

A Study of the Mechanisms Behind the Changing Status of *Hanja* and *Hanmun* in Korean Society: An Epistemic and Power-Knowledge Perspective

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This study examines how the social status of *Hanja* 漢字 “Sino-Korean characters” and *Hanmun* 漢文 “Literary Sinitic” has changed within the history of knowledge formation in Korea, focusing on three interrelated layers: shifts in episteme, the reconfiguration of knowledge baselines, and transformations in curriculum discourse. *Hanja* and *Hanmun* were marginalized in the context of modern nation-state language policy and the establishment of disciplinary academic systems, but this did not immediately entail the disappearance of their educational value. Rather, *Hanja* education came to be assigned new goals, such as deepening vocabulary and literacy, facilitating access to historical texts, and cultivating an understanding of the shared written culture of East Asia. At the same time, the ways in which each country and region evaluated and authorized “valuable” knowledge became a key factor in reshaping the respective status of *Hanja* and *Hanmun*.

Keywords:

Introduction

Knowledge accumulated in human history is the outcome of organizing human experience into forms of information and insight. Knowledge has been formed in the course of practices aimed at satisfying the human desire to know, yet not everything accumulated in this process has been recognized as equally valuable. Some forms of knowledge are authorized as useful within specific historical periods and situations, while others are excluded as useless or treated as objects of revision. In other words, knowledge is not simply accumulated; it is selected, hierarchized, and at times discarded. What matters here is not only the production of knowledge, but also the social conditions under which it is received and used, and it is precisely within these conditions that knowledge becomes entangled with power. From the perspective of the history of knowledge formation, these issues can be explained through Michel Foucault’s concepts of episteme and power-knowledge. For Foucault, an episteme is the historical condition of cognition that defines what can count as knowledge in a given period, and an unconscious framework that organizes the order of discourse.

Power-knowledge refers to the mutually constitutive relationship in which power produces knowledge while knowledge, in turn, legitimizes and augments power. Accordingly, changes in knowledge are less a process of discovering more accurate truths than a reconfiguration of power relations that determines which forms of knowledge are approved as “truth” and which are excluded. What Foucault calls a “regime of truth” is the social system that institutionalizes these mechanisms of authorization and exclusion, and the episteme is the epistemological basis that makes such a regime possible. From this vantage point, the changing status of *Hanja* and *Hanmun* in the history of knowledge formation in Korea can be understood not as a mere transformation in everyday script usage, but as part of a broader reorganization of knowledge and power. In modern Korea, *Hanja* came to be perceived no longer as the script of the canon but as the script of China or Japan, and eventually as a writing system to be excluded. Its place was taken by *Hangul*, which became the primary script of the nation-state, and by English, which assumed the role of mediating modern cultural capital and high culture. The adoption of vernacular writing based on spoken language (言文一致) was promoted as an efficient linguistic strategy for the dissemination and expansion of knowledge, with the result that *Hanmun* was increasingly regarded as a classical written language that had lost its present-day utility. This change was not unique to Korea; similar trends can be observed throughout East Asia. It signals a shift in the center of knowledge-power from an episteme grounded in *Hanja* and *Hanmun* to a modern episteme grounded in Western knowledge and modernity. The first major shift was the dismantling of the *Hanja*–*Hanmun*-centered episteme. In the late tradition, *Hanja* and *Hanmun* functioned as embodiments of absolute knowledge and as a key means by which the ruling elite maintained their power, but the introduction of Western-style disciplinary systems undermined the traditional, integrative mode of thought known as Sinology. As a result, *Hanja* and *Hanmun* could no longer function as the central language of universal knowledge. The second major shift involved the establishment of an episteme centered on the national script and Western scholarship. After liberation, *Hangul* and Western science were placed at the core of knowledge-power, and *Hanmun*, having lost its status as a language of knowledge production, was relegated to the position of a classical language effectively treated as a dead written system. This was not a mere adjustment of language policy, but the outcome of a shift in the very baseline of knowledge and in the ideal human capital desired by the nation-state and society. The modern school system and its curricular arrangements emerged as key apparatuses for inscribing this new episteme into individual subjectivity. Schools shape students into subjects suited to a modern industrial society through disciplinary mechanisms such as segmented spaces, examinations, evaluation, and standardized textbooks. In this process, public education hierarchically organizes the knowledge selected by the nation and society, elevating some forms of knowledge as core curricular content while relegating others to the margins. In this sense, schools are not merely spaces for transmitting knowledge; they are institutional devices that socially reproduce decisions about which knowledge is to be recognized as legitimate. However, these changes did not unfold with the full

consent of all social actors. Throughout the modern reorganization of knowledge, some continued to argue that *Hanmun* should be maintained as the language of the canon, and debates over the use of *Hanja* and the necessity of *Hanja* education persisted for a long period. Even in 2026, public debates on strengthening *Hanja* education have re-emerged in connection with concerns about declining literacy. This suggests that the changing status of *Hanja* and *Hanmun* is not merely a historical issue but a present and ongoing site of social tension. In this light, the rapid revaluation of knowledge in the modern period—both in substance and in pace—can hardly be regarded as the outcome of a process that all members of society rationally accepted. The knowledge system chosen by the state and social elites generated new structures of conflict, which were manifested not only in controversies over script policy and curricular organization but also in broader social tensions concerning the legitimacy of knowledge and the distribution of educational power. Debates about *Hanja* and *Hanmun* therefore cannot be reduced to a simple choice between *Hangul*-only and mixed script. They are directly tied to questions such as: Which forms of knowledge are recognized as legitimate? Which are granted a central position in school education? Which are pushed to the periphery? This study proceeds from the hypothesis that the changing status of *Hanja* and *Hanmun* in Korean society is not a story of the disappearance of a body of knowledge, but of its selection and reclassification. Knowledge always produces effects of power, and power always selects and valorizes particular forms of knowledge. Changes in episteme should therefore be understood not as a process of searching for better knowledge, but as a reconfiguration of mechanisms of power that govern society and shape subjectivity. The formation of Korean humanities itself can be seen as a history of knowledge in which external and traditional systems of knowledge collide and are transformed, and in this process become imbued with power. From this perspective, the changing status of *Hanja* and *Hanmun* should be framed not as a rise-and-fall story of a language, but as part of a broader transformation in knowledge orders and modes of subject formation. To understand the history of controversy over *Hanja* usage and *Hanja*–*Hanmun* education in Korea, we require a consistent analytical framework. These debates have persisted for roughly a century and involve issues that run much deeper than the positions that appear on the surface. At the core lies the question of which forms of knowledge are judged to be more “valuable” in society. The criteria of value differ depending on whether one privileges the functional utility of contemporary language life or the potential for transmitting traditional culture. In the end, the debates over *Hanja* and *Hanmun* must be read not as disputes over script choice, but as struggles over which forms of knowledge acquire authority and which are marginalized within a restructured social order. The Korean case, examined in this way, not only provides a framework for understanding the knowledge order of Korean society but also offers an important basis for analyzing the patterns of collision and reception of knowledge in modern East Asia.

Transformations of the *Sinosphere* and Modern Knowledge Conflicts

As Korea, China, Japan, and other East Asian countries emerged as major axes of the global economy in the twentieth century, various concepts were proposed to characterize this region. Alongside the widely used term “Confucian cultural sphere,” the notion of a “*Sinosphere*” has attracted particular attention. Although the historical community of Sino-character users developed gradually from antiquity, it was only in the modern era that it became an explicit object of scholarly naming and conceptualization. The term *Hanja Munhwagwŏn* 漢字文化圈 “*Sinosphere*” became established when the Japanese linguist Kamei Takashi (1912–1995) translated the German expression “Chinesischer Kulturkreis” to denote the ancient East Asian regions that shared the use of Chinese characters. Other labels—such as “East Asian cultural sphere,” “East Asian civilization sphere,” “Confucian cultural sphere,” and “Buddhist cultural sphere”—have also been proposed to describe the history and phenomena of East Asia, yet each has limitations. “Buddhist cultural sphere” is too broad, as Buddhism extended far beyond East Asia and embraced diverse regions and peoples, while “Confucian cultural sphere” tends to foreground political and philosophical foundations at the expense of other religious and intellectual traditions. “*Literary Sinitic* cultural sphere” (*Hanmun* cultural sphere) likewise encounters difficulties: defining it as “*Literary Sinitic* as a shared common written language” makes it hard to account for the national written standards and various transformed forms of *Literary Sinitic* developed in each country, and to decide whether to include such hybrid forms or how to treat modern contexts in which direct experience of classical literary writing has largely disappeared. In comparison, the term “*Sinosphere*” draws attention to the function of writing as a basic tool of communication and shared meaning, and is thus a relatively more persuasive category. Writing is not merely a medium for transmitting information; it serves as the basic infrastructure of civilization by recording and disseminating the products of human spiritual activity, including religion, philosophy, and literature. As a logographic script, this character system enables communities speaking mutually unintelligible languages to read the same graphic forms with different pronunciations while still sharing common semantic content. This made it possible for East Asian polities to communicate through written exchanges such as brush conversation (P’ildam 筆談), even when their spoken languages differed, and much of the knowledge thus transmitted consisted either of the advanced civilization accumulated in China or of foreign knowledge mediated and tested through Chinese scholarship. From this perspective, the expression “*Sinosphere*” refers not simply to the historical fact that characters were used as a shared script. It designates the entire historical process in which, within specific temporal and spatial settings, culture was transplanted, diffused, and creatively reconfigured through this character system, ultimately producing a distinctive “regional cultural community.” States within this sphere shared institutions in politics, economy, law, and literature through the medium of characters, while also receiving and transforming intellectual and religious traditions such as Confucianism and Buddhism. At the same time, although these societies belonged to different language families, they employed a

common written medium for the production and circulation of knowledge both across borders and within their own polities, thereby forming a distinctive cultural structure. In short, the *Sinosphere* can be defined as the set of agrarian, feudal polities that, historically, used *Hanja* and *Hanmun*—Classical Chinese as employed outside China, including Korea, Japan, and Vietnam—fully or partially as written languages, while their spoken languages remained distinct. By contrast, nomadic groups within East Asia, such as Mongolic and certain Tibetan peoples, did not use these characters and thus fell outside this sphere. The core of this character-based cultural sphere consists of those states and regions that jointly employed *Hanja* and the related written medium of *Hanmun* as tools for recording and sharing their political, economic, institutional, and literary foundations. A crucial point here is that the premodern formation of this sphere cannot simply be reduced to “Sinicization.” Certainly, Chinese military strength, the investiture system, and direct interventions such as the establishment of commanderies played a role in spreading Chinese characters. Yet it is equally important to emphasize that each polity in the *Sinosphere* actively appropriated *Hanja* and *Hanmun* as resources for consolidating its own political order and structures of rule. For ancient East Asian states, *Hanja* and *Hanmun* provided a new platform of knowledge necessary for governance, while the political, legal, ethical, and philosophical contents of classics and histories offered normative frameworks that justified and completed ruling authority. The reception, translation, and commentary of Confucian texts in *Hanmun* were not passive impositions, but strategic choices made in the course of state-building. As a result, despite originating as a foreign writing system, Chinese characters quickly became internalized as the script and written language of these societies. To cultivate personnel suited to Confucian knowledge, governments established state-sponsored overseas study and civil service examinations, and they organized law, ritual, and historical records through *Hanja* and *Hanmun*. These developments occurred not only on the Korean peninsula but also in Japan and Vietnam, suggesting that the adoption of Chinese characters was driven more by the internal demands of state formation than by economic or military exchanges between states. Through these processes, Chinese characters became more than a medium of information transfer; they functioned as a symbol of power and as a criterion for differentiating social hierarchies. Literacy in *Hanja* marked the boundary between ruling elites and the ruled, and the difficulty and sacral aura of the script only enhanced its symbolic force. Nevertheless, it is more accurate to say that the knowledge and texts produced and accumulated through Chinese characters became “power-laden,” rather than that the script itself was identical with power. Writing was a tool of power, and power selected and valorized particular bodies of knowledge through Chinese characters, thereby legitimizing and maintaining social order. At the same time, Chinese characters constitute a symbolic system of strong iconicity and logographic expressiveness that visually condenses ancient conceptions of the world and social structure. Elements such as patriarchy, hierarchical views of Heaven and man, class order, and metaphysical notions like ritual, law, and the Way are embedded in the forms and compositional principles of the characters. While such symbolic

dimensions have weakened over time, it remains difficult to deny that Chinese characters still function as visual images that evoke culture, identity, and authority. In premodern times, at least within the shared cultural arena of Korea, China, Japan, and Vietnam, Chinese characters constituted the only fully recognized, power-charged writing system, and *Hanmun* functioned as the canonical language of knowledge reception and production. Speakers of different vernaculars could communicate through brush conversation using Chinese characters, and texts written in *Hanja*—from classical poetry and prose to early modern newspapers—were read atop a shared graphic foundation. The Qin dynasty’s policy of “unifying the script” (Sōdongmun 書同文) rather than unifying spoken language likewise points to the fact that control over writing served as an efficient means of political integration. From the late nineteenth century onward, however, Western expansion and imperialist incursions triggered crises of state survival across East Asia and provoked fundamental reassessments of traditional knowledge systems and writing regimes. Reformers in various countries identified the causes of national decline in entrenched conservative knowledge structures and argued for the adoption of Western science and academic systems as a means of achieving a “rich country and strong army.” In this context, script and language reforms emerged as central tasks of modernization. Japan was the first case in the *Sinosphere* to undertake a comprehensive modern transformation. It limited the number of characters in use, simplified graphic forms, and achieved a form of written-spoken convergence through the full adoption of kana and the development of mixed-script writing. After the war, some voices even called for the abolition of Chinese characters and the adoption of a Latin alphabet. As Japan—once on the periphery of the Chinese-character sphere—rose as a new power, China felt compelled to respond not only to the West but also to Japan and embarked on its own script reforms. These included restricting the number of commonly used characters, simplifying glyphs, and promoting a complete shift to vernacular writing (paekхва 白話) to replace classical literary style. Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau retained traditional character forms while adopting vernacular prose, thereby establishing a modern written order distinct from the classical model. In Korea, the proclamation of the Korean Empire was followed by policies advocating *Hangul*-only writing, and during the colonial period and after liberation, *Hangul* came to symbolize national identity within rising nationalist discourses. While there were moves to restrict the use of *Hanja*, its graphic forms were not fundamentally altered, and *Hanmun* style steadily declined until it lost its function as a written language of knowledge production. Orthographic policy came to center on *Hangul*-only writing and standard Korean spelling, yet the long-established vocabulary system centered on Sino-Korean words remained largely intact. In Vietnam, the Latin-based script Chữ Quốc Ngữ, devised by the missionary Alexandre de Rhodes in the seventeenth century, was fully disseminated in the twentieth century, leading to the near-total disappearance of Chinese characters and *Hanmun* from education and everyday linguistic practice. In this way, each country reconfigured its use of script and written language, effectively dismantling the traditional form of the *Sinosphere* organized around *Hanmun* and classical knowledge.

Yet this did not mean that the sphere disappeared entirely; rather, it experienced a decline and qualitative transformation, withdrawing from its position as the dominant medium of knowledge while continuing to exert influence in new ways. As discussed in the Introduction, from a Foucauldian perspective changes in knowledge systems are not linear progressions toward more accurate truth, but reorganizations of power that determine which forms of knowledge are approved as truth and which are excluded. Modern East Asian reforms of script and language can thus be understood as shifts in episteme. The traditional knowledge system embodied in *Hanja* and *Hanmun* no longer matched the profile of human capital desired by modern states, and political and intellectual elites adopted Western-style scholarship and nation-language-centered policies as the new baseline of knowledge-power. In this process, Chinese characters became objects of controversy and compromise, and *Hanmun* was transformed from a language of knowledge production into a classical written language effectively treated as a dead medium. Another aspect of the decline and reconfiguration of the *Sinosphere* that merits attention is the role of newly coined Sino-Japanese and Sino-Chinese terms created in the course of translating Western knowledge. Japan and China generated large numbers of neologisms in Chinese characters to accommodate modern academic concepts, and these terms were then reimported into other traditional Chinese-character cultures such as Korea and Vietnam. Although *Hanmun* prose declined, a substantial portion of scholarly, legal, and administrative terminology continued to be formed through Sino-character compounds, and even as each language adopted a vernacular style with its own syntax, they preserved significant commonalities at the level of core vocabulary. This phenomenon produced a new “network of Sino-character vocabulary” distinct from the premodern practice of brush conversation in *Hanmun*. At the level of script and literary style, the *Sinosphere* appears fragmented and dissolved, yet the shared conceptual repertoire transmitted through Sino-character compounds became in some respects even more tightly woven in the modern era. From the perspective of the reconfiguration of knowledge-power discussed in the Introduction, this suggests that the *Sinosphere* continues to function as a qualitatively transformed field of knowledge. Since the 1990s, East Asia has drawn worldwide attention along with its economic rise. Japan, the Chinese-speaking world (China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau, Singapore), and Korea have formed a major economic bloc, and global interest in the region’s culture and languages has grown accordingly. Expanding cultural exchange has highlighted the importance of learning and researching the languages of these countries. In this context, the *Sinosphere* is being reconfigured from a regionally bounded cultural formation into a global cultural phenomenon in which Chinese characters and Sino-character vocabulary function as shared resources. Learners of East Asian languages from diverse national backgrounds acquire not only functional language skills but also tacit understandings of the culture, modes of thought, and knowledge structures of each society through the medium of Sino-character vocabulary. As argued in the Introduction, this once again confirms that knowledge is not a mere aggregation of information, but an episteme that contains specific power

relations and modes of subject formation. Thus, within the East Asian *Sinosphere*, Chinese characters have functioned not only as “symbols for transmitting information” but simultaneously as markers of power, symbolic systems, carriers of locality, and aesthetic devices. They have served as a criterion of educational capital distinguishing elites from non-elites, as the script in which canonical knowledge approved by the state was recorded, and as a locally adapted writing system that each country combined with its own vernacular through forms such as variant *Hanmun*, *hyangchal*, *idu*, and *chŭ Nôm*. Moreover, Chinese characters have been used as visual images in calligraphy, character paintings, advertising, design, and tattoos, and their iconic and logographic qualities continue to evoke traditionality, mystery, and authority as aesthetic resources.

Korea’s Modern Choices and the Reclassification of *Hanja* and *Hanmun*

In premodern Korea, *Hanja* and *Hanmun* were far more than a script and a written language; they constituted the very form of knowledge that sustained the system of rule and social order, mediating canonical learning across politics, institutions, ethics, and literature. Mastery of *Hanja* and the ability to read and compose in *Hanmun* were basic qualifications of the intellectual elite, and the civil service examination and bureaucratic system directly linked these abilities to state power. In this sense, *Hanja* and *Hanmun* in premodern Korea were not merely vehicles for expressing knowledge; they formed the baseline for determining what counted as legitimate knowledge and the material foundation of the episteme that governed the production, selection, and authorization of knowledge. In the late nineteenth century, however, Western expansion, imperialist aggression, “enlightenment” policies, the Kabo Kaehyŏk 甲午改革 “*Gabo Reform*” and the proclamation of the Education Edict fundamentally shook this knowledge order. As discussed in the Introduction, from a Foucauldian perspective changes in knowledge do not constitute a gradual advance toward more accurate truths, but a reorganization of power relations that decides which forms of knowledge are recognized as “truth” and which are excluded. From this viewpoint, the most significant change in modern Korea was not simply the decline of *Hanja* and *Hanmun*, but a shift in the state’s criteria for legitimate knowledge and desirable human capital—from an integrated Confucian scholasticism centered on the classics to a regime based on Western-style disciplinary knowledge and vernacular Korean writing. *Hanja* and *Hanmun* ceased to be the sole canonical language and began to be relativized as one among several forms of knowledge that had to be repositioned within a new system. During the Korean Empire, the colonial period, and the decades following liberation, Korean society adopted Western modern academic systems, a nation-state school system, and a language order centered on standard Korean as core instruments of governance. In this process, *Hanja* and *Hanmun* were no longer treated as central knowledge for state administration but were reclassified as the writing system of traditional texts, as a technical tool for reading historical sources, or as a form of cultural capital in the sphere of cultivated learning. Whereas in premodern

times *Hanja* and *Hanmun* had functioned as the language of “universal knowledge” spanning literature, history, and philosophy, in the modern era they increasingly appeared merely as traces of the past scattered across separate subjects such as Korean, history, ethics, philosophy, and literature. Mid-twentieth-century developments across East Asia—the dismantling of the *Sinosphere* and the adoption of phonetic scripts and nation-language-centered policies—show that Korea’s reclassification of *Hanja* and *Hanmun* was not unique but part of a broader regional trend. Modern Korea’s choice was therefore not to abolish *Hanja* and *Hanmun* outright, but to reorder the priorities and placements of knowledge according to the needs of state and society. As a result, *Hanja* and *Hanmun* withdrew from the front lines of governing power and were relocated as knowledge forms that operate only in restricted domains of education, culture, and high-level literacy. The changing status of *Hanja* and *Hanmun* unfolded amid tensions between *Hangul*-only policy and the practice of mixed-script writing. Following King *Kojong* (高宗)’s decree promoting the convergence of spoken and written language, *Hangul* emerged as a new format for official written Korean. Yet *Hanja* and *Hanmun* did not immediately disappear from society. Well into the early and mid-twentieth century, mixed Sino-Korean script remained common in newspapers, textbooks, official documents, scholarly writings, and private notes, while all-*Hangul* style spread only gradually and within limited media and social groups. In governmental offices, the press, and academic circles, *Hanja* continued to function as a script symbolizing authority, whereas *Hangul* expanded its sphere in an overlapping and competitive configuration. This pattern was not simply the inertial effect of existing practices of knowledge use. For intellectuals accustomed to *Hanja* and *Hanmun*, Chinese characters were not just a matter of writing habits, but a semiotic system that enabled fine-grained semantic distinctions, the expression of abstract concepts, and a link to traditional knowledge. Sino-Korean compounds differentiated meanings under the same phonetic cover and condensed accumulated semantic layers from classics, legal codes, and academic discourses into single- or double-character units. From this standpoint, *Hangul*-only policy functioned as a script reform that simultaneously weakened the cultural and symbolic capital of the existing educated elite. Conversely, proponents of *Hangul*-only writing viewed the establishment of a language order centered on the national script as essential for equalizing education, eradicating illiteracy, and securing national identity. The simplification of writing practices and the unification of orthography were regarded as necessary for building mass literacy in a modern nation-state, and *Hangul*-only writing seemed the most effective tool for that purpose. Conflicts between *Hangul*-only and mixed script, therefore, were not merely disputes over orthographic technique, but struggles over which knowledge and culture should be acknowledged as the shared assets of the “modern Korean.” *Hangul*-only policy advanced the construction of a standardized literacy appropriate to the modern nation-state, while mixed Sino-Korean script was associated with arguments for maintaining continuity with traditional culture, elite learning, and a Sino-character-based vocabulary system. In other words, *Hangul*-only and mixed-script practices corresponded to different epistemes—different regimes of

truth and modes of subject formation. Across twentieth-century East Asia, the dismantling of the *Sinosphere* and the construction of new script and language regimes did not simply change techniques of writing; they redrew the civilizational and epistemic boundaries of knowledge. From this angle, modern Korea's script policies can be seen as a process of reconfiguring the knowledge order and the relationship between power and knowledge. The Korean debates over *Hanja* education foregrounded in this article must be situated within this larger context of repeated contestation from the immediate post-liberation period to the present. In practice, arguments for *Hanja* education have largely emphasized the domain of vocabulary and lexical notation rather than the broader use of *Hanmun*. Hence, many voices advocated abolishing or reducing *Hanmun* instruction as such, while consistently supporting the teaching of *Hanja* as part of Korean vocabulary learning. The persistent calls to strengthen *Hanja* education reflect a recognition that contemporary language use in Korea cannot, in reality, be detached from Sino-Korean vocabulary. The fact that many commentators of the time argued not for "*Hanmun* education" in the narrow sense but for "*Hanja* education" aimed at supporting Korean vocabulary learning and usage shows that there were consistently positive views of *Hanja* education distinct from the issue of *Hanmun*. Of course, even then, support and opposition to *Hanja* education coexisted. Script policy was extremely unstable: between *Hangul*-only and mixed-script textbooks, official policy shifted toward exclusive *Hangul* ten times and toward mixed script seven times, an oscillation that reflects deep controversy and anxiety over complete *Hangul*-only writing. Over time, however, the *Hangul*-only movement steadily gained ground; the use of *Hanja* in newspapers and magazines diminished, and after the publication of *The Hankyoreh Newspaper* on 15 May 1988, *Hanja* remained visible only in the headlines of a few newspapers. The "*Act on Exclusive Use of Hangul*" enacted in 1948 required that official documents be written in *Hangul* and thereby codified *Hangul*-only writing as state policy. Linked to the political imperatives of decolonization and nation-state building, this law marked an institutional starting point for gradually displacing *Hanja* from the center of official script usage. Decolonization here had a dual meaning: it involved the expression of complex national sentiments toward Chinese characters as the script of China and toward the Japanese use of Chinese characters, and it also provided political actors with an opportunity to mobilize these sentiments to secure the legitimacy and symbolic capital of new regimes and to consolidate state power. For political elites, *Hangul*-only policy served as a highly effective instrument that fused the rhetoric of cleansing colonial remnants with the symbolism of nationalism. In actual social practice, however, mixed Sino-Korean script continued to be widely used, and the perceived need for *Hanja* and *Hanmun* education did not easily disappear. Thus, even as *Hangul*-only writing advanced at the level of law and political symbolism, everyday practices of knowledge for a long time continued to involve the habitual use of *Hanja* and traditional scripts. The 1960s and 1970s were decades in which debates over *Hanja* education became heavily politicized. Faced with a large group of established intellectuals who insisted on the necessity of *Hanja* and with widespread mixed-script

practices, the political authorities opted for compromise. The *Second National Curriculum* (1963) restored an official basis for *Hanja* education, and from 1964 commonly used *Hanja* were reintroduced into primary, middle, and high schools. This measure aimed not at a complete break with Chinese characters, but at preserving a minimum level of instruction that would maintain a link between traditional knowledge and modern schooling. Yet in 1968 the Park Chung-hee government announced a “Five-Year Plan for Exclusive Use of *Hangul*” and “Seven Measures to Promote *Hangul* Only,” forcefully promoting the Hangulization of public documents, the deletion of *Hanja* from textbooks, and the abolition of basic educational *Hanja*. These policies accelerated the practical implementation of *Hangul*-only textbooks in the early 1970s and became a decisive turning point in removing *Hanja* and *Hanmun* from the center of everyday school knowledge. In effect, the state declared its intent no longer to approve *Hanja* and *Hanmun* as the “standard” of national education. These sweeping *Hangul*-only measures, however, quickly provoked strong backlash. Proponents of *Hanja* education emphasized the importance of transmitting traditional culture, understanding East Asian classics, enhancing vocabulary and literacy, and grasping the precise meanings of Sino-Korean terms. For them, *Hanja* was not merely a convenient writing system; it was a reservoir of knowledge and a repository of cultural capital accumulated over a long period. Excluding *Hanja*, they argued, meant voluntarily relinquishing access to traditional knowledge and cultural resources. Advocates of *Hangul*-only policy, by contrast, contended that *Hanja* education increased learning burdens and expanded private tutoring, undermining both equality in public education and a language order centered on *Hangul*. From their point of view, *Hanja* instruction represented an unnecessary additional load on a standard literacy system already established by the modern nation-state. The conflict thus went beyond the question of “whether to teach Chinese characters” and raised broader issues about what should be considered basic literacy in contemporary Korea and how traditional culture ought to be transmitted. From the 1980s onward, as generations educated under a stable *Hangul*-only regime came to occupy the center of society, the social base for *Hanja* education gradually weakened. In everyday written communication, *Hangul* established overwhelming dominance, while *Hanja* persisted only in restricted domains such as newspaper headlines, personal and place names, legal and academic terminology, and certain traditional cultural contexts. *Hanja* and *Hanmun* were increasingly pushed to the status of “scripts of specialized domains,” and in the school curriculum they came to be treated as peripheral subjects. Yet the debates surrounding *Hanja* education did not disappear. Once *Hangul*-only writing had achieved a measure of stability, concerns about “declining literacy due to ignorance of Chinese characters” and calls for renewed *Hanja* education resurfaced repeatedly. In other words, only after *Hangul*-only policy had largely succeeded did its perceived side effects—such as problems in mastering vocabulary and abstract terms and diminished access to traditional texts—paradoxically revive arguments for strengthening *Hanja* education. Comparative studies of East Asian countries have noted similar patterns, observing that, after some time following script and language reforms, renewed calls emerge in

places like Vietnam, Japan, and China to reintroduce traditional scripts and vocabulary into education. Since the 2000s, debates have focused especially on *Hanja* instruction in elementary schools and the question of printing *Hanja* alongside *Hangul* in textbooks. In 2002, a joint proposal by thirteen former Ministers of Education calling for the introduction of *Hanja* education in elementary schools served as a symbolic catalyst for renewed discussion of early *Hanja* classes. In 2014–2015, the Ministry of Education’s plan to include *Hanja* mixed with *Hangul* in textbooks from the third grade upward triggered another wave of controversy. Supporters argued that such measures would improve contextual understanding and vocabulary and facilitate the natural learning of Sino-Korean words, while opponents warned that they would increase learning burdens, expand private tutoring, and create confusion in literacy education centered on *Hangul*. After examining classroom feasibility and gathering public opinion, policymakers ultimately abandoned the plan to print *Hanja* in elementary textbooks. This episode demonstrates that whenever the state attempts to strengthen *Hanja* education, social conflicts over educational equity, burdens, and identity erupt almost immediately. In the 2020s, the debate has once again intensified. As students’ declining reading comprehension has become a major social concern, calls to enhance *Hanja* education have re-emerged. Various surveys pointing to reduced reading and vocabulary skills have led some media outlets and educators to link this trend to the reduction of *Hanja* instruction and to demand the reintroduction or reinforcement of *Hanja* education at the primary and secondary levels. As of 2026, the possibility of reintroducing or strengthening *Hanja* education is under renewed discussion among educational authorities and in the public sphere, indicating that this issue is not a mere residue of the past but remains a live and pressing controversy. The modern Korean debate over *Hanja* education thus reveals a cyclical pattern of “abolition → reintroduction → reduction → renewed calls for reinforcement,” and each turn in this cycle brings to the surface underlying social conflicts over the value of knowledge and the aims of education. By contrast, the institutional responses of the political system have tended to converge not on broad disputes over script use or a full-scale expansion of *Hanja* education, but on the creation and maintenance of *Hanmun* as a school subject. Since the *First National Curriculum* in 1954, the Korean national curriculum has undergone repeated revisions—the Second (1963), Third (1973), Fourth (1982), Fifth (1987), Sixth (1992), Seventh (1997), the 2007–2009 revised curricula, the 2015 revision, and the 2022 revision. The status of *Hanmun* as a subject within these reforms provides a telling index of how its position within school knowledge has changed. The language of traditional knowledge, once integral to learning across literature, history, and philosophy, has gradually been separated and reduced to a single subject among many elective courses. In the first and second curriculum periods, *Hanja* and *Hanmun* were treated more as auxiliary knowledge within Korean and other subjects than as independent disciplines. In 1972, however, the government promulgated a list of 1,800 basic educational *Hanja* for middle and high schools, and on this basis *Hanmun* education acquired a certain degree of autonomy. From this period onward, *Hanmun* ceased to be the basic written medium

of state administration and instead took shape as a school subject responsible for understanding Sino-Korean vocabulary, acquiring traditional cultural knowledge, and providing basic reading skills in classical texts. Under the Fifth and Sixth National Curricula, *Hanmun* was retained as part of the common curriculum at the middle-school level, although in practice class hours were extremely limited, and in high schools it was treated as an elective subject whose offering depended on the choices of individual schools and students. This meant that, while *Hanmun* continued to exist in the curriculum documents, it functioned as a peripheral subject in actual school settings. The *Seventh Curriculum* further intensified this marginalization by emphasizing a student-choice-centered structure, and many high schools either drastically reduced their *Hanmun* offerings or maintained them only nominally. By contrast, the 2007–2009 revised curricula began to redefine *Hanmun* not simply as a subject for reading classical texts, but as one that contributes simultaneously to vocabulary development, literacy, and cultural competence. The 2015 revised curriculum made this tendency even clearer, structuring middle school *Hanmun* education around 900 basic educational *Hanja* and aiming to develop students' ability to use Sino-Korean vocabulary and to acquire foundational skills in reading classical texts. It characterized the subject as fostering "understanding of the language and culture of the *Sinosphere*, the inheritance of traditional culture, and the enhancement of vocabulary and literacy," thereby positioning *Hanmun* not merely as a medium for learning classical prose but as a subject that bridges modern Korean language use and cultural understanding. The 2022 revised curriculum further systematized this reconfiguration. In accordance with Ministry of Education Notification No. 2022-33, it was designed to realize the core competencies of the general curriculum within the *Hanmun* subject and simplified middle school content around two areas: "characters and vocabulary" and "sentences." At the high school level, it introduced the general elective "*Hanmun*," the career elective "*Reading Hanmun Classics*," and the convergence elective "*Language Life and Hanja*," thereby diversifying *Hanmun* education into tracks focused on classical reading, language use, and culture/competency. These developments indicate that *Hanmun* is no longer a subject that simply reproduces past models of classical education; instead, it is actively reconfiguring its functions and aims in order to survive within the contemporary curriculum. In terms of instructional time as well, *Hanmun* has consistently occupied a marginal position. Middle schools typically allocate only one or two hours per week, and at the high school level the elective structure generates large differences between schools in the actual provision of *Hanmun* classes. In other words, although *Hanmun* persists in the official curriculum, it does not occupy the central core of school knowledge. This gap between the institutional survival of *Hanmun* and the social demand for *Hanja* and *Hanmun* education reveals a structural tension: from the standpoint of state-sanctioned "official school knowledge," *Hanmun* is a peripheral subject, yet societal demands for instruction in *Hanja* and *Hanmun* cannot be easily dismissed as marginal. Despite reductions in the use of *Hanja* and *Hanmun*, in the number of hours allocated to *Hanmun*, and in the institutional status of the subject, the

voluntary demand for *Hanja* and *Hanmun* learning in Korean society has remained steady. *Hanja* proficiency tests, commercial *Hanja* workbooks, study materials on idioms and Sino-Korean vocabulary, specialized courses in traditional culture, and popular lectures on East Asian classics have long maintained stable audiences. Learners in these contexts do not study *Hanja* and *Hanmun* as compulsory conditions for social advancement, as in the past, but rather choose to do so on the basis of their own needs and interests. For them, *Hanmun* is not merely a school subject tied to examinations; it is a pathway to understanding traditional culture, reflecting on life, cultivating aesthetic taste, and seeking new forms of intellectual stimulation. This voluntary demand is closely related to broader calls for linguistic and cultural diversity in contemporary Korea. At the national level, standardization centered on *Hangul* has proven highly effective in terms of integration and efficiency, yet at the individual level there remains a persistent curiosity about, and need for, diverse modes of expression, traditional culture, East Asian classics, and the Sino-character-based vocabulary world. In addition, demographic aging, increased leisure time, and the rise of public interest in the humanities are moving *Hanmun* learning from the realm of professional necessity to that of quality of life and self-reflection. An increasing number of people choose to fill their post-retirement years with classical reading, calligraphy, and *Hanmun* study, a trend that repositions *Hanmun* education as a form of lifelong humanistic practice rather than a narrowly defined school subject. As this chapter has shown, modern Korea did not simply abandon *Hanja* and *Hanmun*. Rather, it reclassified and reorganized their status and functions according to the types of knowledge and human capital deemed necessary by the state and society. *Hanja* and *Hanmun*, which had once stood at the center of canonical knowledge, were replaced by vernacular Korean writing, Western disciplinary knowledge, and the education system of the modern nation-state. In this process, public debates and discourses over *Hanja* education repeatedly flared up, reflecting the fact that *Hanja* and *Hanmun* are not merely residues of the past or simple writing systems, but remain intertwined with the hierarchy of knowledge, the standards of literacy, the modes of transmitting tradition, and questions of educational equity in contemporary Korea. Ultimately, controversies over *Hanja* education are struggles over which forms of knowledge should occupy the center of school education and which forms of reading and interpretation should be recognized as socially valuable. To understand modern Korean conditions properly, therefore, it is not enough to narrate the rise and fall of *Hanja* and *Hanmun*. One must instead read the changing value and reorganization of knowledge, the shifts in episteme, and the operations of educational power. From this perspective, the conflicts and adjustments surrounding *Hanja* and *Hanmun*, and around the *Hanmun* subject and its instruction, offer a crucial case for understanding how the knowledge order of Korean society has been restructured. The question of whether *Hanja* remains necessary in Korea and whether *Hanja* education should be strengthened is thus not a narrow academic issue, but a comprehensive reflection of how members of Korean society choose to inherit their past and shape the future order of literacy and knowledge.

Divergent Dreams: Conflicting Visions of *Hanja* Education

Hanja education, in the literal sense, is the teaching and learning of *Hanja* characters. As with education in general, however, it does not merely involve the transmission of discrete bits of knowledge but presupposes particular goals for individuals and for society as a whole. In some cases, personal aims and social aims may resonate with one another; in others, the social environment and the goals prescribed by policy do not align with the needs and expectations of individual learners. Public debates and discourses over *Hanja* and *Hanmun* education in Korea fall largely into this latter category. Since the establishment of the Republic of Korea in 1945, the continuous implementation of *Hangul*-only policy has eliminated most *Hanja* from everyday written communication, and it has become increasingly difficult to identify compelling, purely practical reasons to learn Chinese characters. In a social environment where everyday life can be conducted without *Hanja*, it is not easy to persuade the public of the necessity of *Hanja* education, and the situation is even less favorable for *Hanmun*, which has become a near “dead language” in everyday use. Under these conditions, discussions of *Hanja* education reveal divergent orientations and interests depending on the aims they foreground. The controversy over *Hanja* education cannot be reduced to a difference in teaching methods; it encapsulates value conflicts concerning the hierarchy of knowledge, the standards of literacy, the transmission of traditional culture, and the demands of educational justice in contemporary Korea. The repeated cycles of reduction, abolition, reintroduction, and calls for reinforcement that have accompanied *Hanja* education since the advent of *Hangul*-only policy show that this is not a transient issue, but a symptom of a deeper reconfiguration of the modern knowledge order. Support for *Hanja* education typically rests on four main lines of argument. The first is grounded in the structure of Korean vocabulary, in which Sino-Korean words occupy a very large proportion. From this perspective, a certain level of *Hanja* knowledge is believed to contribute to vocabulary growth and improved reading comprehension. Because abstract academic terms and learning-related vocabulary in textbooks and exam questions are predominantly Sino-Korean, it is argued that knowledge of *Hanja* helps learners to grasp the semantic relations among words and to distinguish homophones. In a context where declining reading proficiency among students has become a major social concern, proponents maintain that weakened knowledge of *Hanja* in the era of *Hangul*-only writing has contributed to vocabulary deficits and that basic *Hanja* instruction is needed to shore up the foundations of literacy. The key problem, however, is that there is still insufficient empirical evidence to show how far and in what ways *Hanja* education actually contributes to improvements in literacy. The theoretical claim that knowledge of *Hanja* facilitates understanding of vocabulary structure has intuitive appeal, but systematic research delineating which level of *Hanja* instruction correlates with which type of reading ability remains limited. Moreover, even in cohorts that learned *Hanja*, substantial gaps in literacy and academic achievement persisted, and many analyses attribute current literacy problems more to changes in the digital environment, the

decline of reading culture, and educational and class stratification than to the reduction of *Hanja* education. From this angle, casting *Hanja* education as the main remedy for literacy problems appears to be an over-prescription. The fundamental question is whether there is scientifically and objectively verifiable evidence linking *Hanja* education to gains in literacy. Some studies cite the high proportion of Sino-Korean vocabulary in Korean as supporting evidence, but this alone is insufficient to demonstrate a causal relationship between *Hanja* instruction and literacy. The degree of *Hanja* acquisition has not yet been convincingly shown to correlate in a direct, linear way with vocabulary size or reading ability, and much of the argument remains at the level of conjecture rather than rigorous empirical demonstration. These limitations are related to the complex composition of Korean vocabulary. The Korean lexicon is often divided into native Korean words, Sino-Korean words, loanwords, and hybrid forms. Among Sino-Korean and hybrid words that can be written in *Hanja*, there are many whose meanings and pronunciations cannot be straightforwardly explained solely on the basis of the characters' semantic components and readings. Some Sino-Korean expressions involve mixtures of phonetic transcription and semantic translation. Because phonetic loans are created according to the readings of characters in the borrowing language, it can be difficult for speakers of other languages to infer their origin. For example, the expression 的士 is pronounced *jeoksa* in Korean, and even for speakers of standard Mandarin (who would read it as *di-shi*) or Japanese (*teki-shi*), it is not obvious that this term refers to "taxi"; only in Cantonese, where it is pronounced roughly "*diksi*," does the phonetic connection become clear. Other examples include *Yōngguk* 英國 "England," which transcribes "Eng" from "England" as 英 and combines it with *kuk* 國 "country," and *Sōpsi* 攝氏, which abbreviates the phonetic transcription of "Celsius" (*she'erxiusi* 攝爾修斯) and adds 氏 ("person, surname"). In such cases, learning the *Hanja* themselves does not readily reveal the meanings of the words. In addition, Korean contains redundant synonym compounds in which *Hanja* and native Korean elements are repeated or layered, such as *dam-jang* (담牆), *morae-sajang* (모래沙場), *yang-ojip* (洋屋집), and *sok-naeui* (속內衣). There are also many hybrid forms that combine native and Sino-Korean elements, such as *doenjang* (된醬), *bap-sang* (밥床), *gongbu-hada* (工夫하다), *heot-sugo* (헛手苦), *daedaero* (代代로), *yang-damba* (洋담배), *sin-Yeurop* (新유럽), and *pul-jang* (풀場). Even these hybrids still make use of *Hanja*, but their current meanings are not always transparent from the characters alone. Furthermore, many Sino-character-based words have undergone semantic shifts over time: for instance, *heihan* 稀罕 originally meant "rare" but is increasingly used in the sense of "strange," and *yangmal* (洋襪), which once designated Western-style socks contrasted with traditional *beoseon*, has now become the unmarked term for "socks," while *beoseon* is perceived as a more specialized item. Given these realities, the question of how *Hanja* education relates to vocabulary instruction and, more broadly, to literacy naturally arises. It is not enough to point out that Sino-Korean words account for a large share of the lexicon; one must also distinguish between words whose meanings

can be clarified through *Hanja* and those that cannot and then analyze their respective contributions to vocabulary learning. Comparative studies between groups with little or no knowledge of *Hanja* and groups with higher levels of *Hanja* competence are needed to assess differences in reading ability in a more rigorous manner. This discussion echoes the longstanding controversy over the relative merits of logographic and phonetic scripts, where competing hypotheses and refutations have proliferated without reaching definitive conclusions. The second line of argument emphasizes cultural and humanistic grounds, asserting that *Hanja* and *Hanmun* are indispensable media for understanding traditional culture and the classics. Given that a substantial portion of Korea's literary, philosophical, and historical heritage is preserved in *Hanmun*, it is argued that translations alone cannot fully convey the semantic nuances and modes of thought embedded in the originals, and that at least a minimal capacity to read *Hanmun* is necessary for direct engagement with traditional texts. From the standpoint of a shared East Asian heritage, education in *Hanja* and *Hanmun* is also said to form the basis for understanding the genealogy of Korean humanities and the regional knowledge order that surrounds Korea. Yet, taken to its logical conclusion, this argument resembles the claim that one must read Western classics in the original Latin, Greek, German, or French to truly understand them. It presupposes that "reading the original text" is the only path to genuine understanding and thereby tends structurally toward the same logic used to justify the expansion of foreign language education. This raises the question of whether the ability to read *Hanmun* in the original makes such a substantial difference in understanding traditional culture and classics when compared to reading high-quality translations, and whether that difference can be objectively measured. Considering the time and effort required to master *Hanja* and *Hanmun* as a script and language, it is not unreasonable to argue that, for many learners, reading a greater number of translations may be a more effective way to engage with traditional culture and classics. A third argument interprets *Hanja* education in terms of practical utility within East Asian and international exchange. Proponents contend that the ability to understand Chinese characters will confer a long-term comparative advantage in economic, academic, and cultural interactions with other *Sinosphere* countries such as China and Japan. They also point to the growing numbers of examinees worldwide for Japanese Language Proficiency Tests (JLPT), Chinese proficiency tests (HSK), and Korean language proficiency tests, arguing that this reflects an expanding global demand for education in character-based vocabularies. From this perspective, *Hanja* education is not about preserving remnants of premodern knowledge, but about accumulating competitively valuable language capital within a newly emerging "glocal *Sinosphere*." On closer inspection, however, this argument has limitations. Each of the major East Asian languages—Japanese, Chinese, and Korean—adopts different policies with respect to character forms (simplified, traditional, new character forms), and the commonalities and differences in their vocabularies are intricately entangled. Even within the Chinese-speaking world, the use of characters and the meanings of terms vary by region and historical period. Thus, even if *Hanja* education is strengthened, it does not

automatically guarantee transfer effects to foreign language proficiency, and such transfer is subject to significant constraints. In actual communication and academic work, vocabulary always operates within the phonological and grammatical systems of languages; a shared base of characters does not by itself ensure mutual intelligibility. The misconception among some Chinese observers that *Hanja* education in Korea is essentially equivalent to Chinese language education reflects a failure to appreciate the complex relationship between *Hanja* and individual languages. A fourth argument draws attention to the sizable private tutoring market for *Hanja* and claims that public education must assume responsibility for providing a basic level of *Hanja* instruction in the name of equality and fairness. If *Hanja* is left entirely to private education, differences in economic resources may produce gaps in *Hanja* knowledge, which in turn could lead to disparities in vocabulary and reading ability. From this viewpoint, the inclusion of basic educational *Hanja* and instruction in Sino-Korean vocabulary within public schooling is a means of mitigating inequalities generated by private tutoring and divergent cultural capital. Yet this line of reasoning rests on an implicit assumption that the primary purpose of private *Hanja* tutoring is to enhance vocabulary and literacy. In practice, however, the main driver of private education in Korea is preparation for university entrance examinations, and the extent and intensity of tutoring depend heavily on whether *Hanja* proficiency certificates are directly linked to university admission and whether *Hanmun* is a required subject in entrance exams. Some members of the public may believe that *Hanja* remains indispensable knowledge, while others regard it as entirely unnecessary. In such a polarized environment, it is not convincing to argue that the mere existence of private *Hanja* tutoring obliges public education to follow suit. Private education is fundamentally a means of acquiring power through educational opportunities and cultural capital; it cannot serve, in itself, as a normative basis for educational policy. To argue that public education must incorporate any content for which there is a private market is to risk legitimizing a structure in which public schooling simply tracks the demands of the private education sector. Many of these logical leaps and implicit assumptions reappear, in mirror form, in arguments opposing or reducing *Hanja* education. From a perspective that clearly distinguishes between language and script, some argue that Korean, equipped with its own phonetic writing system in *Hangul*, is fully capable of expressing and transmitting advanced scholarly and abstract concepts without recourse to *Hanja*, and that separate *Hanja* education therefore constitutes a redundant burden. On this view, the key factors in improving literacy are the quantity and quality of reading experience and language use, not the additional learning of a second writing system. Proponents also point out that most modern academic and administrative texts are already produced in *Hangul*-only format, which they take as evidence that *Hanja* is no longer necessary for contemporary communication. They further worry that continued reliance on *Hanja* may delay the consolidation of a *Hangul*-centered linguistic ecology and the formation of a robust national language identity. Here again, however, the question arises whether these claims rest on scientifically and objectively verifiable grounds. Korean society has never conducted controlled experiments to test

how the presence or absence of *Hanja* affects literacy or identity formation. Moreover, the concept of “national language identity” and its relationship to nationalism, and the extent to which the use of Sino-Korean vocabulary actually differentiates or dilutes the national language, have rarely been argued in a rigorous manner. While Chinese characters clearly originated in China, the Sino-Korean words that make up a large portion of Korean vocabulary have been accumulated and integrated over a long period into Korean and thus form an integral part of the Korean national language. Nevertheless, the equation of *Hanja* use with “servile Sino centrism” remains powerful in public discourse, and the tendency to situate Sino-Korean vocabulary outside the national language serves to ideologize discussions over *Hanja* education. A second recurring objection centers on concerns about learning burdens and the expansion of private tutoring. Especially at the elementary level, opponents argue that including *Hanja* in the regular curriculum or printing *Hanja* in textbooks will worsen what is already perceived as an excessive academic load and, as a result, further enlarge the private education market. During the debates over printing *Hanja* in elementary textbooks, civic groups, teachers’ unions, and parent organizations cited increased burdens and rising private education costs as major reasons for opposition, indicating that discussions of *Hanja* policy are closely intertwined with broader mistrust of educational policy. Although learning inevitably entails some degree of effort and “burden,” the mere existence of burden cannot by itself form a sufficient basis for educational decisions. The crucial question is which subjects and contents are deemed valuable enough to warrant inclusion in the curriculum. Knowledge that society regards as valuable will be included in education despite the burdens it imposes, while knowledge judged to lack value will be excluded regardless of the burden involved. Discussion of *Hanja* education must therefore begin from an examination of what intellectual, cultural, and educational value *Hanja* instruction holds for present and future Korean society, rather than from administrative or logistical considerations alone. In practice, however, policy discussions often prioritize administrative adjustments and short-term public opinion over more substantive public discourse on the value of *Hanja* education. Because the arguments for and against *Hanja* education start from different assumptions and goals, they can invoke the same indicators—literacy, heritage transmission, educational equity—yet arrive at opposing conclusions. Supporters emphasize the Sino-character-based structure of Korean vocabulary and the historical and cultural context of the *Sinosphere*, treating *Hanja* as fundamental infrastructure for understanding knowledge systems and transmitting culture. Opponents emphasize the *Hangul*-centered linguistic ecology, learning burdens, and equality, treating *Hanja* as an additional script whose expansion should be approached with caution. Accordingly, discussions over *Hanja* education cannot be adequately described as a simple binary choice of “to teach or not to teach.” What is needed is an analytical dissection of the underlying assumptions in each line of argument: how each side conceptualizes literacy, how it envisions the transmission of traditional culture, and what criteria it uses to define educational justice. Such work moves beyond the narrow issue of *Hanja* education as such and raises more fundamental questions about

which forms of knowledge and language are to be recognized as legitimate school knowledge, and what kinds of subjects the education system is intended to produce. At a deeper level, the difficulties facing *Hanja* and *Hanmun* education do not stem from intrinsic defects in these scripts and languages; rather, they are a consequence of the relocation of knowledge-power in the modern era. In premodern times, *Hanja* and *Hanmun* were directly linked to the knowledge-power of the ruling elite, but in the modern curriculum and academic system they have been displaced from the position of state-sanctioned core knowledge and scattered across peripheral school subjects, private tutoring, and voluntary learning. Without a clear awareness of this relocation of knowledge-power, treating *Hanja* education either as a panacea for literacy or as something to be swept away in the name of nationalism risks addressing only the symptoms while leaving the underlying structure of the current knowledge order unexamined. From the standpoint of Korean vocabulary education, the first priority is to discuss which Sino-Korean words should be taught and how, and then to consider the role of *Hanja* notation and character teaching within that framework. Likewise, the goals of *Hanmun* education must be clearly defined, the level of reading and vocabulary competence required to achieve those goals must be specified, and *Hanja* education must be designed accordingly. Only by setting the aims of Korean vocabulary education and *Hanmun* instruction first, and then situating *Hanja* education within those aims, can discussions over *Hanja* move beyond abstract necessity claims toward a more coherent and realistic educational model.

Tasks for Repositioning *Hanja* and *Hanmun* Education

Debates over the use of *Hanja* and the place of *Hanja* education in Korean society now have a history of more than fifty years. Over this period, research on *Hanja* education has made notable progress and has developed its own methodologies and structures, gaining a degree of disciplinary identity. Yet a careful review of existing studies reveals that declarative assertions about the necessity or legitimacy of *Hanja* education and policy-oriented proposals still occupy a large proportion of the literature, whereas empirical, objective, and scientifically grounded research on the specific domains of *Hanja* education remains relatively underdeveloped. In other words, while the question “Why is *Hanja* education necessary?” has been repeatedly raised, the more concrete questions—“For what purposes, for whom, with what content and methods, with what expected effects, and on what basis can those effects be verified?”—have received comparatively less systematic attention. From this standpoint, treating *Hanja* and *Hanmun* instruction as a narrowly defined internal issue of the Korean curriculum is clearly inadequate. Much of the existing public and academic discourse on *Hanja* education has remained confined to this curricular frame. *Hanja* and *Hanmun* are not educational resources unique to Korea, but common civilizational languages that have mediated classical literature, thought, law, and ritual across China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. In this respect, they occupy a structurally analogous position to Latin and Ancient Greek in the West, which are discussed as

foundational components of classical education and as gateways to understanding Western civilization. Thus, *Hanja* and *Hanmun* education should not be conceived merely as one subject among many within a single national curriculum, but should also be considered in terms of how they might function as basic liberal education in East Asian and global humanities. Need to Sinography and *Literary Sinitic* concept. First, it is essential to recognize that contemporary issues surrounding *Hanja* and *Hanmun* education are not simply matters of classroom management but concerns about how a form of knowledge that has already moved away from the center of knowledge-power might be re-legitimized within education. As discussed earlier, in premodern Korea *Hanja* and *Hanmun* were core media that traversed governance, scholarship, and refined culture. In the modern era, however, their status changed dramatically under Western-style disciplinary systems, nation-state education, and a regime of vernacular Korean writing. As a result, *Hanja* and *Hanmun* no longer occupy the position of universally recognized core knowledge; they have been repositioned as components of particular subjects, tools for understanding traditional culture, or pursuits of individual self-cultivation. Future *Hanja* and *Hanmun* education cannot be designed with the aim of restoring their former knowledge-power. Instead, it must soberly reassess what new value and function these now-peripheral forms of knowledge can possess in today's educational environment. Ignoring this fact and repeating abstract affirmations of the "necessity" of *Hanja* education, or conversely dismissing *Hanja* and *Hanmun* as obsolete remnants incompatible with a *Hangul*-centered order, are both inadequate approaches. The crucial task is to start from the premise that *Hanja* and *Hanmun* are no longer "dominant knowledge" and, on that basis, to establish new educational models suited to current conditions. Second, the status of *Hanja* education needs to be conceptualized with greater precision. As noted at the outset, *Hanja* education in Korea is simultaneously a subset of *Hanmun* subject education and a component of Korean language education, history education, cultural education, and vocabulary education for learners of Korean as a foreign language. In other words, there exists both a general, cross-disciplinary sense of "*Hanja* education" and specialized forms specific to individual academic fields. This implies that different types of *Hanja* education and distinct research agendas are required depending on the learners' age, proficiency, and subject context. A survey of existing work shows that many studies have focused on *Hanja* instruction in elementary schools, basic character teaching methods, and classroom practices, with relatively fewer studies on other segments and purposes. Even in the case of elementary *Hanja* education, it is difficult to argue that sufficient research has been accumulated on core issues such as the goals and nature of the subject, principles of curriculum design, textbook development, teacher training, and assessment systems. This reflects the fact that a clear sense of what *Hanja* education is actually intended to accomplish has not yet been fully established. Whether we are speaking of *Hanja* instruction as part of *Hanmun* subject education, *Hanja* as a tool for Korean vocabulary teaching, *Hanja* as an independent basic script, or *Hanja* as an entry point for acquiring other East Asian languages makes a considerable difference for educational design. Treating "*Hanja* education" as a

single, undifferentiated category inevitably produces ambiguities in goals, content, methods, and assessment. Depending on one's perspective, *Hanja* education may be conceived as extending across multiple educational domains, or it may be confined to certain specific areas. Clarifying this status requires deeper theoretical and institutional reflection. A crucial part of this clarification, as discussed in Chapter 4, is to differentiate clearly among *Hanja* (characters), Sino-Korean words (vocabulary), and *Hanmun* (written language) as distinct objects and levels of instruction. *Hanja* are graphemes, Sino-Korean words are lexical items, and *Hanmun* is a classical written medium. In practice, however, these three are often conflated or treated as a single category in both research and policy discourse. For example, some policy statements speak of "*Hanja* education" while implicitly referring to the teaching of Sino-Korean vocabulary as a means of enhancing literacy. Conversely, some initiatives that nominally aim at reading classical texts remain at the level of basic character forms and do not rise to the level of genuine *Hanmun* reading instruction. A key task for future work is therefore to disentangle these confusions. One must decide whether to frame Sino-Korean vocabulary instruction primarily from the perspective of Korean vocabulary education, whether to discuss *Hanja* teaching under the rubric of *Hanmun* education with a focus on reading skills, or whether to distinguish the two but link them together in a staged sequence. The order of discussion should be restructured so that educational goals in Korean vocabulary and *Hanmun* reading are defined first, and the required level and type of *Hanja* instruction are then derived from those goals, rather than treating *Hanja* teaching itself as the starting point. Third, the development of theories for *Hanja* education urgently requires more robust research methodologies. To date, a large number of studies have proposed teaching methods or reported classroom applications and case studies, contributions that certainly possess practical value. Yet, for example, if one wishes to present a radical-based teaching method centered on character components as a pedagogical theory, it is not enough to show that it produced favorable results in a single class or short-term intervention. One must also address questions such as: Why is a radical-based approach necessary? For which age groups and proficiency levels is it appropriate? In what sequence should radicals be introduced? By which criteria should characters associated with each radical be selected? How should radical names and explanations be standardized and presented? And in what specific respects does this method outperform other approaches? Only when such questions are answered through cumulative research can a teaching method move beyond an individual classroom idea and acquire theoretical persuasiveness. Currently, the theoretical systematization or "modeling" of teaching methods in *Hanja* education has not advanced sufficiently. Many studies remain the achievements of individual researchers or the distinctive practices of particular teachers; relatively few have been developed into generalized models that can be widely applied and tested. A further problem is that proposed teaching theories are not adequately reflected in actual teaching materials and assessment systems that can be immediately used in classrooms. One of the core principles of subject education is that theories must be refined into forms that can be implemented in practice, and that they must be supported

by sufficiently scientific and objective evidence before being introduced into the classroom. What is now needed, therefore, is the development of more carefully structured, replicable, and comparable research methodologies tailored to the various topics of *Hanja* education. This is not simply a general problem of educational research; it is a necessary step if *Hanja* and *Hanmun* education, having fallen away from the center of knowledge-power, are to regain educational legitimacy through demonstrable effectiveness. At the same time, methodology must combine empirical rigor with sensitivity to classroom realities. For instance, if one claims that *Hanja* instruction improves literacy, it is necessary to design assessment tools, comparison groups, and longitudinal studies capable of measuring such effects. To determine whether understanding Sino-Korean words actually transfers to vocabulary growth and reading comprehension, one must go beyond short-term satisfaction surveys or simple achievement comparisons and develop instruments that can assess learners' lexical networks, contextual understanding, and conceptual interpretation. Likewise, to evaluate the effectiveness of *Hanmun* reading instruction, it is not enough to measure translation accuracy alone; assessment needs to include recognition of sentence structure, strategies for reading classical texts, and understanding of cultural and historical contexts. The future of *Hanja* education research therefore lies in moving beyond necessity-based arguments and anecdotal classroom reports toward empirically verifiable and comparative methodologies that can robustly test educational effects. Fourth, foundational research on *Hanja* education should shift from short-term, individual projects to long-term, collective endeavors. Questions concerning character categories, frequency, meanings, graphic forms, etymology, and components are among the most basic and indispensable research topics in *Hanja* education. Issues such as which characters should be designated as basic educational *Hanja*, how to sequence characters by difficulty, how to standardize semantic explanations, how far to incorporate etymological information in educational contexts, and how to present the relationship between variant forms and modern usage must all be addressed at the outset of curriculum and material development. Yet these foundational tasks are difficult to accomplish within the limits of individual research projects. Even in the study of character categories alone, scholars often use different classification criteria; basic character lists differ in size and ordering principles; and it is not always clear which research results are practical for classroom use and which remain at the level of individual hypotheses. These considerations point to the need for long-term collaborative research infrastructures. The standardization of character lists, gradation of characters for educational purposes, construction of databases for character forms and meanings, frequency and usage surveys of Sino-Korean vocabulary, and selection of level-appropriate lexical items are not problems that can be resolved in one or two articles; they require shared, accumulative resources. Up to now, there have been relatively few full-fledged attempts at such collective work in the *Hanja* education field, with the result that basic data and classification systems differ from researcher to researcher and from textbook to textbook, leaving teachers uncertain about which standards to follow. Going forward, joint research projects

organized by academic societies, data-sharing frameworks, the collaborative construction of digital corpora and dictionary resources, and the development of standardized vocabulary lists by learner level are urgently needed. These steps are not merely intended to increase research efficiency; they are the minimum conditions for turning *Hanja* education from the domain of individual opinion or personal classroom experience into a field of public educational knowledge. Fifth, *Hanja* and *Hanmun* education must be redesigned in a way that takes into account both in-school and out-of-school learning environments. As discussed in Chapter 3, within the school curriculum the *Hanmun* subject has become increasingly peripheral, with limited instructional time and significant variation among schools depending on type and elective structures. Outside school, however, there exists a steady demand for *Hanja* proficiency tests, *Hanja* workbooks, classical text reading circles, traditional culture study groups, online courses, and digital learning content. This indicates that *Hanja* and *Hanmun* education can no longer be adequately understood if it is viewed solely through the lens of a single school subject. The task ahead is to conceptualize school-based *Hanmun* education and extra-school *Hanja/Hanmun* learning as distinct layers of education, each with its own goals, content, learners, and media environments. Within schools, given limited time, clear decisions must be made about which core values and competencies should be prioritized. In community and lifelong education contexts, by contrast, flexible content is needed to serve learners of different ages and with diverse purposes. If these two spheres are conflated, school education becomes burdened with unrealistic expectations, while community education loses coherence and structure. Sixth, it is important to make active use of digital humanities and of the newly configured Sino-sphere. The contemporary Sino-sphere is no longer confined to a traditional regional order; it is being reconstituted as a glocal cultural space through the learning of Korean, Chinese, and Japanese and the use of digital resources. This transformation offers a crucial turning point for *Hanja* and *Hanmun* education as well. Education now need not be limited to chalk-and-talk methods in the physical classroom; digital dictionaries, parallel corpora of original texts and translations, annotation platforms, learning analytics tools, open online courses, and AI-based text analysis environments have become available. These conditions make it possible to reconceive *Hanja* and *Hanmun* education not as a return to past authority supplemented by digital tools, but as a field of humanistic learning that can be most effectively reorganized within digital environments. For example, digital platforms that provide integrated access to *Hanmun* originals, translations, annotations, lexical explanations, and cultural information can substantially lower the barriers to learning. Systems that adjust vocabulary difficulty, sentence complexity, and reading scaffolds according to learner levels can overcome some of the traditional limitations of teacher-centered reading classes. The challenge is to re-position *Hanja* and *Hanmun* education not as an old-fashioned discipline reluctantly assisted by technology, but as a domain that can be most productively reimagined through digital tools and infrastructures. Seventh, *Hanja* and *Hanmun* education can no longer aspire to function as a universal form of general education in the way they once did; this fact must be acknowledged,

and principles of selection and concentration must be applied under conditions of limited educational resources. Unlike in premodern times, contemporary schooling must compete with a vast array of subjects and knowledge domains, and *Hanja* and *Hanmun* do not occupy the center of this landscape. Under such conditions, it is unrealistic to demand that all learners receive the same level and type of *Hanja* and *Hanmun* education. A more reasonable approach is to differentiate levels: a minimal level of Sino-Korean vocabulary understanding necessary for Korean vocabulary education; selective advanced instruction in *Hanmun* reading for those who need or desire it; and extended programs for learners particularly interested in East Asian culture and the classics. This does not mean the reduction of *Hanja* and *Hanmun* education; rather, it is a strategy to clarify educational aims and to ensure substantial outcomes at each level. The goal should not be to restore the universal *Hanja* education of the past, but to establish multiple models of *Hanja* and *Hanmun* education, differentiated by purpose, level, and medium, that are more in tune with contemporary realities. Eighth, *Hanja* and *Hanmun* education should not be confined to debates over their status within the Korean national curriculum; they must also be re-positioned in relation to the broader contexts of the East Asian Sino-sphere and global civilizational education. In the West, Latin and Ancient Greek are no longer used as everyday spoken languages, yet they continue to hold educational legitimacy as basic components of classical and civic education and as keys to understanding the Western civilizational tradition. Similarly, *Hanja* and *Hanmun* have functioned as a shared language that underpins literature, thought, law, religion, and art across East Asian history. How this heritage can be reshaped into a form of basic liberal education for today is not solely a Korean concern; it is a task that the entire Sino-sphere must address. In this process, it will be important to move beyond categories tied strictly to national languages such as *Hanja*, Kanji, Hanzi, and “Chinese characters,” and to adopt broader analytical frameworks such as *Sinographs* and *Literary Sinitic* that highlight the shared script system and written language of the region. Such perspectives provide a starting point for rethinking the place of *Hanja* and *Hanmun* in comparative and global humanities. Ultimately, the task ahead is not to keep *Hanja* and *Hanmun* education trapped within abstract debates over whether it is “necessary or unnecessary,” but to redesign its educational functions on the basis of a clear recognition that these forms of knowledge have already been displaced from the center of knowledge-power. *Hanja* education is at once a subset of *Hanmun* subject education, an element of Korean vocabulary instruction, a point of contact with East Asian culture and traditional knowledge, and a foundational resource for global civilizational education. Just as Latin and Ancient Greek are still discussed in the West not merely as “old languages” but as crucial conduits for classical learning, civic education, and an understanding of Western civilization, so too can *Hanja* and *Hanmun* be reconceptualized as important components of civilizational education spanning East Asia and the wider world. Understood in this way, *Hanja* and *Hanmun* education can be freed from the narrow burden of justifying itself solely within a single national curriculum and can instead be framed as a shared humanistic resource of the Sino-

sphere and as one pillar of global humanities education. This, in turn, offers a set of criteria for the long-term direction that Korean *Hanja* and *Hanmun* education ought to pursue. From this perspective, *Hanja* and *Hanmun* education should first demonstrate that it is not a retrospective project aimed at restoring past authority, but a new form of education that serves contemporary language use and cultural understanding and fosters future comparative humanistic capacities. Only then can discussions of how to treat *Hanja* and *Hanmun* in education acquire genuine significance.

Conclusion

In premodern East Asia, *Hanja* and *Hanmun* functioned as the dominant language of knowledge that permeated governance, scholarship, and elite culture. In the modern era, however, under the influence of Western-style disciplinary systems, nation-state education, and the consolidation of vernacular writing in national languages, they were displaced from the center of knowledge-power and reassigned to peripheral domains such as specific school subjects, tools for understanding traditional culture, and spheres of personal cultivation. This transformation should not be understood as a mere adjustment in script policy, but as an epistemic shift concerning what counts as legitimate knowledge, and it is within this new condition that the possibilities for re-legitimizing *Hanja* and *Hanmun* education must be explored. Within this process, the Korean debates over *Hanja* education have mobilized a wide range of arguments—literacy, the transmission of traditional culture, international exchange, private education and equity, and national language identity—yet they have often sought either to restore the past authority of *Hanja* and *Hanmun* or to absolutize the current regime centered on vernacular Korean, without sufficiently reflecting on the fact that these scripts and languages have already moved away from the center of knowledge-power. This study has sought to move beyond such limitations by proposing a perspective that refrains from reducing *Hanja* and *Hanmun* education to an internal issue of subject allocation within the Korean curriculum. Instead, it has emphasized the possibility of repositioning *Hanja* and *Hanmun* within a multilayered context encompassing Korean vocabulary education, *Hanmun* classical education, the East Asian Sino-sphere, and global humanities education. *Hanja* and *Hanmun* are not educational resources belonging solely to Korea; they are shared civilizational languages that have mediated classical literature, thought, law, and ritual across China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam, and in this respect they occupy a position structurally analogous to Latin and Ancient Greek as basic components of classical education and gateways to understanding Western civilization. In short, *Hanja* and *Hanmun* are no longer the dominant knowledge languages of the premodern era, but neither can they be treated as mere historical relics. It is now time to engage in a more thorough reflection on what kinds of value *Hanja* and *Hanmun* education can hold for contemporary language use and cultural understanding, and for the development of future comparative humanistic competencies, and how these values can be substantiated through concrete educational models and empirical research. The present

study aims to provide a starting point for such discussions and to contribute to richer and more finely tuned directions for future research and practice in *Hanja* and *Hanmun* education.

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