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Where Have the Chinese Characters Gone? Modernization of Writing Systems in the Periphery of the Sinographic Cosmopolis

Abstract

This chapter deals with the modernization of writing in Vietnam, in both Koreas and Japan, during the transition from a pre-modern state to a modern nation-state. In Vietnam and both Koreas, despite a strong attachment to the Chinese written tradition, they have decided to stop using the Chinese script. In Vietnam, they switched to the Latin alphabet, in both Koreas to the domestic *Hangul* alphabet, while in Japan, with the least intense contacts with Chinese culture, the Chinese characters were preserved. The reasons for this are modernization, nationalism, and traditionalism. In each of the countries their influence was different. Japan – the colonizer – could modernize at its own pace. In contrast, after their liberation, as the former colonies, Vietnam and both Koreas had to modernize quickly, and in this context the resulting nationalism contributed to the choice of the quickest solution, in each case an alphabetical script.

Keywords: writing reforms, Chinese characters, phonetic scripts, Vietnam, Korea, Japan

Povzetek - Kam so šle kitajske pismenke: modernizacija pisav na obrobju kitajskega kulturnega kroga

Ta prispevek obravnava modernizacijo pisav v Vietnamu, v obeh Korejah in na Japonskem ob prehodu iz predmoderne države v moderno nacionalno državo. V Vietnamu in obeh Korejah so se kljub tradicionalni močni navezanosti na kitajsko pismenost odločili, da zavržejo kitajsko pisavo. V Vietnamu so prešli na latinico, v obeh Korejah na domačo abecedo *Hangul*, Japonska, z najmanj intenzivnimi stiki s kitajsko kulturo, pa je kitajske pismenke ohranila. Razlogi za to so modernizacija, nacionalizem in tradicionalizem. V vsaki od omenjenih držav so ti razlogi delovali drugače. Japonska – kolonizator – se je modernizirala v lastnem tempu, Vietnam in obe Koreji pa so se kot bivše kolonije morali po osvoboditvi modernizirati hitro. V tem kontekstu nastali nacionalizem je pripomogel k izboru najhitrejše rešitve, alfabetne pisave.

Ključne besede: reforme pisave, kitajske pismenke, fonetske pisave, Vietnam, Koreja, Japonska

1 Introduction

The term "script" refers to the system of conventional graphic symbols that represent the linguistic units of a language. Writing was invented from scratch only a few times in the past: first in Mesopotamia and second, almost simultaneously, in Egypt, both at the end of the 4th millennium BCE, a little later, in the 3rd millennium BCE, in the Indus Valley civilization, and at the end of the 2nd millennium BCE in China. Almost at the same time as in China, writing developed completely independently in Central America. In all cases, logographic writing (roughly, the characters of a script record the individual words in a language) emerged first. All other writing systems are derivatives of, or inspired by, the originally invented systems (Coulmas 1989).

This gave rise to several cultural spheres based on the writing and cultural traditions of the various centres. The main drivers of this expansion were religion, culture in the broader sense of the word and political ambition. The oldest is the Mesopotamian cultural sphere centred in Sumer, based on cuneiform and Sumerian cultural tradition. Later, approximately contemporaneous with developments in East Asia, is the Indian cultural sphere, built on Hindu and Buddhist traditions and the Brahmi script. Closer to us is the Arabic cultural sphere, based on the Arabic script and the traditions of Islam, and the Cyrillic cultural sphere, which emerged around the same time, based on the Cyrillic alphabet and the Slavic version of the Orthodox tradition. In our immediate vicinity, we also find an example of a deliberate migration from one cultural sphere to another: Romania. This country was formerly part of the Cyrillic cultural sphere, but in the 19th century the domestic elite

decided to switch to Latin and join a more "advanced", Latin cultural sphere based on Catholic and later Protestant traditions (Daniels and Bright eds. 1996; Coulmas 1989; Pană Dindelegan and Maiden eds. 2013).

In East Asia, the source or inspiration for other scripts was the Chinese logographic script (Chinese characters; Ch. *hanzi*, Kor. *hanja*, Jpn. *kanji* 漢字), which originated in the 2nd millennium BCE. Along with Chinese political and cultural influence, it spread from China to the countries on China's periphery. Adapting to the new local languages that had to be written down, new scripts began to develop alongside it from the middle of the first millennium onwards – in Korea, in addition to the syllabic and partly logographic script *idu* 이두, the alphabetic script *Hangul* 한글 was newly invented in the 15th century; in Japan, the *man'yogana* and, on its basis, the *hiragana* 平仮名 and *katakana* 片仮名; and in Vietnam, the logographic script *chữ nôm* 𡨸喃 (Coulmas 1989). Similarly to Vietnam, and around the same time, indigenous logographic scripts developed under the influence of the Chinese script in independent political entities such as Tangut (Xi Xia), Khitan (Liao) and Jin, and later Jurchen in the northern and northeastern peripheries of China, and the scripts of the Zhuang and Yi peoples, which were at times politically independent, in what is now southern China. Interestingly, the Zhuang and Yi scripts have survived and are still partly in use today. Diglossia appeared everywhere in the written language, where Classical Chinese was the prestigious language, while the vernacular language, written in the vernacular script, was considered less prestigious (Kychanov 1996; Kara 1996; Shi 1996; Holm 2014).

With the exception of Vietnam, Korea and Japan, all other groups have been absorbed into the growing Chinese Empire, where the Zhuang and Yi scripts are still in partial use, while outside China, Chinese characters are – paradoxically – used as part of the standard language only in Japan, in combination with the indigenous syllabic scripts of *hiragana* and *katakana*. Vietnam has switched to the Latinized *chữ quốc ngữ* script, and both North and South Korea use the native *Hangul* script (Lê and O'Harrow 2007; Taylor and Taylor 2014).

The purpose of this paper is to shed light on the reasons why Japan, which among the three peripheral countries mentioned above was the least deeply rooted in the Sinographic cosmopolis, retained Chinese characters in the process of language standardization during the modernization period, while they were discarded in Vietnam and the two Koreas. Due to space constraints, I do not touch in this discussion on the script of the Ryukyu Kingdom (Okin. *Ruuchuu-kuku* 琉球國), which was annexed to Japan in 1879 as Okinawa Pre-

fecture, the use of Chinese characters by the Uyghurs, and Chinese language policies in the People's Republic of China and Taiwan.

2 Language and writing in Vietnam, Korea, and Japan in the first half of the 19th century

At the end of the pre-modern era, in the early 19th century, all three countries – Vietnam, Korea and Japan – were independent and deeply embedded in the Sinographic cosmopolis, while Vietnam and Korea were additionally also under strong Chinese political influence. The position of language and writing in all three countries was similar. As in medieval Europe, diglossia was prevalent. Classical Chinese, written in Chinese characters, played the role of the high language in administration, philosophy, religion and science. The vernacular language, less associated with the functions of political and religious authority, was therefore less prestigious than Classical Chinese, but was valued differently depending on the country and the place of the vernacular culture in it. Literature in the vernacular existed in all three countries. In Vietnam it was written in the vernacular script *chữ nôm* 字喃, in Korea from the 15th century onwards it was mostly written in the native alphabetic script *Hangul* 한글, while in Japan a mixed system of syllabic script (*katakana* 片仮名 or *hiragana* 平仮名) and Chinese characters, which were typically used to write a number of full-meaning words, was used to write literature in the vernacular language. The significant difference is that literature in the vernacular was valued less in Vietnam and Korea than in Japan, where especially the older native literature was valued as classical literature, and the language in which the works were written was valued accordingly. In Vietnam, readers of native literature were limited to an elite educated in Classical Chinese, who could also read the more complex native *chữ nôm* script. The common people often only knew domestic literary works, both prose and poetry, from public readings. In Korea, the situation changed radically after the invention of *Hangul*, but the elite, educated in classical Chinese culture, i.e. the *yangban* 양반, mostly looked down on literature in the vernacular and often opposed the widespread use of *Hangul*. Nevertheless, thanks in part to the efforts of the authorities, literacy in the vernacular began to spread among the people. Translations of Buddhist texts, narrative works and poetry appeared, often written by members of the common people. As the sources show, in pre-modern Japan, the common people were already quite literate, with a developed commercial publishing activity in large centres such as the capital

Edo and Osaka (see Coulmas 1989, 2000, 2003; Cumings 2005; King 2007; Lê and O'Harrow 2007; Gottlieb 2007; Taylor and Taylor 2014; Amino 1990; Yakuwa 2003; Kin 2010; Bekeš 1999). The ideas, presented in this section are summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Valuation of vernacular scripts and literacy at the beginning of modernisation

	Vernacular scripts: valuation	Literacy
Vietnam	*chữ nôm*: complex system, unstable prestige – a means of writing vernacular literary works	relatively low
Korea	*Hangul*: simple, unstable prestige	relatively low
Japan	*hiragana, katakana*: simple, low prestige mixed style of *kana* and Chinese characters: complex system, high prestige in the literary circle	*hiragana, katakana*: relatively high (1877 census: 30-90%, depending on the region)

3 Language in Japan, Korea, and Vietnam in the 20th century

In the process of modernization that engulfed all three countries at the turn of the 19th century, their paths diverged. Japan retained its independence and became a colonial power, annexing the Ryukyu Kingdom in 1879, Taiwan in 1895 and Korea in 1910. Vietnam became a French colony and Korea was annexed by Japan (Cumings 2005; Coulmas 2000). These different fates had different effects on the process of modernization of languages.

3.1 Japan

As a sovereign country, Japan was able to develop education and language to meet the needs of its modernizing society. At the start of modernization, with the Meiji Restoration in 1868, it inherited a diglossia of written language: Classical Chinese and Classical Japanese, and a relatively small proportion of works written in the vernacular of the time. Faced with the challenges and examples from Europe and America, the intellectual elite first saw the need to modernize the language as soon as possible. A movement for the unity of written and spoken language (*genbun itchi* 言文一致) emerged. A new style of translation began to develop, based on the tradition of reading Classical Chinese texts in Japanese (the so-called *kanbun kundoku* 漢文訓読), but applied

to modern European languages: Dutch, English, French, Russian and German, and relying more on the grammar of modern vernacular than on Classical Japanese. A by-product of this, on the other hand, was the large number of neologisms based on Chinese lexical elements, which were used to translate abstract concepts from European thought. A typical example is the neologism *kokugo* 国語, national language. The term was adopted in all countries of the Sinographic cosmopolis and, except for the People's Republic of China and North Korea, is still used today. The print media was also an important factor, owing its popularity to the publication of novelistic feuilletons taken from the professional narrative genre of *rakugo* 落語, as well as political speeches and pamphlets. Interestingly, the state was late in modernizing the language, and the beginning of a systematic approach to standardizing language and script, in short, the creation of a standardized national language (*kokugo* 国語) as a state policy, only dates back to the late 19th century in Japan, some 20 years after the Meiji Restoration (Komori 2000; Lee 1996; Gottlieb 1995).

In the reform and standardization of writing, despite some more radical proposals, a moderately conservative script reform took place in a culturally stable context in Japan, which, with certain limitations, preserved Chinese characters as an important part of the Japanese writing system. Through state efforts the standard language gained influence. Several factors influenced the standardization of writing, despite the opposition of traditionalists. The most important were:

I. Colonial policy, where Japanese was the language of administration, created the need for effective Japanese language education in the colonies (Taiwan, Korea, Manchukuo) and later in the territories occupied during the war in Southeast Asia and the Pacific.
II. The emergence of the periodical press and its readership.
III. The needs of the army in the context of the war effort and military dominance in the colonies, which required precise transmission and reception of information and thus a standardized language with a writing system that was as uncomplicated as possible. Due to the 15 years of war waged by Japan, first on the Asian continent and finally in the Pacific, government reforms of language and writing were stalled and only implemented after the end of the Second World War, under the American occupation. The reform of writing, however, followed in essential respects the framework that had already been prepared by the Japanese Ministry of Education in the 1930s, when Japanese military aggression was confined to China. The form of Chinese characters was standardized and, in the case of the more complex characters, partially simplified, the limited number of Chinese

characters in standard use was defined, as well as standardized notation, i.e. which words, both Chinese foreign words and native words, were to be written using which character. The use of the two syllabic scripts, *hiragana,* and *katakana*, was also standardized. Before and after the Second World War there were also initiatives to switch to the Latin alphabet or to use both syllabic scripts exclusively (*Kanamojikai* 仮名文字会), but these were not considered by the reforms. The result of the reforms was that the so-called mixed style of writing using Chinese characters and both syllabic scripts (*kanji kana majiri* 漢字仮名交じり) were preserved in an otherwise rather refined form, which did not please neither the traditionalists, who considered the reforms too radical, nor the supporters of change, many of whom deplored the half-heartedness of the reforms (Tōdō 1969; Gottlieb 1995; Coulmas 2000, 2003; Bekeš 1998).

3.2 Korea

In traditional Korean society, until 1894, despite the opportunities offered by the invention of the *Hangul* (1446), the system of state examinations – with its social bias (only members of the upper class were allowed to sit for the exams) and focus on Classical Chinese literacy – severely inhibited the penetration of modern education. Literacy among the common people was very low, especially among women, who in traditional Confucian morality were considered to possess the virtue of ignorance. With the Gabo reforms (*Gabo gaehyeok* 갑오개혁), Korea tried to catch the modernization train. Classical Chinese was this replaced by Korean as the official language, written in a mixed style, with Chinese characters and *Hangul*. This mixed style script became the norm with the rapid development of the media. This script replaced the use of *idu*, the old indigenous Korean script based on Chinese characters. A movement also began to unify the written and spoken languages (King 2007).

At the same time, the unequal Treaty of Ganghwa Island 강화도 brought Korea under strong Japanese influence, triggering the Sino-Japanese War, from which Japan emerged victorious. Japanese influence then grew stronger and stronger. After the Japanese victory in the Russo-Japanese War, which was also about dominance on the Korean peninsula, Korea first became a Japanese protectorate in 1905 and was finally formally annexed to the Japanese Empire in 1910. It was thus unable to modernize according to its own wishes and needs. Unlike Taiwan, which it received as war reparations in the Sino-Japanese War, Japan treated Korea not as a mere colony but as an extension of itself (Japan and Korea are one *naisen ittai* 内鮮一体) that had to

be assimilated. Japanese also became the only national language (*kokugo* 国語) in Korea, and Japanese classes became compulsory. The number of hours of Korean classes in "national schools" (Jpn. *kokumin gakko* 国民学校, Kor. *Gugminhaggyo* 국민학교) steadily decreased, and from 1938 onwards Korean was no longer a compulsory subject. It was marginalized and eventually abolished in 1941. The number of schools offering classes at a level higher than the "national schools" was limited. In 1936, for example, only 25% of school-age children (40% of boys and only 10% of girls) actually attended classes. Japanese children in Korea, by contrast, all attended school. From the late 1930s, Koreans were forced to change their surnames and given names to Japanese ones (*sōshi kaimei* 創氏改名). In addition, the use of Korean in public was restricted. Paradoxically, after the rebellion against Japanese rule in 1919, the Korean-language press enjoyed considerable freedom. Outside the institutional framework, Korean nationalists – Christians – also worked to increase literacy in the vernacular among the common people. Tens of thousands of people became literate, but this was a drop in the ocean given the huge population. A severe consequence of this Japanese colonial policy was that the literacy rate in Korea in 1945 was only 22% (King 2007; Mitsui 2010; Coulmas 2000; Tani 2000; Taylor and Taylor 2014; Gottlieb 1995; Cumings 2005; Matles Savada and Shaw eds. 1992).

After the end of the Second World War, the Korean ordeal continued. Liberated by the Soviet Union, but in the emerging world of the Cold War and based on inter-war agreements with the Allies, the US was left to occupy the Korean peninsula south of the 38th parallel. A prerequisite for reconstruction in both parts of the divided Korea was the rapid promotion of literacy among the masses, who now had the opportunity for the first time to be systematically educated in their own language. To this end, it was necessary to standardize the Korean language and script, which Japanese rule had prevented. There was also the question of the use of Chinese characters, which, because of their large number and complexity, were an obstacle to the rapid promotion of literacy. An appropriate language policy had to be defined and implemented at the national level. After the end of the Soviet and American occupations in 1948, two states emerged on the Korean peninsula, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) in the north and the Republic of Korea (ROK) in the south (Cumings 2005; King 2007; Taylor and Taylor 2014).

The DPRK, still under Soviet occupation, radically reformed its language policy and immediately launched an intensive literacy program. By 1948 illiteracy had been largely eliminated. The literacy agenda was less radical in the Republic of Korea, and 10 years after the declaration of statehood and five

years after the end of the Korean War, in 1958, around 8% of the population was still illiterate (King 2007).

The most contentious issue in language policy was the use of Chinese characters. In the DPRK, radical action was taken. The old elites mostly fled to the ROK, many members of the elites were imprisoned, and the state, under the leadership of Kim Il-sung and the Workers' Party (*Choseon rodongdang* 조선로동당), set about creating a "new" culture. Part of this was the "democratization" of writing. The use of Chinese characters was initially abolished, but was reintroduced in 1953, at the end of the Korean War, with a limit of 1,800 characters. The aim of the democratization of writing was to make the writing system as simple and usable as possible. Kim Il-sung himself had a big say in language policy. His version of the standard language, introduced in 1966, was in the DPRK called the "cultured language" (*munhwa-eo*문화어). From the point of view of the "cultured language," Chinese characters – and with them Chinese and other foreign words – were perceived as a threat to the mother tongue. As a result of this view of Chinese characters, vocabulary of Chinese origin and borrowings from other foreign languages, such terms began to be replaced by their vernacular equivalents. Some of the vocabulary of foreign origin has remained, and Chinese characters are still taught to a limited extent, although they are no longer in public use. This was the beginning of the divergence between the language in the DPRK and the ROK. Most of the reforms in the DPRK were top-down, but it is true that the opinion of the citizens was also taken into account (Cumings 2005; Song 2005; King 2007).

As mentioned above, the language policy in the ROK was more relaxed. The old elites retained their prestige, and the colonial administration from the time of the Japanese rule remained in place, including the police and the army, but of course without the Japanese personnel, who had retreated back to Japan. In the ROK, too, from 1945 onwards, there was an intensive standardization of the language, which, under Japanese influence, was called the national language (*gug-eo* 국어). In 1948, in order to combat illiteracy, the Ministry of Education proposed a change from mixed writing to the exclusive use of *Hangul*, but the proposal was rejected due to strong opposition from the conservative elites from the time of Japan's colonial rule, who were well versed in Chinese script. Attitudes towards the use of Chinese characters then fluctuated until the end of the 1970s, with sporadic discontinuations and reintroductions, as well as attempts to limit the number of characters in everyday use. The military regime of Park Chung-hee (박정희) masked its attachment to the class that collaborated with and profited from Japanese colonial rule with a strong nationalism, which included a campaign to "puri-

fy" (*eoneo sunhwa*언어순화) the native language. Its aim was to purge the standard language of foreign words borrowed from English and Japanese. After 1987, when democracy was restored, these campaigns slowly died out. The term itself took on a negative connotation, linked to the totalitarian military regimes that ruled Korea from the early 1960s until 1987. On the other hand, a mixed system of writing with Chinese characters and *Hangul* was retained. In 1974, Chinese characters were reintroduced in Korean language textbooks, with a limit of 1,800 "basic characters" in junior and senior high schools. However, the use of Chinese characters is still limited. They almost never appear in texts for general use, including the daily press; in rare cases, like in professional literature, they are used only as much as the comprehensibility of the text requires, due to the large number of homophones of Chinese origin (Coulmas 2000; Song 2005; Cumings 2005; King 2007).

As a consequence of the different social systems and, as another reflection of this, the different approaches to language policy, the distance between the standard languages of the two Koreas is becoming ever greater. There are differences in phonetics (a standard based on Pyongyang speech in the DPRK and Seoul speech in the ROK) and in lexis. There are also differences in the rules of spelling in *Hangul* (lit. the script of the Han state), which in the DPRK is locally referred to as *Choseon-geul* (조선글 lit. the script of the Choseon state). In this respect, Han 한 and Choseon 조선 are two different names for Korea from two different eras. Han is the name of the last state before it became a Japanese colony and is used in the ROK, while Choseon, the name of the state during the long rule of the Yi dynasty, is used in the DPRK. Despite the different social arrangements, the motivations for linguistic reforms in the two Koreas overlap to some extent: at their roots is the declared or actual anti-colonialism and related nationalism. As far as Chinese characters are concerned, the result is also similar in both Koreas: Chinese characters play a secondary role, their learning is limited, and they are no longer used in the mass media or at most in very limited cases (Coulmas 2000; Song 2005; King 2007; Hannas 1997).

3.3 Vietnam

Vietnam, too, was plunged into colonial dependence in the 19th century, before it could face the challenges of modernization. The French presence in Indochina began with aiding the Nguyen dynasty in unifying Vietnam at the end of the 18th century. The French Revolution put colonial efforts on hold for a while. In the second half of the 19th century the southern third of Vietnam,

Cohinchina, became a French colony first, while the central part, Annam with the imperial capital Hue, and the northern part, Tonking with Hanoi, became French protectorates, a fact recognized in 1885 by China, which was then still under the rule of the Qing dynasty. The whole territory, together with Cambodia, was incorporated into French Indochina in 1887, to which France added Laos in 1889 (Lê and O'Harrow 2007; DeFrancis 1977).

The recording of Vietnamese in Latin script began in the early 17th century with the arrival of Jesuit missionaries, who needed a simple written form of the spoken language for their missionary work. The fruit of their efforts was *chữ quốc ngữ*, a transcription of Vietnamese which did not spread beyond the Catholic community of believers. Under French colonial rule, however, *chữ quốc ngữ* was introduced into the newly established colonial primary schools. The first primary schools to teach Vietnamese in Latin were established by the colonial authorities in 1864 in Cochinchina. On the other hand, the prestige of Classical Chinese was preserved among the traditional elite, as was the use of the indigenous *chữ nôm* writing system. The purpose of language instruction using the Latin script was similar to the instruction of Slovene and Croatian in the Illyrian provinces under Napoleon: as an intermediate phase in which the native population would become literate and then, at a higher level, switch to the language of the metropolis (Lê and O'Harrow 2007; DeFrancis 1977; Vodopivec 2006).

The French colonists and the army opposed the newly established education for the broader class of the local population by means of the *chữ quốc ngữ* script. This position was in line with the aspirations of the old elites from the north of Vietnam, from Annam and Tonking. However, unlike the old elites, the colonialists wanted education to be conducted in French. The old elites, in their anti-French patriotism, contradicted themselves by continuing to despise the indigenous *chữ nôm* while advocating the preservation of the indigenous version of Classical Chinese (Sinh Viet) as the prestigious language of education and administration. Notwithstanding the disagreement between these two groups the colonial authorities still needed a class of local officials, so they insisted on the above-mentioned policy of relying on *chữ quốc ngữ* in schools (Lê and O'Harrow 2007; DeFrancis 1977).

Paradoxically, as a means of colonial language policy *chữ quốc ngữ* also became a means of resistance against colonial rule in the early 20th century. In Hanoi in 1907, in an attempt to raise the educational level of the population, a group of patriots founded the Tonkin Free School (*Đông Kinh Nghĩa Thục* 東

京義塾),[1] which provided a modern education untainted by colonial perspectives to hundreds of students, the future elite of the anti-colonial struggle, at the primary and secondary school levels. Classical Chinese (in its Sino-Vietnamese variant) and French were also taught, but it is significant that most of the instruction was in Vietnamese, written in *chữ quốc ngữ*. Graduates of this school took their experience to the wider society, so much so that the colonial authorities closed the school after only a year. Later, French educational policy changed, as the colonial rulers strengthened the school institutions, where education was conducted in *chữ quốc ngữ*. On the other hand, in 1915-19, they pressured the puppet imperial court in Hue to abolish – after almost 1,000 years – the state examinations based on knowledge of the Classical Chinese canon. During the same period, *chữ quốc ngữ* also began to make its way into the periodical press, with the effect of encouraging national and linguistic consciousness and hindering the penetration of the French language. Literary works written in *chữ quốc ngữ* began to appear, with new readers who were educated in Vietnamese written in Latin. All of this contributed to *chữ quốc ngữ* no longer being perceived simply as a symbol of collaboration with colonial authorities (Lê and O'Harrow 2007; DeFrancis 1977).

The transition from the traditional state of things, with Classical Chinese ("Sino-Vietnamese") and Vietnamese written in the native *chữ nôm* script, to the use of *chữ quốc ngữ* took place, as we have already partly seen, in several phases. During the first phase, Classical Chinese ("Sino-Vietnamese") was seen as a symbol of resistance to French rule, and the use of *chữ quốc ngữ* as a symbol of collaboration. Later, when the patriots realized that modernization was not possible without a general increase in the level of education, a prerequisite for which was the elimination of illiteracy, the second phase began. *Quốc ngữ* was thus adopted as a means of raising literacy among the population. In this way, *chữ quốc ngữ* lost the stigma of collaboration, while the publication of literary works in *chữ quốc ngữ* also raised its prestige. By the third phase, however, *chữ quốc ngữ* was already in use more frequently than Classical Chinese (Sino-Vietnamese) and *chữ nôm*, and thus effectively became the script with which the vernacular language, Vietnamese, was – and still is – commonly written. After independence, it was only a step further to declare *chữ quốc ngữ* the standard script of the Vietnamese language (Lê and O'Harrow 2007; DeFrancis 1977).

The continued interference of outside forces in Vietnam has had tragic consequences for the country, and for Indochina as a whole. A state of war

1 Interestingly, the old name for Hanoi is Dong Kinh 東京, which has the same meaning and is written in Chinese characters in the same way as the name of the Japanese capital.

in Vietnam lasted practically from the Japanese invasion in 1941, through the return of the French after the end of the Second World War, the long and agonizing liberation war against French rule, the division into North and South Vietnam in 1954, and the American intervention, all the way up until reunification in 1975. After the victory of the Viet Minh liberation movement over the Japanese army in 1945, *chữ quốc ngữ* became a symbol of liberation. During the long war, first against France to liberate North Vietnam from the colonial yoke and second against the USA to unify North and South Vietnam, *chữ quốc ngữ* became a symbol of revolutionary progress in North Vietnam. *Chữ quốc ngữ* was also used in South Vietnam, where simultaneously Classical Chinese ("Sino-Vietnamese") and *chữ nôm* were still taught. The uncontested position of *chữ quốc ngữ* was finally stabilized only after the unification of Vietnam in 1975, when *chữ quốc ngữ* became the script used to record the standard Vietnamese language (Lê and O'Harrow 2007; DeFrancis 1977).

4 Discussion

In reviewing the paths taken by various scripts in the peripheral countries of the Sinographic cosmopolis, Vietnam, Korea, and Japan, two types of factors have crystallized that influenced the fate of Chinese characters as part of modern standardized indigenous writing systems, i.e. internal and external ones.

4.1 Internal factors

There are four internal factors:

I. **The prestige of the local written language and literature as compared to the prestigious local variant of Classical Chinese.**
   In Japan, the vernacular has historically held a prestigious position among the elite as the language of literature, while Classical Chinese has been the language of state ideology, administration, education, religion (Buddhism) and philosophy. Gradually, a mixed script of the vernacular language developed, with syllabic script and logographically used Chinese characters. With the spread of syllabic script (*hiragana* and *katakana*) literacy, annotation of the "reading" of the Chinese characters in syllabic script (*furigana* 振り仮名) became established. With this, even more complex texts became accessible to a wider range of readers, who emerged in the Edo period. Even with the modernization

of the language, the widely used mixed script, i.e., Chinese characters in combination with syllabic script, was retained. In the mixed script, Chinese characters were used to write both Chinese foreign words (so-called *on'yomi* 音読み) and native Japanese words (so-called *kun'yomi* 訓読み). Chinese characters were so deeply rooted in the script of the vernacular and in the consciousness of a large part of the literate population that it was very difficult to abolish them altogether when reforms were made to the writing system. On the other hand, the fate of the vernacular scripts in Korea and Vietnam was much more unstable. The use of both *Hangul* in Korea and *chữ nôm* in Vietnam has been repeatedly restricted in the past, and despite the popularity of literary works written in the vernacular, the free development of the potential of both scripts has often been inhibited by the pressure of the establishment.

II. **The proportion of Chinese characters or indigenous logographic characters used in vernacular script.** The situation is similar in Korea and Japan. In Korea, if, in addition to *Hangul*, we take into account the mixed syllabic-logographic script *idu*, which until the end of the 19th century was used partly for administrative purposes, the proportion of Chinese characters in the Korean and Japanese scripts varies from medium to low. Vietnam's *chữ nôm*, on the other hand, is an entirely logographic script and so naturally the proportion of logographic characters is 100%.

III. **The quantity and accessibility of works in the vernacular language.** This factor is directly linked to the first one, i.e. prestige. The unstable position of vernacular scripts in Korea and Vietnam has also meant that literary production in vernacular has been far less widespread and accessible than in Japan, and also less so than texts in Classical Chinese.[2]

IV. **Literacy rate of the general population at the time of the script reforms.** By the beginning of the 20th century Japan had reached a relatively high level of literacy, at least in terms of syllabic scripts and basic Chinese characters. However, in Korea and Vietnam, literacy rates were very low at the beginning of the script reforms (22% in Korea, even lower in Vietnam), mainly due to colonial policies.

2 In Vietnam, after the temporary occupation during the Ming dynasty a Neo-Confucian fever led to the destruction of the printing plates of literary works written in *chữ nôm*. Therefore, only works in the vernacular language survived from the second half of the 15th century onwards (Lê and O'Harrow 2007).

4.2 External factors

The two external factors are linked to the socio-historical context of modernization:

I. **The most important factor is the degree of independence at the time of modernization.** Japan modernized as an independent country, according to its own needs, while Korea and Vietnam modernized under colonial rule.

II. Nationalism in language as part of the modernization process.
In Japan, even fervent nationalists recognized Chinese characters as part of their linguistic tradition. Modernization and thus standardization in the language was not directed against the use of Chinese characters, all that was needed was a rationalization of the already established mixed writing system: a limiting of the number of characters, a partial simplification of some characters and a standardization of their form, and a reform of the syllabic writing ortography. By contrast, in Vietnam – and in both Koreas after the Second World War – in the context of radically changed circumstances under colonial rule, Chinese characters were perceived as an obstacle to the modernization of the language, for two reasons. First, in the spirit of anti-colonial nationalism (the use of Chinese characters is also a product of thousands of years of Chinese cultural hegemony), and second, for reasons of expediency. In both Koreas, learning indigenously developed alphabetic script, *Hangul*, is much more effective and allows for a quicker eradication of illiteracy than learning a mixed system that includes the use of Chinese characters in addition to *Hangul*. The situation in Vietnam was similar. *Quốc ngữ*, initially promoted by the colonial authorities, gained enough ideological prestige in the historical processes of the first half of the 20th century to finally become a symbol of socialist revolutionary change and a "progressive" script. In both the Korean and Vietnamese cases, the relatively limited scope of the literary heritage written in the vernacular was also instrumental. With the transition to the new script, with the radically limited use of Chinese characters in both Koreas and their complete elimination in Vietnam, the break with tradition, especially of writing in the vernacular, was not as severe as it would have been in Japan had it taken a similar step.

5 Conclusion

It is well known that once a writing system is established it is very conservative, and changes only occur in times of great social upheaval (Coulmas 2000). Due to their colonial experiences, traditional societies in both Korea and Vietnam were much more profoundly affected by modernization processes than Japan. This is one of the reasons why deeply radical reforms of writing were possible there, while Japan, against the wishes of many, had to take a more moderate path. All this has less to do with the complexity of a particular script than the above illustration might suggest. Coulmas (2000), for example, argues that in Taiwan, despite not simplifying the characters and not reducing their number as much as in the People's Republic of China, the elimination of illiteracy has been faster and more successful. The reason for this success was a better organized education system. On the other hand, the prejudices of the usually more conservative advocates of the widespread use of Chinese characters are also misguided. There is a group of people in Japan who systematically use only phonetic syllabic writing. They are people who are blind but who, despite their disability, are able to reach the highest level of university studies and even become PhDs by using only phonetic writing for the blind. In ensuring functional literacy, the use of both Chinese characters and phonetic script, even in a language with such a modest phonetic repertoire as Japanese, turns out to be a less relevant factor than the organization of a modern school system. As Coulmas (2000) points out, each type of script has advantages and disadvantages.

The discussion presented above leaves out an important factor that could also have a strong influence on language policy. Japan and the two Koreas are extremely ethnically homogeneous countries, while Vietnam has around 14% minority populations, spread over dozens of ethnic groups. It is precisely this linguistic variety that allows Vietnamese to play a vital role as the national language throughout the territory of a united Vietnam.

As a result of modernization processes in language and writing, in all four countries the mother tongue has become consolidated as the central language in administration, education and literature. Given their colonial experience, this has not been the case in many other countries in the region. In this respect, as well as from the point of view of script, it would be interesting to compare the above findings with language policies and developments in other countries with both a centuries-long state tradition and experience of being colonized, such as Laos, Cambodia, Malaysia, Myanmar (Burma) and Indonesia in Southeast Asia.

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