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LETTER SHAPES IN KOREAN ÖNMUN AND MONGOL hPHAGSPA ALPHABETS

by

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It has long been recognized that the phonetic theory of the Korean Önmun alphabet has its roots in the structure of the Sanskrit alphabet. Several scholars, beginning with Abel Rémusat, L. de Rosny and including G. J. Ramstedt, have mentioned an intermediate influence of the Tibetan alphabet, which derives from the Sanskrit (see Ramstedt, *Grammar*, page 1).

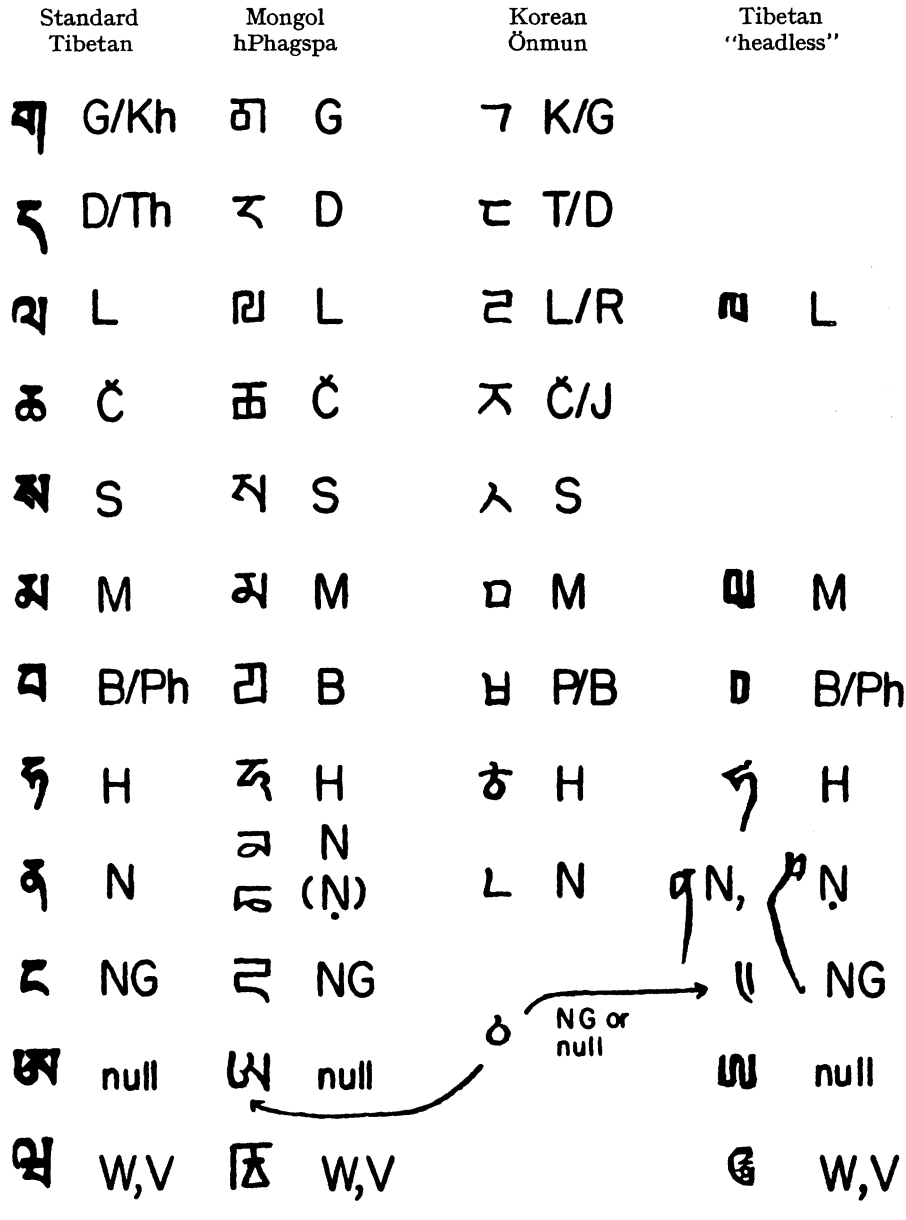
In my book, *Karlgren's Glottal Stop Initial*, paragraphs 159-160, I echoed a suggestion of K. Shiratori and S. Kanazawa (cf. *Einfluss*); namely, that the direct inspiration of the Korean Önmun script was the hPhagspa alphabet of the Mongol Dynasty, the Dörbelǰin Üsüg or Square Writing, which is a modification of the Tibetan alphabet.

Thereupon Mr. Keith Whinnom (University of Hong Kong) wrote to me to suggest that not only the phonetic structure of the Önmun, but also the very shapes of the consonantal letters were taken from the Tibetan via the hPhagspa script (though, of course, with radical simplifications).

Now the view held by the Koreans themselves is that the Önmun letters are of arbitrary geometrical design (see Tsoi Den Hu, *Yazykoznaniye*, pages 118-9). This is evidently true of the vowels, and it looks true of the consonants, which comprise a square and two or three sides of a square, a circle and an overlined circle, and so forth. Attempts to trace the Önmun letter shapes to Tibetan or other alphabets (see Kanazawa, *Einfluss*, pages 11, 13) have not been too convincing, if only because the similarities adduced cannot be extended to more than two or three letters, and could always be fortuitous. Nevertheless, Mr. Whinnom is right, as the tabulation here presented will demonstrate.

In the case of Korean K/G and T/D, the similarity to the shapes of the Tibetan or hPhagspa letters is evident. Korean Č/J (originally TS/DZ; see Ramstedt, *Grammar*, page 21) may well be a loopless form of the

TABLE 1.



hPhagspa-Tibetan Č (or TS), and Korean S a reduced form of hPhagspa-Tibetan S. As for Korean L, it is to be noted that here the letter shape is obviously closer to the hPhagspa rather than the Tibetan; that is, transmission via the hPhagspa alphabet must be supposed.

So far, so good. But I now point out that the relationships are extended if we take into consideration the so-called "headless" (dbu-med) form of the Tibetan alphabet, a form which differs a good deal from the standard printed character (dbu-č'an) and may have a different origin (see Bhattacharya, *Chrestomathy*, page xxii). Among the new similarities here revealed, the most striking are in the shapes of the letters M and P/B, which, taken together, show the square as the basic element of the labials. The headless H, with its superscript dot, is at least interesting. The Korean N may be a squared, loopless form of hPhagspa Ṇ, but since the top-stroke or "head" is certainly not represented, the more likely prototype is the headless Tibetan Ṇ.

In the table, the headless letters are copied exactly as written in Bell's *Grammar*. It will be seen that every one of the basic Korean consonants now has a reasonable analog.

The headless Tibetan script was used in medieval lamaistic inscriptions in North China (samples are shown in Pozdneyev, *Literatura*, pages 197-200), and was no doubt just as familiar to the Buddhist litterati as the standard Tibetan. There is moreover a fact which directly testifies to its influence: one letter of the hPhagspa alphabet itself is from the headless Tibetan, even though the orientation of this script is overwhelmingly toward the standard Tibetan letter shapes. The exceptional letter is W/V, which would be inexplicable if we had only the standard Tibetan letter to compare with it.

It is therefore not unreasonable to conclude that the inventor of the Önmun selected from three alphabets (Tibetan, headless Tibetan and hPhagspa) those consonantal forms which best lent themselves to abbreviation and systematic geometrization.

The importance of Mr. Whinnom's thesis is that it provides the link between Korean and Tibetan. The Tibetan affiliation of the Önmun was hitherto no more than a theory, which could be asserted or denied. Tibetan, indeed, does seem far away and far-fetched; what cultural influence, what energizing and compelling ideological influence, could Tibet have exerted on Korea in the fifteenth century, when the Önmun was introduced?

True, the lexical sequence of the Önmun consonants, and still more their phonetic classification, precisely mirrors the alphabetic order of the Sanskrit, Tibetan and hPhagspa alphabets. This, however, is also the arrangement of the consonants in the standard Chinese lexical-phonetic table (see Hope, *Karlgren's Glottal Stop Initial*, Schedule I), with which the Koreans had been familiar for centuries before the invention of the

TABLE 2.

Obsolete Önmun letters: ㆆ (or ㅱ), ㆁ (or ㅇ) and ㅿ; in shape they derive from the basic null consonant ㅇ. (Gale, ref. 10, page 28: "The four letters ㆁ, ㅇ, ㆆ and ㅿ are silent when used as initials; ㅇ, which now takes the place of all four, is equal to ng when used as a final.")

Equations with Chinese lexical initials (ref. 10, pages 28-29):

ㆆ = clear-pitch null,	影	}	"Throat-sounds".
ㅇ = muddy-pitch null,	喩		
ㅎ = clear-pitch H,	曉		
ㆅ = muddy-pitch H,	匣		
ㆁ = velar nasal NG,	疑		"Back-tooth sound".
ㅿ = palatal fricative Ź,	日		"Half front-tooth sound".

(Cf. ref. 2, Schedule I.)

Possible geometric analogies (ref. 3, page 31):

ㅇ	ㆆ	ㅎ	null, clear-pitch null, H.
ㄴ	ㄷ	ㅌ	N T, T'.
ㅅ	ㅈ	ㅊ	S, C C'.

Önmun. There is no proof of a Tibetan-hPhagspa parentage to be found here.

Moreover, one of the first and foremost purposes of the Önmun (like the Japanese kana) was to help in the study of the Chinese characters and to explain their pronunciation (see Courant, *Bibliographie*, page XCIII). The new alphabet was named, by the Koreans, the Pan Chŏl 反切 (Courant, *Bibliographie*, page XCIII), which is precisely the Chinese term Fan Tz'ieh, meaning "classificatory 反 splitting 切 (of syllables)", that is, the Chinese method of phonetic analysis and phonetic spelling. The Korean sources state (in a circumstantial manner and giving the names of all personages involved) that the commission of specialists to which King Sechong entrusted the task of working out the Önmun system maintained, during its labors, direct contact with the Chinese phonologists. Members of the commission made no less than thirteen

trips to Liaotung to consult an eminent Chinese scholar living there in exile (see Courant, *Systèmes*, pages 18-19; Gale, *Alphabet*, pages 17, 24; Courant, *Bibliographie*, page XCIV; see Tsoi Den Hu, page 120). The subject of consultation is stated explicitly to have been "the initials and rhymes (音韻)" of Chinese lexical-phonetic theory (Gale, *Alphabet*, page 25). The title of the work in which King Sechong promulgated the new alphabet, namely the 御製訓民正音 "The *Correct Sounds*, Elaborated under Royal Auspices for the Nation's Instruction" echoes that of the standard Ming compilation 洪武正韻 "The Hung Wu Imperial *Correct Rhymes*". Indeed a Korean version of this Chinese work, with added Önmun, was published for illustrative purposes by Sechong's commission (see Gale, *Alphabet*, pages 17-18).

Nothing here suggests a Tibetan influence. On the contrary, "all the explanations (given by Sechong's commission) are based on the phonetic doctrines worked out by the Chinese linguistic scholars" (Tsoi Den Hu, page 120).

If we can trust the extant Korean sources, Sechong's commission, in its own account of its work, emphasized the synthetic and geometrizing character of the new alphabet; statements are made which can be interpreted as declaring its complete independence of any other form of writing as far as the letter shapes and the alphabetic principle are concerned (see Kanazawa, *Einfluss*, page 23; Tsoi Den Hu, footnote page 120). This, however, did not satisfy the later Korean scholars, who concluded that the theoretical prototype of the Önmun was to be found in the Devanagari alphabet of Sanskrit (see Tsoi Den Hu, f. p. 120; Gale, *Alphabet*, pages 31, 35), although they of course accepted without question that this Hindu phonetic theory was transmitted by way of the Chinese lexical-phonetic system. Courant likewise supposes the only probable channel of transmission to be via Chinese (Courant, *Systèmes*, page 21; Courant, *Bibliographie*, page XCVIII).

There was, in fact, every reason to regard this as the best answer to the problem. Some Occidental scholars toyed with various other theories, such as a Jurčen, a Khitan, an Uighur-Mongol, a Pali or even a Syriac origin (Kanazawa, *Einfluss*, page 11). For these notions it may be said, quite briefly, that there was no evidence whatever. Even the Tibetan connection was little more than a suggestion put forth by Abel Rémusat and vaguely repeated by a series of scholars.

It is the Önmun letter shapes that provide the decisive evidence for the connection with Tibetan, and to account for this connection, the Mongol hPhagspa alphabet appears as the missing link.

But according to history, the Önmun was introduced in the fifteenth century. In the second half of the thirteenth and first half of the fourteenth centuries, the Koreans had been feudatories of the Mongol Yüen Dynasty. From 1365 A.D., they were under the suzerainty of the Ming Dynasty, which overthrew the Yüen. Where was the Mongol influence, in fifteenth century Korea?

Here a minor puzzle becomes significant. The traditional date of King Sechong's invention of the Önmun was 1443 A.D.; thereupon he set up the royal commission which worked out the idea in detail and published it in 1446. This is, however, contradicted by the existence of a Chinese text, with Önmun translation, published in 1434 (see Courant, *Bibliographie*, pages LX, CII, 163-165). We may now suspect that King Sechong merely took up an earlier invention; that the commission's job was no more than a remodeling, and in particular a thorough integration of the new writing-system with Chinese lexical-phonetic theory.

In the fifteenth century the Koreans, under Ming hegemony, would have been "de-emphasizing" the Mongol suzerainty and Mongol influences of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

The hPhagspa Square Writing was used from 1269 to 1368 A.D. With the Ming overthrow of Yüen, it disappeared from Chinese inscriptions, documents and coinage. The Mongols themselves reverted to the Uighur-Mongol script of the times of Jenghis Khan. The hPhagspa letters survived (and remain until this day) on the Dalai Lama's seal in remote Lhasa; they continued to be used in an occasional Tibetan inscription in the Mongolian lamaseries. Only after Ming in turn was overthrown did the Khien Lung Emperor of the Manchu Dynasty, in a gesture recalling the greatness of the Mongols, try to reintroduce a new synthetic "Square Writing" (Hope, *Karlgren's Glottal Stop Initial*, paragraph 160), for ornamental purposes and for use on seals. But this antiquarian gesture had little effect.

Under the Mings, it could not have been politic to mention the Mongol Square Writing. Korea, perhaps, did not entirely lose the memory of the hPhagspa script, but the tradition (see Kanazawa, *Einfluss*, page 24; Gale, *Alphabet*, page 29) comes down in these words: "(Sechong or Sechong's commission) used the ancient seal character (古篆) as a model for the (Önmun) forms . . .". This has more than once been signalized as an unintelligible statement. But we may suppose that the Korean scholar who first put tradition in this form meant his readers to read between the lines: he was not referring to *Chinese* sigillary characters. Later writers embroidered the Chinese theme (see Gale, *Alphabet*, page 31), but if the historical fact of the hPhagspa connection is demonstrated,

the reference becomes intelligible ... in terms of the hPhagspa seals and bullae of office (Pozdneyev, *Literatura*, pages 153-154) carried by Kubilai Khan's messengers to the four corners of Asia.

Korean tradition preserves a hazy memory of an alphabetic writing earlier than the promulgation of the Önmun (see Gale, *Alphabet*, pages 36, 37). There was in 1314-1331 a queen of Koryö, a Mongol princess, who wished to introduce the Mongol script. The script in question is described as Turkish (i.e., Uighur-Mongol), but this detail may be a later garnishing. The dates mentioned, 1314-1331, fall within the hPhagspa period.

The invention of the Önmun and its "sinicizing", that is, its precise adjustment to Chinese lexical-phonetic theory, were obviously two separate steps; the sinicizing was secondary and to some extent a makeshift process. The alphabet does not contain all the letters required by Chinese phonetic theory. Extra letters, digraphs and even a trigraph were introduced to make up the deficiencies.

The Önmun has no letters to represent the "muddy" (濁) or low-pitched category of Chinese initial consonants. Neither has it independent letters to represent the preglottalized (Ramstedt, *Grammar*, pages 5-6) consonants of Korean, since of course no provision for such sounds was made in the Tibetan and hPhagspa alphabets, or for that matter in the Chinese lexical-phonetic system. When the Önmun was "sinicized", the letters K/G, T/D, Č/J, P/B, S and H, which derive from letters which are of "clear" (淸) pitch in *Chinese* hPhagspa (Hope, *Karlgren's Glottal Stop Initial*, Schedule I), were naturally equated to the clear-pitch lexemes. To represent the corresponding "muddy" initials of Chinese, the same Önmun letters were written double, thus KK, TT, ČČ, PP, SS, HH.

Except for HH, the same doubled letters (along with certain alternative digraphs) were also used to represent the native preglottalized consonants. This step must have been already taken twelve years before the official promulgation of the Önmun; it is stated that in the above-mentioned book published in 1434 A.D. the usage is identical with that of today (Courant, *Systèmes*, page 22). Therefore even by this time the alphabet had some history of development behind it: the lack of symbols for the Korean preglottalized consonants, not noticed in the original system, had been perceived.

The Chinese labiodental lexemes F, F-aspirate, F-muddy and MV, representing sounds foreign to the Korean language, were denoted by means of the Önmun labial consonants plus the null initial written

beneath them, thus P, P‘, P̥P̥ and M̥. This seems to be direct imitation of the subjoining technique so characteristic of the Tibetan script.

The "sinicized" Önmun system has three extra letters, not needed for writing Korean and now quite obsolete. No analogs for these letter shapes can be found in the Tibetan or hPhagspa alphabets, a fact which marks them off from all other Önmun letters. Indeed they are obvious secondary formations, obtained by slightly modifying the shape of the Önmun null. In the old Korean block-printed texts they alternate somewhat indiscriminately with the regular null. In the Önmun as used to represent the Chinese initial lexemes, however, the values of all these symbols (see Table 2) are entirely definite.

The 喉音 or "throat sounds (initials)" of the Chinese lexical-phonetic system include the null ingresses and the aspirate ingresses (of both tonal pitches); that is, sounds proceeding directly from the throat without buccal or nasal modification. (To avoid confusion at the very source, it is necessary to point out that the Chinese classification "throat sounds" does NOT prove that the clear pitch null 影 represents a glottal stop, ut Karlgren; the muddy pitch null 喻, Karlgren's vocalic ingress, is similarly classified). The original Önmun null, a simple loop or circlet, apparently takes its shape from the initial stroke of the letter ཨ, which in hPhagspa Mongolian is the only null which is written at the beginning of a word (Hope, paragraph 185). In the "sinicized" Önmun this null was naturally equated to the Chinese muddy null, because the latter is represented by ཨ in hPhagspa Chinese. For the clear null, the form with the "head" or overline was used. This form may have been originally a mere variant, "headed" as against "headless". It is possible to find a sort of geometrizer's analogy in the use of the overline (see Table 2), but it is very vague.

The overlined form of the null, when provided with the superscript dot which is the regular Önmun sign of aspiration, becomes H; this H, of clear pitch in "sinicized" Önmun, is thus analysed as *clear null ingress plus aspiration*. To represent the Chinese muddy H, the Önmun H is doubled, according to the regular procedure.

The sinicized Önmun distinguishes initial NG by adding a short vertical topstroke or point to the circlet null, obviously a secondary step. One may therefore suppose that the Önmun null originally, as today, stood also for final NG of Korean. The double value no doubt arose from:

i) The confusing tendency in Chinese pronunciation to use NG as an entrave or Hiatustilger in words properly having a null initial (Hope, 100-103) and

ii) The fact that the *lexical* initial NG had disappeared before certain vowels in the Chinese of the hPhagspa inscriptions; thus  *Ngüen* spelled *muddy null* + *VÄN*.

As for the triangular modification of the null to represent the Chinese initial , which in the Chinese of the hPhagspa texts was a sonant palatal fricative Ź, the reason is probably the resemblance to a close vocalic ingress. This friction indeed may have been rather slight, for in Cantonese the sound becomes Y-. (Incidentally, when I was studying Cantonese vernaculars about thirty years ago, I noticed that in some of them the Y- preserved a trace of friction, a nuance of Ź, and it is perhaps of interest to mention that in my transcripts I chose YH as the best digraph to represent this sound).

The Önmun is a true alphabet in the Greek sense, with independent letters for the vowels. The historical development which culminated in this simplest and most perfectly systematic of alphabets, in which the form of the letters indicates their phonetic nature (vowel or consonant) and many of the phonetic relationships, may now be precisely recounted as follows.

A Semitic consonantal alphabet was adopted in India about the eighth century B.C. The Hindus added a system of vowel-points, as in the later Semitic practice. For this step it was no doubt the Old Persian cuneiform, in which the vowels were reasonably well indicated, that provided the inspiration; this is shown by the fact that the Hindus abandoned the haphazard order of the Semitic letters and adopted a highly systematic arrangement which is obviously based on that of the Old Persian syllabary (compare Bartholomae, *Awestasprache*, page 159).

The vowel-points of the Hindu script were at first often omitted, but they finally came to be used as an integral part of the script, not as an occasional auxiliary device. Nevertheless, they still remained an apparatus definitely subordinate to the consonantal symbols (Hope, paragraph 2). Different vowel-points were placed *above* or *below* the consonant, or *left* or *right* of it; the consonant was the support and the vowel an appendage.

The Tibetan alphabet (seventh century A.D.) placed the vowels only *above* or *below* the consonants in the horizontal writing-line. In the hPhagspa alphabet (1269 A.D.) the direction of writing was changed to vertical, which brought the superscript or subscript vowel-signs *into the line of writing*. Then, to avoid ambiguity, it became necessary to place all the vowel-signs after . . . that is, below . . . the consonant to which they

belonged. Some influence in this direction may have come from the Soghdian and Uighur-Mongol alphabets. (These alphabets are of Semitic descent. Is it coincidence that the name "Square Writing", by which hPhagspa's alphabet was known to the Mongols, is also the name of the standard or "Assyrian" form of the Hebrew alphabet: the kethāb merubbā'?)

In the hPhagspa script, the vowels thus achieved the status of independent, on-the-line letters. There was, however, no symbol for the vowel A, which, in the Sanskrit-Tibetan manner, was considered to be inherent in each consonant. Yet every other orthographically recognized vowel had its symbol, except A. The logical lacuna finally became evident, and in the Önmun it was filled. The Önmun thus reached the stage of a Greek-type alphabet . . . with Alpha a vowel on the same footing as Beta. At the same time, the vowel theory received a thorough working-over; the Önmun symbols were made to show the phonetic classification of the vowels they represented, and they were so thoroughly geometrized that no relationship with Tibetan, hPhagspa or any other writing system is detectable in their shapes. This part of the Önmun system, then, is the definitive Korean contribution.

The only evidence of Hindu-Tibetan-Chinese phonetic theory in the Korean vowels is a vestige of the subordination to the consonants: in the Önmun script, as in hPhagspa, Tibetan and Sanskrit, a *null consonant* must still be written to "support" every initial vowel (Tsoi Den Hu, page 119; Courant, *Bibliographie*, page XCVII; Hope, paragraph 2).

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