

The Unexpected Attractions of a Clerical Script in Korean Antiquity: *Hyangga* in the *Samguk Yusa*

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Antiquity on the Korean peninsula was characterized by the import of Sinitic cultural achievements, at different moments in different states, most important of which was arguably the Sinitic system of writing. The Sinitic language quickly became the language of administration, religion, philosophy, and literature, but it had to coexist with the vernacular language which had borrowed its writing system (sinographs), but not its grammar. This hybrid writing system, *hyangch'al*, recorded the vernacular text in Sinitic characters, some of them used for their meanings, others for their pronunciation (as in a rebus), yet others to denote grammatical functions. This alternate system coexisted with the use of Literary Sinitic for over a millennium, even after the invention of the Korean alphabet *han'gŭl*, in 1446, which should have made *hyangch'al* and its successor *idu* superfluous to demand. The fact that it did not seems to suggest that *hyangch'al* was not merely valued for its practical uses: after all, it had given clerks, not part of the elite and as such not trained in Literary Sinitic, necessary access to writing for administrative purposes and afforded them also with a way of understanding administrative documents written in Literary Sinitic through well-established methods of conversion. But *hyangch'al* also enjoyed unique cultural prestige and in some cases was deemed to be a truer conveyor of meaning than Literary Sinitic, such as for example in certain poems.

This paper will look into the functions of the continued coexistence of Literary Sinitic and *hyangch'al* and their historically conditioned intricate interplay. Clerical convention and literary uses coincide in *hyangch'al*, a hybrid linguistically, but a hybrid also in a chronological sense. It could only have come into being after Literary Sinitic had been established as Korean antiquity's sacred and administrative language (it needed the sinographs after all), but it represented a native language deemed much older than recently imported Literary Sinitic – deemed to be universal-, seriously wounding any straightforward claims to historical seniority. The 13th-century *Samguk yusa* (Forgotten Legacies of the Three Kingdoms), one of the two most important extant historical sources on Korean antiquity, recorded over half of the extant poems written in *hyangch'al* (called *hyangga*) and its verse narrative (in Literary Sinitic) often explains the context of their composition, providing an avenue towards a better understanding of the position and claims of the two languages and scripts vis-à-vis one another and competing assertions of supremacy (at least, in certain areas), most if not always cloaked in appeals to histories both native and Sinitic. As such, this paper will use the *hyangga* in the *Samguk yusa* to investigate how *hyangch'al* anchored itself to a native past in the realm of writing that also saw the mooring from foreign shores of Literary Sinitic.

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