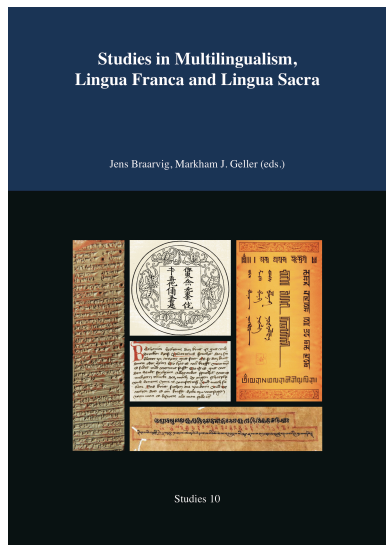


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Studies 10

Vladimir Tikhonov:

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Chapter 17

Classical Chinese as *Lingua Franca* in East Asia in the First to Second Millennia CE: Focusing on the Linguistic Situation in Traditional Korea

Vladimir Tikhonov

17.1 Introduction: Classical Chinese as *Lingua Franca cum Lingua Sacra*

Until shortly before the end of the nineteenth century, the linguistic situation in East Asia was typically characterized by bilingualism. From the second to third centuries CE, the non-Chinese people of East Asia—first proto-Koreans and proto-Japanese, and then a significant number of ethnically non-Chinese dynastic states located on the territory of today's PRC (People's Republic of China)—used classical Chinese as the preferred medium of diplomatic contact, scholarship and highbrow literary expression. As Sinified Buddhism and Confucianism spread beyond the borders of the dynastic states on today's PRC territory, and made inroads into the Korean Peninsula, Japanese Archipelago, and the northern part of what now is Vietnam (SRV: Socialist Republic of Vietnam) in the second to sixth centuries CE, classical Chinese—enriched by so many terms translated and transcribed from Sanskrit that it is often referred to as Buddhist Hybrid Chinese (BHC)—also became the *lingua sacra* of the whole East Asian region. To a degree, the linguistic situation in the non-Chinese states of East Asia paralleled the situation in the dynastic states on today's PRC territory, where the spoken language (*baihua*) started to differ from the written classical norm from the third to second centuries BCE onwards, while the classical language preserved its status as an elite medium of scholarship, statecraft and literary expression. The penetration of classical Chinese outside the boundaries of China proper and the condition of bilingualism it tended to create also had an important socio-linguistic aspect, as command of classical Chinese became an important sign of—and in many cases a precondition for the acquisition of—elite status. At the same time, vocabulary of Chinese origin permeated the spoken language of the underprivileged too, as in many cases—for example, religious or ethical vocabulary—there were few or no native equivalents for the terms that originated from the classical Chinese.¹

As a rule, the earliest texts in classical Chinese outside of today's PRC borders (in the second to fifth-sixth centuries CE) were of an administrative or sacral character, and mostly were generated either by early states or by aristocrats playing an important role in the formation of early statehood. As the Buddhist faith penetrated through different social layers in the societies of the Korean Peninsula and Japanese Archipelago in the sixth and seventh centuries CE, votive text on Buddhist sculptures and other devotional texts became another important genre of classical Chinese writing. Later, by the seventh and eighth centuries CE, Buddhist doctrinal exegesis, poetry and historical writings occupied a central place in classical Chinese literature in Silla (the proto-Korean kingdom which conquered most of

¹Holcombe (2001, 60–78).

the Korean Peninsula by 668) and Japan of the Asuka (538–710) and Nara (710–794) periods. By that time, the hybrid writing systems (*idu* and *manyogana* respectively) in both places, which purported to convey the “native” sounds through combined—semantic and phonetic—use of the Chinese characters, were already in place.² Such a system for Vietnamese (*Chữ Nôm*) was in place by the thirteenth century.³ However, all the three hybrid writing systems were hardly any more popular than classical Chinese, and were used mostly by the elites (especially elite females) or sub-elites for literary and administrative purposes. Later, some of the writing systems became more widespread among commoners as well, serving as a tool for communication between the rulers and the ruled. In Japan, the earlier hybrid writing system (*manyogana*) morphed into easier-to-use *hiragana* syllabic script by the ninth century, but even for this script, the sphere of usage was initially mostly limited to certain literary genres (Japanese poetry *waka*, novels and diaries by female authors etc.).⁴ In Korea, a completely new phonetic alphabet (known today as *hangŭl*), almost disconnected from the preceding hybrid systems, was promulgated in 1446, but also was initially used either for certain literary genres (Korean poetry *sijo*, popular novels etc.) or for the popularization of Chinese Confucian and Buddhist literature.⁵ In all the three countries—Korea, Japan and Vietnam—classical Chinese remained the medium of choice for highbrow writing. Philosophical prose, historical writing and administrative documentation were in most cases dominated by classical Chinese, and poetizing in classical Chinese remained the elite’s most important status symbol. In the present chapter, I will describe the process of the introduction of classical Chinese to the Korean Peninsula, and the reasons why neither earlier hybrid writing systems (*idu* etc.) nor syllabic and alphabetic alternatives emerging later (*hangŭl* etc.) were able to fully displace classical Chinese from its lingua franca and lingua sacra status.

17.2 Linguistic Situation in Traditional Korea: Chinese Writing and Native Hybrid Systems

Chinese writing was not completely unknown to the proto-Korean contemporaries of the Chinese Warring States period (475–221 BCE). Chinese money was an important, prestigious good—and possibly a medium of long-distance exchange as well—in the late Bronze-Age Korean Peninsula, and some coins bear inscriptions. For example, twenty three hollow handled spade-formed coins produced on the territory of the state of Wei were excavated in April 1930 in Onyang Village, Onhwa Township, Yŏngbyŏng County, Southern P’yŏngan Province; they were most likely produced and imported around the fourth to the third centuries BCE, and had simple inscriptions in Chinese which either indicated the place of production or had a more abstract meaning (“Equal harmony”: *pingyong* etc.). It was very possibly through such artifacts that the Chinese characters first became known to the incipient sociopolitical elite of the proto-Korean chiefdoms.⁶ However, Chinese writing and classical Chinese were introduced in full to the inhabitants of the Korean Peninsula only after the conquest of the oldest proto-Korean state, ancient Chosŏn (which loosely controlled

²Nam (2000, 11–48); Loveday (1996, 27–46).

³De Fransis (1977, 20–45).

⁴Frellesvig (2010, 14–16, 158–183).

⁵Yi (1978, 57).

⁶Kim (1977).

parts of the territories in the north of the Korean Peninsula, and the adjacent territories belonging to today's PRC), by the armies of Han dynasty emperor Wu (r. 141–87 BCE) in 108 BCE. It is not at all impossible that the elites of ancient Chosŏn were also conversant in classical Chinese, especially taking into consideration that it was purportedly ruled by a refugee from the Chinese state of Yan, Wei Man (Kor. Wi Man) and his descendants during the last century of its existence (194–108 BCE). In any case, no written testaments from this period are extant except for Chinese coins with the inscriptions mentioned above.

On having conquered the territory of ancient Chosŏn, the Han Empire established its four commanderies (borderland administrative units) there: the largest of them, Lelang (Kor. Nangnang), its centre being situated at the place of today's capital of the DPRK (Democratic People's Republic of Korea: North Korea), Pyongyang, managed to survive until 313 CE, and served as the locus of advanced artisanship and trade which obviously were beneficial for the local native population as well. Several counties belonging to Lelang were separated in 204 CE into a new commandery, Daifang (Kor. Taebang), which assumedly occupied the lands of today's Hwanghae Province of the DPRK. Daifang, a centre of exchange with the south-western proto-Korean tribes of *mahan* and the proto-Japanese (Jap. *wa*, Ch. *wo*), survived until 314 CE. Lelang and Daifang were archetypical Han dynasty Chinese societies where the use of writing was fairly widespread, especially for administrative purposes. In the 1920s–1930s, Japanese archaeologists found hundreds of clay impressions of seals (Kor. *pongni*) from that period, together with some actual seals. In most cases, these clay impressions bear the titles of various offices in Lelang's complicated administrative hierarchy.⁷ In a word, Chinese script and classical Chinese were closely associated at that point with administration and its capacities for organizing socio-political and economical life. As long as the proto-Korean chiefdoms wished to strengthen themselves by emulating the Chinese administrative methods, learning classical Chinese was a *condicio sine qua non*.

Given that the remnants of a brush and knife used for making wooden tablets for writing (*mokkan*) were discovered in a grave of a chief in Tahori site near Ch'angwŏn (Southern Kyŏngsang Province) dated by mid-first century BCE,⁸ it looks as if the use of writing for trade and possibly also administrative purposes penetrated the southernmost regions of the Korean Peninsula—which were not controlled by the Chinese administration from Lelang—almost concomitantly with the establishment of the Chinese control in the northern part of the Korean Peninsula. Trade seems to have been the strongest motive: according to a contemporaneous Chinese source (“Account of the Eastern Barbarians” from *Sanguozhi*, compiled in 297, fascicle 30), c. one thousand people in the land of Three Han (Korean Peninsula to the south of the Han River, which roughly corresponds to today's Republic of Korea, or South Korea) traded with Lelang and other Han commanderies. These people were obviously the chiefs and nascent aristocrats,⁹ and we may assume that they would have been keenly interested in mastering classical Chinese. As chiefdoms and tribal confederations were giving way to the embryonic aristocratic monarchies with some element of centralized administration in the third to fifth centuries CE, classical Chinese very naturally became a part of the “cultural capital” one reasonably expected an aristocrat or middle- or high-ranking official (these two categories largely overlapped) to possess. In the case of the proto-Korean state most exposed to Chinese cultural influences, Koguryŏ (occupied northern parts of the

⁷Harada (1968).

⁸Yi (1992).

⁹Barnes (2000, 19–31).

Korean Peninsula and southern parts of the Dongbei region of today's PRC), the sources already note the existence of the official rank of *chubu* (literally “bookkeeper”) by the end of the third century. It looks as if this title of rank originated from the designation of the office of the official responsible for royal documentation.¹⁰ The figures of the scribes with wooden tablets and documents writing down the orders from the aristocrat buried in the grave—very possibly Dong Shou (Kor. Tong Su, 289–357 CE), a Chinese bureaucrat known for having moved to Koguryō—are visible on the frescos of the Anak-3 grave, dated to the mid-fourth century.¹¹ In fact, a good number of Chinese scribes and other writing and documentation specialists seem to have relocated to Koguryō after Lelang and Daifang were conquered by Koguryō troops in 313–314. In this way, the movement of the population, in addition to trade and administrative emulations, is understood to be an important channel for the importation of classical Chinese into Koguryō.

However, it should not be thought that all those who were literate in classical Chinese in Koguryō were necessarily either high-ranking Chinese migrants or aristocratic officials. We know that fifty-four Koguryō tiles with inscriptions have been excavated up until the present day (in most cases, in Jian county, Jilin province of today's PRC, nearby the North Korean border), and thirty-seven pieces of ceramic with writing on them (mostly in the Koguryō sites in today's South Korean capital of Seoul: this area was under Koguryō control in 475–551).¹² All these inscriptions were made either by low-ranking officials in charge of supervising the local artisans, or possibly by the artisans themselves—who were seemingly able to sign their names and inscribe the name of the locality where the production took place, onto their products. Thus, we may assume that by the fifth and sixth centuries—the time from which most of the tiles and ceramic vessels with inscriptions are dated—basic Chinese writing skills, if not deeper knowledge of classical Chinese, had already become a part of Koguryō's urban culture.

Koguryō's proximity to the Chinese dynastic states, and the large number of Chinese migrants integrated into Koguryō society, seem to have made any attempt to invent a separate local writing system unnecessary. To be sure, some lower-level officials—for example those responsible for erecting Pyongyang fortress, as we can see from the inscriptions they left (566–589)—sometimes wrote Chinese sentences using a typically proto-Korean, Altaic order of words (subject-object-predicate; for classical Chinese a subject-predicate-object sequence would be more natural).¹³ This sort of grammatical “localization” did not result, however, in the creation of a separate local writing system. Koguryō, with its very close diplomatic, trade and cultural connections with the Chinese states and its success in integrating the Chinese population of Lelang and Daifang, obviously did not feel much need to distinguish itself from the Chinese dynastic states by adopting a separate system of writing. This sort of self-promoted cultural integration with what was commonly perceived as the centre of civilization in contemporaneous East Asia contrasted with Koguryō's fiercely independent political attitude, and its long record of military conflicts with its western neighbors.¹⁴

¹⁰See Yun (2007).

¹¹Chōn (2006).

¹²Kim et al. (2008, 58–91, 97–125); Yō (2011).

¹³Nam (2000, 62–66).

¹⁴Yi (2005).

The situation of at least one state in the southern part of the Korean Peninsula was comparable with that of Koguryō. The state of Paekche, which consolidated its centralized administration over *mahan* tribes in the third and fourth centuries, its original centre being today's South Korean capital of Seoul and its vicinities geographically and culturally close to the Daifang-controlled areas to the north, seems to have widely used the Chinese writing from late third and early fourth centuries: its first ever historical book was allegedly written by a “doctor” (Ch. *boshi*, Kor. *paksa*) Gao Xing (Kor. Ko Hŭng), assumedly an intellectual of Lelang or Daifang origin, during the reign of King Kŭnch'ogo (346–375 CE).¹⁵ According to an early Japanese chronicle, *Nihon shoki* (720), Paekche state operated a system of household registers already in the early sixth century (fascicle 17, Keitai tennō, third year, second month). A good number of Paekche inscriptions in the fourth to seventh centuries — on swords, tiles, bricks, wooden tablets, Buddhist reliquaries and steles—survived, but the absolute majority of them are written in fully grammatical Chinese; very few demonstrate the possible influence of Korean word order, and only to a very slight degree. Obviously, Paekche's earlier connections to nearby Daifang and later trade, diplomatic and cultural connections with the southern Chinese dynasties were too close to allow any local variations in writing.¹⁶

The cultural policies of Paekche's eastern neighbor, Silla, which consolidated its power over the south-eastern tribes of *chinhan* and *pyōnhan* by the fifth and early sixth centuries, were, however, saliently different from that of Koguryō and Paekche. The latter developed their power apparatuses after the basics of Chinese writing were already introduced there, primarily by the migrants from Lelang and Daifang; the former, however, had already built the basics of the centralized aristocratic hierarchy by the mid- or late fifth century, when, according to a later Chinese source, the dynastic chronicle *Liang shu* (*Book of Liang*, compiled in 635; fascicle 54, “Account of Silla”), Silla people still “did not have letters and corresponded by making wooden signs.” It meant that the “language of power” of the early Silla state was based upon an elaborate oral tradition. Silla's high- and middle-ranking officials, for example, were known to have titles of rank of mostly native origin (first rank—*ibōlch'an*, second rank—*ich'an*, fourth rank—*p'ajinch'an* etc.) which were later—in the early sixth century or even later—written down with the Chinese characters used phonetically. Some of these titles later acquired the translated equivalents rendered in writing by Chinese characters used semantically. The rank of the first title *ibōlch'an*, for example, was translated as *kakkan*, literally “horn-decorated official,” possibly following the particular appearance of the ritual hairstyle and hair decorations of Silla's chief courtiers.¹⁷ However, such attempts in translation only emphasized the importance of the original native naming, as preserved through oral transmission. By the late fifth century, Silla appears to have developed its own distinctive patterns of official speech, which seemed to be dutifully reflected in the earlier epigraphic monuments of Silla, dated to the early to mid-sixth century. There, the sentence structure mostly tends to follow the native Korean order of words, with modifying words placed in front of the word they modify, and verbs placed at the end of the sentence, after the object. A typical later example of such a “Koreanized” style of Chinese writing is the wooden tablet No 149 from the Wōlsōng (a fortress in the centre of Silla capital city of Sōrabōl, today's Kyōngju) moat, dated to the early seventh century. Most characters are still

¹⁵Kim et al. (1993, 402).

¹⁶Yun (2011).

¹⁷Kwōn (2001).

used semantically, but the order of words in the short inscription—a report on the acquisition of paper, assumedly for the needs of the court—is that of a complex Korean sentence.¹⁸

By the late seventh century—when Silla, having already defeated Paekche (660) and Koguryō (668), safely controlled the whole central and southern part of the Korean Peninsula—this “Koreanized” style of Chinese writing was further elaborated and systemized into a complicated system, which in the Koryō period (918–1392) of Korea was often called *idu*, “the petty-clerks’ writing.” The tradition describes a prominent Silla Confucian, Sōl Ch’ong (late seventh—early eighth centuries) as the inventor of *idu*, although in reality he is thought to have just systematized the pre-existent practice of *idu* use. The use of *idu* was a distinctively indigenous feature of Silla culture, which sharply separated Silla cultural practices from that of either Koguryō or Paekche. All of the three ancient proto-Korean states were essentially bilingual societies where the local oral languages of Altaic origin overlapped with the use of Chinese writing and the classical Chinese language—a language belonging to a different, Sino-Tibetan language family. It was, however, only in the relatively “backward” Silla that the local oral language was also given an expression in writing. The development of *idu* should be without a doubt regarded as one of Silla’s most important contributions to the development of Korea’s own distinctive culture. Having survived Silla’s demise in 936, *idu* continued to serve as the language of lower-level administrative practice (purchase and sale contracts, letters by petty clerks, etc.) and popular religious worship (votive inscriptions, inscriptions on the Buddhist statues and paintings detailing the process of their creation, etc.) practically until the early twentieth century, under the Koryō (918–1392) and Chosōn (1392–1910) dynasties.

At the same time, it is important to note that *idu* in reality, was a complimentary writing system rather than an alternative to classical Chinese. It underwent a course of development—from the earlier, late fifth to late seventh century documents (typified by the wooden tablet No 149 from the Wōlsōng mentioned above) which represented rather a sort of “Koreanized Chinese writing,” with most characters being used semantically but just following the Korean word order, to the authentic *idu* documents of the early eighth century and later, where some characters were used phonetically in order to render the Korean grammatical particles. A good, early example of the latter category is the 755 record on the copying of *Avatamsaka sutra*, (Kor. *Hwaōm sagyōng chosōnggi*) in which the Korean grammatical particles *sik’i* (“to make to do something”), *na* (“or.. or”) or *e* (locative particle) were rendered either phonetically or semantically by such Chinese characters as 弥 (“extensive, full, complete”), 那 (“that”) or 中 (“middle.”) Although the word order was fully Korean, most nouns and verb stems were “normal” Chinese words, aside from some Chinese-character based, Silla-coined nouns like *chōp’it’al* 楮皮脫, “paper mulberry peeler.”¹⁹ In other words, the *idu* script fully depended on Chinese for the bulk of its vocabulary, despite all of its inventiveness in the matter of rendering Korean grammatical patterns with a set of carefully chosen Chinese characters. Rather than a full-blown substitute for classical Chinese, instead it played the role of “Chinese for the masses”—that is, a Chinese-based script which the low-level officials or artisans, less accustomed to the grammatically correct, high-level classical Chinese, could easily use following the Korean grammatical norms.

In the late Silla—early Koryō period (tenth to eleventh centuries), some *idu* documents, apparently authored by the “subalterns” of the mediaeval Korean society with very little

¹⁸Yi (2009, 18–49).

¹⁹Nam (1986), 2000, 200–240).

training in proper Chinese, showed a tendency towards a “radicalization”—that is, a higher proportion of Chinese characters used phonetically. In the 1031 record on Chǒngdosa Temple’s (today’s Northern Kyōngsang Province, Ch’ilgok County) five story high stone pagoda building (Kor. *Chǒngdosa och’ūngsǒkt’ap chosǒng hyǒngjigi*), for example, practically all the particles one can expect from a Korean sentence, as well as some adverbs (“together,” etc.) and the grammatical forms of the past tense and causality of verbs are all rendered by the Chinese characters used phonetically or semantically-phonetically. Still, even in this monument, all the main nouns and verb stems are “normal” Chinese words and Chinese characters used semantically.²⁰ Then, as Korean society increasingly Confucianized in late Koryō—early Chosōn periods (thirteenth-fifteenth centuries), *idu* was also showing a tendency to a “re-Sinification” of sorts: classical Chinese expressions and grammatical forms were added to the fixed patterns of phonetically rendered Korean grammatical particles. It looks as if *idu* was commonly perceived rather as a “vulgarized” form of classical Chinese writing than as an independent writing system—not to speak about any “competition” between *idu* and classical Chinese. By early and mid-Chosōn time (fifteenth-seventeenth centuries), *idu* was progressively becoming a conservative, anachronistic script, as many of its fixed patterns of rendering Korean grammatical forms phonetically reflected the Koryō language rather than the contemporaneous one.²¹ It narrowed its sphere of use: only the clerks with good expertise in *idu* patterns could correctly use it for the sake of document compilation.

Some subdivisions of *idu* possessed a distinctive functionality. For example, *hyangch’al* (literally “native script”) was utilized exclusively for ritual poetry in Silla and early Koryō, known as *hyangga* (literally “native songs”). Only twenty-five typical *hyangga* are extant—fourteen are recorded in *Samguk Yusa* (*Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms*, 1285), a late Koryō compilation of native and Buddhist legends and other forms of “unofficial history,” and eleven were written by a famed Avatamsaka School monk, Kyunyō (923–973) and recorded in his biography of 1075.²² Many more *hyangga* are mentioned in the sources—mostly in connection with Buddhist or native rituals—but are no longer available. *Hyangch’al* differs from the “normal” *idu* of administrative documentation through the far more elaborate phonetic use of Chinese characters for rendering Korean grammar (including sophisticated honorific forms) and also partially for some verb stems; the absolute majority of the nouns and pronouns, however, are Chinese words used semantically. While Silla people are known to be fond of *hyangga*—indeed, in 888 one of the most influential courtiers, *kakkan* Wihong, even spent time compiling an inclusive anthology of *hyangga*, entitled *Samdaemok* (*[Hyangga] of Three Epochs*—no longer extant)²³—there was also a clear understanding that *hyangga* poetry lacked in universality. As Kyunyō’s biographer, Hyōngnyōn Chōng (eleventh and twelfth centuries), masterfully put it in his foreword to Kyunyō’s *hyangga* collection, “Chinese people would not be able to understand more than the foreword here; so, while it would be easy for the people of our country to immerse themselves in these songs and learn them by heart, the songs still bring only half of the possible benefit [...].”²⁴ *Hyangga* were seen as “too provincial” compared to Buddhism’s more universal tasks. In fact, one of the reasons the

²⁰Nam (1997, 2000, 481–534).

²¹Han’guk komunsō Hakhoe (2002, 21–25).

²²See the English translation of this biography: Adrian Buzo (1993).

²³Kim et al. (1993, 230).

²⁴Cited in Hwang (1997, 284–308).

native systems of writing did not spread outside of their prescribed niches (certain spheres of document administration, certain genres of poetry, etc.) in ancient and early medieval Korea was the paramount importance of classical Chinese for Buddhism. Accepted on the official level in 372 in Koguryō, in 384 in Paekche and much later, in 527, in Silla, by the seventh-eighth centuries Buddhism had become a “civil religion” of sorts—it was universally spread across all the social strata and in all the regions under Silla rule. Buddhist sutras and sutra commentaries were all in Chinese—universally legible in all regions despite the differences of dialect. Sutra commentaries produced in Korea in classical Chinese were often also read and cited in China and Japan.²⁵ Thus, Chinese possessed the status of the “universal religion’s universal language”—which made any “competition” with it absolutely impossible for any locally designed writing system. The result was a bilingual society in which both classical Chinese and local systems had their own, clearly defined roles.

While the invention in 1443–1444 of the Korean alphabet—solemnly re-named *hangŭl*, “great writing,” by linguistic nationalists in early twentieth-century Korea²⁶—on royal orders is often described as a breakthrough on the path towards creating the “national language,” bilingualism seems to have remained the core of the linguistic situation on the Korean Peninsula. Just like *idu* with all its variations, the new alphabet—phonetic and independent from Chinese writing—had its own niche in administrative and cultural life; it was, however, somewhat larger in scope. First, it was used for what we would today call the “entertainment sphere.” The alphabet was widely used for writing down the vernacular *sijo* poetry²⁷ assumedly developed in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries by aristocratic scholar-officials (*sadaebu*) who wanted to express either their Confucian ideals or their (often Taoist in spirit) spiritual searches for a bucolic utopia in a form well suited to singing.²⁸ Among all the various *sijo* sub-genres, the narrative *sijo* (*sasŏl sijo*), also known as long *sijo* (*chang sijo*), had the strongest connection to institutional entertainment. Most poems in this form—which was developed by the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in sync with the further development of the middle layers in Chosŏn dynasty’s urban society—were composed either by middle- or low-ranking officials and merchants who (unlike the aristocratic scholar-officials whose behavior was subject to stricter regulations) enjoyed unrestricted access to the quarters of the female entertainers (*kisaeng*). It was exactly the female entertainers who usually sang these poems—and even wrote some of them.²⁹ Second, the alphabet was actively used for creating and spreading popular prose. Vernacular novels—in the beginning often translations of such famed Chinese works as *Jiandeng Xinhua* (*New Tales Told by Lamplight*) by Qu You (1347–1433), but from early seventeenth century also Korea-produced works—were often authored by aristocratic scholar-officials; however, the main consumers of such works were originally the aristocratic ladies whose “correct moral education” was one of the main concerns of the novel writers. From the eighteenth century, however, the vernacular novels by anonymous authors, which often were used as scenarios for popular folk operas (*p’ansori*), also gained a readership among the literate commoners attracted to—among other features of these novels—their parodying of the high-classes’

²⁵ On Korean influences on China and Japanese Buddhism, see Buswell (2006).

²⁶ Lee (2003, 27).

²⁷ *Sijo* is a three-line Korean poem, usually containing 44–46 syllables. See Rutt (1998, 10–12).

²⁸ Chang (1986, 277–285).

²⁹ Kang (1999, 159–253).

moralist hypocrisy, and their often challenging approach to the rules of patriarchal ethics. The absolute majority of commoners, especially women, were, of course, illiterate; but the vernacular novels were customarily read aloud in groups by the few literate members of the community rather than enjoyed alone.³⁰

Third, the alphabet was used by lower-ranking administrators for certain documents—especially these pertaining to the legal proceedings—that were to be announced to or read by the broader community, including the women and commoners who sometimes could read the alphabet but were almost completely illiterate in Chinese writing. Typically, personal attests or certificates of various kinds (*sugi*, or *sup'yo*)—for example, sale and purchase receipts or the divorce agreements between commoners (in the families of aristocratic officials, with their strict Confucian norms, divorces by mutual agreement were almost impossible)—were written in the alphabet.³¹ Fourth, the alphabet was usable in the realm of personal communication—especially if women were to communicate among themselves, or if the communication was of a strictly private, familial sort.³² And fifth, technical officials, specialists (medics etc.) and commoners were to use *ŏnhae* (vernacularly commented) versions of Confucian classics, Buddhist sutras or medical and military reference books.³³ All in all, the alphabet was usable mostly in the cases of communication between various social strata (vernacular novels written by aristocratic officials, government-issued documents in alphabet or government-printed Confucian classics *ŏnhae* are good examples of the alphabet being used to “enlighten the masses”) or between the underprivileged (commoners or women). When, however, the communication was to take place between the male members of the privileged aristocratic official class, there was hardly any space for using the alphabet, at least in the majority of normal situations. The use of the alphabet was rather unthinkable in the genres, for example, of court memorial (presented by the aristocratic officials to the king) or Confucian philosophical treatises. The alphabet could be useful for the task of learning Chinese—in fact, one of the most important *ŏnhae* texts of Chosŏn times was the vernacular rendition of Du Fu’s (712–770) poems (first published in 1481), thought to be a must-read on the way to becoming an accomplished poet in classical Chinese.³⁴ In this case too, however, the Korean alphabet was to facilitate “proper” written communication in classical Chinese rather than to be a substitute for it. Not unlike *idu*, it was a complimentary, secondary writing system—a local script with no ambition to take the place of the regional lingua franca and lingua sacra safely occupied by classical Chinese from the second to third centuries CE onwards.

17.3 Conclusion: Why the Classical Chinese Retained its Centrality

Before the status of classical Chinese as the state’s official script was abolished as a part of modernizing reforms in 1894,³⁵ it used to function as the main administrative tool and the main medium of elite communication in various states on the Korean peninsula for two millennia. The locally devised systems, originally based on Chinese writing (*idu*) but then

³⁰Chŏng (1999, 181–283).

³¹Paek (2007).

³²Han’guk komunsŏ Hakhoe (2002, 28–29).

³³See, for example, Kim (1999) and Yi (2009).

³⁴Kyujanggak Institute for Korean Studies (2010, 168–169).

³⁵Kim (1990, 35).

designed in a highly scientific way independently of it (Korean alphabet)³⁶ were to assist in learning Chinese, or to facilitate the communicative process in cases the sub-elites (petty clerks, technical specialists etc.) or non-elites were to be involved in. But completely supplanting the classical Chinese with any of these systems was out of question. As Buddhism was an important dominant religious discourse until the end of the Koryŏ dynasty, classical Chinese was playing the part of *lingua sacra*. It was the language of sutras and commentaries: Buddhist Hybrid Chinese (BHC) had already begun to spread to the Korean Peninsula in the fourth century CE. It was also the language of the Confucian teachings, which already played an important role in statecraft under the Han Empire's four commanderies and became (in the form of neo-Confucianism) the official ideology of the Chosŏn dynasty since its founding in 1392.³⁷ To a degree, the Chosŏn state exhibited the traits which might be termed "ideocratic."³⁸ Neo-Confucian ideology not only simply legitimised the domination of the aristocratic scholar-official elite, but also provided the elite with a monistic framework of thought and behaviour which was widely regarded as the only universally valid one.³⁹ In such a milieu, the language of Confucian ideology—which was simultaneously the language of "model" Chinese statecraft—could not but acquire a very special status. As *the* language of the presumed universal ethical truth, it was the central element of the cultural capital a member of the ruling class was supposed to possess and display to their peers. Together with classical Chinese, the multitude of historical facts from the Chinese past and the plethora of ideological, philosophical and literary texts, mostly of Chinese provenance, were to be memorized and internalized. The internalization of Chinese—and thus, common regional—culture played the crucial role in the system of status distinctions providing the society with a visible yardstick of societal differentiation. The elites were to be a part of the universal regional civilizational space, linguistically and culturally; and the ruled were left to live in a multitude of local lingo-cultural spaces. Bilingualism, in this way, was first and foremost a class phenomenon. In such a structure, the local writing systems, even if they—like the Korean alphabet—were not directly based on the Chinese script, ultimately provided the masses with some limited access to the supposedly universal—that is, classical Chinese-based—cultural resources. After all, the absolute majority of the key ideological terms one could write down in the alphabet—the words like "loyalty and filial piety" (*ch'unghyo*) or "Heavenly principles" (*ch'ŏlli*)—were taken from classical Chinese. The class-based bilingual system was not, of course, static. It is undeniable that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the prominence of vernacular literature, for example, became much more tangible.⁴⁰ However, the decisive blow to the hegemony of classical Chinese was eventually dealt by the changes in the socio-political basis of the society—that is, by the dissolution of the hereditary status system in the early twentieth century and the empowerment of new, modern ruling classes (bureaucrats and entrepreneurs) whose main cultural capital was both the command of modernized vernacular Korean and mastery of the new "universal" foreign languages—Japanese and ultimately English.

³⁶Ledyard (1966).

³⁷Deuchler (1992).

³⁸Piekalkiewicz and Penn (1995, 62).

³⁹Palais (1996, 25–61, 125–170).

⁴⁰Ko (1998, 65–70, 229–253).

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