

# The Introduction of Chinese Characters into Korea: *The Role of the Lelang Commandery*

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## Abstract

*This paper discusses the role of the Lelang commandery in the process of introducing Chinese characters into Korea. In the Lelang commandery, native populations of non-Han origin would have been put into the “documentary administration,” under situations similar to such frontier regions as Juyan and Dunhuang, in the process of which Chinese characters were most likely accepted on an extensive scale. The use of Chinese characters in the Lelang commandery was not limited to a group of Han people, as has been traditionally understood. Those Chinese characters introduced at that time would not necessarily have to be so-called genuine Chinese characters. Particular examples of Chinese characters that developed later into Korean idu are confirmed in official Qin and Han documents. The population native to the Lelang commandery maintained contact with various usages in the document-based administrative system for over 400 years and the usages suited to the linguistic behavior of the population on the Korean peninsula was naturally selected. It is to be noted that the process of introducing Chinese characters into Korea is best explained by the long-lasting linguistic contact and the resultant transformation.*

**Keywords:** Lelang commandery, Chinese characters, Gojoseon, Wiman Joseon, Goguryeo, literacy, documentary administration, vernacular Chinese, idu, dialect

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## Introduction

Prior to the invention of Hangeul or the Korean alphabet in the fifteenth century, Koreans wrote exclusively in Hanja or Chinese characters, which they borrowed from China. Chinese characters developed in China to suit the particular linguistic needs of the Chinese. Hence, when Koreans borrowed Chinese characters, their usage turned out to be extremely inconvenient because of the linguistic structural differences between spoken Chinese and spoken Korean. To help overcome some of the differences, Koreans developed a writing system called *idu* to represent the old Korean language by borrowing Chinese characters. However, it was not so easy to simply borrow them and alter specific elements of them only when necessary. Much time and effort were required before Chinese characters and the linguistic traits of the people on the peninsula could come to terms with each other, when users could fully familiarize themselves with the Chinese-borrowing writing system. In other words, there should have been a long process of linguistic contacts and adaptation.

In understanding the acceptance and transformation of Chinese characters in ancient times, the key point rests with differences in linguistic traits and attendant inconveniences. As discussed in detail in other papers of this special issue, *idu* obviously was one such by-product. However, while overemphasizing differences, the consideration about the process has been omitted or noticeably reduced. A considerable process of acceptance is to be presupposed if transformations are to occur. With this in mind, this paper explains the introduction of Chinese characters into the Korean peninsula. It does so by trying to uncover the background when transformation of Chinese characters occurred in Korea, by discussing when and how they were introduced and the extent to which they were used.

## A Critical Review of Existing Studies

One of the major reasons that the study of the introduction of Chinese characters is largely stagnant is because of a misunderstanding of ancient Korean history. Han China (206 BC–AD 220) invaded and destroyed the ancient Korean state of Gojoseon (Guchaoxian in Chinese) or Ancient Joseon in 108 BC, thereby dominating some parts of the peninsula through the establishment of military commanderies. Existing studies find the origin of Korean history with Gojoseon, while placing the Han commanderies inside Chinese history. Those studies have generally accepted the idea that although the flow of Korean history that began with Gojoseon was temporarily interrupted by the four Han commanderies, it resumed again with the rise of Goguryeo and continued into the making of the Three Kingdoms period. While this paper does not intend to redefine the scope of Korean and Chinese historiography, existing historiographies obscure the relationship between the Han commanderies, especially the largest commandery at Lelang (Nangnang in Korean) near modern-day Pyeongyang, North Korea, and the acceptance of Chinese characters within the peninsula. In other words, while Goguryeo and Baekje, for instance, have come to represent the linguistic traits of Koreans, the four commanderies of the Han dynasty have often been neglected from the discussion of Koreans' acceptance of Chinese characters.

If we follow this kind of explanation and only consider Goguryeo and Baekje, the general date for the acceptance of Chinese characters in Korean peninsula could not help being late. This paper asserts that Goguryeo and Baekje, which were undergoing state formation, were in constant contact with the four Han commanderies. However, the narrative of existing studies emphasizes the hostility between the Han commanderies and Goguryeo, as well as Goguryeo's power to oust the Han Chinese power from the peninsula. What goes almost unmentioned is how Chinese characters were accepted when Goguryeo and Baekje people came into contact with Chinese commanderies on the Korean peninsula. By ignoring the role of the com-

manderies in this way, existing studies have overlooked the two Korean kingdoms' acceptance of Chinese characters in their very early days, most likely putting off the acceptance of Chinese characters into Korea until the fourth century (Song 2002).

As confrontation ended after Goguryeo's victory, it is generally believed that Goguryeo appraised the remnants of the Lelang commandery and integrated the Han people and their writing system, who understood the culture of Chinese characters. It is also argued that a large group of refugees from the Western Jin dynasty (AD 265–316), who sought asylum in Goguryeo to evade political turmoil after the fall of their dynasty, also played a role in enhancing the culture of Chinese characters (Yeo 2009). However, before the Western Jin dynasty there were Chinese refugees as many as after the Western Jin. Hence the way of explanation emphasizing the arrival of political refugees after the fall of the Western Jin—not before—is very closely related to the historical conception that the Lelang commandery could not represent Korean history.

Incidentally, the conventional view of including Lelang in Chinese history and its remnants as Han Chinese people is responsible for our current understanding of Chinese characters in the Lelang commandery as so-called standard and authentic. On the contrary, Goguryeo people were believed to have a linguistic structure different from that of the Han Chinese, in which they used vernacular Chinese.

To summarize, existing studies argue that Goguryeo and Baekje began to fully accept Chinese characters upon the collapse of the Lelang commandery. Further, the Chinese character-based culture introduced by the Han remnant population from the commandery or Han refugees from mainland China was authentic Chinese characters, which became tailored to the linguistic traits of Goguryeo's spoken language. Linguistic differences between spoken Chinese and Korean made it necessary for Koreans to create vernacular Chinese or early *idu*.

However, the Han dynasty's four commanderies as political power bases should be appraised positively from the perspective of

the acceptance of Chinese characters.<sup>1</sup> First, it does not stand to reason that Goguryeo and Baekje could have had contact with the Chinese inland commanderies and received Chinese characters from them while excluding the adjacent four Han commanderies. Thus, in order to understand Goguryeo's acceptance of Chinese characters, we need to precisely understand how the Chinese characters came into use in the four Han commanderies.

Second, it is evident that the four commanderies were built by the Han Chinese. However, it is also evident that those under the administration of the commanderies were not all ethnically Han. Whether they were the same ethnic origin as Goguryeo people needs further exploration. Still, it is no doubt that these people basically shared a common linguistic culture in that they dwelt in the northwestern part of the peninsula and the land to the east of the Liao river. Accordingly, they should not necessarily be excluded from the process of introducing Chinese characters into the Korean peninsula simply because they were dwelling in the commanderies.

Third, existing studies argue that only the Han in the commandery had a command of Chinese characters while the general populace or those of non-Han origin were excluded from the use of Chinese characters. This is a result of misunderstanding the history of the commandery from the perspective of ethnic discrimination, a dichotomous view. As I have indicated in a previous paper, the *hu* 胡 (*ho* in Korean; meaning "barbarians") was also incorporated into the household registry in the same way as the Han and treated as the ruled class in principle, which included paying taxes, among other duties (B. Kim 2009). They did not have to be excluded from the use of Chinese characters simply because they were non-Han. As I discussed below, the distinction between the Han and non-Han people was not important in the commandery; as many people as possible

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1. A few noteworthy studies on the roles of Lelang include Lee Sung-Kyu (2003) and Lee Sung-si (2005). Prof. Lee Sung-Kyu indicates that while the Han mainly took charge of documentary administration, they could have employed many low-ranking officials out of the local populace in order to secure personnel for documentary administration.

were to be incorporated into the “documentary administration.”

A review of the non-Han population of the Lelang commandery, namely, those classified as “Eastern Barbarians,” makes it unreasonable to postpone the date when Chinese characters were accepted after the first half of the fourth century. Since they had no choice but to come into contact with Chinese writing in various ways in the life of the commanderies, it follows that Chinese characters were first accepted by these Eastern Barbarians in the early days of the Lelang commandery period. Of course, the introduction of Chinese characters could date back to the days even before the four Han commanderies.

Meanwhile, it is also necessary to have a specific understanding of the level of Chinese characters when they were first introduced into the peninsula. First, previous studies have overlooked the various stages of learning Chinese characters. Today, various definitions of literacy are imaginable. UNESCO defines literacy as the ability to understand, read, and write short and simple words in day-to-day life. However, there are more stages of literacy: one stage is where one can read and write material that is relevant to one’s job or interests, another in which one can only understand simple characters and put them down in a document, and another one, in which many simpler characters can be understood and written on a document. There is also a stage where one can write out thoughts, and yet another where one can write a book containing knowledge of a professional kind (Giele 2009). However, previous studies overlook this range of literacy and assume only a single form of Chinese characters introduced into the peninsula at a relatively high level of literacy. Therefore, the establishment of the Taehak (National Confucian Academy) as an educational institution or the acceptance of the Four Books as a source of scripture is cited as background for the acceptance of Chinese characters. While these events certainly institutionalized education, the acceptance of Chinese characters is not necessarily accompanied by the establishment of a form of systematic education. Previous studies assume that the non-Han ruled class in the Lelang commandery was excluded from the process of acceptance

since only those who were exposed to a well-rounded education could apparently possess a high level of Chinese.

Second, the perception that Chinese characters were always highly standardized when they were introduced is problematic. The standard form of a language is not the only form to exist, and can range from a local vernacular to a simple transliteration. The early Chinese dictionary *Fangyan* (Dialects) by Yang Xiong (53 BC–AD 18) states that the Han-era vocabulary was used in various ways, depending on the region. Vocabulary does not necessarily mean differences in culture but may reflect differences in linguistic behaviors. Therefore, over ten dialectic zones confirmed in *Fangyan* evidently demonstrates that the Han linguistic system was far from uniform (Serruys 1959). While Chinese characters served to reduce confusion arising from various verbal dialects and made it possible to write down characters in a uniform manner, various dialectic zones in the Qin and Han dynasties gave rise to different ways of putting down ideas in writing. In other words, there existed variations in Chinese characters before they were introduced into the peninsula. In typical contemporary books, standard usages certainly prevailed. But it is highly likely that linguistic behaviors of a particular region were largely reflected in local documents throughout the empire.

As mentioned, previous studies have generalized the introduction of Chinese characters into Korea, while trying to view the usage of non-standard characters as a transformation unique to the Korean peninsula. Of course, such variations served to pave the way for the invention of *idu*. However, as I mentioned above, it should also be noted that such variations tailored to the linguistic needs of the people were already found in the continental China. It means that old Koreans might have accepted already transformed Chinese.

### **Use of Chinese Characters in the Era of Wiman Joseon**

When would Chinese characters have found their way into the Korean peninsula? While the use of Chinese writing in central China dates

to the fourteenth century BC, it was not until the Warring States period (475–221 BC) that materials containing Chinese ideographs could be directly identified in the east of the Liao river. It means Chinese characters were introduced into the Korean peninsula after they had been fully developed grammatically.

In the Liaodong area and north of peninsula, such coins as *ming-daoqian* (sword-shaped coins) and *banliangqian* (half-weight coins), currencies of the Warring States period, were unearthed. On the coins, some characters are confirmed (Park 2009). Accordingly, it could be implied that by the third or second centuries BC, Chinese writing found its way into Gojoseon. Granted, the inscriptions engraved on the coin do not necessarily reveal the literate level itself of the people of Gojoseon. Rather, it is better to state that they would have understood several Chinese ideographs, even in terms of mere symbols.

However, by the time Wiman Joseon (Weiman Chaoxian in Chinese) emerged, Chinese characters must have found their way into the peninsula in the form of writing and characters. Wiman, a person from the state of Yan on the continent, gathered over 1,000 men and fled from the Han dynasty, as Luwan, King of Yan, rebelled and took to flight to the Xiongnu, a northern nomadic group and enemy of the Han.<sup>2</sup> The fact that Wiman was of Yan origin, situated on the continent, makes it highly likely that the Wiman group would have been exposed to the culture of Chinese characters. It would go too far to say that he and his followers continued to follow Yan culture or carried it into the peninsula if we take into consideration the fact that they arranged their hair in topknots, dressed in a “barbarian” manner, and crossed the border.<sup>3</sup> However, once they subjected barbarians from Zhenfan and Joseon, absorbed political refugees from the states of Yan and Qi, and ultimately enthroned their own king, the Wiman group could not simply be called a mere armed band. Apparently Wiman must have held a certain political position in Yan. A group numbering over 1,000, who had been summoned within such

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2. *Shiji* 115, p. 2985.

3. *Shiji* 115, p. 2985.



a political context, would have been different from a force of peasants who incidentally rebelled. In view of the fact that systematic “documentary administration” was implemented in Yan during the Warring States period and in the days of Emperor Han Gaozu (256–195 BC), it is reasonable to assume that there was a systematic line of command by means of documentation between Wiman and the group under him.

By the time his sons and grandsons assumed control, the kingdom had absorbed more and more fugitives from the Han dynasty. In addition to these records, other literature shows that various states around Zhenfan “wrote petitions” (*sangseo*) to see the emperor in person, each time failing because they were hindered by Wiman Joseon.<sup>4</sup> This suggests that it was unlikely that the ruling elite of those adjoining states were familiar with Chinese characters to write petitions; the only possibility is that Wiman Joseon could have written such letters instead of them.

Moreover, early historical material states that in the second year of the Yuanfeng era (109 BC), an envoy from Han arrived but Ugeo (Youqu in Chinese), Wiman’s grandson, did not follow the Han emperor’s command. “Upholding edict” (*bongjo*) in this context could simply mean “to follow with respect to the emperor’s command” (Song 2002, 25). However, since it is evident that the emperor’s edict was transmitted by means of a written document in the Han era, this leaves open the possibility that all interactions between Han and Wiman Joseon were being carried out by way of documentary administration.

The “Eight Articles of Condemnation” (*beomgeum paljo*) also provides important clues for comprehending the use of Chinese characters during the time.<sup>5</sup> A quick look at its content suggests it is nothing more than a primitive form of laws. Two of the three articles extant reflect ordinary punitive concepts of ancient times. For instance, the articles provide that: 1) a murderer is subject to the death penalty;

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4. *Shiji* 115, p. 2986.

5. *Hanshu* 28-2, p. 1658.

and 2) someone who injured another person must provide compensation with grain. However, a third clause on theft is highly detailed, and explains that the thief can be turned into a slave for the owners of the house he robbed. The article also explains that if the thief pays 500,000 coins in compensation, he can remain a free subject. This article, which presupposes a functional monetary economy, evidently refers to laws related to the death penalty during the era of the Qin and Han dynasties.<sup>6</sup> In other words, the possibility cannot be ruled out that various laws and institutions documented during the Han period were borrowed and introduced in the days of Wiman Joseon.

My discussion thus far has indicated that the ruling group of Wiman immigrated from Han China and continued to accept refugees from Han areas, providing clues to diplomatic transactions and introduction of various institutions, even on a limited scale. If it is assumed that all such processes were possible only with the aid of written Chinese characters, it seems right to admit that Chinese writing was introduced and came into use during the era of Wiman Joseon, but was used on a limited scale and exclusively by the ruling class. In other words, Chinese characters would have been used by those privileged few as a means of ensuring their domination. By now, evidence to indicate that writing was embraced by the general population is unavailable.

### **Documentary Administration and Literacy of the Lelang Commandery**

By 108 BC, when the four commanderies were established, Chinese characters were widely used in both quantity and quality, more so than in previous times. Above all, as far as four commanderies were

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6. Yun Jae-Seug (2002) saw crimes of homicide and injuries as part of the laws in Gojoseon and the third article as drawn up in the Lelang era. However, the treatise of geography in *Hanshu* describes the Eight Articles of Condemnation as the law of Joseon people of Lelang, and the biography of Eastern Barbarian in *Sanguozhi* (Records of the Three Kingdoms) describes it as that of Gojoseon.

established by the Han dynasty, it follows that unlike Wiman Joseon the culture of Chinese characters would have extensively been transplanted with the ruling class using them. Previous studies also reveal the possibility that Chinese characters were used in daily life close to the level of that in mainland China. The Lelang wooden tablets that referenced the households and population of each prefecture, along with the wooden tablets of *Lunyu* (Confucian Analects), which were unearthed in Pyeongyang, North Korea, testify to the fact that they were the same in both content and form as those of the inland commanderies (Son 2006a, 2006b; Y. Yun 2009; B. Kim 2009; Lee, Yoon, and Kim 2009). Notwithstanding, as indicated in Section One, when it comes to the acceptance of Chinese characters into the Korean peninsula, previous studies have understood the use of Chinese characters in the Lelang commandery to an extremely limited extent, the major reason being that they limited the social stratum that used characters to only the Han Chinese. Here, I will continue to look into this issue by referring to cases in other areas during the Han era.

The commandery system in the age of the Qin and Han dynasties featured thoroughgoing implementation of document-based administration. The major political directions of the emperors were drafted on paper, reported and kept as documents. The “Shuihudi Bamboo Slips of Qin” is a set of laws that explicitly requires that “all political administrative matters be kept in documents” and that “oral applications and applications by proxy should not be accepted.”<sup>7</sup> Defense affairs in the peripheral commanderies, as well as ordinary rulings, were documented in writing. Accordingly, “documentary administration” was also strictly carried out in the Lelang commandery, which would have been out of the question without the widespread use of characters. Hence, characters were extensively used in Lelang as an essential part of the implementation of “documentary administration,” rather than for a simple reason of the domination of the commandery by the ruling Han Chinese.

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7. “Eighteen Decrees of Qin Codes,” in Subcommittee for Arranging the Shuihudi Bamboo Slips of Qin (1978, 105).

If the commandery had been nothing more than a part of the military domination system, it would mean hardly anything more than the fact that the ruling class increased compared with that in Wiman Joseon. Since it was assumed in Section Two that Chinese characters were introduced in the Wiman Joseon era, the use of Chinese characters in the Lelang commandery might only mean that the use of Chinese characters increased only in volume and was still limited to the ruling Han class. Then, this would make it difficult to assume that the commandery significantly affected the acceptance of Chinese characters, which in turn would mean that existing studies stating that it was not until the commandery fell that Chinese characters found their way into the life of Koreans on a large scale would not be incorrect. However, the fact that the domination of commanderies in the Qin and Han eras was thoroughly implemented in writing is sufficient evidence to significantly change existing understanding of the use of Chinese characters in Lelang.

Above all, in order to explain the use of Chinese characters in the Lelang commandery as not being limited to the drafting of diplomatic documents or introduction of high knowledge, a review is in order of the situation where the common populace could come directly into contact with documents during Han times. In order for children to be grown to be an official in view, character education was implemented in rural communities. Basic education on characters was offered in a number of schools in non-farming seasons. It is highly likely that there were different kinds of education tailored to individual needs, such as commercial transactions by merchants. Even becoming a lower-rank official was perceived as an avenue that could lead to an affluent economic life and a sort of privilege (S. Lee 1989, 74-77). Therefore, many struggled to prepare themselves for officialdom.<sup>8</sup> In time, this ultimately increased the number of officials of the lower rank (B. Kim 1997). Of course, the demand for lower-ranking officials and commercial transactions should not be exaggerated. However, it is highly likely that ordinary people could have

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8. *Hanshu* 89, p. 3626.

attained a minimum level of literacy. The emperor's commands or various decrees promulgated by the central government reached all the way down even to villages where ordinary people dwelt by way of the commanderies and prefectures. Once reaching the village level, such decrees from the central government were posted in a public place in large and legible print, so that all the population could be well informed.<sup>9</sup> However, most of the population was not fully literate. Some would most likely have read orally for others or those notices could have been meant only for visual effects (Tomiya 2010). However, unless we assume that some villagers were literate enough to read these notices, it is difficult to understand that the government posted them so frequently.

The wooden tablets found in areas such as Juyan specifically indicate the literacy level of the commons. In the Juyan area where the headquarters of the military commandant (Duweifu) was located, commands were handed down from the highest rung down to the beacon fire, a low-level unit. At the beacon fire, the terminal stop of the documents, wood was cut into writing pads for documentation throughout the year, and when those materials were depleted, they were often purchased from upper-level offices. This proves that documentation was done at such a low level. The leader of the beacon fire, along with three or four subordinates, prepared wooden pads and drafted documents. The personnel records of chiefs seen in the Juyan wooden tablets clearly demonstrate that the people were capable of writing Chinese characters. The articles also show that subordinates read and memorized regulations concerning their job assignments, and cases where they often drew up documents on their own are also confirmed.<sup>10</sup>

9. “五月甲戌居延都尉德庫丞登兼行丞事下庫城倉行丞事下城倉 用者書到令長丞候尉明白大扁書鄉市里門亭顯見” (Xie and Li 1987, 3255); “十一月己卯 敦煌太守快 丞漢德敢告部都尉卒人 謂縣：叔盜賊史赤光。那世寫移 今□□□□部督趣。西到各益部吏。□泄□捕部界中。明白大 編西向亭市里□□□□。令吏民盡知□□” (Hu and Zhang 2001, 1 0309③:222).

10. “□縣承塞亭各謹候北塞隧，即舉表，皆和盡南端亭，亭長以札署表。到日時” (Gansu Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology 1991, 2457); “第十燧卒史譚 …… 案甄，治簿” (Xie and Li 1987); “□卒諷讀 火品約第十七候長勝客第廿三” (Gansu Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology 1990, 3451).

Therefore, it can be said that literacy expanded even among the general populace. Is this because they were Han Chinese? While some of the subordinates described in the Juyan documents were conscripted from inland commanderies, others were native to the peripheral areas. While many of the officials of higher rank were from other areas, officials lower than chiefs were mostly from nearby areas (Momiya 1999). Among those from the area concerned, certainly many were deported from inland. However, deportation was not exclusively carried out from inland commanderies. A large number of other ethnicities from other peripheral areas were also removed and granted households in the four Hexi commanderies (today found in western Gansu province, China), a typical case being when the Qiang tribe in the area of the Wudu commandery was forced to move and granted households in Jiuquan and Dunhuang.<sup>11</sup> There were several records where the Qiang tribe was put in charge of official documents.<sup>12</sup>

The foregoing claim that commoners of non-Han origin also had to be literate in order to implement the “documentary administration” under the commandery system would be more persuasive if the level of literacy was lower than expected. There were different levels of literacy among officials during the Han era. For instance, *nengshu* or “capable of documentation” referred to a literacy level possessed by officials who could read, understand simple documents, fill them out when necessary, and handle jobs in the field.<sup>13</sup> When one had familiarized himself with various writing styles, professional knowledge of a given job (such as laws and institutions) and proved him-

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11. “武都氏人反 分徙酒泉郡” (*Hanshu* 6, p. 194); “(武都郡)分徙其羌 遠之酒泉·敦煌” (Hu and Zhang 2001, I 0309③:222).
  12. “入西書八, 郵行 . . . 永平十五年三月九日人定時, 縣(懸)泉郵孫仲受石磨郵牛羌” (Hu and Zhang Defang 2001, VI F13C①:5); “元延二年二月乙卯, 魚離置羌御離吉受縣(懸)泉置畜夫歛” (Hu and Zhang Defang 2001, II 0111②:21); “羌屈調作柱, 二月戊戌作, 名御解, 鄉吏” (Hu and Zhang Defang 2001, II 0114④:83)
  13. “肩水候官候史大夫尹□勞二月廿五日能書會計治官民頗知律令文年卅三歲長七尺五寸儻得成漢里” (Xie and Li 1987, 7183); “候長公乘蓬士長當中勞三歲六月五日能書會計治官民頗知律令武年州七歲長七尺六寸” (Xie and Li 1987, 9597).

self equal to the given tasks, he was considered an expert (*shi* 史), which was different from simply being “capable of documentation.”<sup>14</sup> The qualification and status of someone who was “capable of documentation” was enough to become a low-ranking official like a *suizhang* or the head of a beacon fire. Subordinates who were conscripted from the ordinary peasants needed even fewer literacy skills. All that was required was to read and understand basic characters and job manuals, for which it is assumed that they had to undergo a brief training course designed to help them handle their job. Such low-level officials probably also maintained their literacy after they had returned home from military service. Because of these skills, they could read and understand the emperor’s commands or decrees from the central government that were put on notice in the villages.

In short, under the commandery system, the ordinary populace of non-Han origin were trained under a brief course and put into “documentary administration,” and such an educational program, combined with character education in the villages, contributed to the increased level of literacy in Han times. While the foregoing evidence was based largely on the areas of Juyan and Dunhuang, the same emphasis on literacy education would most likely be true of the Lelang commandery, which also held a defense system with a military headquarters that was established as a peripheral commandery, though no such materials were unearthed as in Juyan and Dunhuang.

### Contact with Various Usages and Choices

The Han were not the only people who used Chinese characters in the Lelang commandery. As stated above, ordinary people of non-

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14. “居延甲渠第二隧長居延廣都里公乘陳安國年六十三建始四年八月辛亥除 不史” (Xie and Li 1987, 2587); “玉門千秋隧長敦煌武安里公乘呂安漢年卅七歲長七尺六寸 神爵四年六月辛酉除功一勞三歲九月二日其卅日/父不幸死憲定功一勞三歲八月二日詔九月晦庚戌故不史今史” (Gansu Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology 1991, 1384).

Han origin also were educated and put into front-line jobs. It is highly likely that most of the low-ranking officials who were in charge of the bulk of document-based administration were of non-Han origin. This means that those who had linguistic behaviors different from the system of Chinese characters learned to read and write in Chinese. This would certainly have been inconvenient for them. However, they could not alter the system of Chinese characters. They had no other choice but to use them in spite of any inconvenience. It was not until sufficient time had passed that much of the population had familiarized themselves with Chinese characters and would have developed a need to get rid of the inconvenience arising from the difference in the culture of Chinese characters and linguistic behavior of the Korean peninsula.

It is important to point out that there was no single form of Chinese characters. Even the writing in official government documents or scholarly books deviated from what we would now define as “standard.” We can often identify non-typical forms of characters that differ from standard characters in such significant works as *Shiji* (Historical Records). Moreover, as indicated in earlier parts of this paper, various languages existed region by region during the Han times. The dictionary *Fangyan* (Dialects), mentioned above, indicates that differences in linguistic systems gave rise to significant differences in vocabulary. Naturally, linguistic behaviors were reflected in written documents. While such linguistic behaviors may better express themselves in private letters, these tendencies most likely showed themselves even in official documents, thus creating some divergence. Official documents were typically passed down from the central government to regional offices and sometimes vice versa. At other times, they were circulated between regional governments. This was all the more the case for private letters.

Therefore, the people of non-Han origin in the Lelang commandery who were involved in the administration would have come into contact with a variety of different forms of Chinese characters, from the more standard forms in central and regional governments, down to the irregular forms found in personal correspondence. While the



non-Han population in the Lelang commandery had no choice but to acquire the knowledge to read and write Chinese, contacts with various kinds of texts would have provided them with opportunities to pick up and use the one suited to their linguistic habits.

It is my position that these kinds of linguistic contacts and the choices made during such a process provided an important chance for the transformation of Chinese characters on the peninsula. In other words, rather than arbitrarily adding some new elements, tailored to their own linguistic habits, to the Chinese characters introduced into the Korean Peninsula, the people on the peninsula picked up those suited to their linguistic habits and used them repetitively until it became a writing system unique to Korea. Moreover, by the time of the collapse of the commandery system in AD 313, many of the non-Han population had been incorporated into the culture of Chinese characters and the “documentary administration” for over 400 years. Because of this, it is highly likely that such a vernacular writing system would have emerged during the days of the Lelang commandery. Goguryeo absorbed many of the remnant people from Lelang after the fall of the commandery, thus significantly stimulating Goguryeo’s use of written Chinese. It is assumed that the document-based administrative system of Goguryeo, then in an early phase of development, would not have reached the level of the Lelang commandery. Accordingly, if any particular vernacular feature was found in the way Goguryeo people used Chinese characters, it is reasonable to determine that it had already been selected and made familiar in the days of Lelang commandery.

There are few extant written sources from the days of the Lelang commandery. Much of this is in the form of inscriptions on coins, tiles, bricks, lacquer ware, bronze and steel items, seals and so forth, with very few characters inscribed on them. Some remains have relatively more characters. For instance, the Spiritual Shrine Stele in Nianchan, which describes the background and purpose for offering sacrifices to mountain spirits by the chief of the prefecture, the Lelang wooden tablet recently unearthed in Pyeong-yang contains information about household registration, and some wooden tablets

also contain *Lunyu* (Confucian Analects) (Yun 2010). Such remains indicate that Chinese characters were widely used in a variety of areas and for a variety of purposes, including ancestral rituals, “documentary administration,” and studies of Confucian classics. However, they yield no direct connection to the development of *idu* in later times. Instead, the Korean linguists suggest that there were some cases where Chinese characters were transformed and that such characters as “中” (*jung*; *zhong* in Chinese), “之” (*ji*; *chi* in Chinese), and “節” (*jeol*; *jie* in Chinese), among others as found in Goguryeo records, are associated with *idu*. However, I believe these cases do not indicate that the people of Goguryeo transformed Chinese characters, but that it was a process of selection through linguistic contact over the hundreds of years since the days of Lelang. First, concerning the character “中” found used on the peninsula, it is generally believed to be a postpositional locative case marker, a departure from the original usage. However, Han era documents show that the usage of “中,” whether in Goguryeo or Han, was not uniform but varied with many different usages concurring simultaneously. For instance, the two expressions “某月中,” which literally means “in a certain month,” and “某月” meaning “a certain month,” were used simultaneously in a same text. In other words, while the character “中” did retain its original sense of “a certain unknown day of the month,” the expression does make sense without the character, making it an expletive or a void expression. In this respect, it is assumed that a vacant sense of “中” in Goguryeo could be identified sufficiently in Han era literature.

While, as a rule, “中” in “某月中” (month + *zhong*) could mean “A certain day of the month,” “中” of “某月某日中” (month + date + *zhong*) could be seen as a postpositional locative case marker. Incidentally, previous studies assume that in China only “某月中” (month + *zhong*) was used, whereas the usage of “某月某日中” (month + date + *zhong*) was exclusively found in Korea, which should be seen as a postpositional locative case marker, transformed by people on the peninsula. However, the Zoumalou wooden tablets found in Changsha, Hunan province, clearly demonstrate that the case of “某月某日中” (month +

date + *zhong*) was also used in China.<sup>15</sup> While whether to see it as a postpositional locative case marker or not remains to be seen, it is unavoidable that China had its equivalent to the Korean expression.

At the same time, even where “中” is preceded by a word stem referring to a place in addition to a time, it often refers simply to a place, though it originated from the meaning “in the middle of.” In most of the cases where “中” is followed by the name of a certain location, it means “in the location” such as “譙門中” (*chomunjung*; *qiaomenzhong* in Chinese), “羌中” (*gangjung*; *qiangzhong* in Chinese), “濃中” (*pungjung*; *fengzhong* in Chinese) and so forth.<sup>16</sup> The sense of referring to a certain location dominates the meaning rather than the sense of “in the middle of.” Likewise, in the case where “中” is preceded by a noun of time, the character held the same meaning, regardless of whether “中” was used or left out. The fact that expressions such as “郡中上人” (*gunjung sangin*) and “郡上人” (*gunsangin*) are both found on the Goguryeo stele demonstrates the arbitrary usages of “中” which were also very prevalent during the Qin Han period (Y. Kim 2007). My point is to emphasize the fact that the usage of “中” had not been uniform since the Qin-Han eras. At the same time, I propose that the vernacular usage on the Korean peninsula did not significantly deviate at all from the original usage of “中.”

Second, many studies have been conducted on the Korean *idu* character “之” (*ji*; *zhi* in Chinese), where it was interpreted as “to be,” mainly because such a form is seen as an erratic Chinese character expression not to be found in general Chinese usage (Nam 2000, 2006). From the perspective of existing Chinese literature, this form was not generally used. However, though the usage of “之” as a terminating ending as it was used in Korea cannot be stated conclusively in the period of the Former Han, numerous examples exist where the character is preceded by a transitive or intransitive verb, while occurring at the end of a sentence. Originally, “之” had many usages.

15. “□大夫事 八月一日中賊曹史郭邁白” (Changsha City Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology 2003, vol. 1, 1.35).

16. *Shiji* 48, p. 1952; *Hanshu* 69, p. 2972; *Houhanshu* 86, p. 2833.

When it occurs at the end of a sentence, it is known not to carry any meaning, such endings as “焉” (*eon; yan* in Chinese), “矣” (*ui; yi* in Chinese), and “也” (*ya; ye* in Chinese) (Pei 1954). For example, many cases can be found on the wooden tablets of Juyan, such as “敢言之” (*gameonji; ganyanzhi* in Chinese), “白之” (*baekji; baizhi* in Chinese), and so forth.<sup>17</sup>

On the Korean peninsula, “之” was also used as a terminating ending when it occurred following a noun. Existing studies view this as conclusive evidence that Chinese characters had been transformed in a particular way on the peninsula. However, the same case is found in official documents in the Former Han era. The Yunmeng shuihudi qinjian reads:

A horse drawing a cart is fed once, and once more while returning. All of the eight horses should be fed at the same time. Even though they draw the cart several times they should not be fed more than once a day. When a prefecture horse drawing a cart is tired, it is fed once more (Subcommittee for Arranging the Shuihudi Bamboo Slips of Qin 1978, 47).

In this context, it suffices to say “又益壹禾” (meaning “be fed once more”) instead of “又益壹禾之” (“be fed once more” + *zhi*) thus dropping the character “之” that closes the sentence, since the ending “之” means nothing but a case where it follows a noun and marks the ending of the sentence. The usage of “之” following a noun is not only found on the Korean peninsula but also found in official documents in the Qin-Han era.

Third, while studies focus on the uniqueness of “中” and “之” to Korea, “節” (*jeol; jie* in Chinese) is also often cited as an important example. On the Jungwon Goguryeobi Monument, the character “節” occurs three times to indicate “at this time,” and in the inscribed

17. “甲渠候長就敢言之” (Xie, Li, and Zhu 1987, 19); “會壬申旦府對狀毋得以□爲解各 署記到起時令可課。告肩水候官候官所移卒責不與都吏□卿 所舉籍不相應解何記到遣吏抵校及將軍未知不將白之” (Xie, Li, and Zhu 1987, 4176); “兵書以七月旦發書堂煌將軍，隨將軍自言□得第州六卒□，欲留至門君卒問宣白之” (Xie, Li, and Zhu 1987, 6240).

stones in Pyeongyang fortress, it refers to “directing” or a subjective particle. Such a usage reached as far south as Silla and throughout the Goryeo and Joseon dynasties (Nam 2000, 2006). When “節” appears in the middle of an epitaph, it is not possible to interpret the character properly, possibly leading readers to see it as an *idu* expression. I have no objection to the idea that the usage of the letter was developed in ways peculiar to the peninsula. Notwithstanding, I do not see the issue as a result of Goguryeo having transformed Chinese characters in their own arbitrary way, because similar usages are readily identified in Chinese materials of the Qin and Han times. In the “Shuihudi Bamboo Slips of Qin,” dating to the late third century BC, and “The Law in Second Year” inscribed on the “Zhangjiashan Han Strips,” dating to the early second century BC, “節” reads as “卽” (*jeuk; ji* in Chinese).<sup>18</sup> The character “節,” which is “卽” superimposed with the radicals “艸” (*cho; chu* in Chinese) or “竹” (*juk; zhu* in Chinese), has the same meaning as “卽.” This agrees with the case where the superimposition of the character “節” is similar to “艸” as shown in the Jungwon Goguryeobi Monument.

In short, “節” of Goguryeo is not a type of transformation unique to Goguryeo. The character “節” that appears on the Goguryeo monument is another accepted form of “卽,” which had already been used in Qin and Han era official documents. Granted, it was not that “卽” was always expressed as “節” in all the documents. On the wooden tablets, many cases are found where “卽” retains its original meaning. This shows that the meaning of “卽” was expressed in various ways. Goguryeo people would have been exposed to each of those varying choices. The likelihood is that the usage that coincided well with its own linguistic needs came into wide use, and over time became established as the norm.

So far, we had a brief review of the usages of “中,” “之,” and “節,” which has been marked off as typical ways of expression in *idu* that

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18. “更隸妾節有急事，總冗，以律稟食；不急勿總” (Subcommittee for Arranging the Shuihudi Bamboo Slips of Qin 1978, 50-51); “芻藥節貴于律，以入芻藥時平賈入錢” (Peng, Chen, and Kudo 2007, 242).

occurred on the Korean peninsula. Our findings indicate that those expressions known as vernacular one did not appear in isolation on the peninsula, but that they all too often showed themselves in a variety of earlier Chinese materials ever since the Qin-Han age. While those materials are not strictly grouped under “genuine Chinese characters,” they are not extremely exceptional cases. It was confirmed that the usages of Chinese characters which is said to be introduced during Goguryeo times and later developed into *idu* were often found in official documents from continental China and coexisted with so-called genuine Chinese characters.

Though Korean vernacular expressions were found in Chinese documents, if there had not been connection linking the two regions, it would have been impossible to explain the interrelationships between the two. However, as discussed above, the Lelang commandery was founded on the Korean peninsula and implemented a “documentary administration” for over 400 years. During this process, much of the population, including those of non-Han origin, accepted and used Chinese characters. The scope of the “documentary administration” covered by the Qin and Han dynasties was extremely extensive. As shown in *Fangyan*, the Han empire included various linguistic traditions. Moreover, documents were not only exchanged between the central government and local governments, but also at times they were exchanged directly between local governments or, in other times, via the central government. Documents of judicial request for the central government (*zouyanshu*), found in the south during the Han period, include those written in other areas like the Shu, Beidi, and Hedong commanderies. Official documents of the Han era contain usages that include various linguistic traditions. It is assumed that those who accepted Chinese characters in Lelang came into contact with various usages of this kind, and selected and used such forms that matched their own linguistic needs. This is the reason why many early *idu* expressions were found in Han period documents concurrent with the Lelang commandery.

## Conclusion

This paper has discussed the role of the Lelang commandery in the process of introducing Chinese characters into Korea. This view has been overlooked to date. While Chinese characters most likely were introduced in the days of Wiman Joseon, we can only assume that they were limited to the ruling group who used Chinese characters for drafting diplomatic documents and describing institutions. No evidence permits any further assumptions with certainty. On the other hand, when it comes to the four commanderies of the Han dynasty, including Lelang, more can be said based on qualitative evidences. The commandery system of the Qin and Han period made it a mandatory requirement that all administrative jobs be performed through written documents, a strict rule all had to comply with from the central government down to the border regions. Han era bamboo slips, which describe in detail the functions of the lowest rung of administration, indicate that the process of receiving, transmitting, and reporting orders from superiors was carried out through written documents. To carry this out, many subordinates and low-ranking officials were taught to read and write characters and were put into the administration. In the Lelang commandery native populations of non-Han origin would have been put into the “documentary administration,” under situations similar to such frontier regions as Juyan and Dunhuang, in the process of which Chinese characters were most likely accepted on an extensive scale.

The use of Chinese characters in the Lelang commandery was not limited to a group of Han people, as has been traditionally understood. Those Chinese characters introduced at that time would not necessarily have to be so-called genuine Chinese characters. Particular examples of Chinese characters that developed later into Korean *idu* are confirmed in official Qin and Han documents. In other words, vernacular expressions were not first invented on the peninsula but were selected out of usages already current in the Chinese empire. In short, my findings confirm that the population native to the Lelang commandery maintained contact with various usages in the docu-

ment-based administrative system for over 400 years, and the usages suited to the linguistic behavior of the population on the Korean peninsula was naturally selected. It is to be noted that the process of introducing Chinese characters into Korea is best explained in terms of long-lasting linguistic contact and the resultant transformation.

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## GLOSSARY

<i>banliangqian</i> (Ch.)	半兩錢	Nangnang ▶	Lelang (Ch.)
<i>beomgeum paljo</i>	犯禁八條	<i>nengshu</i> (Ch.)	能書
<i>bongjo</i>	奉詔	<i>sangseo</i>	上書
Duweifu (Ch.)	都尉府	<i>Sanguozhi</i> (Ch.)	三國志
<i>Fangyan</i> (Ch.)	方言	<i>Shiji</i> (Ch.)	史記
Gojoseon	古朝鮮	<i>suizhang</i> (Ch.)	燧長
Guchaoxian (Ch.) ▶	Gojoseon	Taehak	太學
Hangeul	한글	Ugeo	右渠
Hanja	漢字	Weiman Chaoxian (Ch.) ▶	Wiman Joseon
<i>Hanshu</i> (Ch.)	漢書	Wiman Joseon	衛滿朝鮮
<i>idu</i>	吏讀	Xiongnu (Ch.)	匈奴
Jungwon Goguryeobi	中原高句麗碑	Youqu (Ch.) ▶	Ugeo
Juyan (Ch.)	居延	<i>Yunmeng shuihudi</i>	雲夢睡虎地
Lelang (Ch.)	樂浪	<i>qinjian</i> (Ch.)	秦簡
<i>Lunyu</i> (Ch.)	論語	<i>zouyanshu</i> (Ch.)	奏讞書
<i>mingdaoqian</i> (Ch.)	明刀錢		

(Ch.: Chinese)