International Congress of Aesthetics 2007
“Aesthetics Bridging Cultures”

The Aesthetic Features of Korean Alphabetic System - Hangul

M. Ertan GÖKMEN, Ankara University, Ankara

Introduction

Hangul is the name of the unique alphabet which is being used by Koreans in the Korean Peninsula. The Korean alphabet is used by only Koreans which can be considered as unlike any other alphabet in the world.

For all Koreans not only in the South but also in the North, Hangul is one of the powerful cultural icons. It’s the symbol of nation and national cultural heritage. That the writing system is completely and uniquely Korean is enough to swell the pride of nation. Also that it’s also one of the most remarkable writing system ever invented makes it fully deserving of attention in the wider world.\(^1\)

Invention of the Hangul – Brief History

Before inventing the Hangul, in the peninsula the Chinese characters were being used as it had been imported from China by the early centuries of A.D.. By using the literary Chinese characters Korea became a literate society.\(^2\)

As being of foreign origin, the Chinese characters, which were used until 15\(^{th}\) century, were not capable of expressing all of the sounds in Korean phonetic system. Therefore, King Sejong, the 4\(^{th}\) ruler of the Choson Dynasty, established an institution called Chiphyonjon in the palace and ordered the scholars to invent a new writing system in 1443. Though the king is generally referred to as “inventor” Hangul was in reality the result of years of research by the king and a team of scholars established by himself. Using Sejong’s name as sole inventor gave gravitas and authority to the invention.\(^3\) After completing the 4 year researches and working on it, scholars have presented the new Korean writing symbols to the king and then King Sejong (r.1418-1450 AD) has proclaimed this alphabet to the Korean people as Hunmin chong-um (correct sounds for instructing the people). The most important motivation on inventing a new alphabet was not having a unique writing system at that time and was also being used the Chinese characters known as Hancha among a restricted population. However the usage of the pictographic Sino-Korean Hanchas were being caused a lot of difficulties on expressing themselves in written Korean. King Sejong was very regretful on being not able to write and read by the ordinary Koreans but except some intellectuals and high society called Yangbans. So, that situation has motivated him inventing a new, widely usable letters to use by all population. However, by the influence of the widely accepted traditions in the peninsula and by the prevailed yangbans, scholars and high society continued to use the Chinese characters as the literary script until 1945. What was the most pathetic situation


for the Hangul during the half millennium is that it was called a writing system for
women and children to insult not only the letters but also people who were trying to use
it. So we can easily assume that Hangul was thought fit mainly for the consumption of
women and people of low social rank.

On the other hand, for some scholars Hangul is not that enough to emphasize all of the
sounds of the Korean sound system and because of this reason Chinese writing system is
still somehow prestigious in Korea like in Japan. These considerable resistant scholars
were the aristocratic elites in Korean society who perceived it as a threat to their own
social, aristocratic, or some governmental position. In consequence, the new script,
though ideally suited for Korean, did not replace Chinese but was used side by side with
the Chinese characters as an aid for pronunciation, for grammatical word or to clarify
ambiguities. However, North Korea has totally prohibited the usage of Chinese
characters either in daily life or scientific environment and promoted the Hangul in all
written materials.

Moreover Hangul is accepted to be one of the most scientific alphabet in the world
among the alphabet’s that are being used in present. Also, it was taken in the list of the
Memory of the World International Register of UNESCO on October 1997.

The Letters of Hangul
Hangul consists of 40 letters and is capable of expressing any sound in Korean. Twenty-
one of these represent vowels (including 13 diphthongs) and nineteen represents
consonants. Twenty-four are basics while the others are the compounds of the basics.
Mainly consonants were made by the pictographic ways while vowels were made by the
symbolic and cosmic ways.

Vowels
The vowels of Hangul are based on the three letters originated from the cosmic
representation which all of the vowels are created by combining these letters. These are:

1. the dot (.) – represents the heaven

2. the horizontal line (ㅡ) – represents the earth

3. the vertical line (ㅣ) – represents the man

According to the above mentioned creation process, all of the vowels including
diphthongs and thrithongs are as follows:

\[ a \quad ə \quad o \quad u \quad ü \quad i \quad e \]
Figure 1. Vowels

All symbols of Hangul are written from top to bottom and from left to right. The order of the strokes is as illustrated below. Strokes are never interrupted, not even when they change the direction halfway.
Consonants

Consonants are based upon the position and shape of the vocal organs like mouth, tongue and lip when they are pronounced. In other words, the individual consonants are graphic representations of the way the organs of speech are used to articulate them. The 5 letters of the consonants are the basic letters and the other consonants are based on these 5 letters by adding and combining some elements on them. The basic consonants’ sound properties and also representations are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Letters</th>
<th>Sound Properties</th>
<th>Representation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

*Figure 2. Strokes of the Vowels*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Letter</th>
<th>Pronunciation</th>
<th>Articulation Place</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ㄱ</td>
<td>part of the tongue touches the molar teeth and sticks near the uvula</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ㄴ</td>
<td>the front of the tongue curves and the tip of the tongue sticks to the upper gums</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3. Basic Consonants
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ㅏ</th>
<th>upper and lower lips are joined.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ㅅ</td>
<td>the tip of the tongue and the upper teeth are brought close together, and sound is created by blowing through the narrowed passage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ㅗ</td>
<td>letter that is created by stimulating the uvula, the throat assumes a round shape, hence the form of the consonant.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4. Pronunciation and Articulation Places of the Basic Letters

The List of the Consonants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>initial</th>
<th>k-</th>
<th>n-</th>
<th>t-</th>
<th>r-</th>
<th>m-</th>
<th>-p</th>
<th>s-</th>
<th>-ŋ</th>
<th>ch-</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>medial</td>
<td>-g-</td>
<td>-h-</td>
<td>-d-</td>
<td>-r-</td>
<td>-m-</td>
<td>-b-</td>
<td>-sh-</td>
<td>-ng-</td>
<td>-j-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>final</td>
<td>-k</td>
<td>-n</td>
<td>-t</td>
<td>-l</td>
<td>-m</td>
<td>-p</td>
<td>-t</td>
<td>-ŋ</td>
<td>-t</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>name</td>
<td>kiyök</td>
<td>niün</td>
<td>tigüt</td>
<td>riül</td>
<td>miüm</td>
<td>piüp</td>
<td>shiot</td>
<td>iũŋa</td>
<td>chiūt</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
These consonants are produced by copying of the shapes of the speech organs. The other consonants which were produced by adding some other elements on the basics are as follows:

28 letters of hangul is not made separately but made of basic letters first and then followed by the rest. Moreover, the letters represent themselves as the characteristics of the sound value. For example `ㄴ` (n) is modeled after the shape of the tongue touching the gums and `ㄷ` (d) added a stroke on `ㄴ` representing the sound in the same position of the mouth.
Syllable
Korean syllables are divided into three parts:

1. Chosong (초성) (the initial – syllable onset)

2. Chungsong (중성) (medial/peak vowel/diphthong/triphthong – syllable nucleus)

3. Chongsong (종성) (final consonant – syllable coda)

The Philosophical Features of the Hangul
The main philosophy of the Hunmincheongum is the science of divination – Yeok-hak (역학 - 易學) in which the main principle is based on the Yin(陰)and Yang(陽) principle. Therefore, we can say that Hangul is a formative and visual result of accomplishment of the Yin and Yang principle due to the Great Absolute (太極). In Hunmincheongum, according to the Yeok, the first sound is heaven and the final sound is earth. Man stays in between the heaven and earth. The aim of this is to keep the balance with harmony and going up to the idea of unity. So it is claimed that hangul reflects everything in the world including the voice of human beings. According to the Yin-Yang principle, the forms of the letters in the Hangul followed by the Yin and Yang principle are vertically and horizontally symmetrical.
Conclusion

Hangul has sound values and it can express all sounds of nature and humans. Besides it’s so scientific, systematic and easy to learn that we can use it without any difficulty both in scientific and public use in the society. Therefore, it’s recognized as one of the most scientific and creative alphabets in the world.

After Hangul became the official letters in Korea, the lack of the education, the class discrimination, the problem of uneducated population began to reduce. If we consider the literacy rate of the 2006 we can see that it has reached to the 99% so that this rate shows how Hangul supports the Korean society to become a literate society.

As we have mentioned above, the Hangul has Great Absolute property based on the Yin and Yang Principle as we can see in all other features of Korean culture. The Great Absolute is not only found in the letters but also in the National Flag (태극기 - 太極旗) which is called as Taeguk Flag, in the social life, in the interpersonal relations, in the spoken language like the concrete honorific expression and so forth. Summing up of those Great Absolute values as a whole in Korean society, we can argue that Korean culture presents the harmony which is one of the proofs of the amazing development in the Korea.

References


2 Ibid.
http://site.ebrary.com/lib/ankarauniv/Doc?id=10035642ppg=112

Ibid.
