

About this course

Even though Korean culture's popularity is booming, there are almost no basic courses on Korean philosophy available. This course has been developed to provide a basic knowledge of Korean philosophy to a wide audience.

The course explores the various ways that pre-modern Koreans innovated on existing traditions. It also gives insight as to how they created their own traditions through a continued development of their culture. We will explore the unique view of the world that allowed pre-modern Koreans to innovate in the way that they did, through a process which I coin as the "Korean Matrix". By understanding the origins and evolution of Korean philosophy, the course attempts to widen the student's worldview and expose them to alternative philosophical views.

This course is for an English speaking audience that is interested in Korean culture, instructors and students in Korean studies, and people who are interested in philosophy in a broad sense.

This week, we're going to look at what Korean philosophy is, and what makes it different from the Western philosophy that you might be accustomed to. We'll also be looking at Chinese philosophy in comparison to Korean philosophy, because it has been a large influence on the evolution of Korean philosophy.

Korean Philosophy : Korean Way of Thinking Many of you may not realize that there is such a thing as Korean philosophy and believe that Chinese philosophy is the main or only school of thought in East Asia. However, if you think about that carefully, you may want to ask whether Koreans have been developing their own way of thinking, which is different from Western philosophy or Chinese philosophy. This is because the term "philosophy" as an academic discipline requires a "worldview" that is systematically organized and consistently understood. When the meaning of "philosophy" is downsized, you can even apply this word to a single individual. For instance, when you ask "what is your philosophy?"

This is what makes it a "philosophy." In order to be "Korean" philosophy, it should be differentiated from other philosophies. This is what I call "particularity". If you can't find anything new or different in "Korean philosophy," compared to, let's say, German or Chinese philosophy, there isn't much meaning in calling it "Korean philosophy." It doesn't mean that Korean philosophy should be totally different from other philosophies either.

Remember: philosophy is not a fixed object but an evolving thought in flux. Philosophy does not appear just because an ethnic or cultural group forms, but thrives only when they develop an examined and systematically understood way of thinking. We will consider whether "Korean philosophy" fits both criteria of universality and particularity. In addition, we will examine how Koreans have developed a different way of seeing the world from other philosophies, and the ways non-Koreans can learn to see the world through Korean philosophy, something that Koreans sometimes struggle with.

The Origin of Philosophy in the West The word "Philosophy" originates from ancient Greek. The ancient Greeks developed a basic framework of Western philosophy. Following that, Western European countries were handed down the heritage of the Ancient Greek worldview. Therefore, some people believe that "Philosophy" is just a specific academic discipline born in ancient Greece. However, the scope of "philosophy" has since been

extended to include many different traditions. The term “philosophy” has traversed different areas. Nowadays, philosophy in academia could mean the area of expertise which explores the world in a fundamental way, and it can also be used to just mean “a way of thinking” in daily conversation.

When the Term “Philosophy” Meets Asia When the West engaged with the East in the early 20th century, the term “philosophy” was highlighted as a problem in Asian countries including Korea. This is because the academic system required by this term did not seem to fit well with the long-standing intellectual traditions developed in Asia. So, East Asian intellectuals tried hard to translate it into their own languages.

Nowadays, East Asians have pretty much agreed on the term for “philosophy”, although it differs in pronunciation: In Korean it is “철학 cheolhak”, in Chinese it is “哲學 zhéxué”, in Vietnamese it is “triết học” etc. This agreement is owed to the modern Japanese translation “tetsugaku.” When the term “philosophy” was first introduced, whether it was used to describe the academic discipline or a broader, looser way of thinking, it meant a fundamental way of thinking and was considered to have only one type, namely the Western type, originated in ancient Greece. Various intellectual traditions in Asia were once considered unworthy of the name of philosophy

However, more and more Westerners found Asian intellectual traditions ginteresting, and Asians have tried to fit their intellectual traditions into the framework of a fundamental way of thinking, “philosophy”. From “Philosophy” to “Philosophies” Now you may have heard of “Chinese philosophy” or “Asian philosophy.” These names are the product of a long debate. For instance, there has been much discussion about whether Confucianism is a religion or a philosophy, which had a dominant presence in the East Asian world. Although it is still controversial whether Chinese or Asian philosophy has its rightful place in the field of philosophy, since the 20th century, serious scholarly endeavors to rethink philosophy in a global context have helped us to see “philosophy” as “philosophies” rather than one universal philosophy.

A number of philosophers, who were primarily concerned with Western philosophy such as Kantian, ancient Greek, or analytic philosophy, are increasingly shifting their focus to world philosophy, comparative philosophy, and non-Western philosophy. When we talk about Korean philosophy in this course, we consider this changing landscape of philosophy.

Chinese influences on Korean Culture

The Korean language has many Sino-Korean words: some are adopted from Chinese words, while some are constructed from Chinese characters (Hanja). Accordingly, some people misunderstand that Korean and Chinese share the same origin, or even that Korean comes from Chinese. Of course, if you have studied Korean just for a day, you will find that this is entirely false; they do not even share the same grammar. Then, why are there so many Korean words related to Chinese in etymology? It is because Chinese characters and Chinese culture continued to influence the Korean Peninsula until modern times. In addition to Sino-Korean vocabulary, pre-modern intellectuals adopted Hanmun, classical written Chinese, to write their own thought.

Don’t be misled; they spoke vernacular Korean but wrote in classical Chinese. This can be compared to the role of Latin in pre-modern or early Europe. The same way English has many words originating from Latin, Korean also has many words originating from Chinese. Thus, Korean philosophy can be said to be closely related to Chinese philosophy. Since the

era of Three Kingdoms, Koreans not only accepted Hanja, Chinese characters, but also imported various texts and ideologies from China and innovated to create their own. In the course of this accommodation, Korean intellectuals produced much literature written in Hanja, which is accessible to anyone who knows classical Chinese without any knowledge of Korean.

Korean Alphabet System, “Hangeul” The creation of the Korean alphabet system, Hangeul, (1443) was a turning point. Since then, the ideas that Koreans developed in their daily lives as well as the ideas that they developed as members of the East Asian cultural sphere could be recorded in their own written language, Hangeul. Even before Hangeul, Koreans had writing systems apart from Hanmun. However, the creation of Hangeul gave Koreans powerful tools to express their own thoughts and feelings more vividly. Historically influenced by Chinese culture, including literary and religious traditions, Korean philosophy came to draw many of its components from Chinese philosophy. However, though they may look similar, they work in very different ways.

This difference arose from the way Korean culture processed these foreign concepts to make them their own. This unique mechanism of Korean culture and language, which I call the “Korean matrix”, allowed Koreans to produce distinctive ideas and themes, and to develop a unique way of thinking which deserves to be called “Korean.” As a result, despite the large Chinese influence, Korean culture emerged as something unique from Chinese culture.

The Introduction of the Chinese Character (Hanja) into Korea



Korean has many Sino-Korean words. This is because Koreans had adopted the Chinese character, Hanja, which allowed for both an acceptance of Chinese culture and for the expression of the Korean spoken language.

“The era of the three kingdoms” is the era from 57 BC to 668 AD and “the Three Kingdoms” refers to Baekje (백제, 百濟), Silla (신라, 新羅) and Goguryeo (고구려, 高句麗). In this era, the people living on the Korean peninsula had their own spoken language which was different from the one used in ancient China.

Since this era, Koreans adopted Hanja from ancient China to write down the ancient Korean spoken language of that time. Furthermore, they expressed their way of thinking in Hanmun (classical written Chinese language) as they became used to using Hanja (Chinese character).

Hanja is a kind of medium. By accepting Hanja, Koreans could not only communicate with the people of the ancient China, but also carry out a cultural exchange with them. At the

same time, Koreans became more conscious of their own culture, because even though they could record their own way of thinking, it was difficult to faithfully reproduce the nuances in the Korean spoken language into the written language of a different medium.

This week, we will look at how Koreans formed their own culture and ideas. What we consider to be “Korean” today is the result of their long-standing self-awareness and tenacious practice of reconstructing the cultures from outside. Among them, the Chinese culture had the deepest influence on pre-modern Korea. We will explore ways Koreans have adapted and innovated at cultural boundaries. Influence and Innovation occurs from the un-familiarizing of familiar things. The Korean peninsula has long embraced Chinese culture and had become more and more familiar with it. On the other hand, these pre-modern Koreans became increasingly aware of the insoluble differences between Chinese and Korean cultures. This led to the eventual innovation of the way Koreans interact with and view the world.

Some innovations were so subtle that we do not even realize that they were innovative. Some innovations were so new that we assume that they could not have been found anywhere else. Let’s explore a key example each of Adaptive Innovation and Disruptive Innovation. An example of subtle innovations is the word “Sungkyun”. You might have heard this word from the K-Drama, “Sungkyunkwan Scandal”.

What I would like to articulate here is a small but intriguing point: The word “Sungkyun”, which literally means “Attaining Balance,” comes from ancient Chinese texts, but it is also a uniquely “Korean” name. This sort of adaptation is why I would call this type of innovation, “adaptive innovation”. Most Koreans believe that “Sungkyun” is a genuine Chinese term representing the Confucian ideal, but in fact, most modern Chinese have never heard of this term except from the Korean drama. In this ironic situation, we can find an excellent example of how adaptive innovation occurred in the Korean peninsula.

Koreans selected the word “Sungkyun” from the ancient classical Confucian text for their educational institute, and they sustained the name as their own educational ideal throughout history. I will give a more detailed explanation of “Sungkyun” in the next section. On the other hand, Hangeul is another type of innovation which was not only very novel, but one which also eventually disrupted the status quo on how the Korean language was employed and evaluated. Hangeul is the invented alphabetical system for expressing Korean sounds. When Hangeul was first invented and introduced to Koreans in the mid-15th century, it was not welcomed by the intellectuals of that time, who regarded Hanmun, the classical Chinese written language, to be much superior to Hangeul.

Despite the enormous opposition by intellectuals, Hangeul survived over 500 years. Today, Korean philosophers communicate their thoughts and arguments in Hangeul, not Hanmun. Since Korean and Chinese have very different grammar, I believe it would have been difficult for Koreans to fully assimilate into Chinese culture. No matter how many Chinese words were adopted into Korean, Koreans felt inadequate in expressing their ideas and feelings through the foreign medium. I think that this is due to the latent Korean way of thinking within the Korean vernacular language. [Hangeul was and is a medium of expression to systematically express thought that Koreans could finally call their own, and it developed Korean culture in a conscious way.](#)



Since there are no strict definitions for what is considered a culture, we can look at certain elements of a culture to differentiate it from others.

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Cultural Boundaries and Cultural Innovation

I mentioned the term “cultural boundary”. What does this mean? And how can this lead to cultural innovation?

The term “cultural boundary” is in fact an existing term in human geography and anthropology. It is usually used to describe a geographic area where a group of people live under the same aspects of culture, such as language, religion, and tradition. Of course, as cultures continuously shift, you cannot chart these out on a geographical map, and, more importantly, these cultural boundaries do not necessarily lie on a state or nation’s borders. In fact, there may be multiple distinct cultures within a single nation, or on the other hand, a broad overarching culture spanning across a few countries.

From ancient times till today, cultural boundaries are lines of conflict; two distinct cultures are, in a sense, vying for dominance over a certain area. Though this sort of conflict may not necessarily be an aggressive one, it is one that breeds innovation. I believe that this results in two main types of cultural innovation.

Adaptive Innovation

The example I gave of adaptive innovation, Sungkyun, arises from a general idea of adopting an element from a culture beyond your own, and adapting both the element and your own culture to assimilate them. It is important that there is the element of innovation involved, however. For example, the acceptance of Buddhism and its later development into Zen Buddhism in pre-modern China can also be considered more of an adaptive innovation.

Disruptive Innovation

This type of innovation works in almost the opposite way of the former. Adaptive innovation assimilated foreign elements of culture, somewhat blurring the line between cultures. Disruptive innovation, on the other hand, serves to strengthen these cultural boundaries by making one culture more distinct from another. This is seen in Hangeul, the Korean written language, which replaced the Chinese written script, disrupted existing conventions in Korean literature, and produced something which reinforced the cultural boundary between Korea and China.

This does not mean that Hangeul was created from “nothing.” The elements of East Asian thought had a profound effect on the ideas of the structure and design of Hangeul. We will explore Hangeul a little more on its own later. There, you’ll understand how disruptive innovation can still have cross cultural influences.

As you can see, differences in culture can lead to either a blending of the two through adaptive innovation, or a strengthening of their uniqueness through disruptive innovation. I believe that cultural boundaries allow for a kind of innovation which a single culture will find difficult to achieve. Try to think about cultural differences in your culture, and what kinds of innovation spawned from them.



Confucianism began in around 500 BCE, through the teachings of Confucius. How did this influence ancient Korea? Let's find out.

Influence of Confucianism

The ancient Chinese culture had the deepest influence on pre-modern Korea.

Out of this deep influence, “Confucianism” may be one of the most important. The two examples we will cover in this week, “Sungkyun” and “Hangeul”, are also influenced by Confucianism.

Now, have you heard of “Confucianism” before? What do you know about it?

Confucianism originated from “Confucius”, who was one of the most prominent figures in the history of ancient China. The times in which he lived were incredibly chaotic due to the endless wars that raged on, to the point that many thinkers began proposing their own theories to try and clear up the chaos. You may have heard of names like Laozi (the teacher of Daoism), Mozi (the Founder of Mohism), and Xunzi etc. Each of them ventured their ideas to the various state rulers. Confucius also tried to spread his thought to change his society.

As we learned in the previous week, the Chinese culture, including its literary and religious traditions, had influenced pre-modern Korea ever since the era of “the Three Kingdoms”. According to literary records, Confucianism was also one such unit of culture that was introduced to the Korean peninsula during the Three Kingdom era.

However, the influence of Confucianism was most powerful much later, over the 14th to 19th century in the Joseon era. This was when Confucianism developed into Neo-Confucianism, and was introduced to Korea in the Joseon dynasty. The Joseon intellectuals intensely

jumped into studying diverse theories in Neo-Confucianism. We will explore the details of the debates between Joseon intellectuals in the later weeks.

Sungkyun, traditional or innovative? If you first heard of the word “Sungkyun” from the Korean drama “Sungkyunkwan Scandal,” you may recall a budding love story between two young lovers, similar to the romance stories of today. For many Koreans, however, the word “Sungkyun” may sound old-fashioned and traditional rather than innovative. Hearing this word will perhaps remind people of a traditional method of teaching and learning. In Korea, “Sungkyun” is a well-known name for the higher educational institution that has survived for more than 700 years. What is the secret to this name’s longevity? By tracing the genealogy of this name, you will be able to understand the subtle kind of adaptive innovation that the Korean intellectual history has achieved.

Though “Sungkyun” was originally adopted from the Confucian tradition, Koreans adapted the term as their own, as a way to express the unique identity of the Korean educational ideal, and it continues to hold that meaning today. The word “Sungkyun” is found in ancient Confucian texts, but the meaning of “Sungkyun” has been long forgotten in China and it has completely lost its currency in the modern Chinese vocabulary. Ironically, however, the adopted name “Sungkyun” has endured in Korea to this day. Sungkyun, “Attaining Balance as an Educational Ideal” But what exactly does “Sungkyun” mean? Its literal meaning is “Attaining Balance”, a musical metaphor used to symbolize well-tuned musical performances.

It was used in ancient Confucian classics to describe the ideal way to educate the Son of Heaven, the Emperor of China. However, the word gradually lost relevancy over time. By using the word “Sungkyun” as the name of an educational institution, it incorporated the meaning of “attaining balance” into the education ideal, such as cultivating the ability to balance unbalanced situations, and teaching to settle discord by adjusting for either side. The first time this name was adopted, it was as the name of a royal academy in the Goryeo kingdom under the pressure of the Yuan Empire. The stronger Yuan Empire forced the Goryeo Kingdom to change the names of their government offices to lower-ranking names that fit the Yuan imperial rules.

Intriguingly, the Goryeo people adopted the once highly acclaimed word “Sungkyun” as one of their institutional names instead. This is a real mystery. How did the Goryeo people uncover the then little-known name “Sungkyun” from the Confucian classics? How did the Goryeo kingdom survive the Yuan Imperial pressure and keep this rebellious name, which used to describe the highest form of the educational ideal in Ancient China? We do not know the answer yet. What we do know is, since then, Koreans have never stopped appreciating this name. The name endured for approximately 500 years throughout the Joseon dynasty as the name of a royal educational institution, “Sungkyunkwan”. And this word “Sungkyun” has survived till now as the name of a modern university.

Sungkyun, “Learning to be a better person” When the word “Sungkyun” was first adopted, it was an innovative choice. However, through continued adaptation, Koreans began to see the term as traditional. Through this we can see an example of how traditional Korean culture is the result of continued adaptation upon innovation. This pattern is repeated in

Korean history, which shows an interesting, two-faceted devotion to innovation and commitment to tradition.

From the case of “Sungkyun,” we can see that Korean identity was formed by juggling universality and particularity at cultural boundaries, in the sense that Koreans adopted an idea from the “universal” Confucian teachings, but instead of absorbing it at face value, they revived this word through an educational institute which brought this ideal to the real world. By redefining this lofty ancient Confucian ideal into something tangible, Koreans created their particularity. The core meaning of Sungkyun, which calls for a balanced person in education beyond competency or wit, will resonate well into the future. I think it is quite beautiful that this educational ideal was not only to learn to be smart, but to learn to be a better person.

Sungkyun, “Learning to be a Better Person”

Have you heard of the word “Sungkyun”?

Some of you may have heard of this word in the name of “Sungkyunkwan University”, the institution which provides this course. Otherwise, if you are a big fan of Korean dramas, you may recall a famous Korean drama, “Sungkyunkwan Scandal”.

In fact, “Sungkyun” is a name for a Confucian ideal, and “Kwan” means institution. In this video, we will explore the meaning of “Sungkyun”. Moreover, I will explain why the use of “Sungkyun” is an adaptive innovation in Korean philosophy.



The origin of the name "Sungkyunkwan" has a deep history beginning from an ancient Confucian concept to the Yuan (Mongol) occupation of Korea. Let's find out how this came to be.

The Meaning of “Sungkyun”

Let's look briefly at the history of the name "Sungkyun", and what exactly made it such a 'rebellious name'.

As I've stated, Koreans had adapted the term as a way to express the unique identity of the Korean educational ideal. Let's look briefly at the history of this term, and what exactly made it such a 'rebellious name'.

When Goryeo Korea dynasty was under the Mongol-ruled Yuan dynasty in the 13th century, the Yuan empire mandated that all official government institutions of their vassals be renamed to inferior titles to the empire's own. In a difficult situation where you have to

choose names that will keep your pride without getting on the empire's nerves, the Goryeo people chose to adopt the name "Sungkyun" as a name of their highest educational institute. The name itself was sourced from ancient Chinese classics, which classical scholars claimed its use as the name of an imperial college in early China, while modern literature analysis sees that "Sungkyun" is a musical metaphor used in the Confucian ideals of moral perfection. Either way, the term "Sungkyun" evidently did not comply with the Yuan rules. Surprisingly, this relabeling of Goryeo's educational institute was not prohibited by the Yuan empire.

We can only guess as to why the Yuan empire allowed such a name that clearly flouted their own rules. It is possible that, by that point in history, the term "Sungkyun" had faded so deep into antiquity that it was not relevant enough to the Yuan empire for them to understand the ancient meaning of the word. Perhaps it was simply an oversight. All we know now is that the term "Sungkyun" has lost its currency in contemporary China, while it is seen as a part of Korean culture. We can thus see the adaptive innovation present at this naming.

"Sungkyun", an ancient concept in early Confucianism, was assimilated into Korean culture by its use as the name of the highest educational institute in an innovative move by the Goryeo Koreans. "Sungkyun" has since been recontextualized as a Korean educational ideal which symbolizes the perfection of an individual who is able to harmonize one's own life with others.

Do you agree with the idea of harmonizing yourself with others as an educational ideal? If not, what do you think is a more vital educational ideal?

[Hangeul, the Korean Alphabet](#)

[Hangeul is the name of the unique alphabet system in Korea. Let's explore what Hangeul is and why it is a disruptive innovation in Korean culture.](#)

Korean Alphabet, Hangeul: A Ground-Breaking Writing System The Korean alphabet, Hangeul, is a ground-breaking writing system. Unlike most writing systems, which are the result of organizing phonological elements formed over time, Hangeul was newly invented on the foundations of phonological and phonetic knowledge. Let's delve deeper into how this came to be. Even before Hangeul was invented in the mid-15th century, Koreans did have some writing systems, such as Hyangchal, Gugyeol and Idu, which borrowed Chinese characters to express Korean pronunciations, like the Japanese Kana (仮名) does. However, the fundamental differences between the Chinese and Korean spoken languages made it difficult to express all the Korean pronunciations with the borrowed characters.

Koreans solved this problem by making a new alphabet instead of adapting and improving the transliteration system. And this new invention is a remarkable example of a "disruptive innovation" in Korean culture, which shook up the value system of Korean culture by democratizing information and creating new methods of communication in the literature market. Intellectuals at the time devalued the novel Hangeul in favour of the well-established Hanmun, but today, we see Hangeul dominate. Why is this so? Let's explore what elements of Hangeul allowed it to become so successful.

The Korean Alphabet, Hangeul: an Achievement from Cultural Boundary When I say that Hangeul is unprecedentedly innovative, you may think that Hangeul is a purely Korean product, with no outer influence at all. However, behind the principles of Hangeul is an

excellent interpretation of the shared intellectual heritage in East Asia. In other words, Hangeul's originality is in fact also an achievement developed from cultural boundaries. Hangeul contains the principles of the East Asian trinity, the dynamics of Yin and Yang, and the Five Elements. The three primary vowels are the symbols representing "heaven (• [ʌ])", "earth(— [ə])", and "human ([i])", which comprise the "East Asian trinity."

These three primary vowels were then combined to generate 11 default vowels, and then the number of vowels is increased to 22, when you include default and composite vowels. The Hangeul vowels are also designed to express dual characteristics in yin and yang, such as bright/dark, big/small, and solemn/light, while the Hangeul consonants are categorized according to five articulation positions in the mouth, matching the five elements. In short, the system of Hangeul is very concise and efficient in reconstructing real sounds, and at the same time, is able to write countless syllables thanks to its combinatory principle. This is what makes it such a successful medium for the Korean language.

The Korean Alphabet, Hangeul: A Systematic Implementation All over the world, people utter countless syllables, comprised of consonants and vowels. Considering that different writing systems are employed in different regions of the world, each system is usually confined to the specific systems historically used in a particular region. However, Koreans rejected a writing system that could only record syllables that Koreans use. Instead, they created a way to disassemble sounds, figure out the fundamental elements underneath them, and reassemble sounds through traditional categories. Traditional categories such as "Heaven, Earth, and Human," "Yin and Yang," and the "Five Elements" permeate Hangeul.

Hangeul being composed of these elements enables Koreans to express various sounds in the Korean language that were impossible through Hanmun, as well as write down colorful expressions, and foreign sounds that would be introduced in the future. As you can see, Hangeul is the result of a thorough systematic implementation of the Korean way of thinking. It has become a common heritage that has grown and evolved, and is also an example of how pre-modern Koreans clearly recognized and organized the uniqueness of their own language and culture. Therefore, Hangeul is an important source for exploring the path of Korean philosophy.

[Korean Writing Systems Before Hangeul](#)

[There actually were Korean writing systems prior to Hangeul, namely, Hyangchal, Gugyeol and Idu. I will briefly introduce them.](#)

I already mentioned that there actually were Korean writing systems prior to Hangeul, namely, Hyangchal, Gugyeol and Idu.

As the grammatical structure of the Chinese and Korean language were fundamentally different, these systems were necessary to fully transcribe Korean. These were transliteration systems, which map the sounds of Korean vernacular language into writing systems which borrowed Chinese character, Hanja. However, given that the Chinese characters themselves were what made it difficult for the common folk to become literate, these systems were reserved for a select few. I'll briefly describe these systems which predated Hangeul.

[Hyangchal](#)

This system gave Chinese characters a Korean reading based on the syllable of each character, and was used to transcribe the Korean language. Hyangchal is best known as the method Koreans used to write vernacular poetry and songs (Hyangga): not only was it popularized in Silla, but even used till the Goryeo Dynasty.

Gugyeol

Where the other systems aimed to transcribe the Korean language faithfully, Gugyeol was more of a guide on understanding classical Chinese texts through Korean grammar. It saw the use of specialized markers, modified Hanja, between Chinese characters and phrases, to try and render the “Subject-Verb-Object” order of Chinese text readable to the Korean “Subject-Object-Verb” structure. Gugyeol saw use in translating Chinese classics even till the Joseon Dynasty, and occasionally sees use in contemporary Korea.

Idu

Idu was similar to Hyangchal in that it used Hanja to represent certain Korean words. Developed by Buddhist monks, it allowed for Korean words to be recorded using their approximate sounds or meanings in the Chinese written language. It mainly saw use among the upper-middle class with occupations such as administrative officials.

Given that these writing systems developed for expressing Korean were difficult to teach and learn, literacy was basically reserved for the middle to upper class, leaving a large majority of the nation illiterate. These social issues are what necessitated the invention of a writing system made directly for the Korean language, able to convey its grammar while being able to be taught to the masses.



Three Important Ingredients of Hangeul

Behind the principles of Hangeul, there are three common heritages of East Asian thought. I'll briefly describe these components.

Hangeul's originality is in fact also an achievement developed from cultural boundaries. Behind the principles of Hangeul, there are three common heritages of East Asian thought: the East Asian Trinity, the Yin and Yang, and the Five Elements.

The three primary vowels of Hangeul are the symbols representing “heaven (• [ʌ])”, “earth(— [ə])”, and “human (ㅣ [i]),” which comprise the “East Asian Trinity.” The Hangeul vowels were also designed to express dual characteristics in “Yin and Yang,” while the Hangeul consonants are categorized according to five articulation positions in the mouth, matching the “Five Elements.”

So, what are they? Why was it so important to integrate these intellectual heritages of East Asia? I'll briefly describe these ingredients which permeate Hangeul.

The East Asian Trinity

“Samjae” (C. Sancai), which I call the “East Asian Trinity,” is a worldview that understands humanity as an active agent mediating Heaven and Earth. This idea originated from ancient

China, but the development of Chinese philosophy emphasized “the unity of Heaven and Humanity”, whereas in Korea this unique type of trinity was appreciated as a dynamic structure drawing insight to the relationship between the natural world we depend on (Earth), the ultimate reality we look up to (Heaven), and us human beings who lead life between them.

[The Yin and Yang](#)

The “Yin and Yang” is a concept of dualism. They describe how seemingly opposite or contrary forces may actually be complementary, interconnected, and interdependent in the natural world, and how they may give rise to each other as they interrelate to one another. In Chinese cosmology, the universe creates itself out of a primary chaos of material energy, organized into the cycles of Yin and Yang and formed into objects and lives. Yin is the receptive and Yang the active principle, seen in all forms of change and difference.

I would like to introduce an interesting video in which you can get more details on the Yin and Yang.

<https://youtu.be/ezmR9Attpyc>

[The Five Elements](#)

“The Five Elements” is a fivefold conceptual scheme that many traditional Chinese fields used to explain a wide array of phenomena, from cosmic cycles to the interaction between internal organs, and from the succession of political regimes to the properties of medicinal drugs. The “Five Phases” are Wood(木), Fire(火), Earth(土), Metal(金), and Water(水). This order of presentation is known as the “mutual generation”(相生) sequence.

In the order of “mutual overcoming”(相克), they are Wood, Earth, Water, Fire, and Metal. I would like to introduce an interesting video in which you can get more details on the Five elements.

<https://youtu.be/1uv6pTlIKKs>