

The Impacts of Chinese Characters on Korean Culture and the Current Situation of Chinese Characters Education

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Courses on Asian Community, One Asia Foundation

Translated by Wenting Yang

For 15th lecture of international seminar of One Asia Foundation, Principal Hsu Hsing-Ching 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. The theme of lecture is “The Impacts of Chinese Characters on Korean Culture and the Current Situation of Chinese Characters Education.” After this lecture, Professor Lee visited Chang Jen-Hu, the chairman of the board of directors of our University. Professor Kang and Chairman Chang had a pleasant conversation and a good time.

Professor Kang specializes in the bamboo, wooden, or silk materials of Confucianism literature discovered in China and the studies of Chinese characters. She published books “Confucian Studies from the Bamboo and Silk Materials of Confucian Literature (出土儒家文獻所見儒家思想研究),” “Outline of Ancient Chinese Characters (中國古文字學綱要),” and “Chinese Characters and Chinese Culture (漢字與中國文化).” The theme of this lecture is “The Impacts of Chinese Characters on Korean Culture and the Current Situation of Chinese Characters Education.” Based on the research results of her long-term research, she explained the spreading of Chinese Characters in East Asia and its impacts to Korean Confucian culture. In addition, she also introduced the changes in Korea’s Chinese characters education policies and the current situation of Chinese characters education in Korea. The following is the summary of the lecture:

There was a period of time that China, Japan and Korea all used the same Chinese characters; thus, both Japan and Korea were highly-influenced by 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 used bamboo materials to learn *The Analects*. However, the materials were not the full text of *The Analects* but the most classic part of *The Analects*, similar to Japan’s wooden materials of “The Analects.” In spite of slight differences, China, Korea, and Japan have lots of the similarities. 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 period, 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 on 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. Take *Uigwe* for example which was written with the style of pictures and Chinese characters, this document pointed out that Joseon dynasty was based on Confucianism and it recorded main great activities of Joseon Kingdom, such as national marriage ceremony, Kings' travel, and banquets, for six hundred years. This series of documents have enormous volumes and the total volumes are 3,895 volumes. While China was invaded by Mongolia, the Confucian literature were destroyed. Korea had been through similar invasion but traditional heritages were preserved intact and were not destroyed after thousand years. Thus, the tradition of Confucianism was inherited.

Although we cannot see Chinese characters on the street in Korea now, there are traditional Chinese characters in Korea and we still use Korean mixed script. 1300 Frequently used Chinese characters were promulgated in 1961 and the government regulation requited junior high students must learn Chinese characters. *JoongAng Ilbo* in Korea pointed out that if Korean people wants to inherit heritage, they must have Chinese characters education. By this way, they can understand thoughts, sentiments, and values of their forefathers. *Explaining Graphs and Analyzing Characters* (《說文解字》) brought huge impacts to three countries. It goes without saying that Chinese characters in Japanese were influence by it. Thus, these three countries share lots of similarity in the culture of written language and are able to communicate.

Moreover, Korea has integrated Confucian culture brought from China with its own local culture and formed a unique Confucian culture. Since the end of 14th century, Joseon

Kingdom has held rites to worship ancestors in the ancestral temple annually. The biggest and the most important rite was called “Jongmyo Jerye or Jongmyo Daeje.” “Jongmyo Daeje” is the highest-ranked royal rite according to Confucian rituals. The purpose is for the state to implement the basic Eastern philosophy “filial piety” and to form a sense of bonding and order of national community. Japan also promoted Confucian thoughts in 17th century.

Accompanied with the introduction of Confucian culture, the culture of ritual and music was brought to East Asian countries like Korea and Japan. At the beginning, it imitated the Chinese ritual and music system and use musical instrument like *Bianzhong* (編鐘) in the ancestral rites. Then ruling class used ritual and music system to strengthen governance and maintain stability of society. Korea still preserves various Confucian rites. So-called “ritual and music” is a ruling law, social norms, and virtues based on patriarchal system. Chinese ritual and music system was brought to Japan from Korea in 17th century Edo period. After imitation and integration, it was developed into “Gagaku,” a new “ritual and music” style with Japanese characteristics. “Gagaku” is different to Chinese and Korean “ritual and music” style. Korean “ritual and music” style is more similar to Chinese style in Ming dynasty. Thus, from 14th to 17th century, there were many similarities and some 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 Asian Community.

After Chinese characters culture was brought to Korea, Korean further improved and localized some part of it by their own efforts. To some degree, we might say that model of Korean societal development is a cultural structure led by Confucian thoughts. Although Korean accepted Chinese Confucian culture, it did not just indiscriminately imitate it.

Chinese characters maintained a strong integrity for inheriting of Korean Confucian culture and helped to form a compound and plural culture characteristics in the development process of modern society. Chinese characters and Confucian culture are deeply-rooted in daily life of Korean people. Ideas like “Harmony in a family brings success to everything” and “What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others” influence people’s thinking and act all the time. In Contemporary Korea, Confucianism is integrated into nation’s subconscious and becomes collective personality and mental power. Thus, Koreans apply Confucian righteousness on nationalism, treat ethics as a treasure of ruling the state, and take the hierarchical order between monarch and subjects, between father and son, as the morality motto of self-cultivation. Confucianism is

integrated into social life. For example, Korean life style and people relations still came from Confucian thoughts.

Thoughts of “harmony but not sameness, seek common ground while reserving differences” in Confucian culture is very important for establishing “Community of Chinese characters culture” and for maintaining the peace and stability between the regions. The increasing exchanges among Taiwan, China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam allow us to acknowledge that it is important to cultivate ability of using Chinese characters. If we can gather experts specializing glyph, phonology, vocabulary of Chinese characters to conduct research and write a good reference book on Chinese characters, it will be very helpful for Korean students to improve their knowledge of Chinese characters. East Asian countries should have common perception as East Asian Community. Every country should have its own responsibility and respect each other. While Korea and Japan absorbed the Chinese characters and Confucian culture, both countries integrated and transformed the culture. We should embrace and acknowledge the diversity of different culture. Every country should get along peacefully and popularize the thought of benevolence in Confucianism in East Asian region. Thus, East Asian countries are able to learn from each other and really continue to develop as a community.

(Written by: Meihui Huang, Assistant Professor of Department of Japanese Language and Literature)

※Regarding this course, please refer to the website:

<https://oneasia.pccu.edu.tw/facultydata.php?page=15>