

*One Asia Foundation International Lectures, Fall 2019 Semester*  
*“Humanities General Education: The Asian Community:  
The Construction and Transformation of East Asiaology” Lecture Series (4)*

**Title: East Asian Cultural Community and the Exchanges of Chinese Characters: The Impacts of Chinese Characters on Korean Chinese Characters Culture**

For 4th lecture of One Asia Foundation International Lectures, we invited Professor Kang Youn-Ok (姜允玉), who is the faculty of Department of Chinese Literature and the Director of East Asian Institute at Myongji University to be our guest speaker. Professor Kang is an internationally well-known scholar on Chinese characters, particularly specializing in the bamboo, wooden, or silk materials of Confucianism literature discovered in China and studies of Chinese characters.

Professor Kang first mentioned that although the history issue, low political and social identity toward each other, and territory controversies have been hunting East Asian counties (China, Japan, and Korea), there are many similarities among them. That is the focus of our lecture today: three of them belong to the East Asian (Chinese characters) cultural sphere and the Confucian cultural sphere.

Professor Kang indicated that there was a period of time that China, Japan and Korea all used the same way to record history with Chinese characters. Chinese characters culture was brought to Korean Peninsula estimated in the period of Emperor Wu of Han as the evident of bamboo materials of *The Analects* (《論語》) showed. As China started to use paper to write, Korea still use bamboo materials to learn *The Analects*. Korea combined Confucian culture with its local culture and formed a unique hybrid of Confucian culture. Confucian culture was introduced to Korea in 14<sup>th</sup> century, while Japan began to promote Confucian thoughts in 17<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, Korea was the first country to import Chinese characters and Confucian culture and continued innovation after it formed a unique hybrid of Confucian culture. Hence, from 14<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> century, there were some similarities and differences in China, Japan, and Korea. For example, both China and Korea had ancestral temple system; nonetheless, the architecture style of ancestral temple and sacrificial vessels were different. The culture of “seek common ground while reserving differences” will be a driving force for Korean traditional culture.

Regarding important materials, Four wooden materials with partial content of *Gongye Chang* of *The Analects* (《論語·公冶長》) were excavated in *Gimhae Bonghwangdong* (金海鳳凰洞) Historic Site by Pusan National University Museum in 1999. It was the first wooden materials excavated in Korea and the usage of this wooden materials had close relations with Silla’s national education institute. We can see that education at that time focused on Confucian classics and *The Analects* and *The Classic of Filial Piety* (《孝經》) was required subjects (required reading materials) for students. The required subjects were similar to Japan.

After Chinese printing and imperial examination system were brought to Korean Peninsula, it helped to promote the prevalence of recording with Chinese characters and Confucianism. In 958, Kingdom of Goryeo started imperial examination system and the subjects for examination were Confucian classics. In Joseon dynasty, Confucianism became national religion. At this time, there were two kind of important national documents: the

first kind was official literature like Confucian prints, *Uigwe* (《朝鮮王朝儀軌》) and *Manual For The Five Categories of State Rites* (《國朝五禮儀》) and the second kind was Confucian scholars' writing of their visit to China such as *A Record of Drifting* (《漂海錄》).” These literatures recorded the history of literature, politics, economics, institutions, architecture, clothing, cuisine in Confucian society in Joseon dynasty.

Regarding the changes of educational policies on Chinese characters in Korea, Korean government abolished Chinese characters in 1948 and then the Ministry of Education issued “1000 Frequently used Chinese characters,” also called education Chinese characters, for the first time. In 1972, the government promulgated a list of basic Chinese characters for educational proposes, in which 1,800 Chinese characters were listed. In 1995, the subject of Chinese literature became selective subject. Under the decision of President Kim Dae-Jung in 1990s, Korea broke the taboo against the use of Chinese characters for decades and announced to restore Chinese characters education. As a part of revised educational outline, the Ministry of Education announced in 2015 that textbooks for elementary school beyond third graders will use both Chinese characters and Hangeul (Korean characters) after 2018. Unfortunately Korean government abolished this policy in 2018.

The channels that elementary school and junior high students can learn Chinese characters now are *Seodang* (書堂) and country schools. There are selective courses in junior and senior high school mainly focusing on 900 words promulgated by the Ministry of Education. Selective courses and the courses in the department of Chinese literature in universities must learn 1800 words promulgated by the Ministry of Education. Koreans in general use Chinese characters in the way that mainly rely on Hangeul while supplemented by Chinese characters. This way of writing can be seen in newspapers and books. The reason of using Chinese characters is to avoid misunderstanding resulted from similar pronunciation. For example, name of place or people usually supplemented by Chinese characters with parentheses. In addition, it will not write out every Chinese characters but only use it when necessary. In the job market, Chinese characters become a competitive capability for job seekers. Many Korean companies demands Chinese characters capability and announces that job seeker who has advanced Chinese ability can receive extra score up to 5%. Therefore, because many Korean historical documents were written in Chinese, Chinese characters becomes an accessory appliance to inherit Korean culture. At the meantime, Chinese characters have become a competitive capability for job seekers. As the result, for younger generation in Korea it is critical to learn Chinese characters.

Finally, Professor Kang concluded the lecture that Confucian culture is the basis and model of East Asian civilization and Chinese characters is the beginning point and key for mutual understanding among Asian countries.

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(Written by Tsai Pei-Ching, Associate Professor of the Department of Japanese Language and Literature)

(English Version Translated by Wenting (Florence) Yang, Post-doctoral Research Fellow, Institute of International Relations, National Chengchi University)