

**EXCERPTS FROM THE INDEPENDENT (TONGNIP SINMUN):  
EDITORIAL ON “NATION AND CIVILIZATION”:  
A PERIODICAL FOR THE KOREAN PEOPLE**

**Introduction**

In 1875, a Japanese naval expedition to Korean shores set into motion a series of events that resulted in the “opening” of Chosŏn to increased exchange and interaction with foreign nations. After 1876, Chosŏn signed a series of treaties first with Japan and then with the major Western and regional powers (the United States, Russia, England, France, etc.). Formally, these treaties established Chosŏn/Korea as a “nation” like any other (rather than a state with a special tributary relationship with China), but in substance they accorded foreign nations new privileges within the peninsula and set the stage for a struggle among imperial and would-be imperial powers for control or influence over Korean affairs. Chosŏn’s king and other Korean leaders were often left to try to play foreign states off against one another.

Korean intellectuals took a variety of positions with respect to these developments, from rejection of foreign intercourse to enthusiasm for alliance with and emulation of outside forces, embrace of a pan-Asian alliance to counter Western imperialism, or a nationalist emphasis on Korean identity and unity. One important group, led by Sŏ Chaep’il (1866-1951; who had studied medicine in the United States under the name Philip Jaisohn), Yun Ch’iho (1865-1945), and others, launched an important bilingual (Korean/English) newspaper in 1896, *The Independent* (*Tongnip sinmun*), that provided patriotic editorial commentary on Korean affairs while emphasizing the nation and the development of Korea along a (new) civilizational scale.

**Document Excerpts with Questions** (Longer selection follows this section)  
From *The Independent* (*Tongnip sinmun*), 7 April 1896 and 30 April 1896.

***Excerpts from The Independent (Tongnip sinmun):*  
Editorial on “Nation and Civilization”: A Periodical for the Korean People**

The time seems to have come for the publication of a periodical in the interests of the Korean people. By the Korean people we do not mean merely the residents in Seoul and vicinity nor do we mean the more favored classes alone, but we include the whole people of every class and grade. ...

To meet the first of these requirements it has been put in the native character [written script] called the *ŏm-mun*, for the time is shortly coming, if it is not already here, when Koreans will cease to be ashamed of their native character, which for simplicity of construction and phonetic power compares favorably with the best alphabets in the world.

**Questions:**

1. The Korean edition of *The Independent* was published using Koreans’ “native characters” — that is, the alphabet invented by King Sejong and his advisors in the fifteenth century — rather than Chinese characters. What significance did this shift have?
2. How might it compare with turns to vernacular language in other historical contexts?

**Longer Selection with Questions**

From *The Independent (Tongnip sinmun)*, 7 April 1896 and 30 April 1896.

***Excerpts from The Independent (Tongnip sinmun):  
Editorial on “Nation and Civilization”: A Periodical for the Korean People***

The time seems to have come for the publication of a periodical in the interests of the Korean people. By the Korean people we do not mean merely the residents in Seoul and vicinity nor do we mean the more favored classes alone, but we include the whole people of every class and grade. To this end three things are necessary: first, that it shall be written in a character intelligible to the largest possible number; second, that it shall be put on the market at such a price that it shall be within the reach of the largest possible number; third, that it shall contain such matter as shall be for the best interests of the largest possible number.

To meet the first of these requirements it has been put in the native character called the *öm-mun*, for the time is shortly coming, if it is not already here, when Koreans will cease to be ashamed of their native character, which for simplicity of construction and phonetic power compares favorably with the best alphabets in the world. Difficulty is experienced by those not thoroughly acquainted with the *öm-mun* from the fact that ordinarily there are no spaces between words. We therefore adopt the novel plan of introducing spaces, thus doing away with the main objection to its use. We make it bi-literal because this will act as an incentive to English-speaking Koreans to push their knowledge of English for its own sake. An English page may also command the paper in the patronage of those who have no other means of gaining accurate information in regard to the events which are transpiring in Korea. It hardly needs to be said that we have access to the best sources of information in the capital and will be in constant communication with the provinces.

To meet the second requirement we have so arranged the size of the sheet as to be able to put it on the market at a price which will make it unnecessary for anyone to forego its advantages because of inability to buy.

To meet the third requirement is a more difficult matter. What Korea needs is a unifying influence. Now that the old order of things is passing away, society is in a state which might be

described as intermediate between two forms of crystallization. The old combinations of forces have been broken up or are rapidly breaking up and they are seeking new affinities. The near future will probably decide the mode of rearrangement of the social forces.

It is at this moment when Korean society is in a plastic state that we deem it opportune to put out this sheet as an expression at least of our desire to do what can be done in a journalistic way to give Koreans a reliable account of the events that are transpiring, to give reasons for things that often seem to them unreasonable, to bring the capital and the provinces into greater harmony through a mutual understanding of each other's needs, especially the need that each has of the other.

Our platform is — Korea for the Koreans, clean politics, the cementing of foreign friendships, the gradual though steady development of Korea, resources with Korean capital, as far as possible, under expert foreign tutelage, the speedy translation of foreign text-books into Korean that the youth may have access to the great things of history, science, art, and religion without having to acquire a foreign tongue, and long life to HIS MAJESTY, THE KING.

**Questions:**

1. The Korean edition of *The Independent* was published using Koreans' "native characters" — that is, the alphabet invented by King Sejong and his advisors in the fifteenth century — rather than Chinese characters. What significance did this shift have?
2. How might it compare with turns to vernacular language in other historical contexts?
3. What did *The Independent* stand for?
4. What was the significance in the emphasis on the interests of Koreans "of every class and grade"?
5. How was this different from the emphasis of politics earlier in the Chosŏn dynasty?
6. What were the alternatives to "Korea for the Koreans"?