

## THE ROLE OF HANJA IN KOREA: LANGUAGE, SCHOLARSHIP AND SOCIETY.

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人 (인, in – human), 日 (일, il – day, sun), 大 (대, dae – great), 中 (중, jung – central, middle), 國 (국, guk – nation, country), 女 (녀/여, yeo/hyo – female, woman), 男 (남, nam – male, man), 山 (산, san – mountain), 水 (수, su – water), 心 (심, sim – heart, mind, emotion), Korean language, Hanja, vocabulary, place names, official terms, academic texts.

**Abstract:** This article examines the historical role of 漢字 (Hanja) in Korea, highlighting how it shaped scholarly culture and state administration. Since Korean and Chinese are structurally different, Koreans developed systems such as 향찰 (Hyangchal), and 구결 (Gugyeol) to adapt Chinese characters to Korean grammar and phonology.

It also discusses the influence of Sino-Korean vocabulary, which enriched fields like law, science, and government by providing precise and formal terminology. A major linguistic shift came with 세종대왕 (King Sejong) and the creation of 한글 (Hangul) in the 15th century, a script designed to accurately represent Korean sounds. Although Hangul transformed literacy, Hanja continued to be used in scholarly and official contexts for centuries.

The article concludes by noting that while Hangul is now dominant in South Korea, Hanja remains essential for interpreting historical texts and understanding specialized vocabulary rooted in Sino-Korean tradition.

Hanja constitutes a fundamental component of Korea's historical linguistic infrastructure and has served, for many centuries, as the principal medium for scholarly, administrative, and literary production on the Korean Peninsula. The term Hanja, denoting "Chinese characters," refers to the logographic script whose origins trace back to ancient China and which functioned as a primary vehicle for transmitting philosophical, religious, and socio-political knowledge across East Asia.

The earliest transmission of Hanja to Korea is generally situated between the 4th and 5th centuries CE, corresponding to a period of intensified Sino-Korean diplomatic, cultural, and intellectual exchange. Through these sustained interactions, Hanja was incorporated into the bureaucratic systems of early Korean polities and became indispensable for statecraft, legal codification, historiography, and elite education.

The adoption of Hanja not only facilitated Korea's participation in the broader Sinosphere but also contributed to the formation of a literate elite capable of engaging with continental philosophical traditions, particularly Confucianism and Buddhism. Early Buddhist scriptures, governmental decrees, and historical chronicles were transmitted and recorded exclusively in Hanja, thereby shaping Korea's epistemological and cultural foundations.

Prior to the creation of Hangul in the 15th century, Hanja functioned as the sole authoritative writing system in Korea, and literacy was largely synonymous with mastery of classical Chinese texts. Even after King Sejong's promulgation of Hangul, Hanja maintained its prestige and remained widely employed in academic discourse, official documentation, and legal contexts due to its semantic precision, morphological stability, and capacity to encode complex conceptual structures.

In contemporary Korean society, Hanja continues to hold relevance, particularly in onomastics and historical research. A substantial proportion of Korean surnames and toponyms are still represented through Hanja characters, each of which carries a distinct semantic value and often reflects lineage, ancestral origin, or historical identity. For instance, prominent surnames such as Kim (金) and Lee (李) are written with specific characters that possess long-established cultural and etymological significance. Consequently, Hanja remains an integral component of Korea's cultural heritage and continues to inform contemporary understandings of Korean identity, history, and linguistic evolution.

### Hanja and Hangul: Two Integral Layers of the Korean Writing System

Hanja represents the Sino-Korean characters that constitute the historical foundation of the Korean language. In contrast, Hangul is the phonetic script of Korean, distinguished by its systematic structure and ease of reading, which allows for precise expression of meaning.

Hanja was introduced into Korea approximately during the 4th–5th centuries via China and served for many centuries as the exclusive writing system for official, scholarly, and literary texts. The development and subsequent adoption of Hanja by the Korean people significantly influenced the cultural, intellectual, and linguistic advancement of Korea.

Despite its complexity, each Hanja character conveys a profound meaning, often encapsulating the semantic essence of an entire sentence within a single symbol. Consequently, Hanja characters frequently function as tools to emphasize or enrich the meaning of written discourse.

Hangul, consisting of 24 fundamental phonetic letters (14 consonants and 10 vowels), provides an efficient and logical system for representing Korean sounds. Its systematic design facilitates ease of literacy acquisition and rapid mastery, making it an accessible and practical script for communication.

In Korean linguistics, numerous words trace their roots to Hanja characters, which are frequently utilized in surnames, official terminology, place names, and scholarly texts. The following Hanja characters represent some of the most common semantic components in contemporary Korean:

1. 人 (인, in) – “person” or “human”

This character appears in a wide range of terms pertaining to human beings. Notable examples include 인구 (population), 인간 (human), 인구 수 (population count), 인간적 (humane), and 인간관계 (human relations). Its usage remains prominent in modern Korean vocabulary.

2. 日 (일, il) – “day” or “sun”

日 features prominently in expressions related to time and days. Examples include 일요일 (Sunday), 일식 (solar eclipse), and 일본 (Japan – literally “Land of the Rising Sun”).

3. 大 (대, dae) – “big” or “great”

This character signifies magnitude and importance and is often incorporated into terms denoting institutions or national entities. Examples include 대학교 (university), 대한민국 (Republic of Korea), and 대북 (toward the north).

4. 中 (중, jung) – “middle” or “central”

中 indicates centrality or intermediate status, commonly appearing in place names or educational terms. Examples include 중국 (China), 중앙 (center), and 중학교 (middle school).

#### 5. 國 (국, guk) – “country” or “nation”

국 is essential in denoting sovereign entities. Examples include 한국 (Korea), 국가 (nation), and 외국 (foreign country).

#### 6. 女 (녀/여, yeo/hyo) – “female” or “woman”

This character occurs in terminology related to women. Examples include 여성 (woman), 여자 (girl), and 여자대 (women’s university).

#### 7. 男 (남, nam) – “male” or “man”

남 designates male gender and appears in terms such as 남성 (man) and 남자 (boy/man).

#### 8. 山 (산, san) – “mountain”

산 is frequently used in geographic designations and proper names of mountains, such as 설악산, 한라산, and 북한산.

#### 9. 水 (수, su) – “water”

水 appears in natural and scientific contexts. Examples include 수도 (capital – derived from “waterway”), 수영 (swimming), and 수질 (water quality).

#### 10. 心 (심, sim) – “heart,” “mind,” or “emotion”

심 denotes emotional and mental aspects, appearing in terms such as 감정 (emotion), 마음/심 (heart, mind), and 정신 (spirit, psyche).

These Hanja characters demonstrate the profound influence of Sino-Korean lexicon on Korean vocabulary, reflecting both semantic depth and historical continuity in contemporary usage.

In summary, the examined Hanja characters demonstrate the enduring linguistic and cultural influence of Sino-Korean elements within the structure of modern Korean. Their functions extend beyond simple lexical components, serving as key semantic markers in personal names, administrative terminology, geographic designations, and scholarly discourse. The continued presence of characters such as 人, 日, 大, 中, 國, 女, 男, 山, 水, and 心 illustrates the depth of historical continuity embedded in Korean vocabulary and highlights the integral role of Hanja in understanding the conceptual development of Korean linguistic identity. This analysis reaffirms that a comprehensive study of Korean language and culture is incomplete without recognizing the foundational contributions of Hanja to its semantic, historical, and intellectual framework.

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