
MODERNIZATION OF WRITING ON THE PERIPHERY OF THE SINIC CULTURAL CIRCLE



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BEKEŠ Andrej

University of Ljubljana

ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the modernization of writing systems in Vietnam, in both Korea and in Japan during their transition from premodern states to modern nation-states. In Vietnam and in both Korea, despite their traditional strong attachment to Chinese writing traditions, they decided to discard the Chinese characters. While in Vietnam they switched to Latin alphabet, in both Korea they chose the native alphabet, Hangeul. Surprisingly, Japan, with the least intense contact with Chinese culture, has retained Chinese characters in their writing system. The paper argues that the factors influencing these different decisions were modernization, nationalism and traditionalism. These factors worked differently in different countries. Japan - the colonizer - modernized at its own pace. On the other hand, Vietnam and both Korea, experiencing modernization processes as colonies, had to modernize rapidly after liberation. In such context, the resulting nationalism in these countries helped to choose the fastest solution, the alphabetic script.

Keywords: *writing reforms, Chinese characters, alphabetic scripts, Vietnam, Korea, Japan*

INTRODUCTION

The preconception that alphabetic writing, and within it, Latin alphabet is superior to other types of writing is still persistent among general population. In this sense, modern China and Japan, relying fully or partially on logographic Chinese characters seem to be an aberration.

This presentation addresses the modernization of writing systems in Vietnam, both Korea and Japan during their transition from premodern states to modern nation-states. In Vietnam and both Korea, despite their traditional strong attachment to Chinese writing traditions, they decided to discard the Chinese script. In Vietnam they chose not the native logographic *Chữ Nôm* but Latin alphabet; in both Korea they chose the native alphabet *Hangeul*. Surprisingly, Japan, with the least intense contact with Chinese culture, has retained Chinese characters in their writing system. The paper argues that the factors influencing these different decisions were both internal and external.

1. Internal factors

(I) The prestige of the native written language and domestic literature compared to the prestigious local variant of classical Chinese. In Japan, the native language has historically had a prestigious reputation among the elites as the language of literature, and classical Chinese as the language of state ideology and administration, education, religion (Buddhism) and philosophy. In due time, a mixed writing of the native language using syllabic scripts (*hiragana* and *katakana*) and logographically used Chinese characters, has emerged. With the spread of syllabic writing literacy, *furigana*, the auxiliary annotation of Chinese characters' "reading" in syllabic writing, was established. Thus, even more demanding texts became accessible to a wider circle of readers. In the mixed writing system, both Chinese loan words and native Japanese words were, and continue to be, written in Chinese characters. Chinese characters have thus become deeply ingrained in the writing of the native language and in the consciousness of a large part of the literate population, making it very difficult to abolish them. Thus mixed writing system was preserved in the modernization process. On the other hand, the fate of writing in native language in both Korea and Vietnam was much more unstable. Both the use of *Hangeul* in Korea and *Chữ Nôm* in Vietnam

have been restricted many times throughout history, and despite the popularity of literary works written in the native language, pressure from establishment has often hampered the free development of the potentials of both scripts.

(II) Proportion of Chinese letters or domestic logographic letters used in the native language format. Here, the situation in Korea and Japan is similar. If in Korea, in addition to *Hangeul*, we take into account the mixed syllabic-logographic script *Idu*, which was used partly for administrative purposes until the end of the 19th century, the share of Chinese characters in Korean and Japanese fluctuates from medium to low. The Vietnamese *Chữ Nôm*, on the other hand, since it is entirely logographic, the share of native and Chinese logographic characters is 100%.

(III) Quantity and accessibility of works in the native language. This factor is directly related to the first, to prestige. Due to the unstable position of domestic scripts in Korea and Vietnam, literary production in the native language was more limited and less accessible than in Japan, and also did not reach the quantity level of the native texts written in classical Chinese.

(IV) Literacy rate of the general population at the time of the writing reforms. By the beginning of the 20th century, Japan had already achieved relatively high literacy, at least at the level of knowledge of syllabic scripts, i.e., *hiragana* and *katakana*, and basic Chinese characters. In Korea and Vietnam, due to colonial policies, literacy rates were very low at the beginning of the writing reforms after they became independent again after the World War II (22% in Korea, even less in Vietnam).

2. External factors

External are related to the socio-historical context of modernization.

(I) Degree of political independence at the time of modernization. This is the most important factor. Japan carried out modernization as an independent state, while Korea and Vietnam both experienced modernization under colonial rule, with colonial masters pursuing their own agenda on purpose kept literacy levels low.

(II) Nationalism in language as part of the modernization process. In Japan, modernization and thus standardization of the language was not directed against the use of Chinese characters. The consensus emerged that only the improvement of the already established mixed writing system was needed: limiting the number of Chinese characters, partial simplification of some characters and standardization of their form, and reform of syllabic writing. In contrast, after World War II, in the context of radically changed circumstances after the end of the colonial rule, both Vietnam and North and South Korea perceived Chinese characters as an obstacle on the path to language and writing modernization. The first reason for such perceptions is in the spirit of anti-colonial nationalism; Chinese writing was also the fruit of more than millennium of Chinese cultural hegemony. The second reason is expediency. In Korea learning native alphabet *Hangeul* was much more effective to eliminate illiteracy, much faster than learning the existing mixed system including also Chinese characters. Similarly, in Vietnam, *Chữ Quốc Ngữ*, initially promoted by the French colonial authorities, gained enough ideological prestige through historical processes in the first half of the 20th century to finally become a symbol of “progressive” writing. In both cases, the relatively limited amount of literary heritage written in the native language also influenced the decisions. With strong tradition of native writing and using Chinese characters for writing native words, the rupture with tradition would be much more severe in Japan than was in Vietnam and Korea.

3. Conclusions

In writing systems changes only occur with the great social upheavals. Modernization processes accompanied by colonial rule have shaken traditional society in both Korea and Vietnam much more deeply than Japan. This is one of the reasons why deeply radical writing reforms were implemented there, while Japan took a more moderate path.

In the context of development in normal circumstances, the complexity of particular scripts actually does not play such a big role, as can be seen from the literacy rates in Japan with mixed *kanji-kana-majiri* system and in Taiwan, where Chinese characters were not simplified. Success depends on how well schooling system is organized. On the other hand, the prejudices of some conservatives against wider use of phonetic writing are unfounded, too. For example, in Japan the visually impaired people systematically use only phonetic syllabic writing all their lives, yet despite this perceived disability, they are able to make careers in even in academia. Indeed, each type of script has its advantages and disadvantages.

An important factor not taken in account so far is ethnic homogeneity. Japan and both Korea are ethnically extremely homogeneous; while in Vietnam 14% of the population are members of various ethnic minorities. As a result of modernization processes in language and writing, the native language has become and is consolidated as the national language in all four countries, playing central role both in administration as well as in education and literature. In many colonized countries this was not the case. Further comparison with language policies and developments in other colonized countries with their own centuries-old national tradition, such as in Laos, Cambodia, Malaysia, Burma and Indonesia in South East Asia, and also in former Soviet republics in Central Asia would be instructive.

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