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CHAPTER 1

Letter Writing in Korean Written Culture

Interpersonal communication was one of the earliest functions of writing across the world, and in the written culture of East Asia, literary Chinese was a standard written language shared among educated elites for about two millennia. The terminology referring to letters in literary Chinese attests that letter-writing practices might be as old as the history of writing itself. Most Chinese terms allude to various material supports that made writing and reading possible: bamboo strips (Ch. jian; K. kan), wooden panels (Ch. du; K. tok), wooden tablets (Ch. zha; K. ch’al), silk (Ch. su; K. so), brushes (Ch. and K. han), and so on. This evinces that letters had been written on surfaces older than paper, which was invented in China at the turn of the first century CE. Moreover, the Chinese word shu (K. sŏ), which means “to write” as a verb and “the act of writing” or “writing” as a noun, was most commonly used to refer to epistles in literary Chinese, just as letters functioned as a synecdoche for writing itself in lexicographical traditions of some European languages.

Before the invention of the Korean alphabet in the mid-fifteenth century, male elites had dominated written communication with their exclusive literacy in literary Chinese. The remaining writings of Korean elites from the Silla (?–935) period to the dawn of the modern period display wide usage of all the literary Chinese epistolary vocabulary outlined above. In the literary Chinese classical tradition, the earliest inclusion of letters as a separate section (Ch. shu) in a collection of writings was in Selections of Refined Literature (Ch. Wenxuan; K. Munsŏn), compiled in the early sixth century. In
China, the *shu* section appeared in the collected works of most scholars from the Tang (618–907) period onward. The Korean literati, in contrast, had not meticulously preserved, collected, edited, and published their personal letters as a separate section. Unlike the letters of their Chinese counterparts, the personal correspondence of Korean elites did not receive due attention until the mid-sixteenth century. The remaining examples produced earlier were mostly included in the miscellany section (*chapchô*) of their writing collections along with other random documents. Most seem to have been preserved on account of either their political or academic contents or the authors’ fame rather than the significance of letters as a genre.

Korean literati had good reason to sharpen their skills in drafting sophisticated letters. The official positions held by the successful male elites required them to be effective letter writers. Their duties included drafting various types of written communication with the king, fellow officials in diverse government offices, and ordinary people. They delivered their political opinions to the king by presenting memorials (*sangso*) or official petitions (*ch’aja*); submitted brief reports (*chŏnmun*) to kings, queens, or queen mothers in the cases of both auspicious and inauspicious events in the state; reported local affairs to the king as governors or magistrates in their official missives (*changgye*); asked to retire by submitting the requests of retirement (*chŏngsa*); gave orders to inferior offices by sending out various missives such as orders to outposts (*kwanmun*), casual orders (*kamgyŏl*), order dispatches (*chŏllyŏng*), or directive notes (*t’ongyu*); reported back to superior offices through official reports (*ch’ŏpchŏng*); and drafted various messages among themselves to take care of business in the forms of circulars (*ch’it’óng* or *hoet’ong*). In one way or another, all these official documents that scholar-officials drafted to fulfill their administrative responsibilities took epistolary form, with designated senders and addressees. The drafts of outgoing letters together with received letters thus formed the fundamental decision documents in the Chosŏn polity, which invested letter-writing practices with special political significance.

Korea’s position in the Chinese tributary system, moreover, required Confucian literati to draft flawless diplomatic letters and know the standards of epistolary propriety. China occupied the central position in the East Asian Confucian world order, in which Korea accepted a junior status. Characterized by the notion of respect for superiors (*sadae*), the Chosŏn carefully observed the ritual practices of a tributary state. In this politico-ritual setting, even slight breaches in epistolary protocol could develop into
serious diplomatic problems. For instance, the diplomatic mission to China presented formal diplomatic missives (p’yo) and brief diplomatic missives (chôn) to the Chinese emperor; in return, they brought back his instructive writs (cho), imperial rescripts (ch’îk), or letters of inquiries (chamun) to the Chosôn king. Likewise, the exchange of state letters (kuksô) played the central role in diplomatic interactions with countries of equal standing with Korea, such as Japan. Officials with exquisite literary talent bore the responsibility of drafting impeccable letters representing the Chosôn court in order to prevent unnecessary diplomatic tensions. The practice of letter writing figured prominently in all sorts of administrative and political communications, from fulfilling day-to-day administrative routines in local offices to serious diplomatic missions representing the state to foreign countries. Therefore, it is no surprise that many terms referring to official documents bear etymologies related to the practice of letter writing, such as chôn, ch’a, ch’îp, and só.

The administrative and diplomatic significance of letter writing also affected the evaluation criteria with which the state selected government officials. The munkwa exam was the highest level in the civil service examination system; only those candidates who had passed the preliminary exams either as classics licentiate (saengwôn) or literary licentiate (chinsa) could take it. This three-step exam tested the candidates’ comprehension of Confucian classics, writing skills, and discussion of current events. The second stage, testing writing skills, required the candidates to compose in such diplomatic epistolary genres as formal and brief diplomatic missives, along with some other genres. The mastery of epistolary protocols, in this respect, was as significant in the preparation for the civil service exam as proficiency in the Confucian classics. The thirty-three men who were selected through the munkwa every three years would become high-ranking officials in the central government and were expected to be able to compose impeccable epistles.

Formulaic letters also played a significant role in the formal interactions between elite families. For instance, in Confucian family rituals, the exchanges of nuptial letters between the groom’s family and the bride’s family marked an important step in affirming the tie between them through the upcoming marriage. These letters, written by the patriarchs of the two families, were reported to their respective family shrines in the symbolic gesture of seeking approval from their ancestors. This ritual function bespeaks the symbolic power of letter writing in the social interactions
among Chosŏn elites as the mechanism making their bonds official. Epistolary practices figured prominently in fulfilling both the political responsibilities and social rituals of educated elites. Letter writing in literary Chinese was a serious matter.

THE KOREAN ALPHABET AND THE TAMING OF KNOWLEDGE

The invention of the Korean alphabet in 1443 and its promulgation in 1446 brought about crucial changes in how people wrote and read across Chosŏn society. The ease of this new system allowed those who had not been able to express their thoughts and feelings in writing to do so. Social actors from a wide cultural spectrum, including women and nonelites, took up the practices of writing and reading. The exponential increase in the sheer number of epistles circulated in elite society transformed people’s perception of letters and what they could do with them. The detractors of its usage, mostly male elites, however, discounted literacy in easy vernacular script as reflecting its users’ intellectual and cultural inferiority. They wanted to distinguish themselves from the rest of society with their exclusive access to the classical Chinese literary tradition and warned that the ease of writing in the vernacular could make Confucian scholars avoid devoting themselves to classical learning, while being engrossed in such trivial tasks as writing letters. Contrary to the unchallenged general notion that male elites disparaged and shunned the Korean alphabet, however, literary Chinese and vernacular Korean were at once exclusive and complementary to each other. Due to the gap between spoken Korean and literary Chinese as a written language, the elites found the Korean alphabet extremely useful.

Most of all, the linguistic precision of the Korean alphabet helped resolve an age-old problem of expressing pronunciations of spoken Korean and Chinese characters. Ever since Chinese characters were introduced to Korea, expressing the sounds of Korean terms in writing had posed onerous intellectual problems, due to the lack of linguistic connection between spoken Korean and written Chinese. Korean literati had strived to resolve this since as early as the Three Kingdoms period. The compromise was the creation of a system to render Korean words using Chinese characters—idu, kugyŏl, and hyangch’al. The visual similarities between Chinese words and Chinese renderings of Korean pronunciations, however, often made deciphering texts that included both of them extremely baffling. Whereas some Chinese
characters conveyed meanings with their semantic values, others rendered the Korean pronunciations with their phonetic values or even with phonetic values associated with their meanings in Korean. When readers tried to make sense of the characters only with their semantic values, they easily fell into confusion. Rather than conveying the exact Korean pronunciations, moreover, these Chinese renderings limited them to the range of sounds that the Chinese characters could express.

The absence of phonetic means of writing also posed problems in learning the pronunciations of Chinese characters. The educated male elites habitually composed and exchanged poems in both private and public settings; this was a marker of cultivation for which the understanding of correct Chinese pronunciations was essential. The phonological knowledge comprised the toolkit for matching rhymes as well as complying with metrics and prosody in composing poems in literary Chinese. In this regard, it is worth noting that the organizing principle of the Korean alphabet originated from studies of sounds.\textsuperscript{14} King Sejong (r. 1418–1450) ordered the translation of \textit{Mastering Phonology} (Yunhui), the widely used reference for Chinese phonology, in 1444.\textsuperscript{15} In 1448, only two years after the promulgation of the Korean alphabet, \textit{The Correct Phonology of the Eastern Country} (Tong-guk chŏngun) was published, attempting to standardize the unsettled pronunciations of Chinese characters.\textsuperscript{16} This state-led standardization led to the inclusion of the Korean alphabet and Chinese phonologies in the civil service examination in 1460.\textsuperscript{17} All these efforts attest that one benefit of the new writing system for educated elites was the enhanced capability to grasp the precise pronunciation of Chinese characters, as suggested by the official name of the Korean alphabet, \textit{Correct Sound to Instruct People} (Hunmin chŏngŭm).

Besides making breakthroughs in phonological studies, the state authority endeavored to translate Confucian classics into vernacular Korean. Throughout the premodern period, the onerous process of mastering literary Chinese ensured the dominance of educated male elites, as literacy constituted precious cultural capital that only a few people could afford. However, this impeded their social duty to disseminate Confucian teachings to transform the people morally (kyohwa). With the easy Korean alphabet, they could make some Confucian texts available in Korean translation. Although they continued to use literary Chinese as the official written language for government functions, they attempted to edify the general public with vernacular
Korean texts. This allowed educated male elites to keep their cultural privileges while making egalitarian gestures.

The moral primers were the first works to be translated and published. The court ministers began to discuss the need to translate and disseminate *Elementary Learning* (Sohak) and *The Illustrated Guide to the Three Relationships* (Samgang haengsilto) during the 1470s.\(^{18}\) The Korean translations of these two titles were published respectively in 1518 and 1481.\(^{19}\) Although it is difficult to determine how widely they were circulated, literacy in vernacular Korean script could have spread even among provincial *yangban* elites and *yangban* women by the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century through this kind of elementary education in Confucian principles.\(^ {20}\) However, the translation of major Confucian classics posed more fundamental intellectual problems. With no agreement on how to add *kugyŏl* marks, which would clarify the semantic structures of classical Chinese texts, the translation process demanded extensive deliberations among scholars well versed in classical studies. Moreover, some court ministers objected to adding any kind of grammatical aid to the classical Chinese phrases for the same reason they opposed the usage of the Korean alphabet. They feared that beginning scholars would take shortcuts in the learning process.\(^ {21}\) For these reasons, the Korean translations of the core Confucian classics, the Four Books, did not come out until the 1590s, and it was only at the beginning of the seventeenth century that translations of the Three Classics—*The Book of Poetry* (Ch. Shijing), *The Book of History* (Ch. Shangshu), and *The Book of Changes* (Ch. Yijing)—were published.\(^ {22}\) The state translation initiative lowered the bar to access them, which helped novice scholars jumpstart their learning. With these translations, moreover, the state authority could standardize the meanings of Confucian classics while regulating unorthodox interpretations of them. This reveals how the Chosŏn state defined and standardized the knowledge that could reach people with vernacular Korean literacy.

However, the Chosŏn government most extensively translated Buddhist sutras, which amounted to about 60 percent of all vernacular Korean publications by the court during the second half of the fifteenth century.\(^ {23}\) The Bureau of Printing Buddhist Sutras (Kan’gyŏng Togam), established in 1461, published some ten translated sutras until it was shut down in 1471.\(^ {24}\) Given the ruling elites’ harsh criticism of Buddhist doctrine as the cause of depravity and debacle in the fallen Koryŏ dynasty (918–1392), the proliferation of Buddhist texts in the early Chosŏn period has puzzled many scholars. Some
have stressed how devout early kings were, such as Sejong and Sejo (r. 1455–1468), which only partly explains this phenomenon. The remnants of Buddhism did not merely persist in the political and religious spheres during the early Chosŏn period. The pervasive influences of Buddhism in Korea for about a millennium comprised history, traditions, and lifestyles that permeated the realms of the subconscious, the bodily and daily practices of both individual social actors and the communities they formed, irrespective of their social status and gender. The dynastic change and the subsequent diatribes against Buddhism could not put an end to these embodied religious practices overnight. The majority of the population maintained this way of life, connecting the religious creed and behavioral patterns, despite the ideological downfall of Buddhism in political discourse. If the people were to learn a new writing system and read some stories written in it, the religious content would have been most suitable for their lifestyles. It is thus no surprise that the Chosŏn court was willing to churn out Korean translations of Buddhist sutras if its intention was to widely disseminate the new writing system.

Moreover, the translation of Buddhist texts addressed the same kind of linguistic problems raised in the studies of Confucian classics. The precise pronunciation of mantras (chinŏn) held vital significance, as lay Buddhists believed that the vocalization of mantras would invoke the sacred power of Buddha. Unless the mantras were recited correctly, their piety would not generate any propitious benefits. Korean Buddhists, however, found it daunting to reproduce the correct sounds because the mantras introduced to Korea were Chinese transliterations of Sanskrit originals. The process of resuscitating the mantras involved double-layered phonological scrutiny: from Sanskrit to Chinese and then from Chinese to Korean. Just as the Confucian scholars strove to pin down the correct pronunciations of Chinese characters for their classical knowledge and poetry composition, the Buddhists needed to enhance the ways they could express and instruct the correct sounds to guide lay believers to access Buddhist rituals. In the Chinese context, the Buddhist penchant for psalmody triggered serious consideration of the sound values of writing systems. The first instances of written vernacular in China appeared exclusively in Buddhist contexts. In the same vein, the invention of the Korean alphabet has even been described as a Buddhist phenomenon. Although this argument neglects the versatile applications of the Korean alphabet beyond Buddhist contexts ever since it became available, it gives due attention to the concerns about inscribing the correct
sounds in written forms. Overall, as much as the translation of Buddhist texts into vernacular Korean was ideal for disseminating a new writing system to the general public, the task of transliterating mantras using the Korean alphabet enhanced phonological knowledge and its expression.28

The Chosŏn state also utilized the Korean alphabet to publish texts on practical knowledge. The translation of medical books began in the late fifteenth century and continued to prosper in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.29 Diverse manuals on martial arts and military tactics were translated into Korean after the Japanese invasion in the late sixteenth century and the Manchu invasion in the early seventeenth century.30 However, not every practical subject was translated. For instance, the well-known manual for agricultural techniques Straightforward Explanation of Agriculture (Nongsa chiksŏl) was never translated into vernacular Korean. It appears that this particular title was distributed to local magistrates so that they could instruct the local population rather than distributing the books directly to the farmers.31 This decision could have been affected by either the literacy rate of farmers or the standards that the Chosŏn government had for information to be circulated. Despite the absence of further evidence, this case shows that the Chosŏn state intended to control the flow of information in society by selecting the types of knowledge to be translated in vernacular Korean. Although the Korean alphabet had the potential to democratize the spread of knowledge and information, the state, seizing the initiative, utilized it to define and tame the knowledge. Thus, vernacular Korean script did not become the official writing system of Korea until 1894, when the currents of modernity in the form of nation-states pushed the Chosŏn state to reform its culture and institutions.32

LITERARY EXPRESSION OF THE SELF

The state’s active role in translating and circulating various texts did not necessarily give it full control over the social application of the Korean alphabet. The availability of a new writing system that was easy to learn and use sparked the creative verve of its users. Of course, this creative propensity also emerged among the newly literate. However, male elites, who had savored various literary genres, were the first group to use the new writing system to expand their expressive capacities. The habitual compositions and exchanges of poems among male elites frequently involved oral performance and aural appreciation of their productions; however, this felt rather distant
and outlandish due to the rupture between the spoken and written languages. The first effort to close this gap with the Korean alphabet was the translation of canonical literary Chinese poems. The poems of Du Fu (712–770), a famous Chinese poet during the Tang dynasty, were translated into Korean in 1481. In the poetic culture of premodern Korea, Du Fu’s works were admired as the best examples expressing the pure spirit of ancient times in a sophisticated and sensible style. Circulation in both literary Chinese and vernacular Korean translation perpetuated their popularity and significance throughout the Chosŏn period.

Now that the Korean alphabet directly inscribed the sounds of spoken Korean into writing, native Korean songs that had been transmitted orally were also documented. The lyrics of songs popular during the late Koryŏ period were put together in *Standard Course in the Studies of Music* (Akhak kwebŏm) published in 1493 by the Chosŏn court. Korean poetic genres such as *sijo* and *kasa*, which had been widely enjoyed from the late Koryŏ period on, gained new momentum with the availability of vernacular Korean script. For instance, T’oege Ye Hwang (1501–1570) composed twelve *sijo* poems in Korean to celebrate his enjoyment of life in his residence at Tosan (Tosan sibigok). In the postscript to these poems, T’oege pointed out the differences between expressing emotions in vernacular Korean and classical Chinese. He stated that the contemporary poems were to recite (*yŏng*) but not to sing (*ka*), unlike the songs popular during the Koryŏ period. In order to sing poems, he continued, the poets had to stick to the vernacular words and sounds. In this way, T’oege specifically adduced the ability to directly deliver spoken sounds in written form as something that maximized the poetic sensibility. The popularity of *sijo* poems also facilitated the interplay between vernacular Korean and literary Chinese in a new dimension. Sometimes the Korean *sijo* poems were translated into literary Chinese. *Nine Songs about the High Mountain* (Kosan kugokka), composed by Yulgok Yi I (1536–1584) in 1578, was one such case, in which he commemorated his pleasure in living in Stone Pond (Sŏktam), located in Haeju. Song Siyŏl (1607–1689), a faithful follower of Yulgok’s philosophy, translated these poems into literary Chinese. In this way, Korean poets traversed and hybridized literary Chinese and vernacular Korean, depending on the cultural milieu they wanted to evoke with different linguistic modes.

Unlike literary Chinese poems written by only very few privileged elite women, Korean *sijo* poems were also composed by women of low social status, such as Hwang Chini (d.u.), a famous early Chosŏn entertainer. The
women might have needed poetic skills to serve their male elite patrons by exchanging these song poems. The expression of poetic sensibility in spoken language could have positioned these women on equal standing with their male counterparts.\textsuperscript{38} As the demand for song poems increased, professional \textit{sijo} singers began to emerge in the eighteenth century. The oral performance of \textit{sijo} poems helped to disseminate them beyond the elite class.\textsuperscript{39} This poetic form thus gradually trickled down, and nonelite poets adjusted its structure to deliver their thoughts more freely. Consequently, unlike the original structure with three fourteen-to-sixteen-syllable lines, more lengthy and unhindered narrative \textit{sijo} poems (\textit{sasŏl sijo}) proliferated during the late Chosŏn period, frequently including critical content animated with vulgar slang and onomatopoeia.\textsuperscript{40}

A similar pattern of diffusion happened with the \textit{kasa} genre, which began to spread among male elites from the late Koryŏ period, when \textit{sijo} poems also became popular. Unlike \textit{sijo} poems, however, \textit{kasa} poems have a much looser metrical structure, allowing writers to add to the contents without any restriction on length. This characteristic of \textit{kasa}, which placed it between poetry and prose, must have been inspired by classical Chinese genres like lyric poetry (\textit{ci}) and rhymed prose (\textit{fu}). For this reason, \textit{kasa} made it easier to elaborate on more detailed content than \textit{sijo} poems, while still enabling people to recite them like songs.\textsuperscript{41} As in the case of \textit{sijo} poems, women and commoners composed in this genre during the late Chosŏn period. Elite women expressed their mixed feelings about their lives in what are now categorized as \textit{kasa} verses from the inner chambers (\textit{kyubang kasa}). On the one hand, they reiterated the female virtues set by Confucian norms, but they also expressed their grievances about unfair treatment by in-law family members or their loneliness caused by estrangement from their husbands.\textsuperscript{42} When the commoners appropriated this genre, some did not hold back their dissatisfaction about social discrimination and political institutions. Some \textit{kasa} poems functioned as an alternative means to convey political messages among nonelites. By addressing political issues to people with little education in less direct ways than formal political genres, this genre helped Chosŏn subjects constitute a Korean form of the public sphere.\textsuperscript{43}

The spread of vernacular Korean literacy also affected the ways people consumed prose literature. In particular, the wide circulation of novels differentiated the literary scene of the late Chosŏn period from earlier times. \textit{The Tale of Hong Kiltong} (Hong Kiltong chŏn), authored by Hŏ Kyun (1569–1618), is generally considered the first novel written in vernacular Korean\textsuperscript{44}
The emergence of vernacular Korean novels did not immediately entail a rise in their readership. Because commercial printing had remained negligible well into the nineteenth century, most novels were circulated in manuscripts hand-copied by many hands. In this situation, people could share very few books by either circulating them in their familial and social networks or reading them aloud to entertain multiple people. Even during the eighteenth century, when book-lending businesses prospered in the Seoul area, most books were hand-copied and were frequently read aloud for illiterate or semiliterate audiences. Professional readers (chŏng'isisu) performed various vernacular Korean novels in this context. Although it is generally believed that elite women were the predominant consumers of these novels, the association between women and vernacular Korean script, which linked them to the genre of the novel, remains arbitrary and uncertain at best. There is no evidence that women were the sole or main readers of novels. The need to dissociate elite men from novels caused women to be assigned to this genre, which was again used to reinforce the gender hierarchy between men and women. With both circulation of hand-copied versions and oral performances, people across society could enjoy vernacular Korean novels in the late Chosŏn period. Overall, the availability of vernacular Korean script affected how Chosŏn people produced and consumed literary works regardless of their gender, class, and age.

**DOCUMENTATION AS SOCIAL PRACTICE**

The diffusion of the Korean alphabet and subsequent increase in documents that people produced with this new writing system changed the mode of social interactions. Ordinary subjects took advantage of the easy Korean alphabet to put their grievances into words, particularly through petitions to the relevant government bureaus or even directly to the king. The ability of women and nonelites to voice their grievances in writing and textually process political information instituted a new mode of political communication in Chosŏn society. The addition of the people’s voices to the political discourse not only changed their power relation with the ruling elites but also refashioned how the king and his ministers negotiated and compromised political sway in court debates. Both the kings and the court ministers wanted to use people’s voices for their political advantage. Although the Chosŏn court had mostly forbidden subjects from submitting their petitions or other official documents in vernacular Korean script, to regulate the
excessive inflow of people’s raw emotions to the political debates, rulers relied on the script to reach wider society when the political circumstances required them to do so. In state emergencies, the Chosŏn court found the Korean alphabet useful for either directly communicating with the subjects or widely broadcasting information. It is well known that King Sŏnjo (r. 1567–1608) issued an edict in vernacular Korean to encourage his subjects to fight against the Japanese invaders during the Imjin War (1592–98). There also remain about thirty royal edicts that accompanied the vernacular Korean translation, most of which were issued during the reign of King Chŏngjo (r. 1776–1800).

In addition to their legal and political purposes, the extant documents preserved from the Chosŏn period also show that the use of vernacular Korean script facilitated economic transactions. Some elite families produced inheritance documents and wills in vernacular Korean, which required a more sophisticated understanding of the Chosŏn economic structure. Some remaining evidence confirms that elites exchanged vernacular Korean letters with their servants, to whom they often consigned the management of estates located far from their residence. The head slaves often sold or bought lands on behalf of their masters, for which correspondence between them was essential. These financial transactions frequently involved documents drafted in literary Chinese, which requires us to reconsider how social status factored in literacy in Chosŏn society. Even nonelites with limited education could document such economic transactions as selling and buying lands and houses using the Korean alphabet. Toward the end of the Chosŏn dynasty, merchants could engage in more complicated credit management by issuing promissory notes, for which extensive bookkeeping in the Korean alphabet was instrumental. This situation attests to the proliferation of commerce during the late Chosŏn period.

Women also joined this trend of documentation in both public and private settings. Writing skills were indispensable for women in the royal court to fulfill their work duties. Aside from the few who became a king’s or prince’s consort, women who entered the royal palace as court ladies provided professional services needed for the day-to-day running of the royal residences, sustaining the ritual order of monarchy and maintaining material culture. Those who belonged to the Royal Secretariat had to be proficient in vernacular Korean script to write letters of greeting on behalf of royal family members, keep royal household registries, and copy books for royal libraries. Their expertise also allowed them to exercise their agency...
in cultural production, as shown in the popularity of their calligraphic style, the palace style (*kungch‘e*), created during the nineteenth century.

Women’s literary practices outside the royal palace mostly revolved around the domestic settings of elite *yangban* families. Although deeply invested in Confucian patriarchy, elite households relied on the labors and skills of their female members to abide by Confucian ritual norms. Women in elite households, for example, were responsible for preparing both offerings for the ancestral services and meals for ritual attendees. Because prominent lineage groups offered services up to great-great-grandparents, schedules and resources demanded meticulous supervision. Some families tried to streamline this duty by putting the dates of commemorative rites and needed supplies for ritual offerings into lists. Whereas the former appeared in both literary Chinese and vernacular Korean, the latter were mostly written in vernacular Korean.\(^59\) This attests that both men and women needed to remember the date of the next ancestral service, but the material side of Confucian rituals rested on women’s shoulders, and they used their vernacular Korean literacy.

Some elite women also used vernacular Korean documents in their daily duties. For instance, recording the measurements of dress sizes for family members could save time and effort whenever they made new dresses.\(^60\) Paper sock patterns (*pŏsŏnbon*), blank pieces of paper in the shape of a sock, also provided writing space on which they put down words of blessing for their loved ones. These sock patterns were hoisted on bamboo masts on the full-moon day of the first month, and it was believed that bad luck would go away when they were blown away. Women’s vernacular Korean literacy thus accommodated both their practical and religious practices.\(^61\)

The habit of recording and documenting also contributed to the transmission of homemaking knowhow from one generation to another. A cookbook written by Madam Chang of Andong in the late seventeenth century (*Ŭmsik timibang*), for instance, was circulated among women in her family.\(^62\) In it, Madam Chang asked the daughters to hand-copy and take their own copies with them, while warning them not to displace the original manuscript.\(^63\) As shown in the circulation of vernacular Korean novels during the late Chosŏn period, hand-copying and sharing texts among female family members formed a significant cultural bond. Madam Chang and her daughters formed a textual community around this manuscript cookbook, producing, circulating, interpreting, and reproducing the vernacular Korean text. The materiality of these hand-copied books, such as the calligraphic styles or any
traces left by scribes or earlier readers, contributed to the formation of an intra- and intergenerational fellowship of shared emotions.  

EPISTOLARY PRACTICES WITH KOREAN CHARACTERISTICS

Something socially exciting began to happen in online space only when the Internet became boring and quotidian due to its wide distribution to most social actors. Because of this gap between the emergence of new communicative technologies and their social effects, the process in which communicative innovations end up changing the lifestyles of social actors is not orderly but demands a long period of chaos. One systematic framework with which to comprehend the relationship between innovations in ideas or technologies and their social impacts notes that the diffusion of innovations is a process in which individual actors communicate new ideas or technologies among themselves over time under the given social circumstances. Four factors—(1) the characteristics of the innovation itself, (2) communication channels through which it can be circulated, (3) time needed for the dissemination process, and (4) a social system in which the innovation is communicated— influence the pattern and speed at which it is disseminated. Moreover, each individual responds to innovations with different degrees of willingness to adopt them. Overall, no matter how ingenious a certain innovation might be, its dissemination in the society and social actors’ adoption of it involve a process of negotiation and compromise with the preexisting social system. The usual result was a gap between the rise of new ideas or technologies and their impacts on social practices.

How the invention of the Korean alphabet influenced the modes of social interaction and cultural production corroborates these theoretical analyses. Individual social actors’ co-optation of vernacular Korean script for literary expression, legal empowerment, and documentation mostly began in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century, about a half century after the invention of the Korean alphabet. In spite of its communicative potential, users needed time to fully grasp this new linguistic tool and employ it in various sociocultural practices. This new writing system was at once the innovation itself and the main communication channel through which the innovation was circulated. The Internet also shows this characteristic; however, the transaction costs for the users in these two cases differ radically. Propagation of the Internet requires substantial investment in social and
technological infrastructures for data transmission, such as telephone lines for dial-ups or broadbands for high-speed connections, the creation of enough Internet service providers (ISPs), and the individual users’ willingness to spend on devices such as computers. In contrast, the dissemination of vernacular Korean script relied on rather simple and humble material requirements—brushes, ink, and paper. This grassroots dissemination also did not demand massive infrastructural investments, as shown in the publication of Confucian moral primers or Buddhist sutras on the initiative of the Chosŏn state. This relatively low material bar allowed the Korean alphabet to permeate everyday communicative practices, including letter writing, which might seem too mundane and trivial to have a meaningful impact on human life and social structure. By virtue of their effortlessness, functionality, and informality, vernacular Korean letters developed into the most common communicative genre used across the society. When people’s daily life was saturated with letter-writing practices as routine, however, diverse unconventional practices emerged, which triggered the rise of new cultural norms, social networks, and political culture.

However, not everyone could afford to take part in this seemingly humble material activity. Letter writing in vernacular Korean, therefore, began to spread among royal family members first, then gradually trickled down to the elite class and further. This top-down pattern of dissemination could be also partly attributable to the fact that the new writing system was invented as the result of a state initiative. The most remarkable change took place in the networking patterns both within and among the elite households. Unlike literary Chinese letters exchanged exclusively among male members of elite families, vernacular Korean letters were ideal for maintaining networks among kin, including both men and women. Elite women found vernacular Korean letters particularly valuable. They wrote about and shared their emotions with their loved ones who would have remained separated otherwise. They could express their loneliness as well as longing for the natal family members whom they had left upon marriage, husbands who were away for official duties, and daughters who had married out. Women as letter writers could maintain their own networks outside of those required by their positions in the patriarchal structure within their husbands’ families. As prolific letter writers, they could have considered correspondence their most important link to the outside world. Letters allowed them to “cross the forbidden spaces between their husband’s house and their natal home and invite their dear ones into their secluded quarters.” This situation later
alarmed some male Confucians like Song Siyŏl so much that they considered letters delivered to elite women as unauthorized visitors to the inner quarters, where no visitors were allowed in the absence of their husbands. Nevertheless, for the users of vernacular script, letters must have been the most accessible genre that did not threaten the male elites’ dominance in the literary Chinese classical tradition. Most women letter writers were not writers of anything else. They did not study Confucian classics or publish their works, which could violate the boundary between the female domestic sphere and the male public sphere. The epistolary community charged with poignant emotions created a liminal area between these two spheres, which also included male elites. They joined this web of correspondences as fathers, husbands, sons, brothers, and so on. There remain numerous letters sent by male elites to their female family members, which evinces that many male elites cultivated fluency in vernacular Korean writing through their epistolary interactions with women. Whereas vernacular Korean letters exchanged between men are rare, almost all extant vernacular Korean letters involved elite women as either senders or recipients. In this regard, men and women influenced each other; women were not simply replicating the norms of literary Chinese written culture or devising subversive trends comprehensible only among themselves. While women learned expressive conventions and epistolary etiquette from their male counterparts’ letters, men were exposed to astonishingly new and sometimes eccentric textual practices that women writers employed, which must have originated from their lack of formal education and prior exposure to written texts in nonpaper forms. The proliferation of vernacular Korean letters in elite domestic life functioned as the contact zone between old and new written cultures.

ELUSIVE SECRECY IN CORRESPONDENCE

The absence of an affordable and reliable postal system also partly explicates why the elite class were the widest users of correspondence. The modern postal system was not established in Korea until 1894, and the official relay horses delivered only official documents between government offices during the Chosŏn dynasty. Individual letter writers had to arrange the delivery of their letters on their own. Affluent elite families generally dispatched their servants as messengers who frequently conveyed oral messages along with the letters. The elites preferred oral messages for the content they thought inappropriate to be recorded in writing. This combination also shows that
Chosŏn correspondents had clearly recognized the limitations of letters, which could be lost, intercepted, or purloined. However, letter writers with less means could not afford these double communicative arrangements and had to rely on more ad hoc delivery methods. When no servant was involved as messenger, letter writers commonly asked whoever would be traveling to the area of the recipient’s residence to deliver letters, which was called inp'yŏn. There was no other way to have their letters delivered. In many cases, therefore, the availability of messengers decided the timing of correspondence rather than whether or not the letters were ready to be sent. It was normal for people to store several letters until they found messengers.\(^7^9\) When the senders could not find travelers directly heading for the destination they wanted, they arranged several messengers as a relay (chŏnp'yŏn), which substantially mitigated the chance that the letter would eventually fall into the addressee’s hands.\(^8^0\) Receiving minimal or no material compensation and undertaking cumbersome detours in their travel, these haphazardly arranged messengers were never fully reliable.

The difficulty in finding messengers prompted the creation of epistolary expressions like chûksŏn, chûkchŏn, and chûngnap, meaning that the recipient wrote the reply in haste to send it via the messengers on their way back.\(^8^1\) Time constraints could have kept them from elaborating on the issues that they wanted to convey. Writing back hastily also sometimes forced the addressees to do without basic stationery. They sometimes wrote in the blank spaces of the letters that they had received and sent them back to the original senders.\(^8^2\)

The demand for reliable messengers led letter writers to hire chŏnin or p’aengin, people who professionally ran errands for fees during the Chosŏn period.\(^8^3\) Even if senders hired these messengers, it did not guarantee that the contents of letters would be kept confidential. Many anecdotes evince that the chŏnin messengers, either deliberately or inadvertently, glimpsed letters that they were delivering or allowed strangers to have access to them. For example, The Tale of Ch’unhyang (Ch’unhyang chŏn), a famous p’ansori story set in the late seventeenth century, shows how easily letters could have been intercepted and read by people other than the intended addressees. In this love story between a son of a yangban official and a daughter of a former courtesan, Ch’unhyang, the female protagonist, resists the new magistrate’s advances while her lover is away in Seoul. The magistrate threatens to execute her for defying the state authority. Just before her death, Ch’unhyang hires a messenger to send her letter to Yi Mongnyong, the male protagonist.
At that moment, Mongnyong is traveling back to town as a secret royal envoy after winning first place in the civil service examination. He runs into the messenger on the road and demands to read Ch’unhyang’s letter without exposing his identity. Though the messenger resists a while, Mongnyong succeeds in persuading him by quoting from a poem by Zhang Ji (766–830), a poet of Tang China: “The traveler set out on his way. And then the letter was opened.” Mongnyong gets to read Ch’unhyang’s letter written in blood and sheds tears while doing so. His tears smear the letter, and the messenger becomes angry after discovering the damage. The messenger asks him to repay fifteen nyang, the cost of letter delivery. This vivid scene of Mongnyong reading Ch’unhyang’s letter and the messenger checking out this letter on the open road shows that the idea of secrecy in correspondence is anachronistic.

The intentions of the addressees, much more than those of the senders, and the life span of letters as material objects determined the exposure and future life of the correspondence. For example, King Hyojong’s (r. 1649–1659) secret letter to Chŏng T’aehwa (1602–1673) in the mid-seventeenth century asserts, “This letter should not be shown even to your sons, you have to be watchful!” However, we now read this letter in the published collection of Chŏng’s writings. In 2009, 299 secret letters that King Chŏngjo sent to Sim Hwanji (1730–1802) became known to the world. Although Sim was regarded as Chŏngjo’s political opponent, the letters reveal how they collaborated behind the scenes. On many occasions, Chŏngjo wanted to make sure that all his secret letters would be destroyed after they were read. He offered Sim specific instructions about how to destroy them, including washing the ink away by soaking the letters in water, burning them, tearing them up, or returning them to him. However, Sim not only preserved the letters but also recorded the specific time of day when each one was delivered to him. For Sim, these documents might have held vital political significance. Preserving and chronicling the exchanged letters allowed him to gain the upper hand in the political interaction with the monarch, as he would be able to disclose these letters to the public in the future (and the letters did go public, more than two hundred years after the actual correspondence!).

Secrecy remained near absent in actual practices of writing and reading letters. As Jacques Derrida’s study on Western epistolary culture cogently shows, Chosŏn letters were also “half-private half-public, neither the one nor the other.” They “transgressed privacy and secrecy in part due to the
temporal discontinuity” embedded in reading the same letters for various purposes. Resistance to complete contextualization characterized epistolarity in the Chosŏn period as in other cultures; letters could slip out of context at the discretion of any of the diverse people involved in writing, delivering, reading, preserving, and rereading them.

The physical form of Chosŏn letters also contributed to this half-private, half-public characteristic. Just like in the medieval Islamic world, “letters were single sheets of paper without outer wrapping.” Not until the late eighteenth century did male elites begin to use envelopes for their private correspondence. Most letter writers, however, continued to write on a single piece of paper rather than following this savvy but costly practice. After filling a single sheet with messages, they folded it vertically multiple times into a thin and narrow shape. In this form, the back of the paper came to function as the outer cover: the names of both the sender and the receiver, along with the address, were written there. If they continued onto the back page, therefore, letter writers generally left generous blank space to be used as outer wrapping. With no letter-locking technologies or letter-sealing tradition as in European epistolary culture, access to the contents of Korean letters was neither impossible nor onerous. The multiple blank outer folds, however, meant that “reading letters addressed to others was a deliberate rather than casual act.”

**RESOURCEFUL WRITERS OR MULTIVALENT GENRE?**

The habitual practice of letter writing among yangban elites not only facilitated the dissemination of the Korean alphabet but also pervaded every aspect of their daily life. The sheer number of letters, written in both vernacular Korean and literary Chinese, had exponentially increased since the late fifteenth century. Accordingly, the novelty of vernacular letter writing as a hip communicative tool had gradually faded away. Exchanges of letters became a daily routine for many elites. The socially interesting functions of letter writing, however, began to develop in this period. Letter writers channeled their imagination and individuality into both the physical shapes and the functions of the letters that they wrote and read.

The development of “spiral letters” was a distinctive characteristic of domestic correspondence in which both men and women joined. Spiral letter forms, which required both writers and readers to rotate the given pages while writing and reading them, began to appear in vernacular Korean
letters exchanged in elite households in the late fifteenth century. Their appearance in literary Chinese letters exchanged between male elites lagged behind, only beginning in the late sixteenth century. We can thus assume elite women’s contribution to the configuration and dissemination of this particular nonlinear textual form. Literacy in Korean did not simply empower many elite women to become equal interlocutors for their male peers in epistolary space. More significantly, equipped with imaginative and innovative letter forms, elite women steered the Korean written culture into a new territory of spatial configuration of texts. As a consequence, the practices of writing and reading letters in Korea required not only intellectual commitments but also somatic and cognitive engagement. As a genuine vernacular form of textual layout, spiral letters also had sociocultural implications. Using spiral forms allowed male elites to signal that the contents of their letters were not suitable for circulation in the public domain.

The routinization of letter writing across elite society in the sixteenth century also led educated male elites to experiment with epistolary practices for diverse purposes. As a result, letter writing developed into the main discursive site in which major sociocultural changes took place. First, Confucian literati began to put together and read letters written by prominent masters, creating collections for study. They also revisited their own letters for moral cultivation while reflecting upon their state of mind when they had drafted particular letters. These academic applications leveraged the immediacy of letter writing in specific moments. This approach contrasted with Confucian classics, which were meant to instill normative and universal principles for all readers, irrespective of their cultural and temporal differences. Second, effective communication by letter promoted the social organization of elite groups, and vice versa. Local academies prospered across the country as academic and social centers for rural scholars, who capitalized on such social epistolary genres as circular letters to foster communication between scholar groups in different areas. These genres nicely coordinated with personal correspondence, making the epistolary networks denser and more intricate. The proliferation of group interactions among elites also entailed enhanced circulation of political news. Government newsletters, which had been originally distributed to incumbent officials, traveled on epistolary networks of both individual scholars and scholar groups across the country. Third, the convergence between the circulation of political information and elite social networks sparked the political ambition of nonofficial literati. As a consequence, the scholar groups began to
raise their political voices by developing a new political epistolary genre, joint memorials, which elevated their collectivity as a political weapon.

The epistles of the Chosŏn period illustrate the ways the tension between the totalizing and standardizing force of writing and the resourcefulness of individual practitioners unfolded and was negotiated. The appropriation of letters for diverse academic and sociopolitical schemes seems to epitomize how individual social actors moved beyond the boundary of the genre to pursue their sociocultural aspirations. The imaginative configuration of physical forms in vernacular Korean letters, meanwhile, reveals how letter writers tweaked the already established cultural norms, making their letter-writing practices interface with somatic and cognitive registers. This emphasis on individual letter writers’ versatility, however, raises the question whether epistles as a genre involve the standardizing force as much as other genres of writing. More fundamentally, do letters have this totalizing tendency at all?

The global history of letter writing attests that the perimeter of the genre tends to be ambiguous at best across diverse cultures in different time periods. In medieval China, for example, the contents of letters by the literati are not much different from scholarly or political treatises in many cases, when the epistolary formalities at the beginning and end are removed. The epistolary discourse of a society thus overlaps with the development of other literary genres and probably all genres within it. Jacques Derrida, in a similar vein, claimed that letters transcend the conventional standards used in categorizing a genre: “Mixture is the letter, the epistle, which is not a genre but all genres, literature itself.” Letters can be appropriated, imitated, and converted into numerous other forms of literature, such as epistolary novels. While grappling with the categorization of letters as a genre or genres, Claudine van Hensbergen emphasizes that each and every letter is “a discourse operating throughout texts and society” by interacting and overlapping with both other letters and other texts. With this kind of inherent intertextuality, letters functioned not as an epistolary genre but as “epistolary discourse.”

Defining epistles as direct addresses between writer and receiver allows us to explore the extensive scope of epistolary practices. The “I-you” polarity ultimately constitutes epistolarity. Building upon this definition, this book explores a wide array of “applied epistolary practices” that diversified the subgenres under the umbrella category of epistles. Chosŏn elites expanded the capacity of their daily letter writing to encompass almost all
areas of major discursive change. These applied epistolary practices affirm the utmost adaptability of letters as “not a genre but all genres.”

THE MATERIALITY OF LETTERS

The myriad genres of epistles in late Chosŏn society were correlated with the multiplicity of their material forms. Different physical forms and material conditions suggest the disparate ways human agents handled and related to given letters for different purposes. Bibliographical analysis of the materiality of different letter forms therefore allows us to trace the social interactions surrounding them in ways not possible by simply examining their contents.

Although their sizes varied, most Chosŏn letters were written on a single sheet of paper. This must have been the most suitable form to maintain the textual integrity of the letters while they passed through many hands on the way to their final destinations. The compilation of letters as books, however, transferred these loose manuscripts onto bound codices. Whether printed or hand-copied, letters positioned on the pages of books delivered cultural weight that their original forms had not carried. In premodern Korea, books were not simply used to transmit knowledge and information; they stored and materialized the cultural and intellectual pillars of the past generations. The lives of educated male elites revolved around books, the repository of sagacious words, which literary scholar Boudewijn Walraven aptly calls “the cult of books.” In book form, letters could be blended into preexisting scholarly genres and intellectual discourses to some extent. Letters in books did not always contain texts identical to their original manuscripts. The contents were frequently paraphrased beyond the normal editing processes; inappropriate parts were omitted; and nonlinear textual forms were rearranged to create a linear reading sequence. “The order of books” reined in the creativity of individual letter writers for the sake of orderly reading.

The books did not take codex forms only. Some compilers simply pasted a series of related letters together to form a single scroll. This format did not involve editing, such as paraphrasing or redacting, at all. As shown in figure 1.1, the different sizes and qualities of paper used for individual letters prevent them from having any visual and material coherence besides the fact that they are glued together. Because six letters out of seven bear spiral forms, moreover, the readers of this scroll might have had to juggle with both hands while unrolling, rolling, and rotating in the process of reading it. We do not know whether it was the addressee himself or others who put
Figure 1.1. Seven letters that Pak Sech’ae (1631–1695) sent to Im Yong (1649–1696) in 1694. There are several other examples of scroll books that compile Pak’s letters to Im; one of them, exchanged in 1680, includes as many as seventeen letters in one scroll (G002+AKS-BB55_B00300387E). The measurements of this manuscript are not specified in the catalogue of the Jangseogak Royal Archives (G002+AKS-BB55_B00300389E). Photo courtesy of the Academy of Korean Studies.
together these seven letters. Letter scrolls could have been produced to archive related letters either topically or chronologically, to prevent confusion in reconstructing the discussions developing in ongoing correspondence. Given that these letters were not mounted on a separate material support such as paper or silk, the production process remains incomplete in theory. The compiler might have had further plans for this seemingly haphazard scroll, which we cannot confirm without further evidence. Irrespective of the precise motive of the compiler, we can infer that Chosŏn people preserved and read the letters beyond their original contexts, which resulted in this kind of vernacular book form.

When male elites began to utilize epistolary genres to organize themselves into new social groups, the size of letters grew as both authorship and readership involved multiple people. Whereas personal letters do not normally exceed fifty centimeters in both length and width, many circular letters easily surpassed one meter in length or width. They grew enormous when including the signatures of the group members, which required generous blank space. The larger size of circular letters also implies the different kinds of social practices associated with this particular genre. A group of people participating in both writing and reading could have altered the material attributes of texts for ease of handling.

When nonofficial scholars mobilized to raise their voices on state political issues, the physical forms of their political epistles held more symbolic meaning. Joint memorials, which delivered their political opinions with the signatures of all participating scholars, grew colossal during the late Chosŏn period, because the physical texts materialized the scholars’ politicized collectivity. The physical characteristics of the political texts also decided the ways these scholars performed their protests in the public space of both their home bases and Seoul, as well as en route to the capital. The massive physical forms legitimized their political motives through the hardship of producing and carrying the given text to present it to the throne. The materiality of political epistles, when apposite to the goals of protesters, endowed them with moral superiority that made their voices more powerful and persuasive.

**LETTER-WRITING MANUALS**

Although epistles as a genre remained vaguely defined and hybridized with other forms of writing, their material configurations were adapted to
disparate social demands. In other words, the appropriation of epistles for diverse purposes and the subsequent transformations of their physical forms characterize how the epistolary culture developed in Chosôn society from the sixteenth century. This diversification of correspondence in social and discursive interactions was a far cry from the standardization of epistolary practices. The production and consultation of letter-writing manuals did not thrive in Chosôn society, unlike in almost all other countries, where the resourcefulness of individual writers was counterbalanced by the proclivity to standardize.

Epistolary guides produced in China, such as Sima Guang’s (1019–1086) *The Etiquette of Letter Writing* (Shuyī), Yuan (1279–1368) period encyclopedic collections (Jujia Biyong Shilei Quanji), and *The Collected Letters of Ouyang Xiu [1007–1072] and Su Shi [1037–1101]* (Ou Su shoujian), occasionally are mentioned in Korean sources. However, these titles do not seem to have been widely circulated. It is notable that Chosôn elites consulted only pre-Ming letter-writing manuals, although the proliferation of commercial printing in the late Ming and early Qing sparked the wide circulation of letter-writing manuals in China. This was also different from contemporary Japanese society, where elementary textbooks took the form of exchanged letters (J. おらimonono), teaching novice learners both basic knowledge on various subjects and letter-writing skills. Similar manuals for literary Chinese letters were sporadically produced in Korea. The earliest extant title is Yi Ḥŏnjŏk’s (1491–1553) *Collected Letters* (Ŏanjip), which remains in various manuscript versions. It is recorded that *The Examples and Formats for Korean People* (Tongin yesik) put together by Kim Chŏng (1486–1521) included a chapter on letter writing, but no copies have survived. With the exception of *The Categorized Collection of Letter Forms* (Kansik yup’yŏn), published in 1739 along with the previous two works, all other titles were published during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Most vernacular Korean letter-writing manuals were also published and widely disseminated at that time. This period is significant not only because commercial publications (panggakpon) peaked, thanks to woodblock printing, but also because the introduction of lithographic printing technology made cheap mass publication possible. Even with these letter-writing manuals, the standardizing effect does not appear to have been consequential. For instance, *The Augmented and Supplemented Reading of Vernacular Letters* (Chingbo Ḥŏngandok), the most widely disseminated title in various versions, did not provide model letters for correspondence.
between husband and wife or between father and daughter—the two dyads showing the most frequent exchanges of vernacular Korean letters in actual life. The inclusion of motley contents, mostly unrelated, also implies that these publications were heavily influenced by the commercial interests of publishers. Many titles include information about family rituals and etiquette along with letter-writing skills in the same volume. In some, basic historical knowledge, such as the list of all Chosŏn kings and the anniversaries of their passing, and rules for poetic rhymes and metrics were also included. This book format incorporating miscellaneous materials resembles the daily-life encyclopedia, which was very popular in late Ming and early Qing China when commercial printing proliferated.

Book buyers with limited means wanted to fulfill diverse obligations with the purchase of a single title. The production and circulation of both literary Chinese and vernacular Korean letter-writing manuals seem to have been more closely correlated with the technological supports for commercial printing and thriving book markets than the individual letter writers’ need to consult them.

Chosŏn letter writers seem to have learned letter-writing skills and epistolary protocols through actual social interactions and emotional interactions. Instead of absorbing preset epistolary norms, they constantly monitored “the possibilities of writing in the letter genre and of language as the letter genre manifested them.” This “epistolary self-reflexivity” allowed Chosŏn letter writers to make sense of and negotiate with preexisting cultural norms and political power relationships through the seemingly mundane and trivial practice of letter writing.