

Hanja Education in Korean Elementary Schools

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## Introduction

There is a continuing debate in Korea on whether Hanja should be reintroduced into the public elementary school curriculum. Ever since Hanja's removal from elementary schools and restriction from public middle and high schools in the 1970s, Korean citizens' views on the importance of Hanja education have shifted.<sup>1</sup> Many now believe that learning Hanja is not necessary and will only lead to increased academic stress on already overloaded students.<sup>2</sup> On the contrary, historians and government officials disagree and argue that Hanja education should be preserved because of its cultural and historical impact.<sup>3</sup>

## Literature Review

### *History of Hanja Education*

The first recorded usage of Hanja in Korea was in 400 BCE, however, Hanja was not prominently used until the Three Kingdoms Period which ranged from 57 BCE to 668 CE.<sup>4</sup> The three kingdoms of Baekje, Silla, and Goguryeo were all heavily influenced by their Chinese neighbors.<sup>5</sup> Through interactions with China, Buddhist teachings along with other texts were introduced to the kingdoms which lead to the development of multiple writing systems derived

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<sup>1</sup> Yoon, Min-sik. "‘Hanja’ Education in Elementary Schools Stirs Dispute." *www.koreaherald.com*, 21 Sept. 2015, [www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20150921001084](http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20150921001084).

<sup>2</sup> Go, Billy. "Do You Need HANJA to Speak Korean? + Interview with Koreans." *www.youtube.com*, 13 Oct. 2017, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ExaFV19R-qU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ExaFV19R-qU).

<sup>3</sup> Lee, Jerry. "Semioscapes, Unbanality, and the Reinvention of Nationness: Global Korea as Nation-Space." *Verge: Studies in Global Asias*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2017, pp. 107–136. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/vergstudglobasia.3.1.0107](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/vergstudglobasia.3.1.0107).

<sup>4</sup> Cartwright, Mark. "Three Kingdoms Period in Korea." *World History Encyclopedia*, 5 Oct. 2016, [www.worldhistory.org/Three\\_Kingdoms\\_Period\\_in\\_Korea/](http://www.worldhistory.org/Three_Kingdoms_Period_in_Korea/).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

from Hanja such as Idu and Hyangch'al.<sup>6</sup> Although access to reading and writing were greatly increased during this time period, Hanja was primarily reserved for the upper class who could afford access to an education.<sup>7</sup>

Hangul, the most predominant writing system in modern Korea, was invented in 1443 by King Sejong the Great who ruled during the Joseon dynasty ranging from 1392 to 1910.<sup>8</sup> Unlike Hanja, Hangul is a phonetic alphabet consisting of 14 consonants and 10 vowels.<sup>9</sup> The invention of Hangul provided poor Koreans who could not pursue extensive education the opportunity to learn how to read and write.<sup>10</sup> But many elitist government officials opposed this idea out of fear that educating the lower classes would destabilize the social and political order.<sup>11</sup>

The Seonbi scholars of the Joseon dynasty continued to promote the usage of Hanja instead of Hangul, and it was not until the 19th and early 20th century that Korea made the transition from primarily using Hanja to using Hangul.<sup>12</sup> Hanja's usage in Korea was quickly

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<sup>6</sup> Mair, Victor H. "Buddhism and the Rise of the Written Vernacular in East Asia: The Making of National Languages." *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 53, no. 3, Aug. 1994, pp. 707–751. *JSTOR*, 10.2307/2059728. Accessed 29 Sept. 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Lee, Jerry. "Semioscapes, Unbanality, and the Reinvention of Nationness: Global Korea as Nation-Space." *Verge: Studies in Global Asias*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2017, pp. 107–136. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/vergstudglobasia.3.1.0107](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/vergstudglobasia.3.1.0107).

<sup>8</sup> Alper, Tim. "What Korea's Chinese Characters Mean to Modern Koreans." *Korea.net*, 8 May 2017, [m.korea.net/english/NewsFocus/Column/view?articleId=145751](http://m.korea.net/english/NewsFocus/Column/view?articleId=145751).

<sup>9</sup> Tavassoli, Nader T., and Jin K. Han. "Scripted Thought: Processing Korean Hancha and Hangul in a Multimedia Context." *Journal of Consumer Research*, vol. 28, no. 3, 2001, pp. 482–493. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/323735](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/323735).

<sup>10</sup> Alper, Tim. "What Korea's Chinese Characters Mean to Modern Koreans." *Korea.net*, 8 May 2017, [m.korea.net/english/NewsFocus/Column/view?articleId=145751](http://m.korea.net/english/NewsFocus/Column/view?articleId=145751).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

revitalized during the 1910-1945 Japanese annexation of Korea, which introduced additional Hanja characters to Koreans.<sup>13</sup> Through annexation, the Japanese became in charge of Korean education, and as a result many of the words formed by Hanja characters in school textbooks have strong Japanese influence.<sup>14</sup> In 1971, Hanja was removed from elementary schools and restricted from public middle and high school curricula.<sup>15</sup>

Despite being written solely in Hangul, many Korean students have difficulty understanding the content of textbooks as many of the words are derived from Hanja.<sup>16</sup> In 2013 the Seoul Metropolitan Office of Education decided to address this issue by announcing the restoration of Hanja education in Seoul elementary schools.<sup>17</sup> The Seoul government faced a lot of backlash from parents, students, and Hangul advocates alike who formed the Headquarters for Movement Against Hanja in Elementary School Textbooks, which threatened to demand the resignation of Education Minister Hwang Woo-yea if the policy were implemented.<sup>18</sup> The group argued that the government was not working towards students' best interests, but was instead motivated by economic incentives.<sup>19</sup> The Hanja education industry in Korea makes 10 billion

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<sup>13</sup> Lee, Dae-ro. "Hanja Harms Korean Education." *Koreajoongangdaily.joins.com*, 2 Aug. 2013, [koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2013/08/02/columns/Hanja-harms-Korean-education/2975527.html](http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2013/08/02/columns/Hanja-harms-Korean-education/2975527.html).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Yoon, Min-sik. "'Hanja' Education in Elementary Schools Stirs Dispute." *www.koreaherald.com*, 21 Sept. 2015, [www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20150921001084](http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20150921001084).

<sup>16</sup> Lee, Dae-ro. "Hanja Harms Korean Education." *Koreajoongangdaily.joins.com*, 2 Aug. 2013, [koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2013/08/02/columns/Hanja-harms-Korean-education/2975527.html](http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2013/08/02/columns/Hanja-harms-Korean-education/2975527.html).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Yoon, Min-sik. "'Hanja' Education in Elementary Schools Stirs Dispute." *www.koreaherald.com*, 21 Sept. 2015, [www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20150921001084](http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20150921001084).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

won (\$8.90 million) annually, and over 50 percent of Hanja certification test takers are elementary school students.<sup>20</sup> Parents who wish to educate their young children are now forced to enroll their children in Hagwons and purchase Hagseubji, both of which can have exorbitant prices.<sup>21</sup>

### *Benefits of Learning Hanja*

There are multiple benefits of learning Hanja. For instance, over 70 percent of Korean words have Sino-Korean origin.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, by understanding the characteristics of basic Hanja characters, one can infer the meanings behind more complex Hanja words, making it easier to learn Korean vocabulary.<sup>23</sup> Learning Hanja is also beneficial for students pursuing careers in law, government, or medicine as Sino-Korean words are unusually prevalent in those career fields.<sup>24</sup> Despite having Chinese origin, Hanja is a distinct writing system that is unique to Korea and contains a lot of cultural and historical relevance.<sup>25</sup> Hanja is also useful for the marketing

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<sup>20</sup> Lee, Dae-ro. "Hanja Harms Korean Education." *Koreajoongangdaily.joins.com*, 2 Aug. 2013, [koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2013/08/02/columns/Hanja-harms-Korean-education/2975527.html](http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2013/08/02/columns/Hanja-harms-Korean-education/2975527.html); Yoon, Min-sik. "'Hanja' Education in Elementary Schools Stirs Dispute." *www.koreaherald.com*, 21 Sept. 2015, [www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20150921001084](http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20150921001084).

<sup>21</sup> Sang-hee, Han. "Private Tutoring Costs Unbridled." *The Korea Times*, 6 Apr. 2011, [www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2011/04/113\\_84636.html](http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2011/04/113_84636.html).

<sup>22</sup> Jung, Min, and Young-mee Yu Cho. "Chinese Character Education in Teaching Korean as a Foreign Language: A New Paradigm of Cognitive Expansion (외국어로서 한국어 교육에서 한자 교육의 문제점과 개선방향)." *The Korean Language in America*, vol. 11, 2006, pp. 64–83. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/42922348](http://www.jstor.org/stable/42922348).

<sup>23</sup> Muscanto, Isaac. (2019). Studying Hanja-Based Syllables Improves Korean Vocabulary Retention. Retrieved from the University of Minnesota Digital Conservancy, <https://hdl.handle.net/11299/202587>.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Lee, Jerry. "Semioscapes, Unbanality, and the Reinvention of Nationness: Global Korea as Nation-Space." *Verge: Studies in Global Asias*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2017, pp. 107–136. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/vergstudglobasia.3.1.0107](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/vergstudglobasia.3.1.0107).

practices of Korean companies due to its logographic nature.<sup>26</sup> Research suggests that people are able to read logographic alphabets quicker than phonographic alphabets such as Hangul, making Hanja suitable for billboards and other forms of advertisement.<sup>27</sup> The study suggested that participants had an easier time associating logos and words written in Hanja than in Hangul.<sup>28</sup> Hanja is still present in advertisements, newspapers, and official documents.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, because Hanja characters are derived from Chinese, being familiar with Hanja can help with learning Mandarin. There is an increasing demand for learning Mandarin as evidenced by the rapid increase in percentage of high schools offering Chinese classes from 8.8 percent in 2000 to 36.8 percent in 2012.<sup>30</sup>

#### *Disadvantages of Learning Hanja*

A main concern of parents with the reintroduction of Hanja education in elementary schools is the correlation between Hanja education and increased academic stress on students.<sup>31</sup> Learning Hanja is both difficult and time consuming, therefore diminishing students' ability to learn the language.<sup>32</sup> In Korea, many students use the method of “advanced learning” to stay

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<sup>26</sup> Tavassoli, Nader T., and Jin K. Han. “Scripted Thought: Processing Korean Hancha and Hangul in a Multimedia Context.” *Journal of Consumer Research*, vol. 28, no. 3, 2001, pp. 482–493. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/323735](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/323735).

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 482–493.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 482–493.

<sup>29</sup> Go, Billy. “Do You Need HANJA to Speak Korean? + Interview with Koreans.” [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ExaFV19R-qU), 13 Oct. 2017, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ExaFV19R-qU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ExaFV19R-qU).

<sup>30</sup> Choi, 2015. Quoted in Kang, Hyeon-Seok. “Is English Being Challenged by Mandarin in South Korea?” *English Today*, vol. 33, no. 4, 10 July 2017, pp. 40–46. *Cambridge Core*, 10.1017/s0266078417000220.

<sup>31</sup> Yoon, Min-sik. “‘Hanja’ Education in Elementary Schools Stirs Dispute.” [www.koreaherald.com](http://www.koreaherald.com), 21 Sept. 2015, [www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20150921001084](http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20150921001084).

<sup>32</sup> Jung, Min, and Young-mee Yu Cho. “Chinese Character Education in Teaching Korean as a Foreign Language: A New Paradigm of Cognitive Expansion (외국어로서 한국어 교육에서 한자 교육의

ahead in school.<sup>33</sup> This leads to many children gaining unnecessary early exposure to Hanja.<sup>34</sup> Learning Hanja also encourages a class divide as the wealthier a person is, or the higher social status a person has, the greater the likelihood that they know Hanja.<sup>35</sup> This is partially due to the availability of private education in Korea. Exclusive Hagwons can cost upwards of 10 million won (\$8,430) per month.<sup>36</sup> Additionally, high paying jobs which require extensive education have unusually high rates of Sino-Korean words, making knowledge of Hanja highly recommended in order to be successful in those fields.<sup>37</sup> Many Koreans argue that the simplicity of Hangul makes it unnecessary to learn Hanja.<sup>38</sup> Since Hangul is purely Korean in origin, Koreans tend to have a great sense of national pride over using Hangul.<sup>39</sup>

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of my study is to analyze Korean citizens' perceptions of early Hanja education in Korean elementary schools. My background literature explores the benefits and

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<sup>33</sup> Yoon, Min-sik. “‘Hanja’ Education in Elementary Schools Stirs Dispute.” *www.koreaherald.com*, 21 Sept. 2015, [www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20150921001084](http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20150921001084).

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Lee, Jerry. “Semioscapes, Unbanality, and the Reinvention of Nationness: Global Korea as Nation-Space.” *Verge: Studies in Global Asia*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2017, pp. 107–136. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/vergstudglobasia.3.1.0107](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/vergstudglobasia.3.1.0107).

<sup>36</sup> Sang-hee, Han. “Private Tutoring Costs Unbridled.” *The Korea Times*, 6 Apr. 2011, [www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2011/04/113\\_84636.html](http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2011/04/113_84636.html).

<sup>37</sup> Muscanto, Isaac. (2019). Studying Hanja-Based Syllables Improves Korean Vocabulary Retention. Retrieved from the University of Minnesota Digital Conservancy, <https://hdl.handle.net/11299/202587>.

<sup>38</sup> Go, Billy. “Do You Need HANJA to Speak Korean? + Interview with Koreans.” *www.youtube.com*, 13 Oct. 2017, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ExaFV19R-qU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ExaFV19R-qU).

<sup>39</sup> Mair, Victor H. “Buddhism and the Rise of the Written Vernacular in East Asia: The Making of National Languages.” *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 53, no. 3, Aug. 1994, pp. 707–751. *JSTOR*, 10.2307/2059728. Accessed 29 Sept. 2021

drawbacks of learning Hanja as a native Korean speaker, while the individual survey results provide first-hand testimonies on South Koreans' stances on Hanja education.

## Methods and Procedures

### *Data collection*

I conducted a qualitative study in which I analyzed the survey responses of ten students who have had a public school education in Korea. I asked participants multiple questions regarding their experiences with Hanja education as well as their opinions on the South Korean government's approach to Hanja education. Participants were gathered using convenience sampling and with the exception of one "yes or no" question which collected background information, all questions were open ended to help eliminate answer-option bias. I provided Korean translations to all of the questions and allowed participants to answer in whichever language they felt most comfortable.

### *Data Analysis*

I used thematic analysis to analyze my data. I first reviewed the responses and proceeded to summarize the main ideas as "codes." All of the "codes" were then categorized into major themes where I was able to determine which themes were present throughout the student responses.

## Results

### *Experience Learning Hanja*

Question 2.1 (see Appendix) provides background information on whether the participants have been taught Hanja. Six of the ten participants were exposed to Hanja education while living in Korea. In Question 2.2 (see Appendix), these participants were asked in which stage of their education they began learning Hanja. Four of the participants began learning Hanja

in elementary school, while one participant learned Chinese in elementary school, and one participant began learning Hanja in middle school. When participants were asked in Question 2.3 (see Appendix) about their experiences with learning Hanja, the general consensus was that it was stressful, difficult, and an overall unpleasant experience. One participant described the methods of learning Hanja as being “주입식 교육” or “cramming education.” Despite this response, when asked if they were glad they were taught Hanja in Question 2.4 (see Appendix) three of the participants expressed that they were, while three were not.

#### *Benefits of Learning Hanja*

The three participants who expressed being glad they learned Hanja in Question 2.4 (see Appendix) mentioned how studying Hanja made understanding Korean words and learning other languages easier. When asked about the benefits of learning Hanja in Question 3 (see Appendix), two of the participants expanded on this idea by claiming that learning Hanja helps with learning East Asian languages such as Chinese and Japanese. Three participants mentioned how learning Hanja helps with recognizing Korean words, and two participants mentioned how learning Hanja is beneficial for understanding advertisements. Questions 5.1 and 5.2 (see Appendix) asked about participants’ experiences with encountering Hanja in Korea. Six participants said they encountered a lot of Hanja in Korea while the rest said they did not. Participants saw Hanja in a variety of places such as stores, museums, Gyeongbokgung Palace, old documents, and the suburbs of Korea. Two participants mentioned that Koreans sometimes speak in “사자성어” (Chinese idiomatic expressions) and one went into further detail stating that they encountered a lot of Hanja while studying Korean constitutional law. When asked in Question 5.3 (see Appendix) if Hangul translations were provided for Hanja words, the general consensus was no.

#### *Disadvantages of Learning Hanja*

In the responses for Question 2.3 (see Appendix), four participants mentioned how they disliked learning Hanja since it was very difficult, stressful, and confusing. Question 2.4 (see Appendix) confirmed these sentiments as four of the participants mentioned how they did not enjoy learning Hanja since it was stressful and difficult to learn many characters. When asked about some of the drawbacks of learning Hanja in Question 4 (see Appendix), four participants mentioned how learning and successfully memorizing the characters is difficult, and one participant mentioned how there are not many opportunities to use Hanja making learning it unnecessary.

#### *Hanja Education Requirements*

When asked in Question 6 (see Appendix) if they thought Korean schools should require students to learn Hanja, seven participants said yes, two participants said it should be optional, and one participant said no. When asked about what age students should begin learning Hanja, three said elementary school age, three said middle school age, and one said four years old.

#### *Summary*

The survey helped identify some of the benefits and disadvantages of learning Hanja in South Korea through the first-hand experiences of Korean public school students. By learning about their experiences with studying Hanja and their opinions on mandatory Hanja education in Korea, one can begin to infer whether Hanja education should be re-implemented into Korean elementary schools.

#### **Discussion**

The results from the surveys agree with previous research which claims learning Hanja makes it easier to learn Korean vocabulary.<sup>40</sup> Multiple participants stated that they were able to learn Korean words easier by studying Hanja. The survey results also support findings from the background literature which claim that learning Hanja is most beneficial for students pursuing careers that require extensive education, as one participant mentioned how they often encounter Hanja in constitutional law documents.<sup>41</sup> The idea that Hanja is effective for marketing strategies was supported by the survey when one of the participants mentioned how learning Hanja helps with subconsciously reading signs. Additionally, the study supports the argument that learning Hanja is beneficial for learning Mandarin, since two participants mentioned how learning Hanja can make learning East Asian languages such as Mandarin and Japanese easier. Moreover, one participant mentioned how Koreans sometimes use 사자성어, which are written and spoken using Chinese. Learning Hanja for cultural reasons was not mentioned by participants, however, several had encountered Hanja in old documents, museums, and Gyeongbokgung Palace.

Similarly, the disadvantage of how learning Hanja takes away from Korea's sense of national pride was not mentioned by participants. There was no mention of the Hanja education in relation to the wealth divide in Korea, either. But the data from the survey supported the claim that learning Hanja leads to increased academic stress.<sup>42</sup> Four participants said that learning Hanja was very stressful, confusing, and difficult. One participant claimed they were stressed to

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<sup>40</sup> Muscanto, Isaac. (2019). Studying Hanja-Based Syllables Improves Korean Vocabulary Retention. Retrieved from the University of Minnesota Digital Conservancy, <https://hdl.handle.net/11299/202587>.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>42</sup> Yoon, Min-sik. "'Hanja' Education in Elementary Schools Stirs Dispute." *www.koreaherald.com*, 21 Sept. 2015, [www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20150921001084](http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20150921001084).

the point of hair loss. The survey results also supported the idea that Hanja is becoming unnecessary to learn due to the convenience and simplicity of Hangul.<sup>43</sup> One participant mentioned how there are increasingly fewer opportunities to use Hanja in Korea.

Despite the numerous disadvantages to learning Hanja, the majority of participants supported mandatory Hanja education with three believing students should begin learning Hanja in elementary school and one believing that children should start learning earlier, at four years old. It is also important to note that although participants expressed many difficulties with learning Hanja, six of the participants could not think of any drawbacks to learning Hanja in response to Question 4. This could be partially due to students recognizing the importance of learning Hanja in spite of the numerous difficulties associated with doing so.

Although my research does not provide a definitive answer as to whether Hanja education should be re-implemented in Korean elementary schools, it provides an in-depth look at the benefits and drawbacks of Hanja education in Korean schools and will hopefully encourage other researchers to examine the topic. I recommend additional research to be conducted on the advantages and disadvantages of Hanja education in Korean elementary schools. My study had several limitations, including a limited number of participants, utilizing convenience sampling to gather data, and a lack of previous research on the subject available in English. I would suggest that future researchers survey a greater number of people using a random stratified method of collecting data for more accurate results.

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<sup>43</sup> Go, Billy. "Do You Need HANJA to Speak Korean? + Interview with Koreans." [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ExaFV19R-qU), 13 Oct. 2017, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ExaFV19R-qU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ExaFV19R-qU).

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## **Appendix A: Survey Questions**

### Survey Questions

Q1: How long have you lived in Korea?/How long have you studied in Korea?

Q2.1: Do you know Hanja?

Q2.2: If yes, when did you study Hanja? (Elementary School, Middle School, High School)

Q2.3: If yes, what is your experience with learning Hanja?

Q2.4: Are you glad that you were taught Hanja? Why?

Q3: What are some of the benefits of learning Hanja?

Q4: What are some of the drawbacks of learning Hanja?

Q5.1: While living in Korea did you encounter a lot of Hanja?

Q5.2: If yes, where?

Q5.3: If yes, were there Hangul translations?

Q6: Do you think Korean schools should require students to learn Hanja? If so, at what age?

Q7: Is there anything else you would like to add?