

**EXCERPTS FROM THE SEJONG SILLOK: CH'OE MALLI'S OPPOSITION TO
THE KOREAN ALPHABET**

Introduction

When, in 1443, King Sejong introduced the twenty-eight symbol alphabet for writing Korean, not all scholars or court officials agreed that the new alphabet was advantageous. This passage from court annals records the 1444 dissent of Ch'oe Malli (fl. 1419-1444). His sort of attitude remained important for the rest of the Chosŏn dynasty. Indeed, though the new alphabet found some uses, Chinese remained the preferred medium of most writing by educated elites until the beginning of the twentieth century.

Select Document Excerpt with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)

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Excerpts from the Sejong sillok:
Ch'oe Malli's Opposition to the Korean Alphabet

2. Although winds and soils vary from region to region, there has been no separate writing system for local dialects. Only such peoples as the Mongolians, Tanguts, Jürchens, Japanese, and Tibetans have their own writings. But this is a matter that involves the barbarians and is unworthy of our concern. ... Now, however, our country is devising a Korean script separately in order to discard the Chinese, and thus we are willingly being reduced to the status of barbarians.

[Translated by Yŏngho Ch'oe]

Question:

1. Why did Ch'oe reject the new alphabet?

Longer Selection

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Excerpts from the Sejong sillok:
Ch'oe Malli's Opposition to the Korean Alphabet

Twentieth day of the second month of the year [1444]. Ch'oe Malli, first counselor in the Hall of Worthies, and his associates offered the following memorial: We humbly believe that the invention of the Korean script is a work of divine creation unparalleled in history. There are, however, some questionable issues we wish to raise for Your Majesty's consideration.

1. Ever since the founding of the dynasty, our court has pursued the policy of respecting the senior state with utmost sincerity and has consistently tried to follow the Chinese system of government. As we share with China at present the same writing and the same institutions, we are startled to learn of the invention of the Korean script. Some claim that the Korean script is based on old writings and is not a new alphabet at all. Although the letter shapes are similar to the old seal letters, the use of letters for phonetic value violates ancient practice and has no valid ground. If this becomes known to China and anyone argues against it, it would disgrace our policy of respecting China.

2. Although winds and soils vary from region to region, there has been no separate writing system for local dialects. Only such peoples as the Mongolians, Tanguts, Jürchens, Japanese, and Tibetans have their own writings. But this is a matter that involves the barbarians and is unworthy of our concern. It has been said that the barbarians are transformed only by means of adopting Chinese ways; we have never heard of Chinese ways being transformed by the barbarians. Historically, China has always regarded our country as the state that has maintained the virtuous customs bequeathed by the sage-king Kija and has viewed our literature, rituals, and music as similar to its own. Now, however, our country is devising a Korean script separately in order to discard the Chinese, and thus we are willingly being reduced to the status of barbarians. This is like abandoning the fragrance of storax in favor of the obnoxious odor of mantis. Is this not a great embarrassment to the enlightened civilization?

3. Although the *idu* writing devised by Söl Ch'ong of Silla is vulgar and rustic, it uses the graphs widely used in China as auxiliaries to our tongue, and hence the graphs are not different from the Chinese. Therefore, even the clerks and the servants sincerely want to study the Chinese graphs. At first they read several books to acquire a rough understanding of the Chinese graphs; only then are they able to use the *idu*. Those who use the *idu* must depend upon the Chinese graphs to communicate their ideas, and a number of people become literate through the use of the *idu* writing. Therefore, the *idu* is a useful aid in stimulating learning. ... If the Korean script is widely used, the cleric officials will study it exclusively and neglect scholarly literature. ... If they discover that knowledge of the twenty-[eight] letter Korean script is sufficient for them to advance in their official careers, why would they go through agony and pain to study the principles of Neo-Confucianism? If such a situation lasts several decades, then

surely the people who understand the Chinese graphs would be reduced to a very small number. Perhaps they could manage their clerical affairs using the Korean script, but if they do not know the writings of the sages, they will become ignorant and unable to distinguish right from wrong. ... This Korean script is nothing more than a novelty. It is harmful to learning and useless to the government. No matter how one looks at it, one cannot find any good in it. ...

His Majesty, having read the memorial, responded to Ch'oe Malli and his associates as follows: You said that the use of letters for phonetic value violates the old practices. Is not the *idu* of Sŏl Ch'ong also based on alien sounds? Is not the main objective of devising the *idu* to make it useful to the people? If it is useful to the people, is not this new Korean script also useful to the people? You and your associates believe the work of Sŏl Ch'ong to be good, yet you reject the work of your sovereign. Why? What do you know about the book of rhymes? Do you know how many vowels there are in the Four Tones and Seven Sounds? If I do not correct the book of rhymes now, who is going to do it?

[Translated by Yŏngho Ch'oe]

Questions:

1. Why did Ch'oe reject the new alphabet?
2. What is his understanding of Chosŏn's proper relationship to China? What do "Chinese ways" represent to him?
3. Why does *idu* remain valuable according to Ch'oe? What sort of learning does he value most? Is writing simply an instrument or tool for learning in his view, or is it something more?
4. The Korean alphabet of the 15th century offers a historical example of a "simplifying" educational development meeting both support and resistance. What are some comparable examples, why were they advocated or opposed, and what potential or actual benefits, costs, and consequences did they have?