

FILM REVIEWS

Linguistics, blended with history, culture, and a vision for the future—Korea's King Sejong the Great, who commissioned and promulgated Hangeul (*Hangul* is romanized here according to the McCune-Reischauer system), the Korean script, 553 years ago, undoubtedly would have been pleased with the concept. *Hangeul: Korea's Gift to the World*, however, is a mix of information, imagery, and Korean nationalism—some of it truly compelling, some of it ethereally beautiful, and some of it skewed by narration so heightened and claims so far-reaching as to seem, at times, puzzling at best.

Distributed by the Republic of Korea's Ministry of Culture and Sports, the video focuses on the history, singularity, global applicability, linguistic ingenuity, and organic structure of Hangeul. The system adapts the

graphical representation of sounds into vowels, and consonants follow the shapes formed by the speech organs of mouth, teeth, tongue, palate, and throat while making them.

The audience targeted by this video is sometimes unclear. Certainly postsecondary academics and students in both linguistics and Asian studies programs as well as schools of education are the most likely, evidenced by the

postsecondary classroom settings in the interviews with faculty in the fields of linguistics, education, cognitive psychology, and computer science from colleges and universities worldwide. But high school teachers and students seem to be the secondary target, as the video points out how numerous high schools in China teach Korean, how two secondary schools in Moscow teach the Korean language, and how each October 9 the "birth" of Hangeul in 1446 is celebrated the world over.

The 40-minute video is divided into six segments, some of which can be integrated into the classroom as a springboard for further research, comparative study, and discussion. The introductory segment features a montage of writing systems—from stone tablets, hieroglyphics, Sanskrit, and Arabic, to roman movable type—with the narrator asking, "Of the many character sets used throughout the world, which do you think is the best? The roman character set?" No, we are told, because although roman is *thought* the best, Hangeul actually was developed in a more scientific way and is easier to write. Learning Hangeul—referred to as "morning letters" because it was felt that the basic alphabet could be learned in a single morning—is then implemented by both pre-K children, and "foreigners."

These two claims—the scientific nature of Hangeul and its easy learning curve—are the basis of deeming it "best" linguistic system, which the remaining five segments strive to prove.

The second segment moves the contention upward one rung, by positing Hangeul not simply as a singular linguistic and typological achievement—touted as the only writing system that divides sentences into words and words into syllables and individual sounds—but as a living vehicle for the worldwide introduction of Korean culture. One sees Hangeul Day celebrated through dance, drama, storytelling, and breathtaking costumes. This is one of the more visually pleasing aspects of the video, providing an opportunity for students to become acquainted with Korean history, language, and culture by organizing their own celebrations.

But where did Hangeul come from? Why was it created? And what was so unique about its development that it should stand as the "best" linguistic system in terms of the "scientific" nature of its construction? The third segment addresses these questions from a fascinating historical, philosophical, and physiological perspective, which provides a marvelous opportunity for a discussion and comparative study of global linguistics. This in itself might make up an entire postsecondary course examining the aesthetic of words. Even the individual sounds themselves can be looked at in terms of how historical, cultural, and organic forces erupt simultaneously to sculpt a living language system.

But is Hangeul the best alphabet ever invented? The fourth segment, which concentrates on Hangeul's linguistic merits, aggressively promulgates this assertion, with American, Korean, British, and Japanese linguists attesting to its superiority

Hangeul

Korea's Gift to the World

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over all other language systems.

This being said, the video escalates the study of Hangul center stage into the realm of a global imperative. The fifth segment illustrates how, as Korea becomes an increasingly influential global power, there will likewise be a concomitant worldwide interest in its culture and language. We see students from all over the world—business people, civil servants, clergy, and military personnel—coming to various Korean language institutes and programs.

This segues into the final segment: the launching of Korean culture and the Hangul language into the twenty-first century. As the culmination of the video's entire argument for Hangul as the "most scientific" and "best" language, this is one of the weakest sections, filled with puzzling ellipses of logic, confrontational rhetoric, and other unfortunate choices. In the manner of the crusader, the narrator describes the twenty-first century as an "era of information war," in which all countries will

be striving for dominance, with Korea having a distinct advantage, by virtue of Hangul, over the others. This is antithetical to the spirit of multinational exchange and harmonious integration of Korean culture and language into the global community. Further, non-native speakers are redundantly referred to throughout by the tiresome term "foreigners."

The saving grace of the final segment is a recapitulation of the visual evidence demonstrating the beauty, vitality, and cultural relevance of the language—its relationship to the universally understood themes of humanities, art, and aesthetics. There is a captivating demonstration of how computer graphics are revitalizing Hangul calligraphy, creating new fonts and modalities in linguistic and human expression. In a spectacular vignette, dancers dramatize and emulate the Hangul alphabet, using their bodies to sculpt the letters.

Hangeul: Korea's Gift to the World seems unsure as to whether it wishes to proselytize

or facilitate the introduction of Korean history, culture, and language to an increasingly multicultural and global community. The most effective segments and vignettes demonstrate the human means of expression imbued in Hangul's origins, the cross-cultural sharing of a heritage as celebrated by Hangul Day, the visual insistence of calligraphy to wed powerful emotions to the stasis of words, and the visceral, kinetic sinew of the Hangul dance. These ideas and images work best to facilitate a classroom, and life, learning experience. ■

NAMJI KIM STEINEMANN is the Vice President of the Education Division at the Asia Society, a nonprofit public education institution dedicated to fostering understanding of Asia and communication between Americans and the peoples of Asia and the Pacific. The Asia Society is headquartered in New York City.

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