’s declaration of independence from China only because it had already been widely used all over the country.

The only problem people ran into when using Hangeul as the official script was the confusion caused by the lack of a standardized spelling

18 Gabo Reform 甲午改革 is a series of sweeping reforms, encouraging modernization, introduced in 1894-96 during the reign of King Gojong in response to the Donghak Peasant Revolution.
system. Movements related to Hangeul during the period of enlightenment focused on eliminating such confusion. These movements contributed to the establishment of a standardized spelling system as well as the near eradication of illiteracy through the teaching of Hangeul at school. True to its name, Hangeul finally became the main character in the country’s script life.

5. Tools and Textbooks for Teaching Hangeul

What factors played an important role in spreading Hangeul in the mid-sixteenth century? We can find answers to this question by looking at Hangeul textbooks.

The following four are important materials used to teach Hangeul during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

First, there was *Hunmin jeongeum Haeryebon* 寧民正音解例本. We can safely presume that intellectuals who already knew how to read Chinese used this book to learn Hunmin jeongeum because they needed to study Hangeul as a subject included in the first level examination at the state examination to recruit civil servants as well as in the curriculum at the Seonggyungwan 成均館 Institute.

Second, there was the “Hunmin jeongeum Eonhae” 寧民正音諺解 included in the preface of *Worinseokbo* 月印釋譜. We can guess that this same “Huminjeongeum Eonhae” was also included in the preface of *Seokbosangjeol* (1447), the previous version of *Worinseokbo* (Ahn Byeong-hui, 1985: 798). Whereas male intellectuals mostly used *Haeryebon*, women who wanted to learn Hangeul must have used the “Huminjeongeum Eonhae.”

Third, there is a sentence in the introductory remarks of *Hunnongjahoe* 訓蒙字會 (1527) that goes, “I add vernacular alphabets here in order to assist folks in the remote countryside who don’t know Chinese characters.” This remark has major significance in the history of the dissemination of Hangeul. As people here were encouraged to learn the vernacular script before they learned Chinese, this would have been a critical contribution to the dissemination of Hangeul.

Fourth, there is the “eonbon” 諺本 attached to the Buddhist scriptures published by Buddhist temples. The earliest existing “eonbon” was included
in the second edition of *Jineonjip* 偵言集 published at Ansim Temple in 1569 (the second reign year of King Seonjo). The eonbon is a sort of table in which a consonant and a vowel are sequentially combined to form a syllable in order to make it easy for people to learn the script by heart. In other words, the eonbon is a sort of syllabary for beginners, which concisely and efficiently illustrates the way syllables are formed. During the nineteenth century, the eonbon was printed on a piece of paper and sold in the marketplace. The following picture shows the “Gichuk Singan Banjeol,” 己丑新刊反切 i.e. the syllabary, published in the year of Gichuk 己丑 (1889) and sold in the marketplace.

A *banjeolpyo* 反切表, i.e. syllabary, was included in the beginning of the first volume of *Sinjeongsimsangsohak* 新訂尋常小學, a textbook published by the Ministry of Education in 1896. This is probably the first official effort to teach Hunmin jeongeum at an educational institution established by the government. The following illustrates the form of the *banjeolpyo*. 

Figure 1. *Banjeolpyo* 反切表.
6. Who Taught Hangeul?

There are only a few remaining records that concretely describe how people taught and learned Hangeul. An example that mentions the teaching of Hangeul to children is found in the *Hyeonpung Gwakssi Eongan* (Letters of the Gwak Family of the Hyeonpung Gwak descendent group). In this letter, Gwak Ju 郭澍 pleads for his mother-in-law to teach Hangeul to his children who are staying with her.

I am afraid that having so many grandchildren with you will cause you a lot of trouble... I beg you to teach them the vernacular script, after two children of my younger brother join you. I know it will be a trouble for you, but I beg you to teach them the vernacular script. I am really sorry to ask you this, but please do teach them.

There is also a letter from Gwak Ju to his wife, Lady Ha 河氏, in which he requests that she teach Hangeul to his children and have them write him a letter in Hangeul. These letters indicate that fathers during the Choseon dynasty were keenly interested in the teaching of Hangeul to their children and that women took charge of this task. It is noteworthy that Hangeul was taught privately at homes and that women were the agents of this education. While the teaching of Hangeul was not offered at any
governmental institution, it seems that grandmothers or mothers were expected to teach Hangeul to their children and grandchildren at home.

7. Conclusion

After Gabo Reform (1894) Korean and Hangeul began functioning as the official language and script in Korea, respectively. This was possible only thanks to the widespread teaching and dissemination of Hangeul already in place. If Hangeul had not been as widespread, this kind of

Figure 2. Gwak Ju 郭澍’s letter, sent to his mother-in-law.
reform of the official script could not have been introduced, or would have ended in failure. Official script reform was successful only because Hangeul had been persistently used and taught in the everyday life of ordinary people from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries.

In this paper, I have summarized the ways in which Hangeul was disseminated from the time of its creation to Gabo Reform.

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[Received 25 May 2011; accepted 30 June 2011]