Analysis of the Debate Surrounding the Inventor of Hunminjeongeum

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Abstract: This article presents all views put forward so far about the identity of the inventor of Hunminjeongeum and seeks to find an evidence-based answer to this question by examining each of these views. The debate as to who is the inventor of Hunminjeongeum arose from the intuitive doubt about the possibility of a King creating an elaborate writing system alone and the lacking records about the from the process of the creation of Hunminjeongeum from beginning to end in the Annals of the Joseon Dynasty. Seong Hyeon’s Yongisechonghwa substantially contributed to the birth of the myths that Hunminjeongeum was invented by the collaboration of Munjong and Jiphyeonjeon scholars. Seong Hyeon influenced many scholars of his time and later the scholars of the School of Practical Learning. Writings that deny the sole inventorship of King Sejong without presenting reliable evidence cannot be accepted as reliable resources. There are a number of reliable historical documents that prove that King Sejong invented Hunminjeongeum alone. Denying the sole invention of Hunminjeongeum by King Sejong without presenting any evidence that can override the veracity of the historical resources of the official records and publications can be defined as the results of unscientific imagination.

Keywords: Hunminjeongeum, Hunminjeongeum Haerye, Sejong’s sole invention, Joint invention in collaboration, Jiphyeonjeon

I. Introduction

Hunminjeongeum came into existence in 1443. Hunminjeongeum, but it is still open to debate who its real inventor is. This article presents all views put forward so far about the identity of the inventor of Hunminjeongeum and seeks to find an evidence-based answer to this question by examining each of these views.

Textbooks can be taken as a typical example of the confusion surrounding the inventor of Hunminjeongeum. Currently authorized textbooks on the Korean language and literature have different descriptions about the inventor of Hunminjeongeum, with some of them even deviating from the generally accepted of debate. High school textbooks show no consensus about whether Hunminjeongeum was invented by or under Sejong the
Great. Of the five authorized textbooks currently in use, two make a clear point of who invented Hunminjeongeum. In “High School Korean” authored by Shin et al. (2018) and published by MiraeN, it reads: “In 1443 (25th year of the reign of King Sejong), King Sejong invented Hunminjeongeum in collaboration with young scholars of Jiphyeonjeon (Royal Research Institute) including Jeong In-ji, Choe Hang, Shin Suk-ju, Park Paeng-nyeon, Seong Sam-mun, Kang Hui-an, Yi Gae, and Yi Seon-ro, and proclaimed it in 1446 after three years of validation process to help the people easily read and write in Hunminjeongeum instead of being dependent on the Chinese script difficult to learn.” This represents the view that the Hunminjeongeum was completed in collaboration with Jiphyeonjeon scholars and reports the year of the completion of Hunminjeongeum-haerye (explanation and examples of Hunminjeongeum phonetics and phonemics) as the year of the proclamation of Hunminjeongeum. “High School Korean” authored by Park et al. (2015) and published by Cheonjae Gyoyuk briefly describes that King Sejong finally invented our own script Hunminjeongeum in December 1443, representing the view that Hunminjeongeum was invented by King Sejong the Great himself.

That two authorized textbooks have different descriptions about the inventor of Hunminjeongeum can pose problems in official examinations and cause harm to the identity of Hangul, Korea’s most prestigious cultural heritage. In fact, studies of a few scholars denying King Sejong’s sole inventorship are quoted by foreign scholars. Albertine Gaur, for example, even disseminated a view that King Sejong snatched the achievements of Jiphyeonjeon scholars.

Against this background, this article gives an overview of all debates surrounding the inventorship of Hunminjeongeum, investigates the and undertakes a comprehensive and critical review of. It is also intended to raise awareness about the need to correct the errors in the authorized textbooks which have a formative influence on students’ thoughts.

The current confusion can be roughly ascribed to four factors: (1) Arbitrary selection and interpretation of historical records and literature; (2) Individual imagination without evidential foundation; (3) Uncritical acceptance of inherited views of certain scholarly fractions; (4) Individual patriotic endeavor to arouse national pride under the Japanese occupation rule.