

The Evolution of Ancient East Asian Writing Systems as Observed through Early Korean and Japanese Wooden Tablets

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Abstract

Large quantities of ancient Korean wooden tablets unearthed since the 1990s have underscored and buttressed the importance of primary materials in historical studies. The Korean linguistics field is no exception; with a growing number of tablets available from Baekje and Silla, research on ancient Korean language and writing has accordingly flourished. These investigations had been mainly confined to the Korean Peninsula, however, and had not expanded to encompass all of East Asia. Bearing that in mind, this paper deciphers and explicates written materials through a comparison of two early wooden tablets, unearthed in Korea and Japan, respectively, and surveys the evolution of ancient East Asian writing systems—focusing on the development of writing systems that use borrowed Chinese characters, the adoption and adaptation of character shapes and handwriting styles. Research reconfirms that ancient East Asian writing systems originated in China and moved to the Korean peninsula and then to the Japanese archipelago.

Keywords: ancient Korean wooden tablets, the evolution of East Asian writing systems, Chinese-borrowed characters, *gugyeol* characters, *hiragana*, cursive Japanese syllabary

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Introduction

Since the excavation from Anapji pond in Gyeongju in August 1975 of the first wooden tablet dating from the unified Silla era, an increas-

Table 1. Current Findings of Unearthed Ancient Korean Wooden Tablets¹

(as of October 2009)		
Site (Year Unearthed)	Era	Number of Wooden Tablets (Tablets with Scripts)
Anapji Pond, Gyeongju (1975)	Unified Silla (mid- and late 8th century)	97 (61)
Wolseong Moat, Gyeongju (1984-1985)	Silla (6-7th century)	34 (25)
Hwangnam-dong, Gyeongju (1994)	Unified Silla (8th century)	3 (3)
Gyeongju National Museum, Gyeongju (1998)	Unified Silla (8th century)	4 (2)
Gwanbuk-ri, Buyeo (1983-2003)	Baekje (7th century)	12 (10)
Gungnamji Pond, Buyeo (1995-2001)	Baekje (7th century)	4 (3)
Ssangbu-ri, Buyeo (1998)	Baekje (7th century)	2 (2)
Neungsan-ri temple site, Buyeo (2000-2002)	Baekje (early 6th century)	34 (29)
Dongnam-ri, Buyeo (2005)	Unified Silla	1 (1)
Hyeonnae Field, Ssangbuk-ri, Buyeo (2007)	Baekje (6-7th century)	14 (8)
Warehouse Site, Ssangbuk-ri, Buyeo (2008)	Baekje (618)	6 (2)
Mireuksa Temple site, Iksan (1980)	Unified Silla	2 (2)
Iseong Fortress, Hanam (1990-2000)	Silla (6-7th century)	34 (13)
Seongsan Fortress, Haman (1992-2009)	Silla (mid-6th century)	277 (224)
Bonghwangdae, Gimhae (2000)	Silla (6-7th century)	1 (1)
Baekryeong Fortress, Geumsan (2004)	Baekje	1 (1)
Gyeyang Fortress, Incheon (2005)	Unified Silla (7th century?)	2 (2)
Hwawang Fortress, Changnyeong (2003-2005)	Unified Silla (9-10th century)	9 (7)
Bangu-dong, Ulsan (2007)	Unified Silla	1 (1)
Bogam-ri, Naju (2008)	Baekje (early 7th century)	31 (13)
A Total of 20 Historical Sites		569 (410)

1. The table is prepared based on the present status of ancient wooden tablets unearthed by April 2009, provided in Park Jong-ick (2009, 39), with details pre-

ing number of ancient wooden tablets have been unearthed year after year. As of October 2009, a total of 569 wooden tablets have been uncovered from some 20 historic sites in South Korea, of which about 410 have handwritten inscriptions in Chinese characters. More ancient wooden tablets are expected to be excavated in the future (See table 1).

Produced mostly between the sixth and eighth century, as shown in table 1, Korean wooden tablets are detailed primary sources that vividly depict various social aspects of the Baekje, Silla, and the Unified Silla eras; such invaluable materials have attracted keen scholarly interest. First pioneered by historians, interdisciplinary studies on the writing tablets recently have been pursued by scholars in sociology, archaeology, linguistics, and the arts (calligraphy). This explosion of research, comparable to that following the earlier discovery of ancient epigraphs, is attested to by a series of international academic forums held since 2007.² Academics of diverse disciplines presented

sented at the fourteenth at-site excavation and survey briefing at Seongsan Fortress, Haman on October 28, 2009 added. Figures on wooden tablets at Neungsan-ri temple site in Buyeo are revised by the author based on an excavation and survey report by the Buyeo National Museum (2007). If 37 Goryeo-era wooden tablets recently excavated from sunken celadon transport boats off Tae'an, Chungcheongnam-do province and Sinan, Jeollanam-do province, and 16 bamboo tablets (more appropriate to be billed bamboo with writing) are added, the number of wooden tablets unearthed so far in South Korea will increase greatly. On Goryeo-era data, see Im and Choe (2009) and a 2009 publication by the Buyeo National Museum and Gaya National Cultural Property Institute.

2. Kicking off the series of forums was the inaugural international symposium organized by the Korean Society for the Study of Wooden Documents, "Ancient Korean Wooden Tablets and Cultural Interaction among Ancient East Asian Countries" (January 10-11, 2007). It was followed by a Korea-Japan international workshop hosted by Seoul National University's Kyujanggak Institute for Korean Studies, "Languages and Characters in Ancient Korea and Japan" (July 3-4, 2007), the Korea-Japan international academic conference on "Cultural Exchange and Communications in Northeast Asia via Ancient Character Data" sponsored by the BK East Asian Studies Integration Project Group affiliated with Sungkyunkwan University's East Asia Academy (September 29, 2007), and the Korean Society for the Study of Wooden Documents' second symposium, "Newly Excavated Wooden Tablets" (November 24, 2007). Subsequently, in 2008 were Dongguk University's

and discussed the outcomes of their research, simultaneously deepening academic understanding of Korean wooden tablets while also presenting varying perspectives on the evolution of East Asian writing systems through the medium of Chinese characters.

This paper aims to provide a review of the linguistic research on Korean wooden tablets and then to examine writing systems of ancient East Asia through an investigation of relevant materials from Korea, Japan, and China. With this in mind, the paper will compare two ancient wooden tablets, excavated in Korea and Japan respectively, and discuss interaction in writing systems among East Asian countries, focusing on the adoption and adaptation of Chinese characters and written Chinese.

Current Linguistic Studies on Korean Wooden Tablets

Historical and archeological studies on wooden tablets excavated in Korea have been thoroughly covered by Yoon Seon-tae (2006), Lee Yonghyeon (2006), Jeon Deogjae (2007), and Ju Bo-don (2007). This paper focuses on an overview of linguistic analyses only, with the aforementioned theses excluded.

East Asia Culture Research Institute-sponsored conference on “Exchanges in Ancient East Asia and Wooden Tablets,” an international forum held by the HK Project Team, East Asia Academy, Sungkyunkwan University, entitled “A Search into the Possibilities of Written Material Studies in East Asia” (August 28-29, 2008), and the Korean Society for the Study of Wooden Documents’ third international forum “The Morphology of Ancient East Asian Wooden Tablets.” The year 2009 witnessed an academic symposium on “Ancient Wooden Tablets and Fortress” in commemoration of the 40th anniversary of the National Cultural Property Institute and the centenary of the Korean National Museum (June 4-5, 2009), an international forum organized by the Northeast Asia History Foundation on the topic of “Cultural Interaction Among East Asian Countries Seen Through Ancient Written Materials” (June 10-11, 2009), and the Korean Society for the Study of Wooden Documents’ fourth international forum “Studies on East Asian Wooden Tablets and Newly Unearthed Written Materials” (November 28, 2009).

Baekje Wooden Tablets

1) Wooden Tablets from the Temple Site in Neungsan-ri, Buyeo

Out of wooden tablets excavated from Neungsan-ri temple site in Buyeo, No. 305 wooden tablet³ sparked much scholarly discussion



Figure 1. Wooden tablets excavated from Neungsan-ri temple site

first initiated by Kim Young Wook (2003). His thesis is significant in that it emphasized the linguistic importance of wooden tablets for the first time. Reading the back of the wooden tablet (see the left side of figure 1) as “宿世結業 同生一處 是非相問 上拜白來,” he translated it to mean, “Since they are associated in their present lives through the Karma of their previous lives, they mutually paid homage and have been speaking respectfully to each other after having quarrels.” Assuming it to be a Baekje poetic song, he titled it “Suksega” (An Ode to Former

Lives).” Yoon Seon-tae (2004), noting the Chinese script that read—“Hyehwijeon” (meaning “addressed to Hyehwi”)—on the front of the wooden tablet (left side of figure 1) offered a new interpretation of the tablet as a poetic missive addressed to a person named Hyehwi. Kim Wan-jin (2005) argued that the fourth line was an expression in the style of *hyangga* (vernacular poetry) which meant “(Just now) they have humbly bowed to each other”; he interpreted the text to be a

3. The serial numbers of wooden tablets follow those used in the illustrated catalogues of Korean wooden tablets in the publications of the Changwon National Research Institute of Cultural Heritage (2006), the Buyeo National Museum (2008), and the Buyeo National Museum and Gaya National Cultural Property Institute (2009).

composition (or song) announcing a wedding. Accepting both aforementioned interpretations, Kim Young Wook categorized the wooden tablet as a letter written in the *hyangga* style.

Lee Seung Jae (2008) presented a new reading of the front of the wooden tablet. Although the Buyeo National Museum had deciphered the front to read “慧暈師宛” (*hyeunsawan*), Lee rejected this on account of the shape of the character and maintained the writing to be “慧暈師藏” (*hyeunsajang*). Consequently, Lee presented the possibility that the text on the tablet’s back was a poem (such as an account of Master Hyeun dying or attaining Nirvana). Depending on how one reads the tablet’s front, the interpretation of the back varies: a letter or a wedding announcement in the form of a poem or an account of someone’s death or attainment of Nirvana.

Writing on the third face of the No. 2 wooden tablet from Neungsan-ri temple site (figure 2) was the next topic of contention. Kim Young Wook (2007) again garnered academic attention when he read the line as “小吏猪耳其身者如黑也” and interpreted it to mean “Jeoi, a minor official, has dark skin.” This interpretation was based on a reconstruction of “猪耳” as “dot + zi,” an indigenous Baekje term meaning “pig.” Nevertheless, he did not exclude the possibility that “耳” (*i*) could be read as “ear.” The proper noun “猪耳” (Jeoi) emerged in Middle Korean medical books as being identical with “蒼耳” (*chang-i*), a Korean word in Chinese characters, corresponding to *dotgwimari* or “cocklebur” in Middle Korean. The ancient Korean pronunciation of “耳” (*i*) can be presumed to have sounded closer to “*ni*” rather than “*zi*.” Furthermore, examples of reading such terms with the sound values of Chinese characters are first found in *Hyangyak gugeupbang* (Emergency Remedies of Folk Medicine) from the mid-thirteenth century. In light of the above facts, the conclu-



Figure 2. A wooden tablet excavated from Neungsan-ri temple site

sion was reached that the two Chinese characters comprising “猪耳” should be interpreted as denoting “pig ear,” obviously a nickname given to the minor official.

In addition, as examples of a sentence-ending marker, Lee Seung Jae (2009) cited “之” (*ji*) contained in both wooden tablet No. 301 as “書亦從此法爲之” and the second face of wooden tablet No. 4 as “則熹拜而受之伏願.”

2) Wooden Tablets from Ssangbuk-ri, Buyeo and Bogam-ri, Naju



Figure 3. No. 1 wooden tablet from Bogam-ri



Figure 4. Jwagwan daesikgi wooden tablet from Ssangbuk-ri, Buyeo

Widespread attention followed the nearly simultaneous excavations in 2008 of No. 1 wooden tablet from Bogam-ri, Naju (figure 3) and *Jwagwan daesikgi* (Record of lending meals by a local servant) wooden tablet from Ssangbuk-ri, Buyeo (figure 4). The artifact was the first Baekje wooden tablet containing the Chinese character “中” (usually meaning “during”) as a suffix to the names of months (e.g. “戊寅年六月中” or “during

the sixth month of the Year of the Tiger” and “年三月中” or “during the third month of the year of” Kwon In-han (2008b) and Lee Seung Jae (2009) agree that “中” in the above cases should be regarded as the locative case marker “in” or “during,” as indicated by *idu* (literally, “clerk readings”; an ancient Korean writing system utilizing the phonetic and meaning values of Chinese characters to express native Korean language and meanings), which is equivalent to the proposition “during” in English. Lee Seung Jae (2009) definitively clarified this use of “中” as a locative case marker by noting examples in which the corresponding character in *idu* was used in minor titles of Goryeo-era documents such as *Bulguksa seoseoktap jungsuhyeongjigi* (Records of Repairing the West Stupa at Bulguksa Temple).

In addition, Lee interpreted the character “者” seen in the second line of the No. 1 wooden tablet from Bogam-ri—“出背者得捉工奴”—as playing a conditional and subjunctive function, noting it as further evidence that the use of “者” was common in Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla. Lee continues by interpreting “毛羅” (*mora*) seen at the end of the second line in the front of the No. 3 wooden tablet from Bogam-ri as a term indicating “村” (*chon*) in the same usage with “牟羅” (*mora*) in the Bongpyeong stele (524); he cites it as an example demonstrating the overall similarities between Baekje and Silla in the use of such characters.

Kim Seong-beom (2009), on the other hand, offered a new reading of the No. 1 wooden tablet from Bogam-ri as “年三月中 監數肆人/出背者得捉得安城” and interpreted the meaning as “Four guards captured prison escapees in Deuganseong in March of the Year of . . .” He also presented a new view on “毛羅” seen in No. 3 wooden tablet as a place name indicating “Tangna 毛羅” or “Tammora 耽毛羅,” both ancient terms designating the Jeju Island. This view substantially diverges from Lee Seung Jae’s interpretation of “者” (*ja*) in “出背者” (*chulbaeja*) as a conditional and subjunctive function and “毛羅” (*mora*) as a term designating “村” (*chon*) or village. Future developments in this debate are expected.

Silla Wooden Tablets

1) Wooden Tablets from Seongsan Fortress, Haman

The recent linguistics theses on wooden tablets from Seongsan fortress in Haman that have attracted the greatest attention are those by Kim Young Wook (2008), Lee Seung Jae (2009), and Kwon In-han (2008a). The latter of these contained a comprehensive list of Chinese characters depicting proper nouns based on a tentative reading of the wooden tablets that have been unearthed by 2004 and compared them with proper nouns in the *Samguk sagi* (Historical Records of the Three Kingdoms) and *Samguk yusa* (Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms). The comparison disclosed that a remarkable 97.3 percent of characters used in proper nouns, 108 out of a total of 111, were

identical. The paper also discussed their characteristics in terms of the shape of characters and linguistic analyses. By confirming that their shapes were nearly identical with the semi-cursive or cursive style of ancient Chinese penmanship, particularly Northern Wei (see table 2), further support was lent to the established view that the wooden tablets in question were produced during the middle and latter half of the sixth century. Nonetheless, further research into wooden tablets found since 2006 and a multifaceted study of the data on the description of proper nouns is needed.

Table 2. Comparison of Korean and Chinese Styles of Characters Seen in the Haman Wooden Tablet

Character (No. in Order)	私 (6)	烏 (6)	走 (6)	且 (10)	于 (29)	財 (22)	尸 (31)	弗 (32)
Haman								
China	 <small>北魏 张猛龙碑</small>	 <small>北魏 张猛龙碑</small>	 <small>北魏 张猛龙碑</small>	 <small>北魏 张猛龙碑</small>	 <small>北魏 张猛龙碑</small>	 <small>北魏 张猛龙碑</small>	 <small>北魏 张猛龙碑</small>	 <small>北魏 张猛龙碑</small>

Source: Kwon (2008a, 56).

In discussing the No. 48 wooden tablet from the Seongsan fortress in Haman (figure 5), Kim Young Wook (2008) argued that “之” (*ji*) functions as a sentence-final word, disputing the Changwon National Research Institute of Cultural Heritage’s view that “甌鑄十之” (*jojusipji*) should be read as “甌鐵十之” (*jocheolsipji*), meaning “there are 10 *jocheol*.” Given the fact that such a function of “之” does not exist in Chinese written materials, Kim’s brief argument is quite remarkable in that it posits the substantial development of the *idu* writing system in Silla as early as the middle and latter half of the sixth century. This argument was buttressed by Lee Seung Jae (2009), whose examination of wooden tablets un-earthed in 2006 and 2007 reconstructed this

formula, “益丁 < 06-w40 > = *deodyeong > deodeok (Codonopsis lanceolata), 器尺 < 06-w11 > = *gijak > gijang (Chinese millet), 文尸 < 06-w6, 07-w23, 24 > = geul (a piece of writing), 糸利 07-w33 > = *siri > sil (thread).” He thereby provided decisive evidence that the foundation of the Korean writing system using borrowed Chinese characters had been laid down as early as the middle and latter half of the sixth century. Their arguments are significant in that they offered a much earlier genesis for the development of the Korean writing system, *idu*.



Figure 5. No. 48
wooden tablet from
Seongsan fortress in
Haman

2) Wooden Tablets from the Wolseong Moat, Gyeongju

Among the wooden tablets excavated from the Wolseong Moat in Gyeongju, tablet No. 149 has drawn particular interest from Korean linguistic scholars. Historians such as Lee Sung-si (2000) and Yoon Seon-tae (2005) first pioneered research on the development of Silla's *idu* writing system, with later perspectives offered by Kim Young Wook (2007), Chung Jaeyoung (2008), Yoon Seon-tae (2008), and Lee Seung Jae (2009). In the following chapter, this paper will offer some new interpretations of characters from tablet No. 149 and an investigation of how the tablet illuminates the interaction of character usage and writing systems in ancient East Asia.

Recently Lee Seung Jae (2009) discussed wooden tablets from Wolseong moat other than No. 149. He highlighted the existence of the prefinal ending “-在-” (-겨-; -gyeo-) by reading the front of No. 158 wooden tablet from Wolseong moat as “第八巷 第廿三大舍麻新立在節草辛,” meaning “The Eighth Street was constructed by the 23rd Reverend Masin during a time when grass was scarce.” He also cited “-之” (-ji), the last letter in “禾字差作之” as an example of sentence-final word and

argued that the “那” (*na*) in “生那死那” seen on the front of No. 156 wooden tablet might be the conjunctive ending “or.” Lee’s research demonstrated that the wooden tablets unearthed from the Wolseong Moat in Gyeongju resembled those excavated from the Seongsan fortress in Haman, with discoveries from both locations indicating that Silla’s *idu* writing system developed considerably earlier than generally thought.

3) Wooden Tablets from the Anapji Pond, Gyeongju



Figure 6. No. 188 wooden tablet from the Anapji pond in Gyeongju

Arguments from a linguistic viewpoint recently have also been engendered by the discovery of wooden tablets unearthed from Anapji pond in Gyeongju. A line from the No. 188 wooden tablet (figure 6)—“加火魚 助史三入”—was interpreted to mean, “Three *josa* made from *gahwaeo* were put in.” The tablet includes two terms “加火魚” (*gahwaeo*) and “助史” (*josa*), unseen in wooden tablets previously found. Recent research reveals that they are terms used in the Unified Silla era.

With respect to “加火魚” (*gahwaeo*), Kim Young Wook (2007) and Lee Yonghyeon (2007) regarded the second letter “火” as the translation character of “불/불” (fire) and reconstructed the phrase as “가불” (*gabeul*) or “가부리” (*gaburi*), equivalent to the contemporary Korean term “가오리” (*gaori*) meaning stingray. Lee Moon-Key (2005) deciphered “助史” (*josa*) as “court handyman” on account of the meaning of the two Chinese characters. On the other hand, Lee Yonghyeon (2007) and Hashimoto Shigeru (2007) compared “助史” with “加火魚醃” (meaning “salted guts of *gahwaeo* fish”)—a term contained in No. 193 wooden tablet which was unearthed from Anapji pond at the same time—interpreted “助史” as a sound-borrowing notation that indicates that “助史” can be equated with “醃” (*hae*) or salted fish.

Using this treasure trove of unearthed tablets, recent linguistic

studies of Korean writing systems using borrowed Chinese characters have been enlightening and significant. But problems remain. So far, investigations have been confined to the Korean peninsula, neglecting comparisons with China and Japan, which belong to the same Chinese character sphere. Lee Seung Jae (2009, 123) stated, “It is a great breakthrough to confirm the locative case marker “-中” (-*jung*), sentence-final ending “-之” (-*ji*), and conditional and subjunctive marker “-者” (-*ja*) on Baekje wooden tablets. Through this finding, Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla can be integrated into one language.” He expanded the scope of wooden tablets as a medium for researching the language systems of the three ancient Korean dynasties. It could be very dangerous, however, to leap to a language system theory merely based on the grounds that the three examples are confirmed in China and Japan as well. This will be discussed further in the next chapter as it is necessary to expand our attention to the entirety of the Chinese character sphere in East Asia and develop into our discussion on the adoption and adaptation of Chinese characters and written Chinese.

Interaction of Writing Systems in Ancient East Asian Countries

This section provides an overview of the interaction of the ancient writing systems of East Asia with reference to the aforementioned linguistic research, especially by comparing two representative tablets from the Korea and Japan. The examples used are No. 149 wooden tablet from the Wolseong Moat in Gyeongju and No. 421 wooden tablet from Shiga Prefecture, Japan, mentioned above.

Reading and Interpretation of Materials

Let us examine the two wooden tablets under consideration:

1) No. 149 Wooden Tablet from the Wolseong Moat

Built to defend the Wolseong castle, where the Silla palace was situ-



Figure 7. Wooden Tablet the from the Wolseong Moat



Figure 8. Wooden Tablet from Shiga Prefecture, Japan

ated, the Wolseong Moat was constructed in the late fifth century and filled in sometime during the end of the seventh century after the threat of enemy invasion vanished with Silla's unification of the Korean peninsula (Yoon 2005). Accordingly, the wooden tablets unearthed from the moat are presumed to have been created in the sixth or seventh century. No. 149 wooden tablet's faces are deciphered with established interpretations kept in consideration.

The second, eighth, ninth, and tenth characters of the first face of the tablet have sparked much discussion, as seen below:

- ① 大鳥知郎足下萬引白了 (S. Lee 2000, 87)
- ② 大鳥知郎足下万(拜?)白 (Yoon 2005, 134)
- ③ 大鳥知郎足下万引白 | (Y. W. Kim 2007, 179)
- ④ 大鳥知郎足下万拜白 | (J. Chung 2008, 98)
- ⑤ 大鳥知郎足下万拜 | (Yoon 2008, 285)
- ⑥ 大鳥知郎足下万行 | (S. J. Lee 2009, 115)

Initially the second character had been deciphered as “鳥” (*o*) in light of Silla's 15th rank known as *daeoji* 大鳥知, however, most scholars

now read it as “鳥” (*jo*) as indicated above. When compared to the shapes of characters used in Northern Wei and Tang, shown at right,⁴ the second character has been judged to resemble “鳥” (*jo*) more closely than “鳥” (*o*) in its shape. In particular, the character in question is quite similar to the Northern Wei shape. First read as “引” (*in*) or “行” (*haeng*), the eighth character is now read as “拜” (*bae*) most often. Reading this as “引” (*in*) is problematic in that the writing style of the right stroke deviates from the standard; if reading the character as “行” (*haeng*), then the left stroke deviates from the normal writing style. Hence, the eighth character is posited to be the cursive version of “拜” (*bae*), in particular, due to a considerable resemblance with the same character, shown at left, in the fourteenth century Japanese text *Go gumaiki*.⁵ Furthermore, “万拜” (*manbae*) and “白” (*baek*) are traditionally used to indicate courtesy in reports addressed to one’s superiors or elders. This interpretation of the eighth character corresponds well with the rest of the text as one bows and reports to one’s senior or superior.

Read by some as “白了” (*baeng-nyo*) or “白” (*baek*), the ninth



Figure 9. Shapes of Characters Used in Northern Wei and Tang

4. The shapes of writing presented follow the dictionary *Daishogen* 大書源 (Tokyo: Nigensha, 2007), unless specified otherwise.

5. See <http://r-jiten.nabunken.go.jp>.

character is now predominantly read as “白 | .”⁶ This likelihood is heightened when one examines the Japanese writing styles shown at left.⁷ We can safely decipher the two characters as “白 |” because not only is this shape of “白” with the last stroke at the bottom found in wooden tablets unearthed from Heijokyo palace in Japan, the character “之” (*ji*) with an extended downward stroke can also be found in *hiragana*, the cursive Japanese syllabary. While it differs with the shape of “白” and “之,” shown in faces 2 and 3, this inconsistency raises few doubts because a character’s shape often varies in writing (J. Chung 2008, 98). Accordingly, face 1 can be read as “大鳥知郎足下⁸万拜⁹白 | (=之),” consolidating the established views that interpret it as meaning: “The humble Daejosarang cordially reports to you with many obeisances.”

On the tablet’s second face, the ninth and thirteenth characters have engendered controversy as shown below:

- ① 經中入用思買白不雖紙一二斤 (S. Lee 2000, 87)
- ② 經中入用思買白不雖紙一二个 (Yoon 2005, 135)
- ③ 經中入用思買白不雖紙一二个 (Y. W. Kim 2007, 179)
- ④ 經中入用思買白不雖紙一二个 or 个 (J. Chung 2008, 98)
- ⑤ 經中入用思買白不雖紙一二个 (Yoon 2008, 285)
- ⑥ 經中入用思買白不雖紙一二个 (S. J. Lee 2009, 115)

Early on, the ninth character was read as “雖” (*su*; meaning “although”), but nowadays the dominant view interprets it as “雖” (*yu*; meaning “galloping madly”) in view of the shape of the left half of the character. While a definitive reading is impossible in the absence of

6. “ | ” is a *gugyeol* character, which is read as *da*, a sentence-final ending.

7. The writing style of “白” is obtained from *Mokkan jiten* 木簡字典 (Wooden Tablet Dictionary) (Nara: Nara Cultural Property Research Institute, 2008) and searched from <http://jiten.mabunken.go.jp>, and that of “之” is quoted from *Kana kohitsu daijiten* (Large Dictionary of Historical Sites in Gana) (Tokyo: Kakugawa Shoten, 1981).

8. The phrasal word “足下” (*jokha*) literally means “one is below the feet of his or her counterpart” and used in letters and other writing as an honorific term to one’s counterpart.

9. The phrasal word “万拜” (*manbae*) literally means “bowing 10,000 times.” In the sentence, the term means “I bow to you many times or courteously.”

reference materials in writing style dictionaries, we will respect the commonly accepted reading as “躪.” Scholars have tentatively offered three possibilities for the thirteenth character as “斤” (*geun*), “个” (*gae*), or “𠂔” (*ma*). Due to its shape, it is exceedingly unlikely that it is in fact “斤.” Reading it as “个,” however, seems problematic as well, in that the letter resembles the sample right, from many centuries

斤	 北魏 道人僧暈造像記	 唐 昭仁寺碑
个	 平安 藤原行成	 清 趙之謙

later in the Qing dynasty. Lee Seung Jae’s latest argument that the letter can be read as “𠂔,” a character used only in Korea, is thus noteworthy. His explanation is quite convincing when taking into consideration the character’s shape and the syntax as a unit for counting paper. Accordingly, the second face can be read as “經中入用思買白不躪紙¹⁰一二𠂔” and interpreted as “I will buy one or two yards of *baekburyuji* to insert some pages in a scripture.”

There is a consensus in reading the third face as “牒垂賜教在之 後事者命盡” with a relatively transparent meaning, “It was an order given to me by official document. I have completed the assigned tasks exactly as ordered.” Although some read the second character of the fourth face as “官” (*guan*), the prevailing consensus is to read it as “使內” (*sanae*) and interpret it as meaning “done as ordered” or “disposed of as instructed.”

In summation, we can read and interpret No. 149 wooden tablet as follows:

1st face: 大鳥知郎足下万拜白 | (“The humble Daejojirang cordially report to you with many obeisances.”)

2nd face: 經中入用思買白不躪紙一二𠂔 (“I will buy one or two yards of *baekburyuji* for inserting some pages in a scripture.”)

3rd face: 牒垂賜教在之 後事者命盡 (“It was an order given to me by

10. The word “白不躪紙” (*baekburyuji*) is presumed to be a kind of writing paper. The character “躪” (*yu*) has the meaning of “tread” and it may denote “white and not stricken or not trodden paper,” namely unprocessed white paper.

official document. I have completed the assigned tasks exactly as ordered.”)

4th face: 使内 (“It has been disposed of as instructed.”)

2) No. 421 Wooden Tablet Unearthed from Shiga Prefecture, Japan

This wooden tablet was unearthed from Nishigawamori-no-uchi site in Shiga Prefecture, Japan, most likely a regional public office responsible for rice farming (Okimori and Sato 1994). Presumed to have been composed between 675 and 682 (Kobayashi 1998), the tablet had been found early on in Japanese archaeological digs. The interpretation incorporates existing scholarship.

As shown in figure 8, the front of the tablet is in very poor condition. As such there is no alternative but to rely on its reproduction by the Education Commission of the Chizu-machi, Shiga Prefecture. The thirteenth character has proved to be the most difficult to decipher.

- ① 椋直傳之我持往稻者馬不得故我者反來之故是汝トア(=部) (Japanese Society for the Wooden Documents 1990, 192)
- ② 椋□□之我(持往)¹¹稻者(馬不)得故我者反來之故是汝トア(=部) (Okimori and Sato 1994, 93)
- ③ 椋直傳之我持往稻者馬不傳故我者反來之故是汝トア(=部) (Y. W. Kim 2008, 223)

Japanese academic consensus has the controversial thirteenth character as “得” (*deuk*; *doku* in Japanese pronunciation), while Kim Young

Wook, the only Korean scholar to investigate the wooden tablet, reads it as “傳” (*jeon*). When examining the reproduction, the character’s shape resembles “傳” (see Chinese characters from Han Dynasty, shown left). However, it must be noted that the character diverges significantly from the third “傳,” while it

傳	 漢 武威漢簡	 後漢 魯峻碑
得	 漢 武威漢簡	 東晉 王羲之

11. The characters in parentheses are presumed ones.

can also be controversial that the reading was made not from the original but from a reproduction and that the syntax would then be the awkward phrase” a horse cannot convey a message.” Accordingly, despite the merits of Kim’s argument, we must conclude that Okimori Takuya and Sato Makoto correctly judged it to be “得,” from a reading of the original with an infrared camera. Scholars agree on the interpretation of the tablet’s front face, which can be rendered as “I, Ryochoyoku, have a message for you: because I did not get any horse, I could not trade the rice I carried so I have had to return. Now, you, Urabe, . . .”

As the condition of the back side is good, scholarly consensus is to read the text as “自舟人率而可行也 其稻在處者衣知評平留五十戶旦波博士家.” The text is quite straightforward: “(Now, you, Urabe) will have to go there, leading a party of boatmen. The rice is left at the residence of Craftsman Tanba, Heiru-sato village, Echi-kohori county.”

Combined together, the text reads:

- ① 棕直傳之 (“I, Ryochoyoku , have a message for you.”)
- ② 我持往稻者馬不得故我者反來之 (“Because I did not get any horse I could not trade the rice I carried, I have had to return.”)
- ③ 故是汝トア自舟人率而可行也 (“Now, you, Urabe, will yourself have to go there, leading a party of boatmen.”)
- ④ 其稻在處者衣知評平留五十戶旦波博士家 (“The rice is left at the residence of Craftsman Tanba, Heiru-sato (village), Echi-kohori (county)”)

The Evolution of the Chinese-Borrowing Writing System

This section examines the interaction between ancient East Asian writing cultures, focusing on the wooden tablets of Korea and Japan, which were introduced in the previous section. First, we discuss the development of the Korean writing system using borrowed Chinese characters, centering on the word order, and the consistency of characters used in the writing system. In particular, we are interested in the genesis and development of *idu*, which used Chinese characters in conjunction with special markers that functioned as Korean verb end-

ings and other native Korean grammar structures. Furthermore, this section investigates the influence exerted by such Korean innovations on similar Japanese efforts to develop their own writing systems.

1) Word Order

In terms of the word order, it is characteristic that the arrangement of Chinese characters, as seen in the above-mentioned interpretations of the two wooden tablets, follows that of the Korean and Japanese languages, which deviate from that of traditional Chinese writing. For instance, the Chinese term “故是” (*gosi*; *koze* in Japanese pronunciation) is reversed and written as “是故” (*sigo*; *zeco* in Japanese pronunciation) on the front of the wooden tablet from Shiga Prefecture. Such reversed word order is often found in unearthened relics of the ancient three Korean kingdoms and ancient Japan.¹² This can be seen as an inevitable outcome resulting from the process of overcoming linguistic differences between Chinese, an isolation language, and Korean and Japanese, which are agglutinative languages.

2) Characters Used in the Chinese-Borrowing Writing System

To begin with, the consistent appearance of the sentence-final word “-之” (*-ji*) and the topic marker “-者” (*-ja*) is notable in the Chinese-borrowing writing system. The character “-之” marking the end of a sentence is seen not only in “大鳥知郎足下万拜白 | (=之)” shown in face 1 of the Wolseong moat wooden tablet (hereafter Wolseong tablet) and “牒垂賜教在之” shown in face 3 of the same, but also in “棕直傳之” and “我者反來之,” which both appear in the front face of the wooden tablet from Shiga Prefecture (hereafter Shiga tablet). The origin of the use of “-之” as a sentence-final word is still under debate. Kim Byung-Joon (2009) highlighted similar usages of “-之” in unearthened wooden tablets from Qin and Han China. He argued that the particular usage had been transmitted to Korea and Japan in the form of *sutizi* (vul-

12. An example in case is the Stele with the Inscription of Hwarang's Oath (Imsinseogiseok), which is dubbed Hwarang's oath style. On comparison and review of general examples in Korea and Japan, refer to Okimori Takuya (2008).

gar-style scripts of Chinese).

- (1) ① 而令，丞弗明知，甚不便，今且令人案行之，舉亥不從令者，致以律 (“Yushu” [Volume on Language], in *Yunmeng shuihudi qinjian* [Qin Bamboo Slips at Shuihudi in Yunmeng County])
- ② 爲都官及縣效律：甚有贏，不備，物值之，以其價多者罪之 (“Qinlu shibazhong” [Eighteen Laws of Qin], in *Yunmeng shuihudi qinjian* [Qin Bamboo Slips at Shuihudi in Yunmeng County])
- ③ 諸侯人來攻盜，不堅守而棄去之若降之，及謾反者，皆要斬 (“Zeilu” 1-2 in *Ernian luling* [The Law in Second Year], excavated at Zhangjiashan)
- ④ 駕傳馬，一食禾，其顛來又一食禾，皆八馬共，其數駕，毋過日一食，駕縣馬勞，又益壹禾之 (“Qinlu shibazhong” [Eighteen Laws of Qin], in *Yunmeng shuihudi qinjian* [Qin Bamboo Slips at Shuihudi in Yunmeng County])

According to Kim Byung-Joon (2009, 46-47), it is problematic to regard “-之” as a denominative pronoun. As evidence, he asserted that “案行之” (meaning “to tour and observe many places and then implement”) in example (1)-① and “罪之” (meaning “crimes are accounted for”) in example (1)-② lack a subject; furthermore, “-之” in “棄去之若降之” (meaning “in the event something is abandoned or one surrenders”) in example (1)-③ possesses no meaning at all. Thus, Kim maintains that the character in question cannot be definitely identified as functioning as a sentence-final word, as it follows verbs in the three examples. In the case of example (1)-④, which has the phrase “又益壹禾之” (meaning “to provide feed once more”), he notes that “-之” is used as a sentence-final word on the grounds that it follows a verb and even if the character is omitted, the meaning is not altered.

Accordingly, the use of the sentence-final word “-之” seen in the two wooden tablets of Korea and Japan may well have been developed through incorporating their Qin and Han counterparts in vulgar-style scripts of Chinese. In addition, as shown in the following examples, the writing system first evolved in Qin and Han, then spread to Goguryeo, Baekje, Silla, and finally to Japan.

- (2) ① 其有違令賣者刑之 買人制令守墓之 (“Anyone who sells in violation of the decree shall be punished, while anyone who buys in like manner shall be made to tend graves by the pertinent regulations.”) (From the King Gwanggaeto Stele of Goguryeo, erected in 414).
- ② 五月中 高麗太王祖王 令□新羅寐錦 世世爲願 如兄如弟 上下相和 守天 東來之 (“During the fifth month, the grandfather [King Jangsu] of King Tae [also known as King Munja] came of Goguryeo east to join Maegum from Silla to forge—as had been wished for generations—brotherhood whereby people of both higher and lower positions would maintain harmonious relations so that Heaven could be upheld concertedly.”) (From the Goguryeo Stele in Jungwon, presumed to have been erected in 495).
- ③ 丙戌 十二月中 漢城下後 小兒文達 節 自此西北行涉之 (“During the 12th month of the Year of the Dog, Sohyeong Mundal from the Hanseong region was named to command and defend the area northwest from here.”) (From the No. 4 Inscribed Stone on the Wall of Pyeongyang, made in 566).
- ④ 于時教之 (“It was instructed at this time.”) (Silla Stele in Bongpyeong, Uljin, presumed to have been erected in 524)
- ⑤ 殂鐵十之 (“There are ten *jocheol*.”) (From the No. 48 Wooden Tablet from Seongsan Fortress, Haman; presumed to have been produced in the mid-or late sixth century)
- ⑥ □□□□合五人之 (“There are five people with □□□□ included.”) (From the Stele by King Jinheung of Silla Period in Danyang, presumed to have been erected in 550).
- ⑦ 若國不安 大亂世 可容行誓之 (“If the country becomes destabilized and falls into severe turmoil, I swear to act in a fully acceptable way.”) (From the Stele with the Inscription of Hwarang’s Oath, presumed to have been erected in 552).
- ⑧ 十三日 了作 事之 (“... completed this task on the 13th day of the month.”) (From the Stele for the Embankment Completion in the Year of Musul, presumed to have been erected in 578).

One valuable illustration of the geographical movement of Chinese characters and character-based writing systems can be found in the

dissemination of “之” as a sentence-final word. The propagation from Goguryeo (early fifth century) to Silla (early sixth century) is well delineated in the inscriptions given below. However, no extant epitaphs are available from Baekje. As the marker appeared in the wooden tablet from Neungsan-ri site, made in the early sixth century, and Japan’s No. 421 wooden tablet, presumed to have been made in the seventh century, as discussed in the previous section, it is clear that usage spread south from Goguryeo to Baekje and Silla and then across the sea to Japan.

When discussing the adaptation of Chinese characters and written Chinese, Silla examples 5, 6, and 8, reproduced above, are significant. In these cases, “之” functions as a predicative following a numeral noun. This usage is exceedingly rare in Chinese artifacts and therefore indicates that it was independently adapted and developed in Silla. In this respect, we can surmise that *idu* was initiated in earnest in the mid- or late sixth century.

Second, the topic marker “-者” (*-ja*) is shown in the phrase “後事者命盡” in the third face of the Wolseong Moat tablet and in phrases like “我持往稻者,” “我者反來之” and “其稻在處者” in the front and back of the Shiga Prefecture tablet. The character “者” is primarily used as a kind of demonstrative pronoun, to indicate “a person” or “a thing,” for example: “知者不惑 仁者不憂 勇者不懼,” meaning “A wise person has no doubt about right and wrong; a benevolent person has no worries; a courageous person has no fears” (“Xianwen” [Xian Asked], in *Lunyu* [The Analects]). As topic markers are essential in both Korean and Japanese, “者” appears to have been utilized in both languages when transliterating Chinese phrases. In particular, the “者” that appears in “我者反來之” on the front of Japan’s No. 421 wooden tablet, along with “之,” unambiguously show their functions as topic markers since both characters may be eliminated in traditional written Chinese. Although no such definitive materials are available from Goguryeo, these topic markers have been confirmed in the phrase “其身者如黑也,” shown in the wooden tablet from the Neungsan-ri temple site in Buyeo, evidencing that this usage was developed in Korea and then transferred to Japan.

Another key piece of data can be found in the locative case marker “中” (*jung*) in “經中入用思” from the second face of the Wolseong moat wooden tablet. After the discovery of the Inariyama Sword,¹³ scholars in both Korea and Japan displayed keen interest in its inscription which begins with the sentence “辛亥年七月中記,” was unearthed (K. Lee 1981). Fujimoto Yukio (1986) and Kim Byung-Joon (2009) have amply demonstrated that the locative case marker “中” (*jung*) like the topic marker “者” (*ja*) spread from China to Goguryeo, southward down the Korean peninsula to Silla and Baekje and then across to the Japanese archipelago.¹⁴ The character “中” (*jung*) in “經中入用思” is a clear incidence in which it functioned as a locative case marker following a noun, a usage rarely found in China. This again confirms that Silla skillfully adapted written Chinese to suit local linguistic conventions. The honorific ending “賜” (*sa*) used in “牒垂賜教在之” on the third face of the Wolseong tablet is worth comparing to the same character seen in the inscription “大命受賜而,” which appears on the bronze Yakushi and Amida Nyorai statues at Horyuji temple in Japan, and the phrase “恐夕受賜申大夫前” recorded in the wooden tablet unearthed from the Fujihara-kyo site;¹⁵ in both Japanese texts, “賜” functions as an auxiliary verb expressing respect to the subject. The similarity between the Korean and Japanese cases is not consid-

13. Inariyama Sword is an iron sword excavated at the Inariyama burial mound in 1968. It is known as the oldest example of *manyogana* 万葉仮名, an ancient writing system that employs Chinese characters to represent the Japanese language.

14. Major samples are given below:

- ① 居某里 泗四月中盜牛 去亡以命 . . . (From “Jinbulu,” in *Qinlu shibazhong* [Eighteen Decrees of the State of Qin])
- ② 辭故卅井候官令史泗五鳳三年中爲候官 (From *Juyan hanjian* [Documents of the Han Dynasty on Wooden Slips])
- ③ □大夫事 八月一日中賊曹史 郭邁白 (From the Sun-Wu slips unearthed at Zoumalou, Changsha)
- ④ 延壽元年太歲在卯三月中 (From the Lidded Silver Bowl with Inscription, excavated at Seobongchong Tomb in Gyeongju)
- ⑤ 乙丑年九月中沙嚙部 . . . (From the Petroglyphs in Cheonjeon-ri, Ulju)
- ⑥ 戊寅年六月中/佐官貸食記 (From a wooden tablet excavated in Ssangbuk-ri, Buyeo)
- ⑦ 辛亥年七月中記 (From the Inscription on Inariyama Iron Sword)

15. Quoted from Kobayashi Yoshinori (1998, 49).

ered to be accidental.










Through a close investigation of prominent example texts, we have considered the origins and dissemination of a few key characters employed in the Chinese-borrowing writing system. Data provided by recent archaeological excavations in Japan and Korea have allowed us to trace the spread of written Chinese from its origins in China to the Korean peninsula and then finally to Japan and gain a glimpse of how ancient Koreans adapted Chinese characters.

The Shapes and Script Styles of Chinese Characters

The evolution of Chinese-borrowing writing systems in ancient East Asian countries will be briefly reviewed in this section based mainly on materials concerning the shapes of characters found in wooden tablets from Haman, Buyeo, and elsewhere, in addition to those Chinese characters used in simplified and other various forms.

1) The Shapes of Characters

The first character under examination, “フ,” the simplified form of “部” (*bu*), appears as the last character on the front of the No. 421 wooden tablet from Shiga Prefecture. As shown below, textual mate-





Goguryeo					
	Pyongyang Castle No. 4 Stone				
Baekje					
	Neungsan-ri No. 301	Gungnamji Pond No. 295			
Silla					
	Seongsan Fortress No. 7				
Japan					
	Shigaken No. 421	Heijokyo No. 91	Heijokyo No. 83	Heijokyo No. 100	Heijokyo No. 426

rials from Goguryeo, Silla, and Baekje also exhibit instances of similar shapes for this character.

From the outset, the similarity between the Goguryeo and Baekje examples is quite striking; in fact, this distinctive shape continues in several instances of seventh-century wooden tablets from Japan (from No. 421 to Heijokyo No. 83). Although it is notable that the character in the wooden tablet from Haman during the Silla dynasty resembles the shape of “フ” in *katakana*, it is clearly distinctive from the shape of the *katakana* character “フ” found in the eighth-century Japanese wooden tablets (Heijokyo No. 100–Heijokyo No. 426). In this respect, it would be appropriate to view the character in the wooden tablet from Haman as descending from that of Goguryeo and Baekje. As far as in terms of the simplified form of “部” in Japanese, it appears certain that script styles of the ancient Korean kingdoms influenced those in the early Japanese wooden tablets.¹⁶

Next, as an example of a variant form of a Chinese character, we can cite “紙” (*ji*) appearing in the third face of the Wolseong Moat wooden tablet, which adds a “巾” (*geon*) below “紙.” This character rarely appears in Chinese texts but is often seen in Japanese materials.

As we can see in the above reproductions, the same variant from the Wolseong tablets can be found in a number of Japanese wooden

			
Wolseong Moat No. 149	Heijokyo 1709	Heijokyo	Kawahara Keimaro

16. Hirakawa Minami (2007, 24) also argued that the style of the character “部” (*bu*) in No. 7 wooden tablet from Seongsan Fortrees carried on to the characteristics of Japan’s seventh-century wooden plates.

tablets, including No. 1708 unearthed in Heijokyo, and in Kawahara Keimaro’s handwriting (Kitakawa 1981, 912). These instances suggest the existence of mutual influence between Korea and Japan with respect to the shapes of Chinese characters. Further research is needed into the exchange and dissemination of the shapes of characters through materials on variant forms of characters.

2) The Script Styles

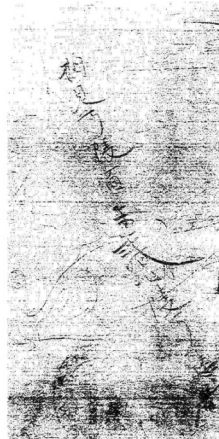
Compound script styles, primarily semi-cursive, occur in all Silla and Baekje wooden tablets (S. B. Lee 2004; Son 2004; Ko 2007). No. 5 wooden tablet from Seongsan fortress in Haman had garnered particular interest as it provides a glimpse into the interaction between Goguryeo, Silla, and Japan.



Ink Scripts
on the Wall of
Sunheung Tomb



No. 5 Wooden
Tablet from
Seongsan Fortress



An Ink Inscription at
Horyuji Temple

Figure 10. No. 5 Wooden Tablet from Seongsan Fortress and Related Chinese Scripts

The last strokes in all three examples share a commonality in that the final strokes extend far to the right (Hirakawa 2007, 23). The tomb mural at Eumnae-ri, Sunheung-myeon, Yeongju is known to have

been created in or around 539 under the influence of Goguryeo. Furthermore, chances are high that the No. 5 wooden tablet from Seongsan fortress in Haman was made in the mid- or late sixth century in the Guribeol area,¹⁷ perhaps in Gyeongsangbuk-do province. It may be presumed that the specific script style that appears in both tablets was common in the border areas of Goguryeo and Silla. In addition, we can posit that this script style crossed over to Japan, as evident in the Chinese script styles seen in texts from the golden hall of Hyoryuji temple. Further in-depth studies are necessary.

Evolution of Characters

Finally, the last character on the first face of the Wolseong moat wooden tablet is significant as it suggests a mutual relationship in the development of *gugyeol*, which were simplified Chinese characters used to indicate Korean suffixes, and *hiragana*, the cursive Japanese syllabary. In the above, I presented some materials of *hiragana*, cursive Japanese syllabary, as cases showing that the character can be read as the *gugyeol* character “ㄷ,” equating to “之.” In all three countries—Korea, Japan, and China—the “grass-hand” style of “之” generally features a dot at the top of the character. In contrast, the *gugyeol* form “ㄷ” and the Japanese *hiragana* character “し” (支) not only omit the dot but also use long downward strokes. This similarity gives rise to a proposition that the congruence between Korea and Japan was not accidental. According to “*Hiragana Writing Style Table*,” an annex to Kobayashi Yoshinori’s research in 1998, “之” was seemed

17. Academics slightly differ on the location of Guribeol. Kim Chang Ho and Lee Kyoungsup cite Haman, Gyeongsangnam-do province, Ju Bo-don, Okcheon, Chungcheongbuk-do, Yun Seon-tae, Bukbu, Gyeongsangbuk-do, and Lee Yonhyeon, Okcheon, Chungcheongbuk-do, or Uiseong, Gyeongsangbuk-do. I’m inclined to follow Prof. Yoon’s estimation on an assumption that it, in view of the style of handwriting, can be near Sunheung where ancient tombs with murals were unearthed. Also taken into account is that Guribeol wooden tablets have refined semi-cursive style of Chinese penmanship, distinguishable from that of wooden tablets unearthed from Seongsan fortress.

identical with ordinary “grass-hand” characters at the early stage of its appearance, then between the early tenth and early fifteenth centuries showed a style similar to Korea’s “ㄷ,” and has since morphed to “し,” still in use today.

In the Wolseong Moat tablet, we may have uncovered the origin of “ㄷ,” the predecessor to the *hiragana* character “し.” As we unearth and identify more instances of “之” used at the end of sentences, the greater our certainty becomes that it functions as a sentence finishing marker. Further research will advance understanding in its *idu* usage and further distinguish it from the original function of “之.” As discussed earlier, the *idu* usage of “之” was developed in the mid- to-late sixth century. In a similar context, it may be appropriate to regard “ㄷ,” which occurs at the end of a sentence in the sixth to seventh century Wolseong tablet, as the symbolization of “之” achieved by transforming the character’s “grass-hand” style.¹⁸ The sentence ending marker “之” was commonly employed in seventh and eighth century texts in both Korea and Japan as shown in the phrase “白之,” meaning “someone says” (Y. W. Kim 2008; J. Chung 2009).¹⁹ If these developments in Silla were transferred to Japan through some route, we can presume that “ㄷ” functioned as the predecessor to the *hiragana* character “し.” In the absence of written materials supporting this proposition other than the Wolseong Moat wooden tablet, the argument can only be extended this far and further explorations on this matter remain to be made.

18. Note that the character “之” (*ji*) in the wooden tablet No. 1484 (3-1)—the number of which was given according to the numbering in Ham Sun-seop (2007)—unearthed from the Anapji pond is also written in the semi-cursive style of Chinese penmanship, a way distinguished from other characters on the wooden tablet.

19. Korea: 大鳥知郎 足下 万拜 白ㄷ (=之) (From the wooden tablet from Wolseong Moat; sixth or seventh century)

洗宅 白之 (“I, Setaek, dare to tell you, sir.”) (From No. 1484 (3-1) wooden tablet from Anapji Pond; late eighth century)

Japan: 大徳 芳子沈 前 頓首 拜 白之 (“I dare to tell Daitoku Hojisin, bowing my head.”) (From the wooden tablet from Koshikida site, Saitama prefecture; late seventh century).

Conclusion

Through a close examination of wooden tablets, this article explored the Chinese character cultural zone that constituted the entirety of ancient East Asia, revealing the interactions among China, Korea, and Japan via the medium of Chinese characters and scripts. To that end, the article first presented a close reading and interpretation of two wooden tablets, unearthed in Korea and Japan, respectively. Continuing with an examination of the evolution of East Asian writing systems, the paper focused on three aspects—the development of the Chinese-borrowing writing system, the introduction of and adaptations in the shapes of Chinese characters, and the shapes of Chinese scripts and the evolution of characters. These investigations again confirmed that East Asian writing systems flowed from mainland China to the Korean peninsula and then to the islands of Japan.

Further researches into the specific linguistic histories of the three countries, examining and comparing their commonalities and differences, are expected to broaden our understanding of the linguistic and writing systems of ancient East Asian countries.

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GLOSSARY

<i>Bulguksa seoseoktap</i>	佛國寺西石塔重修	<i>Samguk yusa</i>	三國遺事
<i>jungsuhyeongjigi</i>	形止記	<i>sutizi</i> (Ch.)	俗體字
<i>Ernian luling</i> (Ch.)	二年律令	Xianwen (Ch.)	憲問
<i>Jwagwan daesikgi</i>	佐官貸食記	<i>Yunmeng shuihudi</i>	雲夢睡虎地
<i>Lunyu</i> (Ch.)	論語	<i>qinjian</i> (Ch.)	秦簡
<i>Samguk sagi</i>	三國史記		

(Ch.: Chinese)