

Chinese Characters Coined in Korea for Writing Names

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The import of Chinese culture to Korea during the the first millenium A.D. lead to the Sinification of almost all aspects of cultural life related to writing: not only religion/ideology, administration, education, etc. but also many place names and personal names were sinified and transformed into Sino-Korean and henceforth written in Chinese characters (and pronounced in Sino-Korean).

However, for writing non-Sinified place names or personal names (e.g. slave names) Koreans coined dozens of ‘Chinese’ characters for closed syllables (CVC). The most common structure is the top-bottom allignement of two elements, i.e. two ‘real’ Chinese characters: the first element indicating the syllable body (CV-; phonographic or glossographic); the second element indicating the final (-C; always phonographic). E.g. the Korean character 𪛗 /KAL/ consists of the Chinese character 加 (/KA/ ‘to add’) on top of 乙 (/ÛL/ ‘second of the ten heavenly stems’) indicating the final /-l/. Or the character 𪛘 /TOL/ – still used in Korean personal names – consists of the Chinese character 石 (Sino-Korean reading /SÔK/, meaning ‘stone’ which in native Korean is /tol/) above 乙 (/ÛL/). It is interesting to note that this system is hyper-generative: for many of these CVC-syllables exists a Chinese character with an identical Sino-Korean reading so the coining of a special character would not have been necessary.

Furthermore, even the invention of the phonetic *han’gûl* alphabet in 1443/4 did not stop the usage of these characters. On the contrary, *han’gûl* was sometimes incorporated into the pattern of building these ‘sound transcription characters’ (音譯字 *ûmyôkcha*) and used for indicating finals uncommon in pre-hangûl phonographic writing.

References:

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