

Was the Korean alphabet a sole invention of King Sejong?

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Abstract

This paper tries to argue that the Korean alphabet is a sole invention of King Sejong on the contrary to the prevalent view that the King either ordered a group of scholars to invent the script (command hypothesis) or worked alongside a team of scholars (cooperation hypothesis). This paper also reviews various observations and theories proposed by western scholars in 19th and early 20th century.

There is absolutely no evidence or record from the period that shows that anyone else helped Sejong or worked on his orders. No member of the *Chipyonjon* was involved before 1443, when they compiled “Explanations and Examples of the Correct Sounds for the Instruction of the People” on the back of the invention Sejong had already completed. The conclusion is that King Sejong invented *Hangul* himself in isolation, perhaps only consulting the crown prince and his other sons.

Many attempts have also been made to reduce the origin of the Korean alphabet to other systems of writing, such as Chinese seal characters, Sanskrit, Tibetan, Uighur-Mongol and Phags-pa. All these comparisons, however, are restricted to incidental resemblances of a few letters and are far from convincing. The mystery of the origin of the Korean alphabet was finally solved in July 1940, when the original text of the *Hunmin chŏngŭm* was found in Andong.

<Key words> Korean alphabet, *Hunmin chŏngŭm*, Sejong, command hypothesis, cooperation hypothesis, origin of Korean alphabet, Korean writing system

1. Introduction

The Korean Writing system – *Hangŭl* - has been dubbed “perhaps the most scientific system of writing in the world” (Reischauer and Fairbank 1960: 435) and even “the world’s best alphabet” (Vos 1963: 31). The term *Hangŭl* (한글) was coined in 1912 by the scholar Chu Sigyong.

The history of the Korean alphabet is extraordinary. The history of world writing in general is a story of borrowing the writing system of a neighbouring people, changing it a little, then employing this adapted system to record a new language. This makes many scholars very skeptical about using the word “invention” in the description of the history of writing. The Korean alphabet is

however, a distinct exception. As a complete new creation, it is unquestionably an “invention”.

This paper¹ tries to argue that the Korean alphabet is a sole invention of King Sejong on the contrary to the prevalent view that the King either ordered a group of scholars to invent the script (command hypothesis) or worked alongside a team of scholars (cooperation hypothesis). This paper will also review various observations and theories proposed by western scholars in 19th and early 20th century.

2. The Invention of Hangeul

Whereas other scripts evolved over time, *Hangeul* was the result of a deliberate invention. We know exactly when it was invented, who it was invented by, why and on what principles it was invented, and we have an original text explaining its use.

The invention of *Hangeul* was recorded in *Annals of King Sejong* (世宗實錄; 세종실록) in 1443². Detailed information about the writing system’s usage was revealed in 1446 in a document entitled *Hunmin chŏngŭm* (訓民正音; 훈민정음), written by Sejong, which translates as “The Correct Sounds for the Instruction of the People.” The term *Hunmin chŏngŭm* can also be used to refer to the original *Hangeul* script itself. The seven-page document was accompanied by a longer work entitled *Hunmin chŏngŭm Haerye* (訓民正音解例; 훈민정음해례) – “Explanations and Examples of the Correct Sounds for the Instruction of the People.” This text was not written by the King, but by a group of young scholars known as the *Chiphyonjon* (集賢殿; 집현전), an Academy of Worthies who worked at Sejong’s command.

The entry from *Annals of King Sejong* has drawn much scholarly attention and begins as follows:

是月上親制諺文二十八字其字倣古篆 ...

이달에 임금께서 몸소 언문 28자를 만들었는데 그 글자는 고전을

¹ This paper was presented at the first International conference, entitled <China, Korea, Japan: Methodology and Practice of Culture Interpretation> held in Kiev, on 15-16 October 2009. An earlier version of this paper was appeared at SOAS-AKS working papers in Korean Studies in electronic form. You can find it at www.soas.ac.uk/koreanstudies/soas-aks/soas-aks-papers/43078.pdf.

² Due to use of the lunar calendar, it may have actually been early 1444.

본받았다.

This month, His Highness the King personally created the twenty-eight letters of the Vernacular Script (*Onmun*), its letters modeled after the Old Seal (*Kojon*).³

This quotation from *Annals of King Sejong* is consistent with all records from 1443 in stating that the letters were the personal creation of King Sejong. Despite this, the accepted view until recently was that the King either ordered a group of scholars to invent the script (command hypothesis) or worked alongside a team of scholars (cooperation hypothesis). Attributing the invention personally to the King was dismissed as a convention of the period, as it had been in the cases of several other Asian scripts (Lee 1997: 74). Few imagined that the King would have had either the time or the ability to personally undertake such a task.

3. Foreigner's Observations and Misconceptions on the origin of Korean Alphabet

Before we delve into the question of who the real inventor of *Hangŭl* was, it would be interesting to review foreigners' observations and remarks on the origin of Korean Alphabet in 19th century and early 20th century. It will show that western missionary's observations on Korean alphabet were very fragmentary and unreliable. Some western scholars believed that King Sejong was not the real inventor and some even believed that Solch'ong was the inventor of the Korean alphabet (cf. Gale 1892, Lacouperie 1894 among others). Most people also suggested that Korean alphabet was modeled based on Sanskrit or Tibet.

According to Ledyard (1965: 269), one of the first observations on Korean alphabet was by Hager in 1799. Hager acknowledged, albeit very briefly, the existence of the *Ŏnmun syllabary* in Korea and classified it with those of Siam, Burma and other Asian countries, and even those of Africa such as Amharic. He seemed only to acknowledge the existence of Korean, but did not analyse its origins or the reasons for its creation.

Rémusat (1820) also described Korean as an alphabet of twenty-four letters, neither ideographic, like Chinese, nor syllabic, like Japanese, but

³ English translation is adapted from Lee and Ramsey (2000: 31). Hangul version is from Huh (1974: 65).

probably based on a form of Tibetan alphabet. Rémusat (1820) was able to neither determine the date of its invention nor accredit someone with its creation. However, he felt sure it could have easily happened as a consequence of the Tartar influence on the Korean peninsula in the thirteenth century.

Taylor (1883) briefly mentioned the existence of a Korean writing system and equally briefly dismissed it as a very primitive form of the Indian alphabet, “introduced doubtless by Buddhist teachers”⁴. No reference to the possible inventor of the alphabet was given and no other evidence was reported at the time.

The assumptions made by Hager, Rémusat and Taylor were pure conjecture, made in the ignorance of the rich historical sources regarding the Korean alphabet and shows that scholars were not yet seriously interested in Korea.

It was not until 1892 that a more concrete analysis of the Korean alphabet carried out by an American missionary, Homer Hulbert (1863-1949)⁵. Compared to his predecessors Hulbert (1892) attempted to conduct an analysis of the Korean alphabet based on systematic investigations rather than simple suppositions. In order to determine the origin of an alphabet, he divided the information collected in two groups: external and internal.

The external evidence concerned with the date of the invention of the alphabet. The internal evidence was related to the alphabet itself and they have been listed by Hulbert in twelve main points⁶. Hulbert clearly affirmed that the results of the internal evidence are more important than external evidence and he did not really take into great consideration the Korean documentation.

⁴ He added that although Korean was supposed to have been developed from Chinese, through the Japanese syllabaries, when carefully considered, its alphabetic arrangement to its supposed Indian origin could be easily established, “while the forms of several of the [Korean] letters prove that it was derived from an ancient Pali or Tibetan type” (Taylor 1883: 348). Korean, therefore, is found in a genealogy of the Semitic family of alphabets under Pali together with Burmese, Siamese, Javanese, Singhalese.

⁵ Hulbert worked in Korea from 1886 as a teacher of English at the Royal College.

⁶ The twelve points are as follows: 1) the comparison of the letters themselves. 2) Whether slight deviations in sound were indicated by the diacritic points or by the use of separate letters. 3) Whether there were different forms for letters according to their position: initial, medial, finals. 4) Whether there was a distinction between capitals and small letters. 5) Whether the writing was entirely phonetic or whether there were silent letter. 6) The existence of breaks in the text other than at the end of lines and how it occurred. 7) The manner of placing the letters. 8) Whether the text ran perpendicularly or horizontally 9) the relative prominence given to vowels over consonants or vice versa. 10) The relative simplicity of the alphabets. 11) The existence of punctuation marks. 12) The method of abbreviation

Based on the external evidences Hulbert fixed the date of the invention of the Korean alphabet on 1445. He also disregarded the eventual influence of Mongols on Korean alphabet. He then argued that Korean should have been modeled on Tibetan, considering that Korea frequently received Buddhist texts in Tibetan from China (Hulbert 1892: 68). He conducted a comparative analysis among Tibetan, Sanskrit and Manchu and concluded that Tibetan should have been the model for Korean⁷. He found a striking similarity between the two and commented (pp71-2): "the Korean *k* is almost identical, the *m* is clearly modeled and *l m n p t ch* are very similar despite some differences"⁸.

In the same year, James Gale's (1892) short article re-ignited the debate over the Korean alphabet at the time. He rightly pointed out the confusion pervading western scholars about two main points: the identity of the inventor and the date of the invention of the Korean alphabet.

Agreeing with Hulbert on the date of the invention under King Sejong's reign, Gale named Sŏng Sam-mun, a member of the Chphyŏnjŏn (Assembly of Worthies), as the creator of the Ŏmun, but he did not give any references or explanations how he came to this conclusion. Gale's article clearly shows how, at the time, information about the Korean alphabet accumulated very slowly especially among western scholars.

On the other hand, Terrien De Lacouperie (1894) claimed that the Korean Ŏmun alphabet of twenty-five letters (14 consonants and 11 vowels) was made in 681 by a great scholar named Sŏlch'ong on a Tibeto-Indian base. No other explanations were added to this brief comment in the rest of the text⁹.

Aston¹⁰ (1895) argued the origin of the Ŏmun in his article, and finally brought into light, as evidence, his translation of a passage of the *Kukcho Pogam* (國朝寶鑑, Mirror of the Dynasty)¹¹. The entry under the year 1446 translated by Aston was as follows (Aston 1895: 508-9):

⁷ He could not find any consistent similarity between Korean and Manchu script.

⁸ When Hulbert (1892) compared Tibetan and Sanskrit he noticed at once the proof of one being derived from the other. He concluded that since the derived alphabet is always simpler than its model, the internal evidence pointed strongly to a Tibetan rather than to a Sanskrit origin of the Korean alphabet (pp72-3).

⁹ It could be also misleading to say that the number of Korean alphabet was twenty-five. At the time of its invention, the Korean alphabet counted twenty-eight letters as the document *Hunmin chŏngŭm* clearly states.

¹⁰ William George Aston (1841-1911) was a Consul in Korea during 1884-86. He was a pioneer Japanese scholar who published a translation of *Nihongi* in 1896 and also he was the first linguist to describe the resemblance between Korean and Japanese.

¹¹ The *Kukcho Pogam* is an anthology of the achievements of the Chosŏn Dynasty, started by King Sejong and continued after his death and was printed for the first time in 1458.

"In the winter of the year 1443 the King invented characters for the twenty-eight true sounds, and drew up directions for their use, giving them the title of Hunmin Chŏngŭm (True sound Characters for the instruction of the people). These letters, like the ancient seal characters, depend on sound, and therefore, the seven-fold vocal combinations, the three extremes, and the refinement of the two breathings, are all comprised in them. These twenty-eight letters can be variously applied without limit. They are simple and intelligible. A clever man can understand them in less than a morning. A stupid man may learn them in ten days."

Aston, however, incorrectly added that another Korean authority, without specifying who it was, observed that the Ŏnmun was made upon the pattern of the Sanskrit alphabet, and that the internal evidence left no doubt that this was the case.

Hulbert (1896) was an additional article to his previous one in 1892 to justify his theories about the origins of the Korean alphabet upon historical evidences, as he claimed.

The introduction opens up with a very strong comment related to a dispute that rose between Hulbert and Yi Ik Seup, a Korean scholar. He remarked that "(my) theory was attacked in a lively manner by Yi Ik Seup, who had about the same historical data to work on the alphabet that I had but who could not see any similarities between Korean and Tibetan letters, wherein he showed a lamentable ignorance of the laws of the evolution of alphabets excusable perhaps in a Korean" (Hulbert 1896: 233). This shows the disregard Hulbert had for the views of the Korean scholar and how he considered western technique of analysis superior to the Korean ones. Furthermore he went on that "He wants us to believe that King Sejong made the letter 'ㄱ' [k] because it was a picture of the open mouth pointing toward the back teeth, that he made 'ㄴ' of this shape to represent the tongue falling from the roof of the mouth, that he made 'ㄷ' to represent 's' because by its forked appearance it represent a hissing sound, that he made 'ㅁ' to represent the sound of 'm' because it shows the shape of the lips in speaking it and that 'ㅇ' represents the open throat in pronouncing the nasal *ng*" (Hulbert 1896: 233). However, he had refused to accept the scientific explanation without any scientific arguments¹².

¹² Hulbert, in contrast to Aston, did not consider the Kukcho Pogam a reliable historical

In 1903, Hulbert published another article concerning the *Hunmin Chōngŭm*, where he noted that the postface to *Hunmin Chōngŭm* (postface of Chōng In-ji) was preserved in the great Korean encyclopedia called *Munhōn Pigo* (文獻備考). As already found in the *Kukcho Pogam*, the *Munhōn pigo* entry stated the date of the invention, the inventor and the number of letters invented and reported all the name of the members of the Assembly of Worthies that participated in the invention of the alphabet: Chōng In-ji, Shin Suk-chu, Sōng Sam-mun and Ch'oe Hang.

What particularly attracted Hulbert's interest in the *Munhōn Pigo* was the statement added by Yi Su-gwang¹³. This would add weight to his theory: "The Korean alphabet was made on the model of the Tibetan alphabet. It had long been contemplated, but the plan was not carried out until the days of King Sejong" (Hulbert 1903: 157-8). Hulbert expressed profound respect for this scholar who admitted the model of the Korean alphabet was Tibetan and that such origin for the alphabet had been contemplated long before King Sejong came to power.

Finally, Gale (1912) is a most extensive article where he re-addressed all the western scholar's theories presented previously. Naming five inventors including King Sejong together with Chōng In-ji, Sōng Sam-mun, Shin Suk-ju and Ch'oe Hang based on the numerous historical evidences, he commented: "These are the five men to whom goes the honour of the creation of this simple and beautiful alphabet" (Gale 1912: 22).

It seemed that he consulted many historical documents, which include *Munhōn Pigo*, *Kukcho Pogam*, *Haedong Yōksa*, *Taedong yasung*, *Kukcho Pyōnyōn*, *Yōnnyō Kisul*. He criticised other western scholars, especially Hulbert, Scott and Aston's theories since they tried to trace the origin of the letters to Tibetan and Sanskrit even though they were aware of the existence of Hong-

reference, because he considered it a mere "gazette of the present dynasty without a proper sense of history" (234p). He therefore based his arguments on the private histories in manual script such as the Choya Hwoet'ong (朝野會通), the Yōnnyō Kisul (燃藜記述) and the Kukcho P'yōnnyōn (國朝編年), which had been handed down from 'father to son' and which formed in his opinion the "proper" history of the dynasty. It can be argued that the major flaw in Hulbert's work is his lack in clearly defining what sources are credible and what sources are not. Hulbert (1896) often established that private histories were more reliable than the official annals, without a sufficient explanation. It therefore looked like more an arbitrary decision rather than a qualitative choice in the selection of credible documentation.

¹³ Yi Su-gwang spent his life in government service and making journeys to China. He compiled an encyclopedic collection of essays in 25 books titled Chibong Yusōl (Classified Essay on Chibong).

mu alphabet. They failed to give it serious consideration. He therefore dismissed their theories and commented that anyone who would have had the trouble to consult the Kang-hi dictionary would have found seventeen or more forms just like the Ŏnmun¹⁴. He remarked with a certain confidence: “to a surprising degree the forms are very close, while it takes a very long stretch of imagination to see any similarity between the Sanskrit letters and the Ŏnmun” (Gale 1912: 51).

The Chinese influence as argument could not be dismissed without giving it its due credit. At the time the alphabet was invented, there was already a long and stable tradition of writing in Korea and it would have been difficult for Koreans to completely ignore those graphic principles with which they had grown up and which they were intimately familiar. Moreover, there may well have been influences on the alphabet from elsewhere in the region. It has been well documented that King Sejong and his assistants conducted thorough research on the writing systems used in that part of the world, including alphabet of Indian origin. It is reasonable to think that this research would have played a role in the design of the new letters. Nevertheless, being influenced by Chinese and other writing systems does not diminish the creative nature of King Sejong and what he had achieved. “Nothing invented is ever created out of thin air, there is always an intellectual history to be considered” (Lee and Ramsey 2000: 41). But there is also no reason to doubt that the origin of the Korean alphabet is anything other than what the *Hunmin Chŏngŭm Haerye* clearly stated.

The *Haerye*, especially in the section entitled *Chejahae* (explanation of the design of the letters), provides a detailed and in-depth explanation of the linguistic and philosophical principles forming the basis of the letter shapes and structure. Although the discovery of *Hunmin Chŏngŭm Haerye* proved that western scholars’ original conjectures were mostly incorrect and unreliable on the one hand, and maybe foolhardy to ignore the work of the Korean scholars at the time on the other, it was at least interesting to observe how much they were interested in and fascinated by the invention of Korean alphabet.

¹⁴ Gale, compared to the previous western scholars, gave great consideration to the Korean historical documents. Moreover he did not support the Sanskrit theory, but he concluded that the alphabet came directly from China and that the laws and principles could be explained on the base of Chinese philosophy

4. The Inventor of the Korean Alphabet¹⁵

4.1. Command theory and Cooperation theory

Because of its unique characteristics of the Korean alphabet, it has long attracted scholarly attention not only from western scholars but from Korean scholars. It is interesting and reasonable to ask where this ingenious system may have come from and who the real inventor was.

The idea that the king did not personally create the alphabet, goes back to the *Yongjae ch'onghwa* (volume 7) of Sŏng Hyŏn (1439-1504), where it is stated that¹⁶:

Sejong established the Onmun ch'ong ("Vernacular Script Headquarters") and gave orders to Sin Sukchu, Song Sammun, et al., to create the Vernacular Script.....

However, the assertion that the king did not create the alphabet himself is inconsistent with a later statement in the same text where the author hints that the king did create it:

Even untutored wives and women can easily understand them. The creative wisdom of the sage is beyond the power of men.

Other statements supporting the command hypothesis continued into the modern period. As an example, the *Songho sasol* (volume 7) of Yi Ik (1681-1763) can be cited. Yi Ik had spoken of the Phags-pa script originally made during the reign of Khubilai Khan of the Yuan dynasty and had guessed that the questioning of Huang Zan would also have been about these letters (Lee 1997: 12). Relying on the same evidence, the following statement can be cited from the *Onmun chi* of Yu Hui (1773-1837):

Our King Sejong the Great commanded his scholarly retainers to imitate the form of

¹⁵ The arguments and evidences in this section are mostly indebted to Lee Ki-Moon (1997).

¹⁶ The English translations of historical documents in this paper follows Ramsey's translation in Lee Ki-Moon (1997).

Mongolian writing and to make inquiries of Huang Zan, and thus created the Vernacular script

In the early part of the twentieth century, Chu Sigyong in his *Taehan kugo munpop* (1906) seems to offer inconsistent information although in some passages he clearly states that the alphabet was the king's personal creation:

Question: Who made the National Letters?

Answer: His Majesty King Sejong the Great of our dynasty made them

Immediately following this statement, however, he hints that there had been collaborators in the invention of the alphabet.

Question: How did his majesty King Sejong made them?

Answer: His majesty King Sejong the Great was concerned that although every nation had made letters and recorded the language of that nation, our nation had not recorded its language and had no writing; and so, establishing the Bureau of National Writing in the Court, he commanded Sin Sukchu, Song Sammun, and others and, imitating the Old Seal and Indian writing, personally made the National Letters.

Until recently, the command hypothesis seems to be widely accepted amongst Korean language scholars who treat the invention as a kind of committee project (Lee 1997: 13).

The co-operation hypothesis, on the other hand, can also be seen in the work of foreign scholars. In Japan, Kono Rokuro (1989: 105) has written:

The date and the creator of hang'ul are known quite clearly. These letters were personally devised by Sejong., the fourth king of the Yi dynasty. Nevertheless, although king Sejong, as the greatest monarch of the Yi dynasty, had many accomplishments and was a gifted man of ample education, it cannot be imagined that the king of a nation, busy with the affairs of the state, could have, from conceptualisation to concrete realisation, produced these new letters completely by himself. At king Sejong's disposal was the Chiphyonjon (Academy of

Worthies) where many young scholars had been gathered, among whom were prodigies such as Sin Sukchu, and so it is certain that there were those who helped the king and participated in the great projects concerning the creation of the alphabet.

The idea that it would have been difficult for the king to have invented the new letters by himself is upholding the cooperation hypothesis. The same kind of cooperation hypothesis can also be seen in American scholarly circles. Burling (1992: 404), among others, reports on the originality of the Korean alphabet, but implies the co-operation theory:

In the fifteenth century, King Sejong of Korea appointed a committee to assist him in designing a new script that would be well suited to the country's language, and usable by ordinary people. The committee did its work brilliantly, and produced the script that is known today as Hangeul. It is unique among the world's writing systems, in combining aspects of featural, phonemic and syllabic representation.

4.2. Personal creation theory

Despite the prevalent view supporting either command hypothesis or cooperation hypothesis, there are some important factors that make us believe that *Hunmin chŏngŭm* is the Sejong's own invention.

The texts from the year of the invention all speak of Sejong's personal invention. The earliest record of the Korean alphabet was the *Sejong sillok* (vol. 102) at the end of the twelfth month of the twenty-fifth year of Sejong's reign as mentioned in the beginning of this paper. It begins as follows:

This month, His Highness the king personally created the twenty-eight letters of the Vernacular Script (onmun).

This is the only instance in which the word *ch'inje* (the personal creation of the king) is employed in the *Sejong sillok* to describe the king's accomplishment. This fact stands on the contrary to the assumption that at the time all accomplishments were customarily ascribed to the King. Sejong himself makes us believe even more strongly that this was his creation. In his preface to the *Hunmin chŏngŭm* he says:

I have been distressed because of this and have newly designed twenty-eight letters

Had he not created the alphabet himself why would he have made such an explicit statement describing his own role? In addition, the following passage can be seen in *Chong Inji's* postface to the *Hunmin chŏngŭm* (1446):

In the winter of the year *kye-hae* (1443-1444), Our Monarch originated and designed the twenty-eight letters of the Correct Sounds, and he adduced in outline examples and appropriates by which to demonstrate them.

A similar passage can be found in the *Hunmin Chŏngŭm Haerye*, the section containing explanation of the designing of the letters, which ends praising the creativity of the king with the following words:

Oh! With the making of the Correct Sounds, the Pattern of the Myriad Things of Heaven and Earth is completely accounted for. The expansive spirit of it! But for heaven's opening the sagely mind, could we have given our hands to it?

What is more, in the anti-alphabet memorial of the movement led by *Ch'oe Malli* vice-director of the *Chiphyonjon* (the Academy of Worthies – a committee of scholars established by the king) the king's authorship of the alphabet was not challenged. The memorial, recorded in *Sejong sillok*, vol. 103 in the second month of the twenty-sixth year (*kyong-ja*) states:

We your lieges humbly observe that the creation of the Vernacular Script is most divinely marvelous and that as an example of bringing wisdom to bear on the creation of things, it stands out pre-eminently among the creations of a thousand elds.

It can be surmised by this statement that, however much *Ch'oe Malli* and his followers opposed the alphabet, they did not doubt the king's creation. Another interesting point arising from the memorial is that it attacks the secrecy surrounding the invention of the alphabet. It has been mentioned before that the alphabet was completely unknown until it was announced in 1443. This leads to the assumption that it took place in extreme seclusion. If *Sejong* had not done this work himself, it would have been impossible to keep it secret in this way.

If some of the scholar of *Chiphyonjon* had been involved in any capacity before 1443, that would have been made known within *Chiphyonjon* immediately and adverse voices would have been raised at an earlier stage.

Of course, it would have been difficult for Sejong to maintain complete secrecy. Although there is no record of how long the work on the invention of the alphabet took, it was certainly no mundane task. The implication that the crown prince could have become his confidant is hinted in his censure of *Ch'oe Malli*:

Further, I am old in years and the routine affairs of the nation are in the sole hands of the crown prince. It is certainly proper that he participate in the decision regarding even minor matters, so how much more the Vernacular Script.

Later in their prefaces to *Hongmu chong'un yokhun* (1455) and *Chikhae tongjasup*, Sin Sukchu and Song Sammun wrote about the crown prince (later king Munjong) as follows:

His Majesty King Munjong the Great, when he was the crown prince, assisted the Great Sage and participated in establishing the sounds and rimes.....

Our Sejong and Munjong were troubled by this and so had already made the Correct Sounds for the Instruction of the People. Thus, for the first time, all of the sounds under Heaven there were none that could not be written down.

These two passages although a little different in content, they both show that Munjong was involved and consulted in the invention of the alphabet and that he assisted in the phonology and riming of the dictionaries. These testimonies are particularly valid as they come from the two people who participated most in the projects that followed the invention of the alphabet.

Sejong's strong position in response to the criticisms of the anti-alphabet memorial of *Ch'oe Malli* also provides striking evidence that he created the alphabet himself and attached great importance to it. The following passage appears in Sejong's censure of the memorial:

Further what was the main intention in the Clerk Reading (*idu*) if not to ease things for the people? And if they eased things for the people, will not the present Vernacular Script also ease things for the people? How can you men consider Sol Ch'ong to have

been right, yet consider the doings of your own reigning king to be wrong?

The king's basic intent for the creation of the alphabet -- to "ease things" for the people -- is re-emphasised here standing in line with his preface to the *Hunmin chong'um* .

At one point of the debate with these officials, *Sejong* confronts them with their ignorance and shows his strong sense of mission:

Further, do you men know anything about rime books? How many initial consonants are there among the Four Tones and the Seven Sounds? If I do not correct these rime books who will correct them?

In addition to the evidence based on historical sources, the phonological theory that can be observed in the structure of the Korean alphabet has also been brought forward as evidence of the king's authorship of the *Hunmin chong'um*.

The Korean alphabet as a writing system was constructed based on a theory brought in from China, which was then developed independently in Korea. More specifically, the Chinese division of the syllable in two parts was changed into a division into three parts, resulting in what were called "medial sounds". The new writing system set up in connection with these medial sounds was the main characteristic of this new phonological theory. It is logically then reduced that the creative mind behind conceiving this theory was also the inventor of the Korean alphabet.

People of the time testify that from a young age, *Sejong* loved scholarship and took great interest in the study of classics and history. When the Song dynasty texts were brought to Korea it is reported that he not only read them but had parts of it published. *Sin Sukchu* directly speaks of the king's scholarly knowledge of phonology in the *Hongmu chong'un yokhun* as follows :

Our King *Sejong* the Great gave his mind over to phonological study and having studied it in depth, created a few letters called the Correct Sounds for the Instruction of the People

Also, in his censure of the memorial submitted by *Ch'oe Malli* and the others he shows his great confidence and strong mission when he scolds them of their lack of knowledge of phonology, and when he says:

If I don't correct these rime books, who will correct them?

If his own knowledge of phonology had not been great how could he have said that? These arguments are also employed to claim that Sejong was the scholar who developed this theory and consequently the inventor of the alphabet.

Perhaps the most direct evidence revealing Sejong's scholarship is provided in the "Explanation of the Terminal Consonants" section of *Hunmin chong'um haerye* where the following two contrasting orthographic rules are examined, and one was chosen. In one, sounds like $c(\text{ㅈ})$, $z(\Delta)$, and $ch(\text{ㅊ})$ are written as terminals. In the other, only $s(\text{ㅅ})$ is written.

Example (1) 빛 꽃 pʌys koc, 열의 갖 yəz ɿy kach
Example (2) 빛 꽃 pʌys kos, 열의 갖 yəs ɿy kas

Of these two types of examples given, the kind of orthography described in (2) is deliberately chosen and is consistent with the orthography given throughout the *Haerye*. In the section "Examples of the use of the letters" the only examples of terminal sounds given are the eight letters ㄱ, ㅇ, ㄷ, ㄴ, ㅂ, ㅁ, ㅅ, ㄹ (k, ng, t, n, p, m, s, r).

The question we can think of is as follows: Who advocated (1) and who advocated (2)? What was the theoretical basis of each of these two positions? However, no record of the debate has been preserved. We have impression that (1) was considered to be theoretical and (2) to be actual usage.

The orthography seen in the *Yongbi och'on ka* is that of the examples given in (1). In it, words are found in which terminal sounds are written with Δ [z], ㅈ [c], ㅊ [ch], and ㅍ [ph]:

깊- kiph – to be deep
꺾 kʌz – edge
쫓- coch – to follow

This unusual orthographic system seen in *Yongbi och'on ka* is also found in the *Worin ch'on'gang chi kok*. There, examples also exist of ㅊ [th] used as terminal, something not seen in *Yongbi och'on ka*.

ㄷ	kʌz – edge
낱	nath – piece
높-	noph – to be high
낯	nʌch – face

It is extremely interesting that these texts published subsequent to the *Haerye* during Sejong's reign did not follow the *Haerye's* orthographic rules. How could their authors have dared ignore the authority of *Haerye*? Here, the orthography of yet another text published during Sejong's reign, the *Sokpo sangjol* (1447), is worth noting. This book follows the orthographic rules of *Haerye* to the letter. It is widely known that Sejong composed the *Worin ch'on'gang chi kok* based on the *Sokpo sangjol*, which was composed by Prince *Suyang* (later King Sejo). In addition, the *Yongbi och'on ka* is a text that was completed at Sejong's command and was his special concern from the time preparations were started in 1442 until its publication in 1447. Considering these facts, it becomes clear that texts with which Sejong is thought to have been directly involved did not follow the *Haerye* orthographic rules.

From the discussion above, it can be noted that Sejong had a theory of orthography that at the time was very special and idiosyncratic, and that he applied this theory to the works with which he was directly involved, the *Yongbi och'on ka* and the *Worin ch'on'gang chi kok*. Sejong carried out in-depth research in phonology and reflected the results of this research in his construction of the letters and orthography. Therefore, Lee (1997) concludes that the scholar who had the ability to create the Korean alphabet could be no one but Sejong.

5. Other factors: accidental or intentional?

In addition to the arguments above drawn from historical documents and King Sejong's profound knowledge about phonology and linguistics, we can think of some other interesting factors that can be considered to support my hypothesis of King's own invention. These factors, however, can be regarded as accidental, and needed to be elaborated more in order to be convincing factors to support King's sole invention theory.

5.1. The number of syllables in preface

The numbers of syllables in Korean translation of the King's preface are 108. One hundred eight signifies the meaningful number in Buddhism. The fact that Buddhist symbolism was included in the preface implies that the inventors were not Confucian scholars but somebody who was sympathetic with Buddhism. It was King Sejong himself, who was interested in Buddhism, unlike Confucian scholars in Choson dynasty.

5.2. King's preface

We can see the following paragraph in the King's preface, explaining the sound value of each consonant:

- ㄱ is a molar sound, like the initial sound of the character 君 [君]
- ㄲ if ㄱ is written dually, like the initial sound of the character 𪛗 [蛙]
- ㅋ is a molar sound, like the initial sound of the character 快 [快]
- ㆁ is a molar sound. Like the initial sound of the character 業 [業]

군꺈꺈업 (君蛙快業) means 'The King and the prince happily completed the mission'. '꺈' means 'baby dragon' in Chinese, thus it implies a prince. (Kim 2007: 145-7). In Choi Malli's 상소문 also mentioned that the prince Munjong was involved in the creation of the new letters.

The invention of *Hunmin chŏngŭm* by King Sejong himself can be thought of as a miracle or being impossible by many scholars. Considering many alphabetic letters known in Korea at that time such as Sanskrit, Uigur, Tibetan, and Phags-pa scripts, etc, they may think that a similar system could be found suitable for writing Korean. The fact is that King Sejong did not select one of the above mentioned foreign writing systems to modify and adapt it to writing Korean. It is the most outstanding achievement of the King considering the fact that modifying an existing foreign script is the easiest way and a general tendency in the world's history of writing systems. A profound knowledge of phonology and linguistics made it possible for King Sejong to invent an independent writing system.

6. Conclusion

We have argued that the invention of Hangul was indeed that of the King himself. Firstly, attributing a work personally to the King was found to be inconsistent with Korean tradition. King Sejong had been involved in various other projects in which he had worked as part of a team, but only *Hangul* was referred to as his personal creation. Furthermore, documents defending the invention from its critics attest to Sejong's excellent linguistic knowledge and familiarity with the new script and also show his close personal attachment to the project. We also need to note on Sejong's success in keeping his work secret - on what was a project unprecedented in Korean history. Such secrecy would have been impossible at the time had the project been carried out by a large team. Above all, there is absolutely no evidence or record from the period that shows that anyone else helped Sejong or worked on his orders. No member of the *Chipyonjon* was involved before 1443, when they compiled "Explanations and Examples of the Correct Sounds for the Instruction of the People" on the back of the invention Sejong had already completed. The conclusion is that King Sejong invented *Hangul* himself in isolation, perhaps only consulting the crown prince and his other sons.

Many attempts have also been made to reduce the origin of the Korean alphabet to other systems of writing, such as Chinese seal characters, Sanskrit, Tibetan, Uighur-Mongol and Phags-pa. All these comparisons, however, are restricted to incidental resemblances of a few letters and are far from convincing. The mystery of the origin of the Korean alphabet was finally solved in July 1940, when the original text of the *Hunmin chŏngŭm* was found in Andong.

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<한글 초록>

이 논문에서 우리는 훈민정음의 '세종 친제설'을 다시 한번 주장한다. 세종이 집현전 학자들과 협력하거나 (협동 가설), 집현전 학자들에게 명령하여 (명령 가설) 훈민정음을 창제하였다는 가설을 반박하고, 훈민정음은 세종 단독의 작품이라는 것(친제가설)을 주장하는 것이다. 창제 과정에서 그 당시 세자의 협력이 있었을 가능성은 열어 두었다. 우리의 주장은 언어학 외적인 증거와 언어학 내적인 증거에 토대를 두고 있다. 언어학 외적인 증거는 다양한 역사적 문헌들에 근거를 두고 있다. 언어학 내적인 근거는 용비어천가와 월인천강지곡에 사용된 표기법이 세종의 독특한 음운학적 지식을 반영하고 있다는 데서 출발한다. 이 외에도 훈민정음 서문의 한글 번역문이 108개의 음절로 이루어져 있는 사실이나, 훈민정음의 첫 글자인 'ㄱ'의 발음을 설명하는 글자로서 하필이면 임금 군(君)자가 선택된 배경에는 뭔가 숨겨진 이유가 있다고 보았다. 또 훈민정음 문자들을 표시하는 한자들을 순서대로 열거하면 '군규궤업'이 되는데, 이것은 '임금과 왕자가 즐겁게 일(훈민정음 창제)을 이루었다'는 뜻이 된다.

이 논문에서는 또한 19세기부터 20세기 초까지 서양학자들이나 선교사들이 한글의 기원이나 훈민정음 창제 배경에 대해서 발표한 논문들도 살펴 보았다. 우리는 이러한 연구들의 문제점을 지적하였고, 한글 창제에 대한 여러 가지 가설들의 문제점은 1940년 <훈민정음> 원본이 발견되면서 한층 더 분명해진 것으로 보았다.