



Introduction: Hanmun Teaching and Hanmun Grammar

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“Hanmun” 漢文 is the Korean term for Literary Sinitic,¹ also known as Classical Chinese or Literary Chinese, or *wenyan* 文言 in Chinese. While these terms differ in their precise meanings, it is safe to say that “Hanmun” is the broadest of them all. Anything written in any form of pre-modern Chinese can be considered Hanmun.

The question of Hanmun teaching is the core theme of this issue of the *Journal of Sinographic Philologies and Legacies* and is an important and precarious problem in Korean studies, as it has been since the inception of the field. It is also highly relevant in the present day, as decisions must be made on how to proceed with Hanmun teaching, influencing the future of Korean studies.

Hanmun is important because almost all writing in Korea prior to the 20th century was in that language. Until the 1990s, a sound knowledge of *hancha* (漢字, sinographs) was necessary to understand mixed-script writing, which was common throughout the 20th century. Even in the 21st century, Hanmun remains an important part of Korean word-building, particularly in formal contexts. Nevertheless, the need for Hanmun — or even just only for *hancha* — as part of the Korean Studies curriculum is often questioned. Hanmun education has been marginalized within Korean studies and has often been criticized when requests for the streamlining or economization of Korean studies have been made. As Ross King argues in his article in this volume, it is common practice in most Korean language teaching, both in South Korea and in the West, to ignore this aspect of training for full academic proficiency in Korean. Hanmun is treated as an alien subject in Korean studies, one that belongs more to Chinese studies. Accordingly, Hanmun education tends to be delegated to sinologists as a cost-saving measure. This creates a difficult situation for those who believe Hanmun is important to Korean studies, as well as for students interested in pre-modern Korea and its key language, which is absolutely necessary for any serious approach to the field.

The topic here is Hanmun, not just *hancha*. Knowledge of *hancha* is simply an important prerequisite for Hanmun education that happens to be highly useful for learners of Korean. While this is one possible argument in favour of the importance of Hanmun in Korean studies, it is neither the most important nor the best argument. The best argument for Hanmun is that without at least some basic instruction in the language, a program of Korean Studies cannot have any historical depth. It would then

¹ Reasons for using the term “Literary Sinitic,” which was originally coined by Sinologist Victor Mair, are found in Ross King “Editor’s Preface Vernacular Reading in the Sinographic Cosmopolis and Beyond” *Literary Sinitic and East Asia*. Leiden: Brill, 2021.

be restricted to ultra-modern materials from the last few decades of Korean history, and would have to ignore the part of Korean literary and cultural life that is still deeply rooted in Hanmun culture. There are two reasons why Hanmun is essential to understanding Korea:

First, it provides access to older materials, allowing students of Korean Studies to grasp the wealth of Korean history. In other words: To make the treasure trove of the Korean cultural tradition accessible.

Second, it provides cultural literacy, allowing students of Korean Studies to participate competently in the culture of Korean humanities.

For a long time, it has been difficult to motivate students of Korean studies to take an interest in Hanmun. This is because most students are primarily interested in modern Korea, and it often takes time for them to recognize the value of Hanmun as a key to Korean history and culture. They also need time to understand its continued importance in word-building and in the higher registers of contemporary Korean.

This is not only a problem in Korean Studies outside of Korea; Hanmun education also struggles to be accepted in the curricula of South Korean high schools and university humanities courses. Often, “Hanmun” (writing in Chinese) is used synonymously with “*hancha*” (Chinese characters), and knowledge of *hancha* is considered sufficient for students of history and literature at Korean universities.

The idea that Hanmun “has no grammar” — motivated by the fact that it is an analytic language that relies on word order rather than morphology to convey meaning² — is not mainstream anymore, but the study of Hanmun grammar and methods of teaching it remain niche subjects. On the other hand, the last few years have seen the publication of textbooks and reference books in both Korean and Western languages. Additionally, a steady stream of books on Classical and Literary Chinese are being published by Western Chinese Studies departments. These books offer a variety of more or less systematic approaches to the teaching of Hanmun grammar.

Nevertheless, there are still many unsolved problems with Hanmun teaching, both within and outside Korea. Most of these problems relate to understanding syntax, which is key to understanding Hanmun. More specifically, there is a problem with explaining Hanmun syntax in a way that is easy to understand and useful for Hanmun teaching.

The articles in this volume are the result of a conference held at Ruhr University Bochum on 16 June 2025. Titled “Hanmun Teaching and Hanmun Syntax,” the conference was part of the “First Workshop on the Digital Study of Pre-modern Korean Writing Systems and Texts.”³ Six of the seven articles in this volume are related to papers presented at the conference. The conference formed part of the “Hanmun Lab”

² For a discussion, see: Heiner Roetz, “Die chinesische Sprache und das chinesische Denken. Positionen einer Debatte.” *Bochumer Jahrbuch zur Ostasienforschung* 30 (2006): 9-37, and Edward McDonald, “The Challenge of a “Lacking” Language. The Historical Development of Chinese Grammaticals.” *Chinese Language and Discourse* 8:2 (2017), 244–265.

³ The conference was generously funded by the Volkswagen Foundation (Hanmun Lab project).

project, supported by the Volkswagen Foundation and conducted by Korean Studies researchers at Ruhr University Bochum.

Attended by specialists and students of Korean Studies and other branches of East Asian Studies at Ruhr University, the conference provided a valuable opportunity to discuss how to teach Hanmun and address the challenges it faces in Western academia. In particular, we discussed questions relating to syntactic analysis, textbooks and their use in the classroom, and teaching methods. All participants had experience teaching Hanmun in practice, and some of the attending students had experience of these classes, enabling them to comment on the claims and arguments put forward.

The conference was very fruitful, as common topics and problems were identified. Even better, we were able to suggest solutions and make proposals to improve Hanmun education. The description of Hanmun syntax and the teaching of Hanmun grammar — arguably the same thing — is a field in which experimentation is possible and welcomed by the scholarly community.

Although there is a long tradition of teaching Hanmun in Korean Studies, as well as an even longer tradition of teaching other forms of Literary Sinitic in Sinology (or Chinese Studies) and Japanese Studies, it is only very recently that the explosion in student numbers has prompted a re-evaluation of the didactic approach in Hanmun classes. This is an important development since the needs of Hanmun learners must be at the centre of our attention if we are to foster enthusiasm for Hanmun studies among young scholars. We also need specialized teaching materials that take into account the needs of students with a background in Korean studies, as their needs and experiences differ greatly from those of students of Chinese studies. To appeal to students of Korean Studies, most of whom have not chosen Korean Studies because of Hanmun, at least some of the texts and examples should come from Korean Hanmun texts to demonstrate their relevance to Korean Studies. If the *Shiji* 史記 of the Chinese Han era fails to engage early-stage Hanmun learners of Korean Studies, the *Samguk yusa* 三國遺事 of the Korean Three Kingdoms era may be more successful at catching their interest. I would argue that we should reassure our students that we are not trying to lure them into Sinology under the guise of Korean Studies and that we should use Korean materials for Hanmun teaching. This is something that only a small number of Korean Hanmun textbooks does — presumably because to most authors of Korean Hanmun textbooks “Hanmun” means “Sinology.” The careful didactic treatment of “Korean style Hanmun,” as explained in Kyusik Sim’s article in this volume, is far from being the norm in Hanmun textbooks published in Korea for Korean audiences. “Hanmun” in the Korean context can mean anything from “Classical Sinology” to “Korean texts written with (some) Chinese characters.”

Students can always return later to study the Chinese connections of Korean Hanmun once they have developed a fundamental grasp of Hanmun and the culture behind it. While we should be careful not to diminish the value of what we (and Hanmun) have to offer, making some concessions to our audience’s tastes will help build acceptance and interest.

Currently, Hanmun classes are not common in Western Korean Studies departments. Only a handful of European universities offer such classes, and the situation in North America is similar. Clearly, teaching Hanmun to Korean Studies students causes additional costs, which departments are reluctant to incur. Furthermore, Hanmun undoubtedly places an additional burden on students who are already struggling with the difficulties of Modern Korean.

There is no doubt that Hanmun must be presented in an accessible way, and that a simplified introduction will suffice for the majority of our students. Nevertheless, this is precisely the kind of foundation that students of Korean Studies require, enabling them to deepen their knowledge of Hanmun and Hanmun literature when they need to. Even Korean Studies specialists who deal with modern subjects and do not require a working knowledge of Hanmun in their everyday work will find that a basic understanding of Hanmun improves their grasp of word-building and phraseology in Modern Korean. It also contributes to a general knowledge of Korean culture and history.

It is difficult to find time in academic curricula for Hanmun, and resources for teaching are scarce. Due to the neglect of Hanmun in most Western university curricula, it is also difficult to find qualified teachers. Last but not least, there has also been a lack of teaching materials that consider the specific needs of Korean Studies learners (as opposed to learners in Sinology).

The last point has been remedied to some degree by the publication of Yannick Bruneton's *Grand manuel de chinois classique: hanmun*, published in French in 2025.⁴ Another textbook by Felix Siegmund (working title: *Practical Hanmun*), in English, is upcoming.⁵ The accompanying electronic course is already available in an early access version at the time of writing. This course is developed to be useful for self-learners who choose to learn Hanmun as an autodidact without access to a local teacher.

It should also be mentioned that a first step has been taken towards compiling an online Hanmun-English dictionary, which will hopefully result in a useful resource for learners and researchers of Hanmun Studies. Although this is not a topic covered in this special issue, the lack of reliable, comprehensive dictionaries that take into account the needs of Hanmun learners and researchers who are non-native Korean speakers remains one of the central problems of Hanmun education.

The seven articles in this volume address the question of how aspects of Hanmun teaching should be organized and conducted, as well as how Hanmun can be made more appealing to students.

In his article "First things first: Bringing back a sinographic component to Korean Language Education (KLE) in North America," Ross King (University of British Columbia, Canada) describes the state of Korean language teaching in North America and the role that *hancha* and Hanmun education play in it. Arguing against the current trend in Korean language teaching, which is to exclude *hancha* teaching and to ignore

⁴ Yannick Bruneton, *Grand manuel de chinois classique: hanmun* (Malakoff: Armand Colin, 2024), p. 623.

⁵ Everyone who is interested in the materials is welcome to email the author at felix.siegmund@rub.de

Hanmun entirely, he explains why knowledge of *hancha* – and ideally also of the basics of Hanmun syntax – are necessary prerequisites for high-level Korean language competency.

Korean language teaching without *hancha* teaching is going to produce semi-literate graduates. For this reason, Ross King argues for the (re-)introduction of *hancha* teaching into the Korean Language curriculum at North American universities and for the need to produce adequate teaching materials. He also shows a possible solution in the form of his own materials for *hancha* classes, which use a computer-augmented learning approach.

In his article “Reflections on a Curriculum for “Korean-Style” Sinographic Literature: Definition, Scope, Terminology, Grammar, and Textual Examples for Anglo-American Universities,” Kyusik Sim (Korea University, South Korea) approaches the problem of Hanmun teaching at North American universities. He explains the need for new (English language) textbooks and how they should approach the problem of Hanmun teaching through a curriculum that highlights the particularities of Korean-style Hanmun. He also argues for an inclusion of *Idu* into Hanmun teaching – an aspect that is usually missing from Hanmun classes as taught in Korean Studies.

In his article “What to Teach, What to Learn: The Development of Royal-Centered Publishing Culture and the Formation of Reading Culture in Early Chosŏn,” Johann Noh (Korea University, South Korea) follows the interpretive trajectory of Chinese classics in early Chosŏn at different stages from the compilation of annotated editions, to *kugyŏl* texts, and finally up to vernacular translations (*ŏnhae*). He discusses how these developments contributed to the formation of literati reading practices, paying special attention to reading practices related to the civil service examinations. His article fills some gaps in our knowledge of how texts were actually read and how readers of Hanmun approached their texts. Since the texts in question here are those of the highest register, we can assume that more efforts were made to ensure truthful transmission and correct understanding than other texts would have received. We are dealing with a special case here, but nevertheless the findings also carry much importance for our understanding of reading practices regarding other, non-canonical texts. And as such they are also partly applicable to reading situations outside of the state examinations.

In her article on “Embodied Approaches to Classical Chinese Syntax: Rhythm, Repetition, and the Role of Korean Pronunciation,” Wonkyung Choi (Leiden University, The Netherlands) argues for the integration of traditional teaching methods into the repertoire of contemporary Hanmun education. She especially emphasizes the importance of the auditory memory and, accordingly, the importance of sound patterns, for the process of building a reliable memory of Hanmun pronunciation and, ultimately, also of Hanmun text blocks. She argues that it is useful for students of Hanmun to acquire a general understanding of the structure of texts through listening and reading aloud, before they approach the text with the goal of translating it. This traditional

approach has been used successfully in Korean Hanmun education for centuries and can be modernized to be used in contemporary classroom settings.

In his article “Between empiricism and pragmatism: the “Puzzle method” for teaching Hanmun for beginners,” Yannick Bruneton (Université Paris Cité, France) explains the ideas behind the “puzzle method” as a tool for teaching Hanmun. The puzzle method is also used in his Hanmun textbook *Grand Manuel de Chinois Classique* (2024), which is the first French-language textbook specializing on Hanmun (as opposed to textbooks on Classical Chinese or Literary Chinese, as seen from a Chinese Studies point of view).

In her article “Rethinking Hanmun training in Korean Studies through translanguaging and learner-centered exercises,” Barbara Wall (University of Copenhagen, Denmark) introduces the reader to new methods for Hanmun teaching. She makes an argument for connecting Hanmun with modern Korean for Western learners, so as to keep up their motivation and provide a basis of knowledge that is relatable for the learners and that they can build their further progress on. She also explains how the approaches taken by current textbooks fit into theories of language teaching. Her highly innovative and experimental approach is an inspiring example of how Hanmun education can be diversified and also enriched with elements that appeal to a wide audience.

In his article “Early 20th cent. Hanmun Textbooks and their use for Hanmun education today,” Felix Siegmund (Ruhr University Bochum, Germany) argues for more attention to old textbooks and in favour of borrowing concepts and materials from them. The early 20th cent. was a period in which the need for and the desirability of Hanmun knowledge were discussed widely and in which new didactic concepts were tested. Considering this, there seem to be some parallels to our present situation, which is equally characterized by the need to adjust Hanmun teaching to the needs of present-day curricula. Grammatical explanations and syntax models from these textbooks can still prove useful in today’s classroom. Especially the *hōsa* 虛辭/*silsa* 實辭 paradigm, which provides a very simple and easily understood framework for basic syntax analysis, can still be used without much change.

This is a broad array of topics and a diverse set of approaches to the challenges of Hanmun education. All articles are united by the common cause of striving for modern, state-of-the-art Hanmun didactics, which not only considers the peculiarities of Hanmun as a language, but also takes into account the history of Hanmun teaching and the language’s culture. A recurring topic is that of mnemonic techniques, such as recognising patterns in writing or sound, or a combination of the two. Another common topic is how to select materials and methods given the vast heritage of the Hanmun tradition in Korea and East Asia. What should Hanmun education focus on? What should be taught first?

As well as the broad scope of topics covered in this special issue, it is important to highlight its trans-regional nature. We have contributions from Canada, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark and South Korea. The experiences of the scholars involved and the ideas discussed can also be said to include those from the USA. This

is an impressive record, spanning most of what is referred to as ‘Western’ Korean studies. Consequently, this special issue can be considered representative of Hanmun teaching in the West and its connection to Korea.

The study of how texts were received and the cultural background of Hanmun usage in the past is an important part of Hanmun studies. Only by understanding this connection, and by disseminating knowledge of, and interest in, how readers in the past — mostly during the Chosŏn period — approached Hanmun texts, can we explain the meaning of Hanmun for Korean studies. Furthermore, such knowledge must be an integral part of Hanmun education since pre-modern texts are only fully intelligible when their status within the tradition of Chinese literature, its genres, readership, social and political context, and the aesthetic and formal requirements governing their composition are understood. As with all ancient languages, Hanmun cannot be taught in the same way as modern languages, but rather through the framework of philology.

Although the future of Hanmun teaching outside of Korea seems uncertain, there is good reason for hope. The feedback and results reported from Hanmun teaching efforts around the world so far are encouraging.

It is also clear that Hanmun should be taught as a subject in its own right to Korean Studies students. Sending Korean Studies students to a Classical Chinese class run by Chinese Studies instructors is not ideal. Firstly, Korean Studies students usually do not know Modern Chinese, so they struggle with the pronunciation in class, which is usually in Mandarin. This is a serious problem. Students of Korean Studies also tend to be much less well-prepared for the large amount of *hancha* required by Classical Chinese courses, which often assumes that students will already know a large proportion of it from their studies of Modern Chinese. Last but not least, students are not usually interested in Classical Chinese for the purpose of reading ancient Chinese texts – they are much more motivated by the prospect of reading Korean materials in Chinese (Hanmun).

For Hanmun to prosper as an academic subject in the West, we must strive to re-establish it as part of the Korean Studies curriculum—at the very heart of Korean Studies programs, as part of the regular curriculum. If this is not possible, the minimum goal should be to provide Korean Studies students with the opportunity to study Hanmun as part of their training. Of course, not every student of Korean Studies should be expected to become a Hanmun specialist. It is sufficient to train a small number of specialists so that, in the future, those who are enthusiastic about the language can fill the small number of positions in Korean Studies that require a good knowledge of Hanmun.

The articles in this volume demonstrate the substantial scholarly enthusiasm and expertise in Europe and North America that makes this a realistic goal. Furthermore, the necessary teaching materials already exist. The foundation for Hanmun teaching and studies in the West is solid, and it is now time to implement what has been prepared. There is no doubt, however, that the current teaching materials still require significant refinement, and there is ample scope for expansion and improvement in quality. It

seems that there already are many innovative ideas about how to proceed with Hanmun teaching – it is now time to implement them.

We would like to thank the editors and the anonymous peer reviewers, without whom this volume would not have been possible. Despite working to a very tight schedule, they were still willing to accommodate late submissions and the usual minor setbacks of publishing. This journal is fortunate to have such competent and diligent editors.

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