

THE NATIONALIZATION OF WRITING

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As the most tangible subsystem of language, writing lends itself easily to political instrumentalization. In spite of the borderless world of cyberspace, the symbolic potential of writing continues to be exploited in many parts of the world, for in this age of globalization nationalism is still a potent force. In this paper I shall review a number of cases where writing systems have served as vehicles of nationalism. The discussion focuses on East Asian languages and writing systems, Chinese, Korean, and Japanese, in particular, but other examples from Europe, as well as the Soviet Union's successor states are also referred to for comparison. The questions of how the goodness of writing systems can be evaluated and how systematic criteria tend to be superseded by symbolic ones is discussed in connection with *Hunmin jōng.ŭm* ['The Correct Sounds to Educate the People'].

Introduction

The great original writing systems which, for all we know, were independently invented in ancient times, all came into existence within the context of a particular language. For the purposes of this paper, I shall call a language for which an original writing system evolved the matrix language of that writing system. At some point in the course of their long histories, all original writing systems were recruited to record other languages than their matrix language. Some of them became defining features of entire areas of civilization. As scripts of empire or religion, they were maintained for many centuries, spreading in the wake of, and as a means of, cultural diffusion across vast areas. From Mesopotamia, where it first evolved, cuneiform spread through large parts of the Ancient Near East where, in addition to Sumerian and Akkadian, it was used to represent the Elamite, Hurrian, Urartian, and Hittite languages. As the script of what was the lingua franca of Southwest Asia from the first millennium B. C. E. until the 17th century C. E., the Aramaic script was carried, albeit in various derived forms, to places as far away as western China, serving a range of languages of Semitic, Iranian, and Altaic stock. A daughter of Aramaic-derived Nabatean, the Arabic script, blessed by Islam, experienced an even wider expansion, continuing to be one of the world's major scripts today. This distinction is shared with only few other scripts, notably the Chinese and the Roman.

Thanks to China's advanced culture, the Chinese script became the first writing system of a number of languages spoken at the periphery of the Middle Kingdom, such as Vietnamese, Korean, and Japanese. Chinese characters were

also used to write other languages, such as, Tibetan and Sanskrit, India's classical language. Sanskrit, which has been written in several scripts, is now typically associated with Devanagari, a modern offshoot of the ancient Brahmi script, which came into being in the 3rd century B. C. E. and served as the blueprint for a great number of scripts on the Indian subcontinent and in Southeast Asia. With maritime trade, Indian learning spread through Southeast Asia, taking Buddhism and Hinduism, as well as Indian alphabets, as far afield as the Malayan archipelago, now Indonesia and the Philippines. Prior to the arrival of Islam in the first half of the second millennium, the Indian model of writing was universal throughout the region.

And Roman. THE alphabet, as it is sometimes called, has of course become the most catholic script of all, representing a greater variety of languages than any other and, partly thanks to its closeness to the symbolism of IPA, is used more than any other by a large measure for providing hitherto unwritten languages with a suitable script. The Cyrillic alphabet must also be mentioned in this connection. Originally designed by Greek missionaries for Slavic languages, it first became the script of Orthodox Christianity, Old Church Slavonic or Old Bulgarian being its classical language. In modern times, after the Russian Revolution, it became the script of the Soviet empire. More than fifty non-Slavic languages of the Turkic, Uralic, Caucasian, Indo-European, and Altaic families were written in Cyrillic when the Soviet Union ceased to exist in 1991. Thus Cyrillic, too, must be counted among the scripts that transcend linguistic boundaries to demarcate an area of civilization.

To summarize this brief and admittedly selective overview, if we look at the world atlas of writing systems and scripts today, a small number of systems cover virtually the entire globe: Roman, Cyrillic, Arabic, Chinese, and Brahmi-derived Indic. To be sure, the variety of existing and historic writing systems outside these five groups is considerable, but in terms of demographic strength, they constitute only a small fraction of all literate societies. Moreover, aided by Microsoft and other agents of cyberspace cultural imperialism, a single script, Roman, is set to make further inroads. Already it is the only script used by the United Postal Union to publish its Universal Postal List of Localities, 500,000 place names in 189 countries. As the script of all Western European languages, English in particular, it provides access to the overwhelming majority of data banks the world over, and although electronic communications equipment for the internet is being made available for major language markets with their scripts, such as the Japanese and the Chinese, the total amount of written telecommunication in Roman far surpasses that of all other scripts combined. The stage seems set, therefore, for the Roman alphabet in its ASCII guise to push other systems further to the edge.

Yet, accompanying the dispersion of the major scripts just mentioned, there have always been countervailing tendencies opposing the forces of homogenization. To some extent, this is an all-but-inevitable result of the structural differences between the matrix languages of scripts and other languages to which they were adapted. However, structural features of the language system requiring alterations of an imported writing system were not the only factors mitigating against

homogenization. While the advantages of extending the range of a script have always been noted and allowed to take effect, forces pulling in the opposite direction, both consciously and unwittingly, can also be traced back a long time. It is with these that this paper is concerned.

Writing and ethnic identity

One of the areas in which the erstwhile Soviet Union most obviously failed was nation-building, that is, in its attempt to transform the Czarist empire into a modern nation-state. A telling manifestation of this failure was the decision by several nationalities/speech communities in the late Soviet and immediate post-Soviet period to abandon the Cyrillic alphabet. Indeed, in retrospect, the disintegration of the Soviet Union was foreshadowed by a number of language-policy initiatives concerning script choice (Coulmas 1994). In Moldova, the Cyrillic script, which under the Soviet regime was intended to foster ties with the Union and underscore the distinction of Moldavian from Roman-written Romanian, was replaced by the Roman alphabet, and the identity of Moldavian and Romanian was recognized.

As Jacob Landau 1996 has pointed out, with the introduction of *glasnost*, language grievances burst open in many parts of the Soviet Union. In what he calls the 'six newly independent ex-Soviet Muslim republics in Central Asia and the Caucasus', that is, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Azerbaijan, the debate regarding the changing of the alphabet was a focal point in manifesting ethnonational self-assertiveness. This question was considered so important because it involves culture (a return to 'the roots'), economics (investing in textbooks and other print products), inter-group relations (opposition to local ethnic Russians), and politics (affiliation with other states). Abandoning the Cyrillic alphabet was seen as a way of curbing the predominance of the Russian language as well as its speakers' influence. By abandoning Cyrillic, these republics moved away from Moscow in search of new alliances.

Propaganda coupled with economic incentives on the part of Iran and Saudi Arabia persuaded the government of Tajikistan in 1992 to pass a language law that commits the republic to revert to Arabic script. Neighboring Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and the Caucasian republic of Azerbaijan, in keeping with a more pro-Western orientation, decided to replace Cyrillic by Roman, clearly not a decision that can be motivated by linguistic arguments concerning the suitability of either script for any of the languages in question. Discussions about adopting the Common Turkic Alphabet (*Ortak Türk Alfabesi*), with the additional letters *ä* [æ] and *ñ* [ŋ] (MTAS 1992), for use in all Turkic languages spoken in these republics underscore the political dimensions of script choice. For Chechnya, too, replacing Cyrillic by Roman was a political manifestation rather than anything else.

Post-Soviet Mongolia is yet another example of a 'return to the origins' script choice policy. In 1991, prior to independence, Mongolia's political leaders called for the re-introduction of the vertical Mongolian script that had been re-

placed in 1946 by the Cyrillic alphabet. Once Mongolia had become an independent republic recognized by both Russia and China in 1993, this became official policy. Implementing this policy proved a difficult task, however. Five years later nothing much had changed. At the end of the century, government documents continued to be written in Cyrillic, as were all newspapers. With a GNP per capita of \$340 (1994), Mongolia ranks among the poorest countries of the world. The fact that parts of the population still lead a nomadic life is another factor that makes it difficult to effect policy objectives. Literacy statistics are unreliable, but an illiteracy rate of 20% would seem a conservative estimate. Yet, bringing the traditional script back to life remains a policy objective.

As these cases vividly illustrate, scripts are prone to come into prominence as political symbols in times of crisis, since script choice is easily instrumentalized for ideological purposes. Even where such purposeful instrumentalization is not in evidence, scripts tend to become the focus of political controversy whenever attempts are made to change established norms. A telling example of this can be observed at present in the German-speaking countries.

A spelling reform in the courts

After more than a decade of research and committee work by representatives of the three major German-speaking countries, Austria, Germany, and Switzerland, the 1994 Vienna spelling conference drafted a very moderate reform proposal for the German spelling system (cf. Eroms & Munske 1997).

The proposed reform affects five areas of the spelling system: Sound/letter correspondence, capitalization, spelling of compounds, punctuation, and hyphenation and word division at the end of a line. Some anachronistic and unsystemic rules will be scrapped, and some spellings will be made more regular. For example, according to the old rules, it was impossible to insert a hyphen between <s> and <t> even if the juncture coincided with a syllable boundary, as in *Kis-ten* 'boxes'. This peculiar rule had to do with typesetting, since <st> is printed as a ligature in German typesetting. The new rules permit hyphenation in these cases, as in other consonant clusters at syllable boundaries. The spelling rules for <ß> will be more regular in future, since <ß> will be used for [s] only following long vowels and diphthongs. Thus, new *Fluss* (with a short vowel) rather than old *Fluß*.

Will written German be very different after the reform? Hardly. For example, of the 1417 words elementary school students learn to spell from first to fourth grade, 32 will be affected by the new rules. Of these, 28 involve a change from <ß> to <ss>. The remaining four are *heute Abend* and *gestern Abend* with *Abend* capitalized; *selbstständig* rather than *selbständig* (in the latter, the *-st* of *selbst* 'self' was assimilated in the former rules to the *st-* of *ständig* 'standing', which does not make much sense); and *zu viel* 'too much' spelt as two words rather than one. This would seem to be a bearable load for teachers and students to carry, but evidently not for parents.

In 1996, the three countries agreed that the reform be phased in starting in August, 1998. This was, however, not to be, because the proposal provoked heated political discussion: Letter-to-the-editor columns, public symposia, collections of signatures by the tens of thousands. More than that, a barrage of legal challenges have been mounted against the reform. This is what makes this case particularly interesting in the present context. Those who most vehemently disapproved of the reform were parents who could not bear the thought that their children should be taught what they once learned was wrong, and teachers in despair because proper standards of what is right and what is wrong seemed to be slipping away. Both groups were not content to simply ignore the reform. Rather, they insisted on challenging it in court, implicitly acknowledging thereby the state's authority to decide where hyphens are to be put and whether a given word should be spelt with double *ss*, or curly *ß*.

Incredible as it may seem, twelve German district courts had to rule on the spelling reform (Coulmas 1997). Seven decided in its favor, five against it. This legal jumble is unavoidable in a federal country with sixteen ministries of education rather than one. To resolve the issue, the whole exercise has been referred to the Constitutional Court, Germany's highest court. Of course, the Court did not deliberate whether *Fluss* violates the Constitution. It had to rule on a more difficult and more interesting question: Who has the right to alter the spelling rules of German? Can a reform be enacted by ministerial decree or does it need parliamentary approval? Who is to be the master of the written language? Opponents to the reform held that spelling was too important a matter to be left to bureaucrats and misguided linguists. The Constitutional Court did not follow their arguments and allowed the reform to pass. Some diehard anti-reformists still did not give up. In Schlesweg-Holstein, one of the Federal Republic's 16 *Länder*, they initiated and won a plebiscite against it.

The public dispute on the German spelling reform was focused almost entirely on the pros and cons of the reform. Very few participants in the discussion questioned the significance of the whole exercise or suggested that people should do as they please, that is, write according to the old or the new rules. This suggests that beyond the details of the reform there is wide agreement that the state and its institutions should be entrusted with safeguarding the integrity of the spelling system, lest it be corrupted by unauthorized meddling.

This way of thinking is paradigmatic for what in the title of this paper has been called the nationalization of writing. By this notion I wish to make a distinction between employing a writing system and the spelling conventions associated with it as a symbol of ethnonational identity, on the one hand, and charging the state with the task of codifying a writing system and acting as the sealkeeper of the written language, protecting it from lawlessness and decay, on the other. This is new. Until the beginning of this century, orthographic conventions had evolved without much official guidance. After a spelling conference held in 1901, spelling rules were fixed in a dictionary compiled by Konrad Duden. To this day, the Duden dictionary, published by a private company, is the most widely used reference work for spelling questions, although other dictionaries are available

which deviate in detail. The 1996 reform proposal, however, is intended to set a binding standard. Its proponents want it sanctioned by the state, while its opponents want it outlawed by the state. Over the decades, this kind of statist thinking has gained ground as writing has become increasingly conceived as not just being similar to law, but as providing its very foundation (Großfeld 1997). Against this point of view it has been argued convincingly, that there can be no rights with regard to a shared language (for instance, a fundamental right to correct German) and that, therefore, spelling conventions or any other aspect of the language system cannot be regarded as falling within the domain of fundamental rights that the state is obligated to protect (Roellecke 1997). Despite their undeniable merits, however, such arguments mostly fall on deaf ears. There is an apparent desire in the German and other European speech communities, such as the French, to legalize the written language. How does this situation compare with attitudes toward the written language in Asia?

Writing and the state in Asia: China, the paradigm case

This is, perhaps, a misguided question, for statist attitudes toward writing and literacy have an even longer and more pronounced tradition in the East than in the West. China is, perhaps, the most conspicuous example of a civilization that emphasizes state control over the written language, although other examples outside the sphere of Chinese culture easily come to mind. In Burma, for instance, the kings of successive dynasties attached great importance to the matter of an orthographic standard (Nishi 1997). Written Tibetan, too, experienced official institutionalization. Other examples could be referred to for comparison. For the nationalization of a once universal script, however, Chinese provides the paradigm case.

From early times, literacy skills were critical for social advance in China, the written language functioning as a crucial means of social control. The Mandarin scholar-bureaucrat embodied this tradition, which perpetuated itself above all through the civil-service examination system. Initially institutionalized by the first emperor of the Sui dynasty, Wen Di (reigned C. E. 589-604), the examinations tested knowledge of the Confucian classics, the ability to compose formal essays, and calligraphy. The exams required protracted and arduous preparation, which, however, was deemed worthwhile. Competition was always fierce, because to become an official was the highest reward, in terms of both income and recognition, in imperial China (Taylor & Taylor 1995:149-50).

China's civil-service examination system is the prime example of instrumentalizing the written language for purposes of state. Both conservatism and political reform were intimately associated with literary and scholarly subject matter. The May Fourth Movement at the beginning of this century, which called for China's renaissance, was essentially a literary revolution leading to the abandonment of the classical style, *wenyan*, in favor of a vernacular style called *baihua* ('plain language'). Political allegiances found expression in the medium of the written language. For reform-minded men of letters, and men they were for the most part, the function of the classical language as a social filter was to be weak-

ened, if not entirely removed. As of the late 19th century, the civil-service examination system came increasingly under attack, as the empire proved impotent to resist foreign intervention. It eroded as the ideological foundation of state power even before the end of the Ching Dynasty and was eventually abolished early in the 20th century, but its influence lingers on.

Both the Republic of 1912 and the People's Republic of 1949 continued to consider Chinese letters not only focal elements of Chinese identity, but also important matters of government responsibility. The Communist Party was committed to written language reform and spreading vernacular literacy long before it came to power (Seybolt & Chiang 1978). Once the People's Republic was established, writing reform was high on the agenda of government business. Both Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai devoted considerable attention to the problem. A Committee for Chinese Writing Reform, which reported to the government was established in 1950, and in 1956 the State Council promulgated the first 'Plan for the Simplification of Chinese Characters'. Another character simplification scheme followed in 1964.

Taiwan did not go along with Beijing's writing reform, while achieving a much higher literacy rate much earlier than the People's Republic. Although, as DeFrancis (1984: 218) has pointed out, more than anything else this has to do with the efficiency of Taiwan's Japanese-shaped educational system, the island's high literacy raises doubts about one of the essential presuppositions of China's writing reform, that character simplification will help to advance literacy. (When the People's Republic of China was founded in 1949, illiteracy still was as high as 85%.) Both Taiwan and Japan have demonstrated that near universal literacy can be achieved in spite of Chinese characters. The question, however, remains whether literacy in Chinese characters is the most productive form of literacy for our age, or, to put it the other way round, whether character literacy has serious disadvantages, such as, 'the intractable incompatibility between characters and computers' (Hannas 1997), which will force the eventual demise of the former. Whatever the answer to this question, Taiwan's refusal to adopt Beijing's standard is yet another expression of the common perception that the written language is properly a matter of state control. Since Taipei does not recognize Beijing's jurisdiction, it claims the right to its own official standard of written Chinese.

In the pre-modern societies of East Asia, when literacy was restricted, Chinese writing, especially classical Chinese, was a code for interregional and even international communication among the educated elites of China and adjacent lands. As literacy became more widespread, the unity of this community of literati was gradually superseded by more particularistic vernacular literacies, which, following the model of China's bureaucratic literacy, came under state control. Compulsory education further strengthened the state's grip on the written language. This is evident both inside the Chinese-speaking world, notably in China and Taiwan, and outside it in those speech communities that once belonged to the sphere of Chinese characters, especially Japan and Korea. Both these countries have inherited China's statist attitude toward the written language.

Japan

Like the Chinese, the Japanese identify their ethnicity with their language. There is a strong general interest in the language, which is often portrayed as incorporating the true spirit of the Japanese people. Such ideas are of modern origin and can be traced to European linguistic nationalism. The authenticity of the language, this the Japanese intellectuals learned from their European counterparts, was a valuable spiritual asset that could be exploited for the purpose of modernization. Japanese was made Japan's national language or *kokugo*. This term was coined in the Meiji period (1868-1911) and is still used as the common designation of Japanese as a school subject. It implies both that there is but one language of the country and that the state is its proper steward. Through compulsory education, the Japanese government implemented a policy of linguistically unifying the country, making sure that standard Japanese based in the dialect of Tokyo came to be understood throughout the country. It also promoted the idea that Japan was a homogeneous country whose national identity 'naturally' flowed out of its ethnic identity.

When the Japanese started to build their empire, which eventually incorporated Taiwan, Manchuria, the Korean peninsula and Micronesia, the government saw no contradiction between linguistic nationalism and a colonial language regime of promoting Japanese at the expense of indigenous languages. Japanese was seen as a means of uplifting other races and offering them the opportunity to become good Japanese citizens. Early this century, Ueda Kazutoshi 1895, a linguist who had studied in Germany, called the Japanese language 'the spiritual blood of the nation' thus advancing a notion that was to reverberate in Japanese thought on language until well after the Pacific war. Linking as it does the cultural with the racial aspect of the perceived Japanese uniqueness, it encapsulates the essence of Japan's ethno-nationalism. As a member of the National Language Research Committee, Ueda wielded considerable influence.

That their language not only possesses certain features that are unique or salient in comparison to other languages, but is unique as a notion many Japanese embrace as part of a more comprehensive myth of their own insularity. This conviction is fueled by the common confusion between language and script. Combining Chinese characters with two Japanese syllabaries, *kana*, the Japanese writing system is both unusual and rather involved. As the most visible part of the language system, it manifests both Japan's indebtedness to China and her cultural independence. Accordingly, script-reform discussions are invariably politically charged. The government invariably plays a central role in such discussions. Since the Meiji period, there has been a continuous tug of war between progressive intellectuals advocating romanization or, failing that, the limitation of Chinese characters, and conservative supporters of the traditional script, including an open-ended list of Chinese characters.

It is not uncommon that the written language is used as a means of social control, but in few cases is this more obvious than in Japan. This is largely due to the mixed nature of the Japanese writing system, which lends itself to socially

stratified literacy practices: Kana symbols are few and easy to learn, while Japanese Chinese characters are even more involved and time-consuming than their Chinese models.

Since the Meiji period, writing reform has been advocated repeatedly, but the state has been slow to act. Whenever a simplification was effected, as during the education reform under American occupation, when the number of characters in common use was substantially reduced, such moves were usually followed before long by countervailing policies. Thus, while character limitation after the war was conceived as a measure to facilitate the acquisition of literacy and reduce the importance of character knowledge as an indicator of social status, the slightly revised 1981 List of Characters for General Use was defined as a basic standard, rather than an upper limit that should not be surpassed. In effect, therefore, the importance of Chinese characters to written Japanese and to social advance had been reaffirmed (Unger 1996). Appeals to tradition and Japan's unique written language, which makes use of three different scripts, are very common. They camouflage, perhaps not always deliberately, the social control function of this written language, which, by virtue of its complexity, continues to restrict upper-level literacy to the erudite elite.

Today, state control over the written language is generally accepted in Japanese society, although a serious challenge to government authority has been mounted from an unexpected direction, the computer industry. Computer software that handles Chinese characters often does not conform with government-approved standards. Character lists drawn up by the Japan Industrial Standard Organization (JIS) and the International Standard Organization (ISO) include many more characters than the official *Jōyō kanji* list of 1981. Developments in telecommunication are extremely rapid. Rather than wait for the conclusion of lengthy government deliberations, software makers release their products in order not to diminish their marketing opportunities. As in other areas, industry seems to be unwilling to yield to state control. Yet, there is nothing to suggest that the Japanese government is willing to give up its role as the rightful custodian of the written language.

Korea

In Korea, the influence of Confucianism was extremely deep and lasting. China's civil-service examination system was adopted with little modification and practiced consistently from the 10th to the 20th century. For many centuries, Korea was a model Confucian state. Mastery of Classical Chinese was an indispensable prerequisite for securing a place among the intellectual elite. The written language was cultivated much as it was in China. However, it was obvious early on that Chinese characters were ill-suited for writing the Korean language. They were adapted for this purpose in the *Idu* clerical script, but this made for extremely cumbersome reading and writing.

In a remarkable attempt to open the world of letters to a greater number of his subjects and make vernacular literacy possible, King Sejong in the 15th cen-

tury, therefore, undertook the ambitious project of a writing reform. It was a top-down reform initiated by the highest representative of the state. A group of scholars under his leadership designed the ingenious system of phonetic letters known today as *han'gŭl*. This is a matter of understandable pride for the Koreans. Says Shin Sang-Soon (1990:xiii): 'Han'gŭl is the best asset which Korea has inherited from her past.' It took many centuries for this view to gain acceptance.

King Sejong's new script was promulgated to the literate public in 1446 in a rescript entitled 'The correct sounds for the instruction of the people'. His motives were at least three: to create a system with a good linguistic fit, which would be uniquely Korean, and simple, so as to make literacy more accessible to the common people. Consisting of only 28 basic letters that represent the sounds of Korean in a straightforward and elegant manner, *han'gŭl* meets these requirements to a truly astounding extent. The King and his associates, moreover, thought of an ideological justification of the new script, tying it to the doctrines of the *Ijing*, the 'Book of Changes', which the followers of Confucianism revered as the most important of the Five Classics. Providing highly sophisticated philosophical arguments, they tried to convince Confucian scholars that *han'gŭl* reflected the cosmic order and was destined to be the proper writing system for all Koreans. Yet, the reform failed. The very idea of vernacular literacy ran counter to the communication practices of a highly stratified society in which elite literacy was a means of social control. The educated classes looked with disdain on the new system and continued to use Chinese writing until well into the present century. A vernacular literature developed since the 17th century, but its prestige could never match that of Chinese.

Nowadays, however, the creation of *han'gŭl* is celebrated as the proudest moment in Korean cultural history. It was at the center of the commemorative events staged in Seoul in 1997 in honor King Sejong's 600th anniversary. In North Korea, there is less inclination to credit royalty with Korea's most distinguished cultural achievement, but the script is used and held in high esteem nevertheless. What caused the change? The single most important factor was Korea's emergence as a modern state, a process that was unwittingly aided by Japanese colonial rule.

Near the end of the 19th century, Korea's conservative Confucianist elite proved to be unable to meet the political challenges that put Korea at the center of a power struggle between China, Russia, and Japan. Prevailing in two successive wars over the other two, Japan established itself as the dominant power on the Korean peninsula and in 1910 made it part of its empire. The colonial administration first discouraged and later proscribed use of the Korean language, promoting Japanese instead. Their harsh language regime provided the conditions necessary to kindle the fire of linguistic nationalism, the first sparks of which had become visible before the turn of the century when progressive intellectuals who opposed the corrupt and impotent bureaucracy started to publish the all-*han'gŭl* newspaper *Tongnip Shinmun* ('The Independent'). Under the Japanese, writing *han'gŭl* became a visible symbol of opposition and self-esteem. During much of the colonial period (1910-1945), Korean in *han'gŭl* letters served as a vehicle for

opposition to Japanization. Although, in 1907, three years prior to the formal inauguration of Japan's rule over Korea, a mixed style of Chinese characters and han'gul was introduced for official documents by government decree, it was only when the Japanese had left that han'gul became the official script of Korean, five centuries after King Sejong's noble failure.

One interpretation of this failure is that Sejong was ahead of his time. King Sejong's motivation for promoting a writing reform has been called 'nationalistic' (Lee Don-Ju 1990:49). However, even if there were the seeds of ethno-nationalism, state and society at the time were not organized in a way that would allow grass-root nationalist movements to develop, if only because the vast majority of the population were illiterate. In the 15th century, the nationalization of writing could not succeed because there was no nation state in the modern sense of the word. That Korea was and continued to be administered largely in Chinese testifies to this fact.

Japan's domination of Korea and its attempt to impose the Japanese written language upon the Koreans was completely different from the millennium-long domination of Korean letters by Chinese. As I pointed out earlier, Chinese writing was universal in the sense that it was the common medium of written communication of an area of civilization whose unquestioned center was China. The Japanese written language, by contrast, was that of a people who, like the Koreans, had learned the art of writing from China and adapted the system to their vernacular. It had no universal appeal. On the contrary, it was despised as provincial and inferior to Classical Chinese by conservative Sinophiles and loathed as the language of an unwelcome intruder and rival by reform-minded nationalists. This was the kind of atmosphere that generated enough nationalist fervor to allow han'gul-using reformists to win the upper hand over Chinese-writing traditionalists. It can be said then, in sum, that the nationalization of Korean writing, whose foundations were laid more than five centuries ago, became a major focus of Korean cultural nationalism and anti-colonialism that culminated when Japan was forced to withdraw from the Korean peninsula.

Han'gul is unchallenged now as the official script in both Korean states, although there are some differences, especially concerning the use of Chinese characters. Shortly after their foundation in 1948, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the Republic of Korea adopted different policies on the standard form of the written language (Sohn 1997). In South Korea, a first government-sponsored attempt at orthography reform was made in 1954. Ill-informed as it was, it had to be rescinded, however. Another reform scheme was drafted by the Ministry of Education in 1973. Meanwhile, North Korea adopted a policy of 'purification' (the linguistic equivalent of ethnic cleansing) and abolished Chinese characters. Contrary to this, successive governments in the South abolished and reintroduced the study of Chinese characters several times. As a result, while in a general sense the Korean language continues to serve its speakers as an important marker of ethnic identity, its two diverging forms in the North and the South have become associated ever-more strongly with the political identities of a divided nation.

Owing to North Korea's seclusion during the past half century, its divisive language policy has had profound effects. Beyond regional dialect variation, Korean now has two different phonetic norms, two distinct lexical norms, and two different orthographies (Kim 1992). Yet, on both sides of the 38th parallel, the written language is subject to state control. Five and a half centuries after the royal rescript 'On the Correct Sounds of Instructing the People', the process of nationalizing Korean writing has thus been brought to a conclusion, although not in a way that King Sejong could have anticipated.

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