

## The Spreading of Chinese Character and Asian Community

The First Semester 2018

Courses on Asian Community, One Asia Foundation

For the fourth lecture, we invite Professor Wen-chin Lin from Department of Chinese literature. The theme of this lecture is “The Spreading of Chinese Characters and Asian Community.” The summary of this lecture is as below:

The invention of writing of language facilitate the rapid improvement of human history and civilization. In the development of history on writing in the world, comparing to writing system in other countries, “Chinese character” is the most special symbol system. Frist, every independent complete character expresses particular meaning. For example, the character “人 (human)” is from the observation of the side view of human shape, the character “山 (mountain)” is from the image of undulating crest of hill, and the character “水 (water)” is from the image of wandering river or water flow. In addition, through combining different characters, more Chinese characters are invented to satisfy to needs for complicated society and communication of thoughts among people. For instance, “人 (human)” add “山 (mountain)” become “仙 (divine),” “人 (human)” add “水 (water)” become “水 (溺, drowning),” “人 (human)” add “木 (wood)” become “休 (rest),” “人 (human)” add “共 (together)” become “供 (supply),” and “人 (human)” add “倫 (orderly)” become “倫 (ethics).” Syllabary, which represents a phoneme, is difficult to be consistent, because once the phoneme transformed, the word changes accompanied with it. On the other hand, Chinese character which represents a word or phrase has high consistency that even ancient literature from two thousand years ago can be read and understood by the contemporaries.

It was recorded that countries that surround China, such as Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, had borrowed Chinese characters. Some of them used Chinese characters to present meaning and sound directly, while some of them used Chinese characters either to present sound only or to present meaning only. Thus, in the process of using Chinese characters in these countries, the shapes of Chinese characters changed diversely and

not necessarily consistent with the characters used in Mainland China and Taiwan. For example, the seal script of the character “為” recorded in Hsu Shen (許慎)’s book *Explaining Graphs and Analyzing Characters* (說文解字) written in Han Dynasty was “𠄎” and upper part was pictogram “爪.” In the book *Jade Chapters* (玉篇) edited by Ku Yehwang (顧野王) during the Liang Dynasty, it was recorded as “爲” and it was the regular script of the seal script. However, in the book *Broad Rimes* (廣韻) written in Song Dynasty, the informal form of the same character “為” was recorded. In simplified Chinese, in order to reduce strokes of characters, this character was simplified as “为” and the number of strokes was lessened to four strokes. Regarding to the same character, it was written as “為” as formal form in Taiwan and the same form was adopted in Japan. Meanwhile, the formal form of this character is “为” in China and the form “爲,” as recorded in the book *Explaining Graphs and Analyzing Characters*, was adopted in Korea. Japan and Korea not only borrowed character to present meaning but also created new characters following the rules of “Compound indicatives” and “Phono-semantic compound characters.” For example, characters “凧 (kite),” “躑 (soon after, immediately),” “問つかえ (get stuck, be blocked, stumble),” “凧おろし (wind blowing down from mountains)” are particular characters created in Japan and characters “尘 (the simplified form of “塵,” written as “尘” in simplified Chinese),” “畚 (paddy field, rice paddy),” “垩 (foundation, foundation soil),” “蕎 (Buckwheat)” are particular characters created in Korea.

The culture of power spread from China to East Asia and formed the culture circle of Chinese characters. In the process of spreading Chinese characters, neighbouring countries not only inherited it but also innovated particular Chinese characters and terms. These innovated Chinese characters in turn bring impacts to users who use Chinese characters as mother tongue. In Taiwan, Japanese characters, such as “压 (press),” “伝 (pass),” “応 (response),” “劳 (labor),” “丼 (bowl),” can be seen from time to time. Professional terms like “野球 (Baseball),” “經濟 (economics),” “串燒 (skewered dish),” “場所 (place),” and “宅急便 (express home delivery)” are also frequently used in Taiwan. Through borrowing Chinese characters, it also brings culture impacts and integration of thoughts to countries in East Asia. Regarding area

observation, it is important to observe from culture perspective as it avoids being shallow and fragmented and facilitates the full understanding of development commonality in Chinese character culture circle.

Professor Wen-chin Lin first introduces the characteristics of Chinese characters from Oracle bone script and *Six Writings* (六書). In the consecutive section, he gave various examples to show that countries in Chinese characters circle, such as Taiwan, China, Korea, Japan and Vietnam, adopted the same characters directly or created new characters based on their own needs. As Professor Lin indicates, “neighbouring countries not only inherited Chinese characters but also innovated particular Chinese characters and terms. These innovated Chinese characters in turn bring impacts to users who use Chinese characters as mother tongue.” Take Japan for example, the innovated characters, like “凧 (kite),” “躑 (soon after, immediately),” “問つかえ (get stuck, be blocked, stumble),” “凧おろし (wind blowing down from mountains),” were called “Japanese character” or “Japan-made Chinese characters.” It demonstrates that Japanese do not think Chinese characters are from foreign countries or it is so deeply rooted in Japanese culture that became part of their life. These Chinese characters are not only used in Japan but also are spread back to Taiwan and China. For instance, many “Japan-made Chinese characters” were included in *A Dictionary of Current Chinese* (現代漢語辭典), the most famous dictionary in China.

Except “Japan-made Chinese characters,” there are “Japan-made Chinese terms.” Terms used in social science and human science like “民主 (democracy),” “科學 (science),” “文化 (culture),” “經濟 (economics),” and “政治 (politics)” that we use frequently are actually “Japan-made Chinese terms.” Likewise, we do not think these terms are from foreign countries. Young generation in Taiwan even adopt more Japanese terms than the previous generation in recent years. They use terms like “素人 (amateur),” “達人 (expert),” “色違 (different color),” without hesitation and it means that these terms are integrated with their daily life. Why Taiwanese, young generation in particular, share high acceptability toward “Japan-made Chinese terms”? I think it is

not only because that they like Japanese culture, but also because that Japanese characters and Taiwanese characters are very similar and Chinese characters are logograph; thus, it is able to understand the meaning from the shape of Chinese characters. Moreover, using seldom-used combination of Chinese characters (such as 色違) can catch people's attention and create sense of freshness and new stimulation. These stimulation became fashion in young generation and young generation tend to pursue these elements.

I still recalled that Dr. Joon-Kon Chung mentioned in the first lecture that “regarding the construction of Asian Community, except of the wall of ‘state,’ ‘border,’ ‘nation,’ and ‘internal thought,’ the priority is to overcome the wall of ‘language’.” Asia, especially East Asian countries are belong to Chinese character culture circle. Although in East Asian each country has its own independent phonology and grammar system and these systems are not consistent with each other, these countries are able to communicate to certain degree through common Chinese characters. Although Korea reduced the usage of Chinese characters after 1980s, Koreans and Korean government start to reevaluate the importance of Chinese characters after several decades. According to literature, Korean government already put Chinese character learning back to the curriculum of elementary school in 2011 and plans to reintroduce mixed script textbooks to third graders in elementary school by 2018. In Vietnam, for the necessity of economic development (according to statistics, 40% of foreign direct investment to Vietnam are from countries in Chinese character culture circle) Chinese characters are revalued as well. Therefore, we should believe that in order to overcome the wall of “language” in Asia, particular in East Asia, to construct a common Chinese character system is the necessary priority. (Written by: Chen Shun-Yi)