

The Creation of Idu

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The Creation of *Idu*

YOON Seon-tae

Abstract

This paper aims to examine how idu, a writing system that represented the ancient Korean language by borrowing Chinese characters, was created. Through analysis of existing epigraphs and newly found wooden tablets, this paper critically scrutinizes the hypothesis that idu originated in Goguryeo or Baekje and highlights Silla's role in the culmination of idu's evolution. Silla's written materials attest to the tireless efforts made from the mid-sixth century to use Chinese characters to transcribe Korean sounds. While primitive idu stagnated or declined in Goguryeo and Baekje from the late sixth century, Silla developed the idu system which achieved a transition to an agglutinative language through the use of their own punctuation, case marker, sentence-final endings, and prefinal endings. Presumably this formed the basis of both the hyangchal transcription principle in which the stem of a word is read with its meaning and its ending is read phonetically and the gugyeol principle in which morphological affixes are inserted in between Chinese sentences in the interpretation of classical Chinese texts.

Keywords: *idu*, punctuation, *hyangchal*, *gugyeol*, wooden tablets, interpretative reading of Chinese characters

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The Concept of *Idu*

Even before the creation of Hangeul (Korean alphabet), historical records confirm that Koreans tried to represent the sound of their language in script. Not having their own writing system, ancient Koreans adopted Chinese characters as a means to express themselves. In the beginning, they used the same grammatical order as the Chinese to convey the Korean language. However, as they grew familiar with Chinese characters and classical Chinese, they attempted to deconstruct elements of the Chinese writing system in a manner that could express native Korean sounds in a Korean way. *Idu*, a writing system that represented the ancient Korean language by borrowing Chinese characters, was created through this process. This paper aims to examine how *idu* was created.

Today, the term *idu* has a number of meanings within Korean academic circles. In a broader sense, it refers to all forms of transcriptions of ancient Korean vocabulary, phrases, and sentences that use Chinese characters: the transcription of “proper nouns” such as names of people and places; the *gugyeol* writing system created for interpretative reading of classical Chinese texts; and the *hyangchal* writing system used to transcribe whole sentences of vernacular poetry such as *hyangga*. According to this notion, *idu* encompasses all kinds of writing systems that ancient Koreans made “to represent their sounds using Chinese characters known as “Chinese-borrowing writing system” (*chaja pyogibeop*). In a more narrow sense of what *idu* means, some scholars distinguish it strictly from *hyangchal*, which refers to poetic and lyrical expression in verse, and limits its definition to prose of a practical nature in private and public domains, such as administrative documents, records of erecting structures, and religious dedications.¹

If we adopt the broader definition, it should be considered that *idu* writing system was already established with the transcription of

1. See Nam (2000) and Y. Lee (2008) for diverse scholarly views on the conceptual definition of *idu*.

proper nouns. In this case, explaining the creation of *idu* is simple. However, because ancient Koreans transcribed proper nouns through a partial application of the principles of “phonetic loan characters” (*gacha*)—a Chinese invention that transcribes the native vocabulary of neighboring peoples in Chinese characters—it is very difficult to make a clear distinction between Chinese-style and *idu*-style notation. Therefore, it is problematic to define *idu* as all forms of Chinese-borrowing writing system in ancient Korean.²

Originally, *idu* was a general term for *ido*, *iseo*, and *idu* which appear in old records. For instance, a reference in *Daemyeongnyul jikhae* (Literal Explanation of the Ming Code) (1395) states: “A vernacular script created by Seol Chong of Silla is called *ido*.” Other historical texts corroborate the origins: Yi Seung-hyu writes in *Jewang ungi* (Rhymed Record of Emperors and Kings) (1287) that “Seol Chong created *iseo*” and Jeong In-ji’s introduction to *Hunminjeongeum* (Proper Sounds for the Instruction of the People) (1446) also notes that “Seol Chong created *idu* for the first time.” According to these records, *idu* was a written script used from the Goryeo period (918-1382) by petty functionaries who were responsible for issuing administrative documents,³ and it was understood to be a “vernacular script” (characters created to represent a people’s native sounds) distinguished from classical Chinese.

Choe Haeng-gwi’s introduction to the classical Chinese translation of “Bohyeon sibwonga” (Chanting of Ten Vows of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva) cited in *Gyunyeojeon* (Tales of Gyunyeo) notes that because *hyangga* is “transcribed in *hyangchal* that is similar to the system for writing Buddhist scriptures, Chinese have difficulty understanding them,” and “it was created by Seol Chong by changing Chinese characters for the better.” Here, *hyangchal* indicates Chinese-borrowing writing system of ancient Korean, used from late Silla to

2. I think that if one wants to include the transcription of proper nouns under this definition, a more proper expression is “Chinese-borrowing writing system,” not *idu*.

3. From the Goryeo period, classical Chinese was established as the cultivated written script of high-ranking officials, while *idu* was the written script of low-level government officials. This milieu was reflected in the term “*idu*.”

early Goryeo before the term *idu* appeared. It seems that *hyangchal* was also regarded as a writing system created by Seol Chong and distinguished from “Tang writing” (Han writing), just like *idu*.

Based on the discussion so far, we should note two facts when defining *idu*. First, *idu* was a writing system for ancient Korean that was qualitatively distinguished from classical Chinese, and second, although *idu* outwardly resembled Chinese characters as it used them in transcribing the Korean language, it was in fact an entirely new writing system qualitatively distinct from the classical Chinese.

As such, it is meaningless to narrowly define *idu* as the transcription system used for prose and *hyangchal* as the transcription system used for verse. Whether used for verse or prose, they are all writing systems for the ancient Korean language, though there might be some differences in the usage of full lexical words in a given context. We do not need to differentiate them as far as writing system is concerned.

Prior to the Goryeo era, terms like *hyangchal*, vernacular script, and some others were used, and the term *idu* was in use from Goryeo to represent the transcription of ancient Korean that is distinct from classical Chinese. This gives the context that it is inappropriate to limit the scope of *idu* to document-style prose; instead, we should expand it to include such systems as *hyangchal*. This conception of *idu* has existed all along. Even when the term *hyangchal* is specifically used to refer to the transcription of *hyangga* and old poetry and songs, it is usually understood as a subcategory of *idu* (Nam 2000).

Even after defining *idu* as such, it is still not easy to pinpoint its origins. Scholars accept the *hyangchal* system, used for the notation of *hyangga*, as a type of *idu*. But when it comes to the transitional period from classical Chinese to *idu*, determining whether or not the primitive form of *idu* can properly be termed *idu* is a much more complex question. This is mainly because of the broad spectrum of the transformation process of classical Chinese.

Developed for an inflectional language, Chinese characters and classical Chinese were ill-suited for transcribing ancient Korean, an agglutinative language that possesses a complex syllabic structure

and variable endings. Consequently, ancient Koreans must have exerted significant efforts in the cumbersome process of shifting from Chinese characters to *idu*. The acceptance of *idu* most likely took a considerable amount of time through trials and confusions.

To explain the creation of *idu*, we need to review step by step how ancient Koreans developed the Chinese-borrowing writing system: first, the transcription of proper nouns (names of people, places, and official titles, for instance); second, the deconstruction of classical Chinese into the word order of ancient Korean; and finally, the appearance and development of morphological affixes (such as case markers, sentence-final endings, and prefinal endings), or so-called *hyangchal* stage.

Ancient East Asian societies adopted Chinese characters as a means of self-expression. This adoption provided the foundation for the formation of one cultural sphere that encompassed China, Korea, and Japan. The conventional view argues that, within this Chinese-character cultural sphere, Chinese characters and classical Chinese spread unidirectionally from China in the center to the periphery.

In reality, however, although the Chinese-character cultural sphere shared a common foundation in terms of the use of Chinese characters, there also existed heterogeneous cultural layers within the sphere. The paths that each peripheral society took in internalizing the transformations of Chinese culture were very dynamic and cannot be understood in a single dimension. The acceptance, digestion, and transformation of Chinese characters and classical Chinese varied distinctively between Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla. In fact, Goguryeo's adaptations of Chinese culture proved to be more valuable for latecomers Silla and ancient Japan in their efforts to catch up with the core culture.

This paper investigates the creation and evolution of *idu* by examining cultural differences in the writing systems of Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla in terms of the historical and structural context.⁴ In

4. Therefore, examining the creation of *idu* involves investigating cultural history: how the periphery internalized the foundation and knowledge for ancient state-

particular, this paper reexamines the assumption that “*idu* originated in Goguryeo” and the hypothesis that “*idu* originated in Baekje.”

As will be discussed later, it is clear that the basic principles of the *idu* writing system emerged while transcribing proper nouns and they were developed and systematized during the gradual evolution into *hyangchal*. Yet trying to explain the creation of *idu* from an evolutionary perspective hampers a clear distinction of *idu* from Chinese characters. Moreover, by doing so, the origin of *idu* is attributed inevitably to Goguryeo or Baekje, which were ahead of Silla in adopting Chinese characters and classical Chinese, and consequently, the latecomer Silla is depicted as inheriting and further developing the writing systems of the two kingdoms.

If *idu* is defined as a vernacular script in clear distinction from classical Chinese, the prevailing view since the Silla period, we need to identify more accurate indicators which can explain the qualitative shift from classical Chinese to *idu*. This will bring us closer to comprehending the real creation of *idu*.

Recently, large quantities of ancient wooden tablets have been uncovered that can help resolve this issue. These newly discovered materials, many of which present the records of everyday public and private life, are groundbreaking because they indicate the use of script in central and local societies.

Along with preexisting epigraphs, these wooden tablets provide great assistance in helping us reconstruct the writing culture of ancient Korea.⁵ Among them, wooden tablets from Baekje enable us to understand the adoption and alteration of Chinese characters and classical Chinese. Although few in number, they are crucial primary source materials from the Baekje period. Through comparison with similar materials from Goguryeo and Silla, these groundbreaking sources allow us to examine the status Baekje occupied in the adop-

building, which had been introduced from the core civilization, and how the three kingdoms on the Korean peninsula developed from that base to form an axis in ancient East Asia.

5. See Yoon (2007a) for the history of the excavation and research on ancient wooden tablets in Korea.

tion and transformation of Chinese characters in ancient Korea.

Through analysis of existing epigraphs and newly found wooden tablets, this paper critically scrutinizes the hypothesis that *idu* originated in Goguryeo or Baekje and highlights Silla's role in the culmination of *idu*'s evolution. An examination of the historical and structural context reveals that, despite the fact that Goguryeo and Baekje had adopted Chinese characters at least a century prior to Silla, the latecomer Silla created an entirely new writing system of *idu*, which neither of the two early adopters had attempted, and developed it further into *hyangchal*.

Chinese-Borrowing Writing System of Goguryeo

With the establishment of the four Han Chinese commanderies in 108 BC, ancient Korean societies came into early contact with written Chinese. Political entities on the Korean peninsula used Chinese characters for exchange and trade with the commanderies from around the first century BC. With a portion of its territory under the rule of the Xuantu (Hyeonto in Korean) Commandery from the beginning, Goguryeo was the first among the Three Kingdoms exposed to the Chinese writing system via household surveys and document administration in the Han Chinese commanderies and prefectures.

As Goguryeo overcame the Xuantu Commandery during the reign of King Taejo (r. 53-146), its use of Chinese characters was not limited to contacts with the Chinese administrative districts but was extended for the development of its domestic political system. As part of the effort to strengthen royal power, Goguryeo introduced in the second century an office named *jubu*, modeled on the Chinese system, which was responsible for issuing and managing administrative documents. In conflict with Lelang (Nangnang in Korean) and Daifang (Daebang in Korean) Commanderies at the time, Goguryeo tried to establish a state system on the Chinese model to counter strong Chinese forces (S. Lee 2003).

In 313, Goguryeo drove out the Lelang and Daifang Comman-

deries. By absorbing the intellectuals of the former commanderies and the advanced Chinese culture that had been thriving in this territory for 400 years, Goguryeo probably experienced a breakthrough in its writing culture.⁶ We can make this inference based on a series of subsequent measures—such as the official adoption of Buddhism (372), establishment of Taehak (National Confucian Academy) (372) and promulgation of a code of administrative law (373). Portrayals of document administration on ancient tomb murals provide concrete evidence that a document administration system had been introduced in the fourth century (Ko 2004).

The wide use of Chinese characters and classical Chinese in Goguryeo is proved by the discovery of various written materials dating from the fifth century. Regarding the concept that *idu* originated in Goguryeo, epigraph scriptures of Goguryeo have been studied heavily, including King Gwanggaeto's stele (414),⁷ the Goguryeo stele in Jungwon (mid- to late-fifth century), inscription engraved on a silver bowl found in Seobongchong tomb (fifth century), and inscriptions found in the Goguryeo's Pyeongyang fortress (mid- to late-sixth century).

The second line on Side 1 of King Gwanggaeto's stele reads: “我是皇天之子 母河伯女郎 鄒牟王” (“I am King Chumo, the son of the Celestial Emperor, and my mother is the daughter of the Earl of the River.”). This appears to be classical Chinese, but an argument has been raised that this text follows the order of the Goguryeo language and some addition of morphological affixes such as case markers or endings to the original text makes it read more like modern Korean. Particularly, “王於忽本東罷 黃龍負昇天” (third line on Side 1) may be interpreted as “The King was on the hill east of the fortress and the Yellow

6. In Goguryeo, a Buddhist exchanged letters with “Zhidun 支遁,” a learned monk of the Jin dynasty China for discourse on Buddhism in the mid-fourth century even before the official approval of Buddhism in the kingdom.

7. This is the only stele from Goguryeo located on the South Korea. It was confirmed to belong to Goguryeo in 1979. About 270 characters of the inscriptions of the stele have been deciphered until today and the exact date of its construction is still subject to controversy.

Dragon took him on its back and ascended to Heaven,” which some scholars see as evidence that the line was written in *idu*, not in classical Chinese (Hong 1957; and Y. W. Kim 2004).

Yet it is also possible to argue that the first quotation (second line) was written in classical Chinese, and in the second quotation (third line), deciphering the phrase “黃龍負昇天” is problematic. In recent years, the latter is generally deciphered “履龍負昇天” and so, it is more appropriate to interpret it as a complete sentence in classical Chinese that means: “The King stepped on the head of the Dragon on the hill east of Holbon and ascended to Heaven” (Yeo 2009). Although some argue that many sentences were rearranged to follow the order of the Goguryeo language, the stele’s inscription is generally believed to have been classical Chinese.

However, even if the inscription had been in classical Chinese, scholars have confirmed that the proper nouns found on it were recorded in the style of *seokdok* or “interpretative reading,” which served as the basis for *idu*. *Idu* utilized the phonetic sounds and interpretive meanings of Chinese characters to transcribe ancient Korean. First, the principle of “phonetic loan characters,” which was one of the six categories of Chinese characters, was adopted for the method of borrowing sounds. As an example, the Chinese character “古” was used to represent the sound of the syllable “고” without any reference to its original meaning “old.” This is called *eumdok* or “phonetic reading.”

Many non-Han Chinese people used this transcribing method to represent proper nouns of their own languages. Such phonetic transcriptions were not unique to Korea. Moreover, the Chinese method of transcribing Korean proper nouns, such as the names of places and offices during the rule of the Han commanderies, was transmitted to later Goguryeo and Baekje; through this adoption of Chinese characters, ancient Koreans learned the principle of phonetic loan characters.

In addition to phonetic reading, there is another method of “interpretative reading,” which discards the phonetic value of Chinese characters and saves only their semantic value by fixing the rep-

resented meanings with the letters of their native language. The use of interpretative meanings of characters is a unique feature of *idu*. Forming and fixing the meanings of Chinese characters would have taken a considerable amount of time, so it is surmised that the principle of interpretative reading arose after that of phonetic reading.

Notably, transcription by interpretative reading appears on King Gwanggaeto's stele. Although the king's posthumous name is a proper noun, different sources show different characters. On King Gwanggaeto's stele, for instance, he is called “國岡上廣開土境平安好太王.” In contrast, the inscription on a jar commemorating the achievements of King Gwanggaeto that was discovered in Houchong tomb reads: “國岡上廣開土地好太王.” Yet another inscription on the Moduru's tomb murals records: “國岡上大開土地好太聖王.” If these names were read phonetically in Chinese, different characters having the same meaning—such as “廣” (*gwang*) and “大” (*dae*) (both meaning “great, big”), or “境” (*gyeong*) and “地” (*ji*) (both meaning “land”)—could not have been used. This shows that these proper names were read in the Goguryeo language with their semantic and not their phonetic value in Chinese.

How were these transcription methods invented? If transcription of the Korean language could have been satisfactorily achieved with only phonetic sounds, use of interpretative meaning would have been unnecessary. Moreover, in Goguryeo, phonetic reading of Chinese characters did not properly convey meanings, so it had to be accompanied by the oral rendering of interpretative reading, that is, a text written in classical Chinese that was later interpreted into the Goguryeo language. Judging from the aforementioned three examples, it seems that interpretative reading of Chinese characters developed in the early period of Goguryeo and was used for transcription for the first time in Goguryeo (K. Lee 1998).

The emergence of interpretative reading implies that classical Chinese had been deconstructed and then rearranged in Korean word order. This can be inferred from the occasional insertions on King Gwanggaeto's stele of sentences that follow the order of the Goguryeo language or so-called “vernacular classical Chinese,” instead of standard classical Chinese. For instance, in the Goguryeo stele in Jung-

won, the character “之” (*ji*), a sentence-final ending used in Silla’s *idu*, was employed for final word to end each sentence and the character “中” (*jung*) (a locative case marker used in Silla’s *idu*) appears occasionally as well (Nam 2006). The use of “中” as a locative particle has also been confirmed in the inscription engraved on a silver bowl found in the Seobongchong tomb (H. Yi 1954; and K. Lee 1981).

However, as these writing systems do not completely depart from classical Chinese grammar, it is difficult to determine for sure whether they are written in *idu* or not. What can be said is that Goguryeo was already experimenting in the fifth century with elements of *idu*, including interpretative reading of Chinese characters, deconstruction of classical Chinese and then rearrangement in native word order, and the regular use of “之” as a sentence-final ending.

Chinese-Borrowing Writing System of Baekje

A section titled “King Geunchogo” in *Samguk sagi* (Historical Records of the Three Kingdoms) cites a well-known phrase from *Gogi* (Old Records) that reads: “since its foundation, Baekje had never recorded its affairs of state, but now, thanks to Confucian scholar Ko Heung, it came to have *seogi* “書記” for the first time.” Many people regard *seogi* as the title of a history book from Baekje, but from the context of the phrase it may also mean Baekje first came to have “written records” of affairs of state during the reign of King Geunchogo (r. 346-375). As this phrase refers to the historical time period during which official written records of state affairs had been codified, it is highly likely that Baekje adopted Chinese characters prior to the mid-fourth century.

In relation to this, it is notable that in *Sanguozhi* (Records of the Three Kingdoms) appears the name Baekjeguk, a phonetic loan character transcription used by the Chinese commanderies in the third century. The name was also used by Baekje to refer to itself. A diplomatic document, sent by King Gaero to the Northern Wei, records a

place name called Soseoksan in the western frontier of Baekje, whose transcription style displays commonalities to those of Soseoksakguk (Xiaoshuoguo in Chinese) and Daeseoksakguk (Dashisuoguo in Chinese), the two small states of Mahan recorded in *Sanguozhi*.⁸ These Chinese-borrowing writing systems for country and place names indicate that from 313, the writing culture of the Hanseong period (18 BC–AD 475) of Baekje was led by intellectuals absorbed from the Lelang and Daifang commanderies.⁹ In terms of the office title or a surname, the Confucian scholar Ko Heung cited in the *Gogi* seems to symbolically represent these intellectuals.

In addition, it is noteworthy that the practice of official written records first began with Ko Heung. This signifies that Baekje's official record system was established on the basis of contributions of intellectuals from the Lelang and Daifang Commanderies adept in the intricacies of the Chinese document administration system. For that reason, the administration system was probably quite developed.

Also of interest is that the eighth-century Japanese text *Nihon shoki* (Chronicles of Japan) records a household survey that was taken in 509 to locate and bring back people who had been displaced from Baekje and migrated into Imna (Mimana in Japanese). This implies that Baekje already had records of family registration in the late Hanseong period (Y. Kim 2005).¹⁰ Moreover, after migrating from Baekje to Japan in the early sixth century, Wang Jini and his family interpreted diplomatic documents and dealt skillfully with document

8. It was already mentioned in the section on Mahan in *Haedong yeoksa sok jiriji* (A History of Ancient Korea, Supplement of Korean Geography) by Han Jin-seo.

9. *Songshu* (Book of Song) records that Baekje requested to acquire *Yilin* (The Forest of Changes), a fortunetelling book, and tools for fortunetelling. Artifacts used for fortunetelling dating back to the era of the Lelang commandery, which were discovered in Seogam-ri Tomb No. 201 and No. 205 in Pyeongyang, show that cultural exchange with the Lelang and Daifang commanderies and intellectuals who migrated south to Baekje after the fall of the commanderies played a very significant role in Baekje's adoption of Chinese characters and classical Chinese in the fourth to fifth centuries.

10. *Nihon shoki* (Chronicles of Japan), chapter 17, February, 3rd year of Emperor Keitai's reign.

administration, such as numerical tallies, vessel accounts, and land register and received high praise for excellent performance in public administration, much superior to the native literati in Japan.¹¹

The *Nihon shoki* helps us understand that Baekje's document administration system reached an advanced level prior to the sixth century and was clearly differentiated from what was achieved by its neighbors (Yoon 2007b). This was possible because the official record system of the Hanseong period was established by directly importing the document administration system of from the Lelang and Daifang Commanderies and by relying on intellectuals absorbed from them.

This fact is well demonstrated in wooden tablets and other written materials. From the Ungjin period (475-538), there are many instances of sentence-final words with no actual meaning (e.g., “耳,” “也,” and “之”) used solely to mark the end of a sentence. Yet, a glance at the written materials of the Sabi period (538-660) unearthed so far shows that the use of Chinese characters and classical Chinese in a style very similar to Chinese-style expression was commonplace.¹² I examine several examples from Baekje *idu* during the Ungjin and the Sabi periods.

A queen's bracelet discovered in the mausoleum of King Muryeong reads: “庚子年二月多利作大夫人分二百卅主耳.” Some interpret the front part as meaning “made (作) by Dari (多利) in the second month (二月) of the year of Gyeongja (庚子年) (AD 520),” following the word order of the Korean language (Nam 2000; J. Chung 2003). However, this is insufficient evidence that the bracelet is inscribed in *idu*, as artifacts from the Lelang and Daifang Commanderies as well as main-

11. *Nihon shoki*, chapter 19, July, 14th year of Emperor Kinmei's reign and April, 30th year of Emperor Kinmei's reign; chapter 20, 1st year and October, 3rd year of Emperor Bidatsu's reign.

12. Some scholars believe that stone epitaphs found in the mausoleum of King Muryeong and scripts on wooden tablets discovered in Neungsan-ri, also known as Baekje poetry, are in *idu* (Y. W. Kim 2003), but they do not give clear reasons why they are not classical Chinese.

land China exhibit inscriptions with similar writing systems.¹³

Meanwhile, wooden tablets unearthed at a temple site in Neungsan-ri near Buyeo provide useful information for understanding the writing culture of Baekje during the mid- to late-sixth century after the transfer of its capital to Sabi in 538 (B. H. Lee 2008). The personal name “Jeoi 猪耳,” which appears on a four-sided wooden polygonal tablet, has been deciphered by Korean linguists to be a transcription of interpretative reading with an added ending sound marker (Y. W. Kim 2007). However, whether it is really an added ending sound marker remains controversial within linguistic circles.¹⁴ Final judgment should be postponed until the ending sound marker can be proven with the help of other cases.

Written on the third side of the aforementioned wooden polygonal tablet, characters such as “者” (*ja*) and “也” (*ya*) in “其身者如黑也” (meang “the body looks black”) as well as the blank space that follows this sentence seem to be related to Silla’s *idu*. The ways that “者” was inserted to designate the subject of the sentence, “也” was added at the end of the sentence and a blank space was deliberately inserted to end the sentence in a way that looks very similar to the *idu* writing system that appears in other written materials of sixth- and seventh-century Silla, which will be discussed later. But as “其身者如黑也” could also be understood as classical Chinese, we cannot yet definitely conclude that this sentence on the tablet is composed in

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13. If “耳” (*i*) at the end of the inscription had been a sentence-final ending, it could be regarded as a clue to a primitive style of *idu*. However, there are cases where measurement units (e.g., “形” [*hyeong*] for a unit of area) were employed for transcribing proper nouns in Baekje, so it is possible that “主耳” (*ju*) was a representation of a unit.
14. Prof. Kim Young Wook’s paper cited here is based on an earlier one he presented at the first international conference (January 11, 2007) organized by the Korean Society for the Studies of Wooden Tablets. At the conference, two discussants of the paper, Prof. Kwon In-han (Sungkyunkwan University) and Prof. Chung Jaeyoung (Korea University of Technology and Education) had difficulty agreeing with the presenter on this point, as there is no report of *dochi* (도치) being a dialectic form of *doeji* (pig) and also, the phonetic value of “耳” at the time remains unclear.

idu. Nonetheless, it seems evident that in accordance with the conventional usage of “者” and “也” written in classical Chinese, “者” was inserted to signify the subject and a sentence-final word was added at the end of the sentence along with a deliberate blank space to end the sentence.

If we accept this view, it seems that the use of “者,” which denotes the subjective case marker, and those of “耳,” “也,” and “之,” which mark the end of a sentence, are not only Silla inventions. Judging from the example of the Side 3 of the four-sided wooden polygonal tablet found in Neungsan-ri, Baekje intellectuals seem to have borrowed from classical Chinese the usages of “者” (a word for the subjective case) and “也” (a sentence-final word with no meaning) to represent their native language in classical Chinese.

They also wrestled with how to effectively convey meaning by representing intentional punctuation, such as attaching sentence-final words to classical Chinese and inserting a deliberate blank space to end the sentence. This can also be observed in written materials of Goguryeo, as mentioned above, so the transcription systems of both Baekje and Goguryeo must have influenced Silla. Surprisingly, however, Baekje made no further development in Chinese-borrowing writing system until the seventh century.

Additional Baekje source material has been recently discovered in Bogam-ri, Naju. The wooden tablets are believed to date from the early seventh century, judging from other relics excavated with them, such as large jars, earthen utensils, and roof tiles, among others.¹⁵ Below is a sample of the local administrative writing culture of the late Baekje period as found on the Wooden Tablet No. 4 of the Bogam-ri.

15. In the paper, this part relies heavily on the description and interpretation of the scripts in ink made available in the press release of “Wooden Tablets Excavated from Bogam-ri, Naju” (2009) by the Naju National Research Institute of Cultural Heritage. The photo files of the ink scripts presented at the press release do not allow a clear interpretation, so I just introduce the interpretations made by the excavating authorities here. I will revise this part later upon a clear decipherment of the texts concerned.

(front) 郡仿(?) …(illegible)… 文

(back) 受米之及八月八日□嵯支□記□遣之好二□□□又□告日□□

貢之□□

□□□ □八月六日□□

The writing seems to move from the front to the back and clearly confirms that the sentence-final word “之” (*ji*) was intentionally added to end the sentence without any other substantive meaning, as in “. . . 受米之. 及八月八日 . . .” (. . . received rice. On the eight day of the eighth month . . .). However, as shown in “受米之” and “及八月八日,” the order of the words in the sentences follow that of classical Chinese,¹⁶ so it is questionable whether we should regard “之” as a sentence-final ending of *idu*. An identical usage appears in Wooden Tablet No. 301 of the Neungsan-ri relics from the mid- to late-sixth century.

· × 書亦從此法爲之 凡六ア五方 ×

· × □行色也 凡作形□中□具 ×

Based on the wooden tablets of Baekje examined in this paper, I conclude that both Baekje’s central and local societies generally used a writing system quite similar to classical Chinese, despite the use of borrowed character transcription for proper nouns including the names of people and places. After the Ungjin period, Chinese characters like “耳,” “之,” and “也” were added to indicate the end of a sentence without adding any actual meaning. There is insufficient evidence as of yet to conclude that this addition is an *idu* transcription for a sentence-final ending. This indicates that the word order of classical Chinese had been kept almost intact till the seventh century. A definitive conclusion must wait until further relevant materials from Baekje are excavated, but sources available to date display clear differences from *idu* transcriptions of Silla.

16. The Wooden Tablet No. 5 of the Bogam-ri, Naju also shows the Chinese word order of the predicate, “verb + object.”

Qualitative Transformation in the Chinese-Borrowing Writing System

In Goguryeo, “之” was deliberately inserted at the end of a sentence from the early fifth century as punctuation and played an important role in the development of Silla *idu*. Nonetheless, despite a span of over 100 years between the Goguryeo Stele in Jungwon (fifth century) and the stone inscriptions on the walls of the Jangan Fort in Goguryeo Janganseong (mid-sixth century), no real progress can be observed in the borrowed character transcriptions between the two writings.¹⁷

Of course, little can be known definitively, as very few written materials from sixth- to seventh-century Goguryeo remain today and extant materials are mostly Buddhist relics. But as displayed in the stone inscriptions on the mountain fortress walls in Nongo-ri, Taechon, transcriptions of Chinese characters followed the style of classical Chinese even in local societies. In my view, this is strong evidence that contradicts the widely-held viewpoint that the primitive form of *idu* from the fifth century had blossomed and further developed. In stark contrast to the Goguryeo materials, mid-sixth century Silla documents exhibit the addition of listing case markers¹⁸ or sentence prefinal endings, such as “耶” (*ya*) in “大人耶小人耶” (Whether one is adult or child) found on the Jeokseong monument in Danyang (dated before 550) and “在” (*jae*; 在) in “此成在□人” (meaning “□ who made this”) on the Inscription on the Monument for Dammed Pool

17. Several events that occurred in the late Goguryeo period—such as the transition in the motifs of tomb murals from folk life to the four deities of the four directions, the widespread diffusion of Daoism in society and the rearrangement of one hundred-volume *Yugi* (Extant Records) into five-volume *Sinjip* (New Compilation) by Yi Mun-jin, a scholar of the Taehak (National Confucian Academy) during the reign of King Yeongyang—seem to symbolize the advent of a change in the cultural trend of writing that the early writing system of classical Chinese, which was sprinkled with some borrowed character transcriptions, had lost favor and was being replaced by exclusive Chinese writing of elaborate refinement, just as in China.

18. The same usage of “耶” (*ya*) is found in “. . . 生耶死耶” (meaning “life or death”) in Wooden Tablet No. 3 of the Wolseong moat relics, supporting that it is an *idu* writing.

Construction in the Year of Musul, erected in 578 in commemoration of the completion of the embankment.

Silla's written materials attest to the tireless efforts made from the mid-sixth century to use Chinese characters to transcribe Korean sounds. While primitive *idu* stagnated or declined in Goguryeo and Baekje from the late sixth century, it developed in Silla from the late sixth century to the early seventh century. One important evidence of Silla advances in *idu* is Wooden Tablet No. 149 discovered among the Wolseong moat relics.

This four-sided wooden polygonal tablet with long rectangular sides is estimated to date from the second half of the seventh century, judging from the reclamation period of the Wolseong moat and its transcription system. According to a very recent interpretation of this piece, the final character on Side 1 “|” corresponds to the sentence-final ending “-,” and “者” on Side 3 functions as the marker of “-는 (은)” which represents the subject (J. Chung 2008).

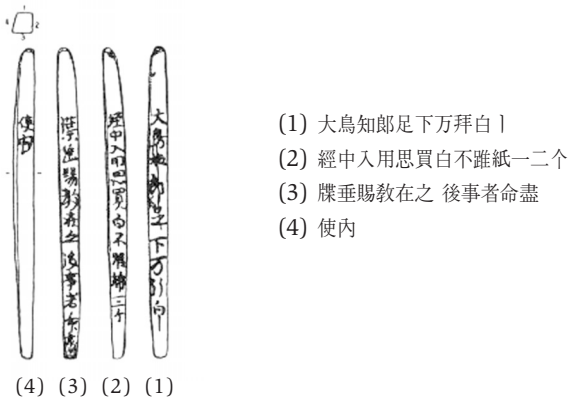


Figure 1. Wooden Tablet No. 149 of the Wolseong Moat Relics

As shown in figure 1, unlike on the other sides, the characters on Side 3 was written in a single long line until the end of the tablet. The fact that the transcriber wrote in this fashion, disregarding the sufficient writing space on Side 4, implies that the sentence ends with “命盡.” Thus on Side 4, “使內” with the meaning of “Executed as

ordered” (Y. W. Kim 2007) is a phrase entire in itself to be separated from the prior sentence. “內” (*nae*) in “使內” (*sanae*) is a borrowed character transcription of a sentence-final ending (Park 2007). Based on this, the text may be interpreted as follows:

- (1) Honorable Daejojirang, I make a bow to you and report.
- (2) The production of the scripture requires the purchase of twelve rolls of *baekburyuji* paper.¹⁹
- (3) There was an order issued to do that. All matters have been handled upon the order.
- (4) Executed as ordered.

If we accept the above interpretation, we can confirm that “賜” (*sa*; ㄱ), an honorific prefinal ending was transcribed by this time and that a mature form of *idu*, which could stand comparison with *hyangchal*, had emerged by the mid- to late-seventh century. This tablet vividly shows that *idu* was not invented by the scholar Seol Chong, but rather finally systematized by him after a process of continuous development of the transcription system through the sixth and seventh century.

Of particular note in this artifact is the deliberate insertion of a blank space following the character “之” on Side 3. Due to linguistic differences between the Korean and Chinese languages, ancient Koreans invented their own punctuation method for reading classical Chinese, in which a meaningful sequence of words was read as a discrete set, and also deconstructed the grammar so each Chinese character was rearranged in a manner of that could express native Korean sounds. This process of adaptation occurred simultaneously with the adoption of Chinese characters. Early attempts include Goguryeo’s

19. I used to translate “一二个” into “one or two rolls.” However, taking into consideration the fact that this wooden tablet is an administrative document, I now think that it is highly likely that the order was issued on the precise amount of paper to be purchased. So I rectify my previous translation and translate it as “twelve rolls” in this paper, with reference to the discussion by Kim Young Wook (2007) and Chung Jaeyoung (2008).

use of sentence-final words such as “之,” characters with no meaning value, indicating the end of a sentence (e.g., King Gwanggaeto’s stele and the Goguryeo stele in Jungwon) and the aforementioned sentence-final words that appear in the sixth- or seventh-century Baekje artifact.

On the other hand, the blank space that appears after the final ending *ji*, as in Side 3 of Wooden Tablet No. 149, should not be regarded solely as punctuation and instead must be understood in relation to the evolution of *idu*. A punctuation space is not simply a blank area. A deliberately inserted space is a clever device employed by ancient Koreans to overcome their linguistic barrier with classical Chinese. Intellectuals in Silla thought up “empty spaces” between densely compacted Chinese sentences and developed the *idu* system, which achieved a transition to an agglutinative language through the use of their own punctuation, case markers and endings. Presumably this formed the basis of both the *hyangchal* transcription principle in which the stem of a word is read with its meaning and its ending is read phonetically and the *gugyeol* principle in which morphological affixes are inserted in between Chinese sentences in the interpretation of classical Chinese texts.

In adopting the forms of Chinese legal documents, Silla transformed them into their own by adding *idu* transcriptions. Beginning in the eighth century, unlike Tang dynasty China and ancient Japan, Silla stopped using the Chinese titles for official laws, such as “移” (*i*) or “解” (*hae*), and used *idu* for public documents: “白之” (*baekji*) (사뢰다; meaning “report”).²⁰ This was inherited from the pattern of China’s Northern and Southern Dynasties that used “某足下(前)白,” which had been introduced to Silla. Sometime before late seventh century and the creation of Wooden Tablet No. 149 of the Wolseong moat relics, the pattern was changed into Silla-style “某足下(前)白之” with the addition of

20. Due to the influence of Silla document procedures, documents of public administration were written solely in *idu* in the Goryeo and Joseon periods, although the bureaucrats were very advanced in their comprehension of classical Chinese. The prototype of the formalities of administrative documents can be found in Silla.

a sentence-final ending in the Chinese-borrowing writing system.

In particular, the fact that “丨” in Wooden Tablet No. 149 was a straight vertical downstroke without the slight curve typical in the cursive style of the character “之” and the omission of the last stroke of “白” enables us to infer that the convention of adding “白之” at the end of a document heading had been widely adopted. This indicates that, by the end of the seventh century, Silla intellectuals were widely using a modified *idu* document format and had reached the point of abridging and codifying the headings.

Then, why did the qualitative transformation of *idu* transcription occur in the latecomer Silla and not in Goguryeo or Baekje, kingdoms that had embraced Chinese characters and classical Chinese a century earlier? Some scholars argue that Silla was forced to develop native writing systems due to its relative backwardness with regards to comprehension of classical Chinese (K. Chung 2003). But I think that we need to examine the historical and structural context of the differing patterns of writing culture among the Three Kingdoms in order to understand this development.

As discussed earlier, an extended period of competition with the Chinese commanderies had led Goguryeo and Baekje to establish state structures modeled upon the more advanced Chinese culture, wholeheartedly embracing the Chinese system in efforts to repel Chinese power. After the demise of the Lelang and Daifang Commanderies, both kingdoms absorbed the thriving culture based on the culture of Chinese characters and classical Chinese. As a result, the state systems of fourth-century Goguryeo and Baekje possessed a governance structure grounded in writing and document administration, just as in China.

It was completely different in Silla. Starting with “*nama*” (11th of the 17 official ranks) and up, the names of government offices were transcribed by borrowing Chinese characters for corresponding native sounds. After King Beopheung’s promulgation of laws (520), the remaining offices were renamed in the Chinese style with the addition of a senior or junior identifier to the office title. This suggests that Silla’s power structure was gradually augmented and rearranged

following the promulgation of laws (Ju 2009). At the same time, it also indicates that offices from *nama* rank and higher had already become established within the original power structure even before their titles were transcribed in Chinese characters. In short, Silla had a certain command system prior to its adoption of Chinese characters and classical Chinese. In the absence of a written language, this was inevitably an “oral system.”

On the other hand, as displayed in the stele of Naengsu-ri, Yeongil (503), Silla possessed a rudimentary document administration system of conveying and keeping records of orders and subsequent legal measures before the introduction of Chinese document administration system in the early sixth century (S. Lee 2003). In this case, how could such a system function, given that bureaucrats had low-level comprehension of classical Chinese until the mid-seventh century?²¹

Let us recall the description of Silla in the Chinese chronicle *Liangshu* (Book of Liang) that reads: “無文字 刻木爲信” (“In the absence of a writing system, signs are engraved on wood as verification”). While this could be viewed as a general statement about a pre-literate society or a disparaging comment made by a Baekje envoy about Silla to the Liang court, the description could also reflect the fact that even until the late fifth century, Silla used a system of oral directives complemented by wooden symbols, in clear contrast to Baekje’s system of document administration.

Early Silla writings found on the stele of Naengsu-ri, Yeongil and the wooden tablets of the Wolseong moat include subjects and vocabulary—such as “教” (meaning “orders”), “白·口” (meaning “reports and executions”), and “善” (meaning “formal objections”)—that depict the everyday functioning of the oral command system in great detail. This is demonstrated by the phrase “爲聞教令” inscribed

21. When a diplomatic document arrived from the Tang dynasty in the early period after King Muyeol (r. 654-661) ascended to the throne, Gangsu was the only one who could interpret it (*Samguk sagi*, vol. 46, Chapter on Gangsu). This shows that only a very few could interpret classical Chinese in Silla until the mid-seventh century.

on the stele found at Sinseong fortress in Mt. Namsan, Gyeongju (591). The phrase suggests that the characters for “an official order of state” (教令) could have originated from an earlier term which denoted an orally transmitted order that “reached people by ear” (爲聞).

These materials enable us to infer that, even before the inception of the classical Chinese-based system of document administration, Silla benefited from a stabilized power structure that operated via oral commands. This served as an important factor in the rapid acceptance of the document administration system, as indicated in the stele of Naengsu-ri, Yeongil.

Eventually, unlike in Baekje, Silla’s pre-existing oral command system provided a structural context for determining the content even after the adoption of Chinese-character-based document administration. As such, Silla officials exhibited a propensity for reproducing oral directives, or spoken language, in word choice and document content. Perhaps this legacy of an oral system led to the effort to express the agglutinative Silla language in written documents and, ultimately, to the creation of *idu*.

As previously discussed, Silla did not use Tang-style official document titles such as “解” (*hae*) and instead used the *idu* system as can be seen in the expression of “白之” (*baekji*; meaning “to report”). These procedures for public documents persisted through the Goryeo and Joseon dynasties, despite their advanced understanding of Chinese characters. In this regard, Silla’s accomplishments should not be devalued by arguments that Silla had lacked deeper comprehension of the Chinese characters and classical Chinese or that it was at an early stage of adopting Chinese culture. In fact, the *idu* system was used for the sake of clear, effective communication of royal intentions to the officials as well as between officials through precise representation of the Silla language, thus serving as the very core of document administration.

The intellectuals of Silla attained an advanced level of oral communication and strove to achieve the same level of communication in written documents, which, I believe, operated as a unique social condition in Silla’s development of *idu*. As a result, Silla’s document

administration was aimed at clear communication among intellectuals, helping Silla *idu* achieve a concrete representation of the Silla spoken language. Historical assertions that Seol Chong created *idu* in the second half of the seventh century symbolize the final stage when Silla literati shared the use of *idu* among themselves. Later, Silla would deconstruct classical Chinese using the Silla language and then reappropriate Chinese characters as Silla letters.

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GLOSSARY

Bohyeon sibwonga	普賢十願歌	<i>iseo</i>	吏書
<i>chaja pyogibeop</i>	借字表記法	<i>Jewang ungi</i>	帝王韻紀
Daebang ▶	Daifang (Ch.)	<i>jubu</i>	注簿
Daemyeongnyul	大明律	Lelang (Ch.)	樂浪
jikhae	直解	<i>Liangshu</i> (Ch.)	梁書
Daeseoksaekguk	大石索國	Mimana (J.) ▶	Imna
Daifang (Ch.)	帶方	Naju	羅州
<i>eumdok</i>	音讀	<i>nama</i>	奈麻
<i>gacha</i>	假借	Nangnang ▶	Lelang (Ch.)
<i>Gogi</i>	古記	<i>Nihon shoki</i> (J.)	日本書紀
<i>gugyeol</i>	口訣	<i>Samguk sagi</i>	三國史記
<i>Gyunyeojeon</i>	均如傳	<i>Sanguozhi</i> (Ch.)	三國志
Hangeul	한글	<i>seogi</i>	書記
Hunminjeongeum	訓民正音	<i>seokdok</i>	釋讀
<i>hyangchal</i>	鄉札	Soseoksaekguk	小石索國
<i>hyangga</i>	鄉歌	Soseoksan	小石山
Hyeonto ▶	Xuantu (Ch.)	<i>Songshu</i> (Ch.)	宋書
<i>ido</i>	吏道	Taehak	太學
<i>idu</i>	吏讀	Xuantu (Ch.)	玄菟
Imna	任那		

(Ch.: Chinese; J.: Japanese)