

The Struggle for Literacy in Korea:

*An examination of literacy and the power of language in Korea, 1392-1945*

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April 19, 2012

## **Introduction**

Traditional narratives tend to break Korean history into two periods: the pre-modern and the modern. In addition, each scholar has his or her own temporal dividing line separating these two periods, whether it be a specific year, or a range of years. Regardless of differing opinions and different markers for what determines “modernity,” all of these historical narratives have one thing in common: they split Korean history in two. Despite this artificial split created by many an academic work, several aspects of Korea’s long history can serve as a continuous link between the pre-modern and modern periods as a way to challenge the notion of forcing the need to create a definite dividing line between two historical periods. This paper will examine one such of those aspects.

I will argue that Korean history, from the Chosŏn period through the colonial period, has been marked by a societal struggle for literacy. In other words, literacy, at various stages in Korean history, has served as the locus of power that has manifested itself in a myriad of forms. Furthermore, I will examine literacy as a vehicle for linking such disparate members of society as Neo-Confucian literati during the Imjin War and Korean independence activists of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The first part of this paper examines the pre-Kanghwa Treaty Chosŏn period (1392-1876) and contains the majority of my analysis. In it, I establish the meaning of literacy during this time period and focus on literary Chinese as a determiner of power and social status. First, by examining writings by the Chinese emperor and Korean kings, I will explore the power of the written word in East Asia, narrowing my focus to Chosŏn Korea.

The next section will establish literacy’s role as one of the most important factors in maintaining and reinforcing a strict hierarchical society dictated by Neo-Confucian norms. I will

show how educational institutions cemented the Chosŏn elites' position at the top of the social ladder through a strict control of the literary sphere.

The next section related to literacy in the Chosŏn period will examine literacy's role in Chosŏn Korea's foreign relations with Ming China. I will show how literary Chinese created a community of transnational scholars and helped forge relations between these two nations. On the other hand, I will also examine how an inadequate command of written Chinese also had the ability to damage foreign relations between Korea and China during the Chosŏn period.

After discussing the relationship between literacy and foreign relations, I will complicate the binary notion of a class of fully literate elites contrasted with the rest of the "illiterate" population. This portion of the paper will highlight varying degrees of knowledge of literary Chinese, and how this knowledge (or lack thereof) affected certain social actors such as students with a low intellectual ability and women.

The next section of this paper delves into the relationship that exists between literacy and the notion of masculinity in Chosŏn Korea. I will argue that knowledge of literary Chinese and a strong ability to write poetry in Chinese fit the ideals of masculinity for Chosŏn elites. This portion of the paper also highlights the power of literacy in assigning certain gender roles and hardening the lines between men and women in Korea by analyzing the interplay between literary Chinese and *Hangŭl*, Korea's native script, during this time period. I will further reinforce the power of literacy with regards to ascribing power during the Chosŏn dynasty.

The last section related to literacy in the pre-Kanghwa Treaty Chosŏn period will deal with literacy as it relates to views of Japan as "barbaric" during the Imjin War. I will show how knowledge of literary Chinese was used by Chosŏn elites to ascribe a certain sense of civilization to Korea while simultaneously criticizing Japan as "barbaric" for lacking this knowledge of

Chinese. However, I will also demonstrate how literacy helped to transcend notions of barbarism and hatred toward the Japanese by facilitating supposedly “civilized” interactions between scholar-officials of the two countries, who were both well-versed in literary Chinese.

The next section of the paper will examine two major shifts with regards to Korean history, and these shifts’ effect on the power of literacy. While both shifts drastically changed Korean society, I argue that the struggle for literacy and literacy’s power in society remained constant, despite the changes that occurred with regards to scripts and languages.

The first shift – the breakdown of the Sino-centric world order in East Asia – will focus on the final decades of the Chosŏn dynasty, from 1876-1910. Here I will argue that what it meant to be literate changed dramatically as a result of the elevation of the status of *Hangŭl*, Korea’s native vernacular script. Despite the drastic expansion of the officially “literate” sphere, I will show that literacy still granted power and agency to certain members of Korean society, who maintained a “struggle” for literacy by actively pushing for the inclusion of *Hangŭl* into the official and public sphere.

The second shift – Korea’s annexation by Japan and the subsequent colonial experience – will focus on Korea’s status as a colony of Japan from 1910-1945. This part of the paper will argue that despite changes in both script and language, from literary Chinese, to *Hangŭl*, to Japanese, there still existed a struggle for literacy in society. I will show how literacy in Japanese became the major (but not the only) determiner of power for members of Korean society at this time, as a result of formal and informal Japanese policies. I will also demonstrate a more nuanced view of literacy at the time by exploring the status of literary Chinese and Korean during the 1920s, as knowledge of these languages still carried with it a certain degree of power and social agency.

This section of the paper will also delve into yet another form of literacy during the colonial period: literacy in foreign languages. Using Korean independence activist Yun Ch'i-ho's life and diary as an example, I will highlight the struggle for literacy in foreign languages other than Japanese as the highest form of personal cultivation in colonial Korea.

Finally, I will quickly go beyond 1945 and analyze the short story "Kapitan Ri" by author Chŏn Kwangyong. Through his fictional account of a Korean doctor in the 1940s and 1950s, I will show how popular notions of literacy as an avenue for power are reflected in the post-colonial period, and how these notions share much in common with notions dating back to the early Chosŏn period.

### *What is Literacy?*

The use of the word "literacy" in this paper will refer to different "literacies" depending on the time period and the sector of society in question. For example, in the case of early Chosŏn Korea, literacy will refer not merely to the ability to read any script, but rather will refer almost exclusively to the ability to read and write literary Chinese. My later analysis of Korea in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, will focus on literacy as the ability to read or write literary Chinese, *Hangŭl*, or any mix of the two. Every section in my paper will begin by explaining what I will consider literacy to encompass during that period, and any deviations from my initial definitions will be highlighted and expanded on in their respective sections.

My analysis will borrow heavily on scholar Brian V. Street's "ideological" model of literacy. He summarizes this approach as follows:

Those who subscribe to this ["ideological"] model concentrate on the specific social practices of reading and writing. They recognise the ideological and therefore culturally embedded nature of such practices. The model stresses the

significance of the socialisation process in the construction of the meaning of literacy for participants and is therefore concerned with the general social institutions through which this process takes place and not just the explicit ‘educational’ ones. It distinguishes claims for the consequences of literacy from its real significance for specific social groups.<sup>1</sup>

He goes on to enumerate certain characteristics of his “ideological” model, of which I will highlight those most pertinent to my analysis:

It [the model] assumes that the meaning of literacy depends upon the social institutions in which it is embedded [...] literacy can only be known to us in forms which already have political and ideological significance [...] the particular practices of reading and writing that are taught in any context depend upon such aspects of social structure as stratification (such as where certain social groups may be taught only to read), and the role of educational institutions [...] the process whereby reading and writing are learnt are what construct the meaning of it for particular practitioners [...] we would probably more appropriately refer to ‘literacies’ than to any single ‘literacy.’<sup>2</sup>

By using Street’s model as a basis for my analysis, I will focus on those “literacies” throughout Korean history that had “political and ideological significance.” I will also focus on specific social groups and what literacy meant for them based on the cultural and historical context they found themselves in.

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<sup>1</sup> Brian V. Street, *Literacy in Theory and Practice* (Cambridge, Mass: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Street, *Literacy in Theory and Practice*, 8.

## The Struggle for Literacy in Chosŏn Korea

First, it is necessary to explore the meaning of being literate in Chosŏn Korea. For the purposes of this analysis, the focus will rest on the Chosŏn polity from its inception through approximately 1876, when Chosŏn Korea first became exposed to the West. While I acknowledge the gross oversimplification of a time period marked by wide social and economic changes, this will help highlight the major points related to the struggle for literacy during this time. The majority of the analysis will focus on the later Chosŏn period, corresponding roughly to the post-Imjin War era.

### *Literary Chinese in Chosŏn Korea*

To be literate in Chosŏn Korea meant to have varying degrees of mastery of literary Chinese,<sup>3</sup> a strictly written form of the language that attempted to mimic the written Chinese of the era stretching roughly from the late Spring and Autumn period (770 – 476 BC) through the end of the Han dynasty (206 BC – 220 AD).<sup>4</sup> As early as the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD, elites on the Korean peninsula adopted Chinese characters and literary Chinese as the official form of writing, which existed concurrently with a vernacular devoid of any script.<sup>5</sup> The full incorporation of the civil service examination (*kwagŏ*) in the late Koryŏ dynasty meant that the government – whose civil institutions would continue on to the Chosŏn period – would be composed of members of the

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<sup>3</sup> While the terms ‘literary Chinese’ (文言) and ‘classical Chinese’ (古文) are often used interchangeably, Sinologists maintain the two are different. In a strict sense, classical Chinese refers to the written variant of the language that existed *only* from roughly 600 BC until the end of the Han dynasty in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD. Literary Chinese, meanwhile, refers to the written variant of Chinese that was *based on* pre-3<sup>rd</sup> century classical Chinese, and remained the written standard for the language until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the vernacular movement took hold. In this paper, I will maintain the distinction between these two terms when referring to literary Chinese, which is the Chinese (漢文) used by Chosŏn elites in all official writings.

<sup>4</sup> Jerry Norman, *Chinese* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 83.

<sup>5</sup> Young-mee Yu Cho, “Diglossia in Korean Language and Literature: a Historical Perspective,” *East Asia: An International Quarterly* 20, no. 1 (2002): 3.

elite society who were well versed in the Confucian classics and maintained a “high level of scholastic ability.”<sup>6</sup> Needless to say, this ability was firmly anchored by a high proficiency of literary Chinese.

### *The Power of Words and Writing in the Chosŏn Polity*

Writing came to have boundless power in the Chosŏn period. It both created kings, and gave those same kings the power to rule. With knowledge of literary Chinese as the main tool for political advancement among the elite, it is no wonder that words and the written language were bestowed with a “mythic importance.”<sup>7</sup> Through Chinese royal investiture of the Korean kings and royal edicts by Korean monarchs to their subjects, writing became the symbol of ultimate power.

### *Investiture*

Each time a new Korean king ascended to the throne, the Ming emperor sent a lavish embassy to Chosŏn with the purpose of granting investiture.<sup>8</sup> This elaborate ritual involved Chinese envoys traveling to the Korean capital with a written edict from the Emperor himself. This edict, which essentially appointed the Korean king as ruler over his domain, was read aloud “outside the city wall” to the king, who “prostrated himself when the imperial edict was read to him.”<sup>9</sup> While Key-Hiuk Kim asserts that investiture of the king of Korea from the Chinese emperor was purely symbolic and ultimately unnecessary for the establishment of a Korean

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<sup>6</sup> Edward J. Shultz, *Generals and Scholars: Military Rule in Medieval Korea* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2000), 7.

<sup>7</sup> Cho, Young-mee Yu, “Diglossia,” 3.

<sup>8</sup> Donald N. Clark, “Sino-Korean Tributary Relations Under the Ming,” in *The Cambridge History of China: vol. 8. The Ming Dynasty, 1368-1644*, eds. Denis Twitchett and Frederick Wade Mote (Cambridge, Mass: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 283.

<sup>9</sup> Key-Hiuk Kim, *The Last Phase of the East Asian World Order: Korea, Japan, and the Chinese Empire, 1860-1882* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 6-7.



king's authority,<sup>10</sup> Donald Clark shows that investiture was highly valued by Chosŏn kings, and equally valued by the Ming emperors for its leveraging ability (investiture was withheld twice during the Ming dynasty, over disputes related to how the Korean kings in question rose to power).<sup>11</sup>

Thus, investiture of Korean kings by Chinese emperors serves to underline the power of writing and of words in Chosŏn Korea. To the elite of the time, authority literally emanated from the recitation of this piece of literary Chinese text, forcing the king of an entire region to leave the comfort of his seat of power and bow before it. Therefore, that writing and words had a similar power as they worked their way down the chain of elites, from emperor to king, from king to scholar-officials, and from scholar-officials to subjects, is a phenomenon that characterized Korean history as early as the late Koryŏ period, and became a widespread fact in the Chosŏn era.

### *Royal Edicts*

Just as the edicts granting the Korean king authority over Chosŏn reflected the power of the Chinese emperor in the form of the written word, so did royal edicts reflect the power of the Chosŏn king over his realm and his subjects. For example, King T'aejo of Chosŏn (Yi Sŏng-gye) proclaimed his intent to govern over the people after receiving the "Mandate of Heaven" in the form of a written and disseminated royal edict.<sup>12</sup> An edict such as this reflects the use of the written word as a tool to symbolize the establishment, justification, and spread of royal authority. These edicts, most of which were written in literary Chinese, perpetuate the status of Chinese as

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<sup>10</sup> Kim, *The Last Phase*, 9.

<sup>11</sup> Clark, "Tributary Relations Under the Ming," 289-90.

<sup>12</sup> Jahyun Kim Haboush, "Royal Edicts: Constructing an Ethnopolitical Community," in *Epistolary Korea: Letters in the Communicative Space of the Chosŏn, 1392-1910*, ed. Jahyun Kim Haboush (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 17.

the main medium of written expression and literacy in it as the dominant marker of elite status in Chosŏn society. What then, are we to make of the handful of royal edicts written in Korea's native script, *Hangŭl*?

As Jahyun Kim Haboush explains, King Sŏnjo employed the vernacular script to disseminate an edict during the Imjin War,<sup>13</sup> exhorting Koreans captured by the Japanese in the southern part of the peninsula to escape their captors and return home.<sup>14</sup> Haboush suggests that using the vernacular could be interpreted as a way for the king to directly reach Korean captives, away from the prying eyes of the Japanese captors, who presumably were part of an East Asian literary community based around knowledge of literary Chinese.<sup>15</sup> I believe that beyond these practical purposes, using *Hangŭl* also carried other meanings.

First, King Sŏnjo elevated – if only temporarily – the status of then century-old *Hangŭl*, allowing it to exist side-by-side with the highly revered Chinese script as a symbol of state power. In doing so, members of society literate in only the vernacular were granted transient elite status. This “elite status” in the context of the edict refers to the importance of these captives to the court's war efforts. As the edict describes, those who returned with “detailed information about enemy operations” would be handsomely rewarded.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, reaching these men and women with *Hangŭl* was an absolute necessity for the king, who required any advantage against the invading Japanese. While literacy in *Hangŭl* would not become a determiner of power for at least another three hundred years, a topic this paper addresses later, King Sŏnjo's royal edict to Korean POWs of the Imjin War temporarily conferred a symbolic powerful quality to Korea's

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<sup>13</sup> Haboush, “Royal Edicts,” 18.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 21.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 19.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 21.

native script by including the “*Hangŭl*-only” community into the sphere of official written communication.

At first glance, this complicates my initial analysis of the power of literacy in Chosŏn Korea. If knowledge of literary Chinese created and perpetuated certain power structures in pre-modern Korea, then *Hangŭl* should have had no place in any elite circle. The example above, however, is meant to highlight the malleability of literacy based on top-down directives. Sŏnjo’s court granted power to social actors literate in only *Hangŭl* during a time of national strife and extreme circumstances. These circumstances allowed for a temporary break in traditional practices, such as the use of literary Chinese for all official communication. Despite elevating the status of *Hangŭl* for a period of time, literacy in literary Chinese still remained the main determiner of power in Chosŏn Korea.

#### *Social Structure Dictated by Neo-Confucian Ideology, Reinforced by Literacy*

In order to establish a state based on the ideals of Neo-Confucianism, leaders of Chosŏn Korea created a comprehensive public education system charged with disseminating morality and propriety through the rigorous teaching of the Confucian classics.<sup>17</sup> This approach suggests a top-down method for Confucianizing society, as these schools served to train future bureaucrats to prepare for the civil service examination (*kwagŏ*). Students of these institutions would take several exams of escalating importance in the hopes of becoming one of the elite thirty-three chosen to become bureaucrats in the government.<sup>18</sup> By the time these students reached the last stage of the examination process (the *munghwa*), they were tested on “their ability to write

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<sup>17</sup> Jahyun Kim Haboush, “The Confucianization of Korean Society,” in *The East Asian region: Confucian heritage and its modern adaptation*, ed. Gilbert Rozman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 92-3.

<sup>18</sup> Jahyun Kim Haboush, “Creating a Society of Civil Culture: The Early Joseon 1392-1592,” In *Art of the Korean Renaissance, 1400-1600*, ed. Soyoung Lee (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2009), 7.

diplomatic documents...their ability to craft critical essays on current affairs, [and] the composition of poetry.”<sup>19</sup>

Thus, the bureaucracy of Chosŏn Korea was chosen based on rigorous training in reading, writing, and analyzing texts in literary Chinese. Literacy then became the main avenue for ascending to the ranks of men who hoped to shape society in their own Neo-Confucian image. This addresses the main point of this paper: Korean society as a society marked by a struggle for literacy. The civil service examination system demonstrates how varying degrees of literacy and mastery of literary Chinese were achieved through schooling and strenuous testing procedures (hence, the “struggle,” since at each subsequent stage in the process, the candidates for advancement became fewer and fewer). One must be careful to confine this “struggle” to an elite portion of the population who had access to formal education. As Haboush asserts, “many groups were excluded from taking it [the *kwagŏ*] based on class and gender.”<sup>20</sup>

Therefore, by limiting access to literacy in literary Chinese to a small segment of the population and creating a direct path to prestigious bureaucratic posts through demonstrated prowess in the use of literary Chinese, the Chosŏn government used literacy to reinforce a social structure with scholar-officials at the top, and the illiterate masses at the bottom. Naturally, there existed a “gray area” of Chinese literacy that also had a direct effect on certain actors’ positions in society. This issue will be addressed later. For now, however, I argue that mastery of literary Chinese by the most privileged portion of society granted them with not only the ability but also the self-ascribed *right* to govern the population and structure society along Neo-Confucianist lines. Martina Deuchler summarizes the status of these men perfectly when she asserts that, “[T]he scholar-official fulfilled a prominent role as a morally superior man (*hyŏn*) who was

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<sup>19</sup> Haboush, “Creating a Society of Civil Culture,” 7.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 8.

called upon to lead the ignorant masses. The scholar-officials set themselves apart from the rest of society as a special group that was, on the basis of its merits in government service, vested with extraordinary privileges.”<sup>21</sup> What I would add to this argument is that at the center of these “extraordinary privileges” was their literary ability. Literacy was, in effect, the determiner of power and status in the highly stratified society of Chosŏn Korea.

#### *Literacy and Foreign Relations: China*

The struggle for literacy in Chosŏn Korea can also be examined as a reflection of the foreign relations at the time. As Korea at the time was firmly part of a Sinocentric world order, this part of the paper will focus solely on Ming-Chosŏn relations and how literacy and the written word provided a locus for the negotiation of this relationship.

As discussed earlier, royal investiture by the Ming emperor demonstrated the power of the written (literary Chinese) word with regards to the dissemination of authority and the legitimacy of the Chosŏn king. Writing could also have the reverse effect. That is to say, it could discredit the Korean polity in the eyes of the Chinese emperor if not used appropriately. For example, during the early years of both the Ming and the Chosŏn dynasties, the Ming emperor was “offended” by “poorly worded memorials from Korea,” which greatly disturbed the creation of smooth relations between the two countries at the time.<sup>22</sup> An even more tangible consequence of the adverse effect of poor writing was the closing of the border between China and Korea after three separate incidents of offending the Ming emperor by sending memorials that were deemed unacceptable by the Chinese court.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Martina Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation of Korea: A Study of Society and Ideology* (Cambridge, Mass: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1992), 109-10.

<sup>22</sup> Clark, “Tributary Relations Under the Ming,” 277.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 277-78.

These instances demonstrate that writing and literacy were taken extremely seriously by elites at the highest level. This also highlights how varying degrees of literacy (in this case, insufficient command of literary Chinese) had a direct effect on Sino-Korean affairs. This nebulous territory that could perhaps be called “semi-literacy” can be seen in interactions that took place in the literary space between the Ming and Chosŏn Korea. As Ŏ Sukkwŏn, a minor official in 16<sup>th</sup> century Korea explains, Chinese officials deemed some of the official letters from Korea “unintelligible.”<sup>24</sup> Ŏ goes on to defend his countrymen’s efforts to write properly in Chinese, offering an example of his own stellar abilities to write in literary Chinese to the point of passing off his literary productions as authored by an actual Chinese person.<sup>25</sup>

Despite Ŏ’s vehement assertions that Koreans wrote just as well as the Chinese, his writings suggest a less straightforward reality. His *Miscellany* suggests that many high-ranking officials in Chosŏn perhaps lacked the appropriate level of literacy necessary for proper diplomatic communications. Therefore, while a high degree of literacy granted noble Koreans a lofty social status and immense privileges, there were many officials at the top who lacked a true mastery of literary Chinese. This point, while seemingly contradicting my original arguments, actually upholds my assertions in several ways. First, I argue that these men managed to master just enough of the necessary material to excel in passing the Korean *kwagŏ*, thereby still upholding the power of literacy in Chosŏn Korea. Second, their blunders with regards to written communications with China demonstrate the power of the written word and how poorly worded missives served to damage the relationship between two states.

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<sup>24</sup> Peter H. Lee, trans., *A Korean Storyteller’s Miscellany: The P’aegwan chapki of Ŏ Sukkwŏn* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 150.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 150-51.

Ŏ Sukkwŏn's own life also underlines certain realities with regards to literacy in Chosŏn Korea. Through his writings and his interactions with his Chinese counterparts in the Ming court, it becomes apparent that he had a near perfect grasp of literary Chinese. Therefore, logic would dictate that he should have held a high position resulting from his command of the written word. This was not the case, however. Peter Lee points out that "Ŏ Sukkwŏn was indeed a minor official who was denied higher status because of his origins."<sup>26</sup> Thus we see the limits of literacy to ascribe power in Chosŏn Korea, as social origins still played a central role in dictating any potential social advancement. Despite this roadblock, Ŏ enjoyed certain privileges that stemmed directly from his literary prowess. He traveled often to China, interacted with Ming officials, wrote communications in the name of Chosŏn, and overall helped to maintain stable relations between the two states. Literacy may not have vaulted him to the ranks of the elite bureaucracy, but it certainly shaped his career in a way that partially defied his humble origins.

#### *The Varying Degrees of Literacy*

At this point it becomes necessary to further develop the notion of varying degrees of literacy in Chosŏn Korea, and how these differences affected certain social actors. Drawing again from Ŏ's *Miscellany*, we see that certain women in Chosŏn Korea had access to an education and were able to write poetry in literary Chinese.<sup>27</sup> While Ŏ criticizes some works as "insipid," he acknowledges their raw talent and their ability to write using Chinese.<sup>28</sup> This suggests that certain women (from the upper-class, no doubt), while unable to gain true power as a result of their gender, could use the power of writing to break out of their traditional roles as mothers and keepers of the household. Through writing and a certain degree of literacy, these

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<sup>26</sup> Lee, *Miscellany*, ix.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 250.

<sup>28</sup> Lee, *Miscellany*, 250.

women were remembered in history by figures such as Ŏ Sukkwŏn, and elevated their marginalized status through their writings, which were deemed sufficiently well-crafted enough to be discussed by elite Chosŏn men.

A lower degree of literacy was also common among students who joined the so-called private academies (*sŏwŏn*). While discussing the role and growth of the private academies in Chosŏn Korea is outside the scope of this paper, it suffices to say that the *sŏwŏn* served to break the monopoly on Neo-Confucian scholarship previously held by the state-run public schools (*hyanggyo*), and existed not purely to prepare students to pass the civil service examinations, but rather for the pursuit of Neo-Confucian knowledge for its own sake.<sup>29</sup> Evidence that many of the students in private academies had a lower degree of literacy can be found in one official's complaint in 1675. He laments, "students of public schools who are not literate vie with each other to gain admission as academy students to avoid the military tax."<sup>30</sup> This alludes to the greater problem of young men joining private academies to avoid paying a military tax. By joining *sŏwŏn* to avoid this tax, young men who were not as qualified to continue their studies at the public schools used the dissemination of Neo-Confucian knowledge (namely, literacy) by the private academies as a way to pursue their selfish financial needs. Literacy thereby took on a different role of empowerment during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when the number of private academies was at its height.<sup>31</sup> It enabled certain social actors to continue "struggling" for literacy and continue to gain benefits from this struggle, even if these actors had no intention of taking the demanding civil service examinations.

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<sup>29</sup> Haboush, "Creating a Society of Civil Culture," 9.

<sup>30</sup> Yŏng-Ho Ch'oe, "Private Academies and the State in Late Chosŏn Korea," in *Culture and the State in Late Chosŏn Korea*, eds. Jahyun Kim Haboush and Martina Deuchler (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999), 32.

<sup>31</sup> Haboush, "Creating a Society of Civil Culture," 8.



My analysis of literacy as the ultimate tool of empowerment in Chosŏn Korea would benefit greatly from a detailed knowledge of private academies' rosters. Several of the *sŏwŏn* admission guidelines stated that there would be no discrimination based on social status when admitting students.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, the private academies might have served as locations for men of lowly birth (second sons, commoners, etc.) to empower themselves through a struggle for literacy and Neo-Confucian knowledge. Unfortunately, scholars today lack any evidence that demonstrates whether or not private academies were true to their word.<sup>33</sup>

### *Literacy and Masculinity in Chosŏn Korea*

In addition to reinforcing a rigid social structure, shaping foreign relations, and granting a degree of agency to certain non-elite social actors, a good command of the written word also served as a marker of masculinity and manhood for Chosŏn elites. Linking literacy with masculinity in the Chosŏn era will help challenge the Park Chung-hee (and perhaps continuing contemporary) notion of an “effeminate” Chosŏn elite, unconcerned with warfare and more concerned with poetry.<sup>34</sup> While the latter might be true in an extremely oversimplified sense, it is only “true” because to be concerned with poetry (i.e. strive to become highly competent in literary Chinese) *was* to be masculine at the time. As Vladimir Tikhonov asserts, “the valiant fighter did not seem to represent the dominant paradigm of ideal manhood in late Chosŏn society, nor was violence required as proof of manhood in the real-time daily life of the dominant classes [the *yangban*].”<sup>35</sup> Tikhonov goes on to explain exactly what it meant to be a

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<sup>32</sup> Ch'oe, “Private Academies,” 21.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 22.

<sup>34</sup> Sheila Miyoshi Jager, “Monumental Histories: Manliness, the Military, and the War Memorial,” *Public Culture* 14, no. 2 (2002): 390.

<sup>35</sup> Vladimir Tikhonov, “Masculinizing the Nation: Gender Ideologies in Traditional Korea and in the 1890s-1900s Korean Enlightenment Discourse,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 66, no. 4 (2007): 1039.

*yangban* “*taejangbu*.”<sup>36</sup> He describes this “manly man” as an “impassionate learner,” who also had an ability to “astonish [his] elders with unusual study skills.”<sup>37</sup> This man must also be “a man of balance and restraint” with a sense of “duty and righteousness.”<sup>38</sup>

Kang Hang, a *yangban* scholar whose record of captivity in Japan during the Imjin War is recorded in *The Record of a Shepherd (Kanyangnok)*, embodies Tikhonov’s ideal of Chosŏn masculinity through Kang’s own literary prowess. To begin with, as Haboush and Robinson point out, the *Kanyangnok* is a “master tale of Confucian loyalty.”<sup>39</sup> Therefore there is no room for doubt with regards to Kang Hang’s own portrayal as the model of Chosŏn elite masculinity. One way he demonstrates this masculinity is through the expression of extreme emotions in the form of poetry. One such poem reads:

The beneficence of my King reached even prisoners in the enemy cave;  
The sail that left the edge of the earth nears the season of our barley harvest.  
So distant are the enemy islands, so vast the sea;  
My eternal heart swells to fill the lonely ship.<sup>40</sup>

Here, Kang is grappling with the extreme emotions of loneliness, homesickness, and despair with regards to his and his compatriots’ situation as captives in Japan. He is also exalting the Chosŏn king and praising him for his benevolence, thereby reasserting his loyalty and his status as an ideal Confucian man. Many other such poems are scattered throughout Kang’s record, proving that a high level of literacy and proper command of Chinese poetry was the ideal way of

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<sup>36</sup> 대장부(大丈夫)

<sup>37</sup> Tikhonov, “Masculinizing the Nation,” 1042.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Jahyun Kim Haboush and Kenneth R. Robinson, trans., *The Journal of a Korean Captive in Japan, 1597-1600: Kang Hang’s Kanyangnok* (Under Review at Columbia University Press), 4.

<sup>40</sup> Haboush and Robinson, *Kanyangnok*, 78.

expressing a certain style of manhood, valued by the elites of the time. This fact is far from the rhetoric that labels Chosŏn Korea as effeminate and backward.

A short account from Ŏ Sukkwŏn's *Miscellany* further reinforces the link between literacy and masculinity in pre-modern Korea. He recounts the story of a minister by the name of Ŏ Segyŏm, who travels to the Chinese capital in 1480 to present the severed ears of a group of Chinese rebels to the Ming court.<sup>41</sup> During a banquet meant to honor Ŏ Segyŏm, he is asked to write a poem, and produces the following lines:

A moat is hundred feet deep, walls a hundred feet high;

His fame will last a thousand years.

I hold the heads of monstrous rebels;

I do not mind if my name is hung in the Ling-yen Gallery.<sup>42</sup>

Ŏ is ultimately praised by the Chinese for his literary ability.<sup>43</sup> In this example we can see how a Korean minister asserts his Confucian masculinity by fusing the gruesome spoils of a battle victory with delicately crafted lines of Chinese poetry. Ultimately, it is interesting to note that Ŏ Sukkwŏn highlights praise for Ŏ Segyŏm as a result of the latter's literary ability, without mentioning similar praise for the more tangible achievements on the battlefield. This suggests the immense power of literacy in Chosŏn Korea and how it reflected on those who properly wielded it.

Revisiting *Hangŭl* can shed more light on literacy's ability to grant a sense of masculinity in Chosŏn Korea. While this paper's earlier example of the use of *Hangŭl* in royal edicts helps to complicate the notion of a truly diglossic culture existing in Korea at the time, elite notions of

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<sup>41</sup> Lee, *Miscellany*, 115-6.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 116.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*.

Korea's native script remained fairly static. That is to say, many Chosŏn elites viewed *Hangŭl* as vulgar, barbaric, and uncivilized.<sup>44</sup> They also viewed it as a womanly script, as evidenced by the pejorative word *amgŭl*, a term used during the Chosŏn dynasty to refer to *Hangŭl* as “women’s script.”<sup>45</sup> By characterizing *Hangŭl* as feminine, Chosŏn male elites further reinforced literary Chinese as masculine. Therefore, one’s masculinity in Chosŏn Korea could be measured by one’s degree of literacy in Chinese. Furthermore, I argue that the existence of “the other” (namely, a vernacular script) allowed for a hardening and strengthening of the notion that scholarly pursuits in literary Chinese were reserved for men of high social standing, thereby tightening the grip these men had on a major determiner of power: literacy.

#### *Literacy and the “Barbary”*

Literacy also held a powerful position in the context of interactions between Chosŏn elites and the “barbarian” Japanese during the Imjin War. Revisiting Kang Hang’s *Kanyangnok*, we see that he and his party were spared from death as a result of their “scholars’ hats and silk clothes.”<sup>46</sup> Based on earlier arguments in this paper, it can be established that Kang’s position as a scholar was directly tied not only to his social standing, but also to his literary prowess and his knowledge of the Confucian classics. As a result, through literacy, he enjoyed special treatment – even as a prisoner of war – during his captivity by the Japanese.

Literacy in Chinese also had a direct impact on Kang’s personal relationships while in captivity. For one, he was able to form certain bonds of friendship with Japanese monks through various exchanges of poetry and conversation.<sup>47</sup> As the editors note, however, these

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<sup>44</sup> Ross King, “North and South Korea,” in *Language and National Identity in Asia*, ed. Andrew Simpson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 203-4.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, 204.

<sup>46</sup> Haboush and Robinson, *Kanyangnok*, 44.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, 76-7.

“conversations” among men who spoke two completely different languages most likely were the result of written exchanges in literary Chinese.<sup>48</sup> Therefore, having a command of literary Chinese was able to create a sense of transnational community between members of a scholarly elite, despite the horrors of war and the nature of Kang’s captivity. This is especially interesting in light of Kang’s assessment of the Japanese as blasphemous barbarians “of a different race.”<sup>49</sup> He regarded those in Japan with a high literary aptitude (such as the aforementioned monks) as civilized, thereby excluding them from his generalizations regarding the otherwise “barbaric” population. This highlights the civilizing power of literacy in the eyes of Chosŏn elites, who saw it as a mark of high culture.

Kang Hang also uses the skills gained from a rigorous training in literary Chinese to attempt an escape from Japanese captivity. This came in the form of earning silver by selling his calligraphy.<sup>50</sup> Despite the traditional Confucian view of commercial activity as being a lowly pursuit, Kang seems to pragmatically break with this tradition in a desperate situation resulting from war, by ironically relying on his literary abilities to collect money. This underlines the tangible power of the written word, as Kang was able to earn money from his ability to write Chinese stylistically. While certainly an extreme example of one man’s desperation, this anecdote nevertheless suggests the wide range of power, both tangible and intangible, associated with the command of the written (Chinese) word.

### **A Series of Shifts: Literacy in the Late 19<sup>th</sup> and Early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries**

*The Enlightenment and Literacy in the Final Years of the Chosŏn Dynasty*

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<sup>48</sup> Haboush and Robinson, *Kanyangnok*, 76.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, 80-1.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 75.

In the later years of the Chosŏn dynasty, change was sweeping the Korean peninsula at a rapid pace. In the wake of the Sino-Japanese War, in which Japan emerged as the dominant power in East Asia, the traditional Sino-centric order that Korea had for centuries been a part of began to crumble.<sup>51</sup> As a result, many Korean reformers looked to Japan as a model for modernization in the wake of Korea's opening up to the rest of the world and the shattering of China's cultural and political primacy on the continent.<sup>52</sup> As these reforms<sup>53</sup> took hold, Korea's major governmental institutions began to imitate those of Japan, which in turn had imported these structures from the West beginning from 1868 during the Meiji Restoration.<sup>54</sup> With regards to education, the reforms aimed to undermine the importance of Confucian studies by ending the traditional examination system responsible for granting the *yangban* their elite status in society.<sup>55</sup>

During this time of social, political, and cultural upheaval, there emerged a group of reform-minded young men who founded the so-called Independence Club (*Tongnip hyŏphoe*).<sup>56</sup> It is outside the scope of this paper to examine the role of the Independence Club in depth. For the purposes of my argument, however, it suffices to highlight the Independence Club's establishment of an all-*Hangŭl* newspaper known as the *Independent* (*Tongnip sinmun*).<sup>57</sup>

The Independence Club's efforts during this time of uncertainty and change in Korea's history had a remarkable impact on the power of literacy. To begin with, the *Independent*, along

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<sup>51</sup> Michael E. Robinson, *Korea's Twentieth-Century Odyssey: A Short History* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007), 17-18.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 18-19.

<sup>53</sup> The Kabo Reforms of 1894-1895.

<sup>54</sup> Robinson, *Korea's Twentieth-Century*, 19.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

with other newspapers that were written in either *Hangŭl* or mixed script,<sup>58</sup> became a new space for public discourse.<sup>59</sup> This suggests the expansion of what it meant to be “literate” in Chosŏn Korea. While *Hangŭl* had existed for centuries, it had never been a legitimate determiner of power like literary Chinese had. In other words, even though many Koreans across all classes could read *Hangŭl*, that fact alone never granted the *Hangŭl*-literate actor any social status, with the exception of a few times during Chosŏn’s history.<sup>60</sup> In the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, *Hangŭl* literacy granted social actors the ability to participate in active debates related to civilization, nationhood, and Korea’s future as a modern independent nation in the global system of international affairs.

Women provide one such example of a portion of society that gained a new voice as a result of changes in views on literacy. For example, three different newspapers<sup>61</sup> published a letter written by a group of women in Seoul in late September of 1898. This letter demanded equal rights for men and women in Korea, citing examples of “civilized” and “enlightened” nations to bolster their cause, while simultaneously asking for the establishment of a women’s school.<sup>62</sup> Within a matter of weeks, another letter appeared in two newspapers in response to the aforementioned circular letter written by women. This response expressed wholehearted support for the women’s cause, and urged the public to do the same.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Writing that included the use of both Chinese characters and Korea’s native alphabet (*Hangŭl*).

<sup>59</sup> Se-Mi Oh, “Letters to the Editor: Women, Newspapers, and the Public Sphere in Turn-of-the Century Korea,” in *Epistolary Korea: Letters in the Communicative Space of the Chosŏn, 1392-1910*, ed. Jahyun Kim Haboush (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 157.

<sup>60</sup> See “*Royal Edicts*” section in this paper.

<sup>61</sup> Two were *Hangŭl*-only newspapers, one used mixed script.

<sup>62</sup> Oh, “Letters to the Editor,” 163-4.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, 164-5.

These letters are a perfect example of literacy's changing role in the last few decades of 19<sup>th</sup> century Korea. As *Hangŭl* became a legitimate medium for official discussion, the members in society who could actively shape national policies grew dramatically, as a result of their ability to read and write *Hangŭl*. Just as knowledge of literary Chinese granted a small group of elite Chosŏn men with special privileges and a large degree of social and political power, so did knowledge of *Hangŭl* grant large swaths of the Korean population with an increased role in the nation's immediate future. Like the women described above, previously voiceless members of society could harness the power of writing by using an alphabet that they were both familiar and comfortable with. Furthermore, they could express themselves by writing in the language they spoke day-to-day, as opposed to fumbling with an ancient language and a complex and difficult writing system.

#### *Literacy and Social Dynamics in 1890s Korea*

It is now necessary to take a step back and place *Hangŭl* in a larger context of overall literacy in Korea at the turn of the century. The elevation of *Hangŭl* by the efforts of reform-minded groups and publications did not signal a drop in the prestige (or the usage) of literary Chinese. It also did not create a purely diglossic culture, with elites reading and writing in literary Chinese and the lower classes employing only the written vernacular. What emerged instead was a complex literary sphere with a myriad of actors and writing styles.

First, the Chosŏn government used both pure literary Chinese as well as mixed script in all official written communications.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, as Se-Mi Oh points out, newspapers during this time translated published government materials into either the vernacular *Hangŭl* or mixed

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<sup>64</sup> Ross King, "North and South Korea," 205.



script.<sup>65</sup> These facts demonstrate the fluid and interconnected nature of literacy in Chosŏn Korea at this time. While elite members of society still heavily used literary Chinese, its translation into other languages and other scripts eroded the necessity for learning literary Chinese in order to become a literate and informed member of society. Also, the fact that the government used mixed script indicates a growing comfort among elites with using (even partially) *Hangŭl* for official purposes. Similarly, the editors and writers of vernacular newspapers such as the *Independent* were all highly educated young men, who no doubt had a superb command of literary Chinese. Therefore, an expanded definition of literacy and the mixed use of a variety of scripts across various sectors of society reflect the tumultuous social and cultural changes during the 1890s in Korea.

A particular kind of literacy, however, still served to reinforce the balance of power during this time. In the 1890s in Korea, those with the most power had a vast knowledge of all three scripts: Chinese, mixed script, and *Hangŭl*. For example, while actors in society such as women could use *Hangŭl* to express themselves in the vernacular newspapers of the day, it was the editors of those newspapers – all highly educated individuals with knowledge of all three scripts – who ultimately had the power to digest, include, and disseminate the women’s circular letters. Furthermore, the editors of these newspapers had the power of translation, allowing them to translate powerful decrees from the government from literary Chinese into mixed script or the Korean vernacular. In other words, those who had a firm grasp of all literary means during that time period in fact controlled a seemingly “open” discourse among Koreans. They ultimately served as powerful middlemen, dictating discussions that took place between the Chosŏn elites

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<sup>65</sup> Oh, “Letters to the Editor,” 160.

and the populace at large. Their power would not last long, however, as the Japanese continued to gain influence on the peninsula.

### *Literacy in the Colonial Period*

After Korea became annexed by Japan in 1910, the meaning of literacy as it related to power changed drastically. Just as the use of mixed script and *Hangŭl* was gaining currency among elites as a legitimate method of writing, and just as literacy in these scripts began to grant previously marginalized sectors of society a new voice with regards to Korea's future, the Japanese annexation changed the norms regarding language and literacy.

Starting with the Educational Ordinance of 1911, the Japanese authorities began compulsory Japanese language education in most schools.<sup>66</sup> When the Second Education Ordinance came into effect in 1922, compulsory Japanese language instruction in schools continued to increase to the detriment of Korean instruction.<sup>67</sup> The Third Education Ordinance of 1938 only perpetuated this trend.<sup>68</sup> By the time the Fourth Education Ordinance was enacted in the early 1940s, Korean was completely eliminated from all schools.<sup>69</sup>

These ordinances aimed to solidify the place of Japanese as the “national language” of Korea by displacing Korean and establishing Japanese as the day-to-day language of the nation's youth. This bottom-up approach would also be reinforced by a top-down approach that shut out many non-Japanese speakers in Korea from attaining a good job. As Michael Robinson explains, “the route to the best jobs lay in upper education in Japan. Therefore, from the beginning, attaining Japanese cultural and linguistic skills became de rigueur for the ambitious sons of the

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<sup>66</sup> Robinson, *Korea's Twentieth-Century*, 45.

<sup>67</sup> Mark E. Caprio, *Japanese Assimilation Policies in Colonial Korea, 1910-1945* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009), 129-30.

<sup>68</sup> Moon-Jong Hong, “Japanese Colonial Education Policy in Korea,” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1992), 146.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, 149.

elite and Korea's tiny middle class if they were to have any chance at even the middle- and low-level, white-collar jobs in the cities."<sup>70</sup>

Through this system of formal and informal laws and norms created by the Japanese authorities in colonial Korea, Japanese was firmly established as the language of culture, power, and high social status. As a result, society's "struggle for literacy" changed in the colonial period due to a change in the institutions of power. Just as literacy in literary Chinese was the only acceptable form of literacy among the elites during the Chosŏn dynasty, so was literacy in Japanese essential to gaining status and power in Korea between 1910-1945.

#### *Departure from the Norm in 1920s Colonial Korea*

This does not tell the whole story, however. While Koreans were forced through both explicit and implicit coercion to struggle for achieving Japanese competency, Japanese officials were also coerced to an extent to learn Korean, particularly during the "cultural rule" period starting in 1920. For example, the Governor General "encouraged his officials to learn the Korean language" as a way to gain the trust of Korean elites and try to quell a growth of Korean nationalism through the strategy of "divide and rule."<sup>71</sup> This highlights the importance of cooperation by the Korean elites in the Japanese imperial project. By learning Korean and using it as a way to make ties with influential members of Korean society, Japanese officials inadvertently complicated the status of Japanese as the prime language of literacy in 1920s Korea.

This period also saw the fostering of ties between the Japanese authorities and Confucian literati in the countryside. Acknowledging that this "vehemently anti-Japanese" group of

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<sup>70</sup> Robinson, *Korea's Twentieth-Century*, 46.

<sup>71</sup> Jun Uchida, *Brokers of Empire: Japanese Settler Colonialism in Korea, 1876-1945* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2011), 148.

influential men could prove detrimental to peace in the colony if not coerced, the Governor General of Korea allowed the literati to continue presiding over the county academies (*hyanggyo*) in the provinces.<sup>72</sup> It can be inferred that this not only perpetuated the spread of Chinese literacy in the countryside through the continued adherence to a Confucian curriculum, but also cemented the authority of Korean literati in the rural areas of Korea. The Japanese authorities thereby created a situation that had few differences with the Chosŏn dynasty that they had deposed. One large difference, however, rested in the fact that Japanese officials hoped to coerce these Confucian literati to leverage their status in their respective local communities to push for Japanese modernization campaigns, especially with regards to “the elimination of ‘evil customs.’”<sup>73</sup>

Despite having ulterior motives, these efforts by the Japanese – from the enacting of the Educational Ordinances through supporting countryside Confucians – upheld the continued tradition of a societal struggle for refinement and social status through literacy, whether in literary Chinese or Japanese. Furthermore, Korean was still a necessary method of communication for the Japanese elites who wished to woo their Korean counterparts into becoming part of their grand social experiment on the Korean peninsula. While the Japanese language was inarguably the most dominant form of literacy as far as guaranteeing social status and power was concerned, it did not completely shut out other forms of literacy on the peninsula that had previously enjoyed a similar status in the decades and centuries before colonization.

*Foreign Language Literacy in the Colonial Period: Yun Ch'i-ho's Diary*

Another kind of “literacy” that emerged in the years before Japanese annexation and truly flourished in the colonial period was the literacy related to the acquisition of foreign languages

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<sup>72</sup> Uchida, *Brokers of Empire*, 160.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

other than Japanese by Koreans. By expanding their linguistic horizons and acquiring other forms of “literacies,” certain elite Koreans navigated several social spheres that included Korean, Japanese, European, and American elite circles. One such Korean was independence activist Yun Ch’i-ho.

Yun Ch’i-ho is known for taking part in most of the major events in Korean history from the 1880s through the end of the colonial period.<sup>74</sup> He served several roles throughout his life, including positions in the government and educational institutions.<sup>75</sup> Inarguably a member of the Korean elite, his diary provides insight into his literary abilities and the social status these abilities granted him.

We learn from his diary that as early as 1883 he traveled to Japan to learn Japanese, went to China to learn English in 1885, and ultimately traveled to the United States to refine his English in 1888.<sup>76</sup> The diary of his colleague and friend, the Chosŏn diplomat Min Yŏnghwan, further describes that during a diplomatic sojourn in Russia, Yun Ch’i-ho decided to travel to Paris to refine his French.<sup>77</sup> By the time of the Japanese annexation of Korea in 1910, Yun Ch’i-ho was a true polyglot with a grasp of several of the world’s most important “literacies” at the time.

Before looking more closely at some specific portions of Yun’s diary, it is necessary to point out a few key facts about its writing process. As if mirroring the linguistic shifts between pre-and post-Kanghwa treaty Korea already discussed in this paper, Yun’s diary starts in 1881

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<sup>74</sup> Hyung-chan Kim, “Yun Ch’i-ho in America: The Training of a Korean Patriot in the South, 1888-1893,” *Korea Journal* 18, no. 6 (1978): 16.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>77</sup> Michael Finch, trans., *Min Yŏnghwan: The Selected Writings of a Late Chosŏn Diplomat* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, 2008), 143-4.

written purely in literary Chinese, and changes exclusively to *Hangŭl* by late 1887.<sup>78</sup> And, in late 1889, rather than foreshadowing the primacy of Japanese by switching to that language, he instead began writing his diary in English.<sup>79</sup> While his diary would remain in English for the rest of his life, his writings during this time still include place names and certain phrases written exclusively in literary Chinese, Japanese, and sometimes *Hangŭl* and mixed script.<sup>80</sup>

In his later writings, Yun demonstrates how his knowledge of various “literacies” allowed him to become influential in various social circles. For example, we see him serving as an interpreter for an American psychologist as early as 1925.<sup>81</sup> Furthermore, several years earlier, he had been contacted by a Korean friend who had the task of persuading him to follow the request of the Japanese governor of Kyōnggi Province to “deliver a speech in favor of the Gov. [sic] General, in the Administrative Propaganda 施政宣傳 that authorities are carrying out throughout the entire country.”<sup>82</sup>

Through these two examples, Yun’s position in colonial society becomes clearer. He navigates between Americans, Koreans, and Japanese with relative ease as a result of his social position and his comfort with various different languages. Regardless of his political views (he was an ardent independence activist), his knowledge of different “literacies” granted him access to the major social actors of colonial Korea, which in turn respected him.

Another poignant example of Yun’s mastery of different “literacies” and how this augmented his intellectual and social position occurs during a visit to Tokyo in 1922:

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<sup>78</sup> Kim, “Yun Ch’i-ho in America,” 16.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> Yun Ch’i-ho, *Yun Ch’i-ho’s Diary, Vols. 8-9*.

<sup>81</sup> Yun Ch’i-ho, *Yun Ch’i-ho’s Diary: 1925-1931, Vol. 9* (Seoul: National History Compilation Committee, 1988), 27-8 [4 July 1925].

<sup>82</sup> Yun Ch’i-ho *Yun Ch’i-ho’s Diary: 1920-1924, Vol. 8* (Seoul: National History Compilation Committee, 1987), 240-1 [17 April 1921].

After lunch Mr. Cynn and I went up to Tokyo to get some books at Maruzen book store [sic]. Delighted to get some books I had been to get [sic] on Socialism and Bolshevism. Returned to Yokohama about 6 p.m.<sup>83</sup>

The diary does not reveal whether these books are in English or in Japanese, but the important point is that Yun Ch'i-ho demonstrates here how literacy in both Japanese and English not only granted him the ability and comfort to travel to Japan with ease, but also expanded the literary materials available to him. Yun takes advantage of his literary ability to expand his intellectual pursuits and study some of the most important and revolutionary philosophies of his day. He is doubtless the perfect example of a Korean elite negotiating between various “literacies” in his quest to gain influence and expand his horizons. In this sense, Yun’s position is not too different from this paper’s earlier analysis of Kang Hang’s struggles during his time as a captive in Japan during the Imjin War. Both men were able to forge connections with foreigners who were deemed the “enemy” in times of national struggle as a result of their literary ability. Therefore, these two men who lived centuries apart are symbols of Korean society’s struggle for literacy throughout its history, and provide an example of a link that transcends the traditional notion of pre-modern vs. modern Korea.

*Polyglotism in Korean Popular Fiction of the Post-Colonial Period: “Kapitan Ri”*

In Chŏn Kwangyong’s 1962 fictional short story “Kapitan Ri” (까삐뻔 리), he explores the power of language through the main character, Yi Inguk, M.D. Yi is a doctor and a member of the Korean elite, who lives through various changes in Korea’s history: colonial occupation, liberation, Soviet occupation, and American occupation. At each stage in the story, Yi perfects the language of the occupier (Japanese, Russian, or English) in order to gain social status and

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<sup>83</sup> Yun, *Diary*, Vol. 8, 323 [15 May 1922].

respect from the occupying forces.<sup>84</sup> His reflections on the Japanese language are recounted as follows:

Few of his patients had ever come from the groups that couldn't speak Japanese. Not only had he always spoken the national language [Japanese/*kokugō*] in the clinic and throughout his social life, but he had also insisted on using Japanese exclusively at home, too. So unfamiliar had he become with Korean that he had found it awkward to express himself in it after Liberation.<sup>85</sup>

This exaggerated fictional account of a Korean elite with a high degree of literacy in Japanese highlights the popular conception of the power of language during the colonial period. Later in the story, as a captive under Soviet occupiers, he impresses his captors by demonstrating a high command of Russian, a feat that eventually leads to his release as a prisoner.<sup>86</sup> Dr. Yi's final encounter with foreigners comes in the form of an American, Mr. Brown, who is impressed by Yi's English abilities and hires him as an interpreter.<sup>87</sup>

Through fiction, Chŏn Kwangyong demonstrates how language and literacy continued to be a relevant force in Korean society, spanning the years from the colonial period through the American occupation of South Korea. A grasp on various "literacies" not only granted Yi Inguk M.D. with a certain degree of high social status, but also even went so far as to save his life. While clearly an exaggeration of reality, "Kapitan Ri" helps us understand the power of literacy in the consciousness of Korean society.

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<sup>84</sup> Chŏn Kwangyong, "Kaptian Ri," Marshall R. Pihl, trans., in *Land of Exile: Contemporary Korean Fiction*, ed. Marshall R. Pihl et al. (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe/UNESCO, 1993).

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*, 68.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid*, 79-81.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid*, 81-83.



## Conclusion

In this paper, I have traced the power of literacy and language in Korea from 1392-1945, with a brief look at the post-colonial experience. Using Brian V. Street's "ideological" model of literacy, I attempt to frame literacy in Korea as a complex interaction among various forms of "literacies," each with their own social implications and norms. By doing so, I hope to join seemingly disjointed portions of Korean history into one overarching analytical thread: Korean history as a history marked by a struggle for literacy. By looking at Korean history through this lens, I am not attempting to oversimplify a long, rich tradition of social, political, and economic change. Instead, I want to complicate the notion of a definitive split between Korea's "modern" and "pre-modern" history. By drawing similarities between the struggle for literacy faced by historical figures such as Kang Hang, Ŏ Sukkwŏn, Korean women in the 1890s, Yun Ch'i-ho, and the fictional Yi Inguk, M.D., I hope to emphasize the need for a comprehensive understanding of certain strands of Korean history, culture, and society that have existed for centuries and still reverberate today. Perhaps then we can start to realize that contemporary Korean students poring over complicated English texts in a cram school in downtown Seoul have much in common with their ancestors learning Neo-Confucian ideology in a 16<sup>th</sup> century private academy in Kyŏngsang Province. Both examples demonstrate that literacy as an avenue for power, social position, and a voice in Korean society has been a basic tenet for hundreds of years and will continue to be that way for future generations.

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