The Power of the Brush

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CHAPTER 2

The Rise and Fall of a Spatial Genre

When letter writing was no longer a special means of communication dominated by a few male elites, its practitioners began to experiment with the physical shapes of letters that they wrote and read. Most notably, some users of the Korean alphabet created nonlinear textual forms such as “spiral letters” from as early as the late fifteenth century.¹ To produce this peculiar form, letter writers had to rotate the texts counterclockwise by 90 degrees several times to complete their messages (figure 2.1).² This spiral movement in writing letters brought about the same bodily motion in reading them. Writers and readers became engaged in the same physical movement in handling the letters, in addition to sharing an emotional and intellectual commitment to the contents. The scrutiny of material forms of spiral letters, therefore, unfolds the social practices through which people actually wrote and read them, details that their contents alone would not reveal.³ Investigating the “traces” of the bodily also enables us to reconstruct two related cognitive processes: (1) how the letter writers envisioned the layouts of their letters on a blank sheet of paper; and (2) how the recipients figured out where to start reading and where to move on from one part of the text to another.⁴ The implication that letters substitute for the physical presence of the senders was intensified because their “bodily” movement and “cognitive” process embedded in spiral forms evoked their presence as something tangible.⁵ The spiral forms added crucial elements of meaning to the process of deciphering the texts.
The spatial organization of text was deeply embedded in the cultural, social, and political norms that influenced how people produced, inscribed, circulated, and interpreted written works. This was even more the case in letter writing because certain margins or spaces on the page denoted either the sender’s deference to the addressee or the physical and social distance between them. Margins and blanks in texts always delivered ideological connotations. These spaces also offered room where social and cultural minors could challenge the legitimacy of norms set by elites, which occupied the central space of the pages. The organization of textual space in Chosŏn spiral letters delivered more complicated information. First, the manipulation of margins accompanied multiple textual directions, which inextricably entwined somatic movements with cognitive interpretations. Second, unlike commentaries or annotations, the texts in the marginal space were continuations of the main contents. In other words, the appropriation of
“textual margins” in Korean epistolary culture defies the general notion about the relation between main texts and marginal notes. Chosŏn letters call for a reconsideration of the very definition of margins.

The examination of Korean spiral letters, however, poses a crucial challenge in research methodology. Whereas manuscript letters bearing spiral forms abound and are well preserved, there remain no documented records about why and how Chosŏn letter writers produced and circulated spiral letters. They did not even name the form. People might have found nothing extraordinary about spiral forms due to their ubiquitous and quotidian usages. Certain fundamental cultural practices, though distinctive to our modern eyes, could have been so generally accepted that they never needed to be articulated.

The absence of documented records, however, does not prevent intellectual inquiries. Theoretical breakthroughs on the limitations of archives, developed in African American studies, are useful in grappling with this kind of research problem. Research on slavery in the transatlantic world exemplifies the challenges that existing documents present to scholars interested in the histories of the oppressed. The archive can be a place of absence, largely a site excluding the voices of women, African slaves, and other people of color, which makes it difficult to recover aspects of their culture and agency. The notion of “critical fabulation” has been proposed as a tool to make productive sense of the gaps and silence in the archive, where the voices of enslaved women are absent. A writing methodology that combines historical research with critical theory and intellectual imagination makes it possible for us to “tell an impossible story” through exploiting the capacities of the subjunctive in fashioning a narrative.

Korean spiral letters began to develop in domestic correspondence including women, who were mostly left out of official history and government documentation, unless they held some power or had encounters with authorities. Although the act of writing letters enabled Chosŏn women to exercise some agency, their behavioral patterns and cultural proclivity was not deemed deserving of being documented in official archives. We do not have self-description about their own epistolary practices. Even though the content of women’s letters offers no hints about the origins and functions of spiral forms in Chosŏn epistolary culture, examining the documents’ physical forms reveals some meaningful information about how women letter writers materialized their agency. The method of “critical bibliography,” the study of texts as material objects, takes manuscript letters themselves as the
corpus of solid evidence. A similar methodological approach is advocated by young scholars in Native American and indigenous studies who call for new methodologies focusing on the close observation of material objects produced by Native Americans to overcome the silence on and biases toward them in the archives of early America. Likewise, the bibliographical information that we discover from Korean spiral letters complements the limited archives, which reveal only piecemeal pictures of women’s lives in the voices of male elites. Comparison with the textual cultures of other East Asian countries, moreover, helps us expand the interpretive scope. This bibliographical evidence can be accepted with a reasonable degree of certainty when supported by comparative studies and theoretical rumination.

UNRAVELING SPIRAL LETTERS

This analysis is based upon Chosŏn letters in their original forms, most of which were written by members of yangban aristocratic families. Many of these letters have been preserved as family treasures by the descendants of senders or recipients. To what extent did existing spiral letters represent their actual usages in social life during the late Chosŏn period? Researchers may be tempted to create statistics about their geographical distribution, the time periods when they were used, and the social status of the letter writers. The problem is that only a few prestigious elite clans during the Chosŏn period enjoyed the cultural privilege and economic means that enabled them to preserve these letters in their family archives. The archives encapsulate political hegemony and cultural dominance, the exertion of which decided the life span of material texts and their transmission to future generations.

Some letters, moreover, survived not as archived texts but as part of grave goods. For example, 185 letters were found during the excavation of the tomb of Madam Kim, who died in the 1580s, for relocation in 1977. These letters were written to her by her husband and natal parents. In 1989, another batch of 172 letters was recovered from Madam Ha’s tomb, which were exchanged with her husband, Kwak Chu (1569–1617), and her daughter, who had married out. The discovery of a vernacular Korean spiral letter in Yi Êngt’ae’s (1556–1586) tomb in 1998, meanwhile, received much public attention as an exemplary love letter of the Chosŏn period. Yi’s wife wrote this letter to her deceased husband; it was buried with a pair of shoes woven with locks of her hair as love tokens (figure 2.2). These letters, mostly
written in vernacular Korean, offer vivid glimpses of elite epistolary practices using both spiral and nonspiral forms. However, they represent only the life of the elite class, who could afford such textual practices during their life and decent burials after their death. Some letters, moreover, survived not as texts but as repurposed paper. For example, the letters discovered in Madam Kim’s tomb had been crumpled and used as cushions between the corpse and the coffin. We do not know how many letters were recycled like this and how many of them were spiral letters. Statistics based on existing letters will remain provisional at best and show only a partial picture of Chosŏn epistolary culture, unless and until there are further archaeological discoveries.

Some recent discoveries suggest that the spiral form could have been used beyond the elite class. In 2010, for instance, eighty-five letters from Chosŏn interpreters, which had been sent to an interpreter of the Sō daimyo from 1795 to 1810, were discovered in Japan. Seventy-two letters in this batch were written in Korean, and some of them bear spiral forms. Official interpreters during the late Chosŏn period had formed secondary status
groups, *chungin*, whose members held petty clerical positions or practiced other vocations that required special expertise such as medical doctors, astrologers, or legal specialists as well as interpreters. The complexly intertwined cultural and intellectual interactions between *chungin* and *yangban* elites might explain their shared epistolary styles. The fact that spiral letters were sent to foreigners, however, is significant. Chosŏn interpreters would not have sent their letters in spiral form unless they knew that the Japanese recipients were already familiar with this layout through their continued exposure to Chosŏn written culture.

Some scattered examples evince that epistolary customs did spill over to a few nonelite outliers who came from even humbler origins than the *chungin* class. During the late Chosŏn period, high-ranking court ministers hired private servants, *kyŏmin*. Most of these *kyŏmin* came from a commoner background, and they performed petty tasks, from preparing tea or medicine to taking care of their masters’ bedding and table settings. Their duties also included sending and receiving letters on behalf of their masters. For instance, Hong Ponghan (1713–1778), a leading political figure of the Noron faction in the eighteenth century, hired a *kyŏmin* named An Suuk (d.u.), who was exceptionally good at drafting various writings. Hong habitually consulted An in writing personal letters as well as official reports to government offices and even memorials to the throne. It is unlikely that all servants were as well versed as An in epistolary protocols, particularly because nonelites’ literacy remains questionable. Nonelites, moreover, did not use epistles for sociopolitical empowerment until the late nineteenth century. Taking all these circumstances into account, it would be reasonable to consider the proliferation of epistolary practices as an elite phenomenon for most of the Chosŏn period. Nevertheless, ruling out the possibility of nonelite participation would skew the records of actual epistolary interactions in the Chosŏn society.

**Organizing Principles**

The letter in figure 2.3 was produced in 1811, and it displays 360-degree spiral effects. The letter writers indented the beginning of their message radically toward the lower-left side of the paper while leaving a generous margin on top. When the paper was filled to the lower-left edge, they turned it counterclockwise by 90 degrees and continued to write in the left half of the upper margin. When that was filled, they again turned the paper counterclockwise
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by 90 degrees and continued to write in the right half of the upper margin. When the contents even filled up the right margin of the paper, the letter could be read from all four directions. This particular spiral letter exhibits four distinctive characteristics: (1) both writers and readers have to rotate the given page to handle it; (2) a single text is divided into several parts, laid out in different places on the same page; (3) these different parts do not create subordinate relationships with one another, unlike marginalia or annotations; and (4) the spiral layout is integrated into the writing practice rather than through a separate process of designing textual space.

In spite of the shared idea of rotating the page, writers’ decisions on the degree of spiral effects varied from 90 to 360 degrees. Inchoate spiral letters with only a 90-degree spiral effect began to appear in the early fifteenth century.
century, written by male elites in literary Chinese. These letters, which added only one or two lines in the narrow upper margin, do not present the systematic application of spiral effects to writing and reading. The writers must have turned the page by 90 degrees simply to use the margins as extra writing space. Full-fledged spiral forms initially emerged in vernacular Korean letters produced in the late fifteenth century, several decades after the invention of the Korean alphabet (see figure 2.1). They began to develop in the domestic contexts where men and women read and wrote together within elite households. Female writers wrote more spiral letters with more extreme spiral effects than did their male counterparts. Male elites’ letters written in literary Chinese began to exhibit full spiral forms only in the late sixteenth century, which suggests that this particular form was popular in vernacular Korean letters first and then influenced male elites’ literary Chinese letters. Considering that not every letter writer produced spiral letters, it does not seem that male elites randomly chose this textual form. In Korea, as in India, where writers often chose among different scripts, social actors’ choice of a language defined social significations because it either confirmed their affiliation in the existing sociotextual community or gave rise to a new community. In the same vein, Chosŏn letter writers chose a spiral form from among other alternatives, thus joining a particular sociotextual community. For the distinctiveness of Korean spiral letters compared to nonlinear texts developed in China and Japan, the contribution of women who wrote in vernacular Korean script deserves due credit.

The imposition of spiral effects on letters increased their visual complexity, which slowed down the process of writing and reading them. The more extreme the spiral effects, the longer it took to decipher a given letter. The decision to apply spiral effects does not seem to have been governed by the contents. Existing spiral letters cover a variety of topics, including family affairs, academic debates, social issues, and political problems. The division of textual parts through the application of spiral effects does not necessarily correspond to changes of subject in the given letters, either. The need to turn the page could come at any moment in the narrative’s development. However, no spiral forms appear in documents registered at the state offices, such as petitions and memorials. The spiral forms never carried over to the pages of books, which were closely linked to official history, orthodox scholarship, and literary oeuvres: textual domains that male Confucian elites dominated. Spiral letters were used only in nonofficial settings. The absence of any apparent pattern as well as the usage only in private settings suggest that
spiral forms developed into a vernacular textual style for diverse purposes of self-fashioning.

NONLINEAR TEXTS IN EAST ASIA

The organizing principles of nonlinear textual layouts that developed in other countries under the influence of literary Chinese classical tradition offer some clues about the origins of Chosŏn spiral letters.

The Luoshu as the Prototype of Nonlinear Texts

In the ancient Chinese classical tradition, symbolic abstractions contributed to the prevalence of geometric texts bearing nonlinear forms particularly during the Warring States period (475–221 BCE) and the Qin (221–207 BCE) and Han (206 BCE–220 CE) dynasties. The earliest example appeared in The Luo River Script (Luoshu) and The Yellow River Chart (Hetu), which represented the relationship between the terrestrial and the celestial. According to the legend in The Book of History (Shangshu), Yu the Great, the founder of the Xia (circa 2070–1600 BCE) dynasty, obtained the script from the tortoise of the Luo River. In the state formation of early China, The Luo River Script functioned as “a talisman of great magic power, the representation of the virtues of excellent leadership, as well as the sacred law and order.”

Both Confucians and Daoists employed this symbol of magico-religious perfection and sociopolitical legitimacy to explicate the correlation between the universe and human life. The practical application of The Luo River Script numerology was closely related to the development of such ideas as yin and yang, the Five Elements, the Eight Trigrams, the Nine Palaces, and the Ten Thousand Things (figure 2.4). The result was a proliferation of diagrams derived from The Luo River Script in which texts were prone to be multidirectional. The numerological theory from The Luo River Script branched out to the practices of divination, geomancy, astronomy, astrology, alchemy, and fate calculation, resulting in the nonlinear composition of the texts used for such practices. These texts subsequently influenced the modes of artistic expression and architectural structures across East Asia. Numerous textual examples of such cases are preserved in the Daoist canon (Daozang) consisting of about 1,400 texts along with occasional archaeological discoveries.

Korean literati must have been familiar with these diagrams through their classical training. However, it does not seem that this exposure carried
over to the habits of textual composition in general. Aside from their commonality as nonlinear texts, these Chinese examples differ radically from Korean spiral letters in terms of organizing principles. Unlike the integrated contents and forms in Korean spiral letters, the Chinese diagrams display meticulous designs that must have preceded the addition of textual contents. While a single text forms multiple text blocks in Korean spiral letters, different kinds of information fill different textual parts in Chinese occult miscellanies. These pieces of information dialogically interact to constitute the diagrams as a microcosm of Heaven and/or Earth, unlike Korean spiral letters, in which different textual parts merely maintain the sequential relation. The only commonality between them is the act of rotating texts in the process of producing and deciphering them.
The Chu Silk Manuscript

The textual layout of *The Chu Silk Manuscript* (Changsha Zidanku Chu Boshu) shows more similarities with Korean spiral letters than with the geometric diagrams because it contains prose narratives. This manuscript, dated at around 300 BCE, consists of three textual parts: an eight-line text and a thirteen-line text at the center, surrounded by a set of texts on four sides. The short text at the center accounts for the creation of the Chu (770–223 BCE) people. The thirteen-line text written upside down elaborates on the events when Heaven was in disarray.29 The surrounding text with twelve subsections describes the calendrical rules of each month, accompanied by colored icons of the monthly gods. The four corners are adorned with symbolic trees. About the relationship among the three texts, it has been argued that the eight-line text is upright due to its positive content, whereas the thirteen-line text is upside down due to its negative content,30 and that the layout of multiple texts in the same space generated hierarchies among them. Readers should thus focus on the texts at the center of the page. The same is true in the debates over reading order. Some scholars argue that the eight-line text should be read first, whereas others claim that the thirteen-line text should be read first.31 Little attention has been given to the surrounding texts in the margins.

The layout of the surrounding texts, however, made reading this manuscript from all four directions possible, which is analogous to Korean spiral letters.32 The positions of twelve icons on the four edges and four holy trees at the corners have been claimed to govern the textual directionality. The pictorial images would have been drawn first, and then texts were arranged to align with the images. In this integrated relationship between images and texts, the surrounding texts are “picture-texts-cum-arranged-texts” (*tuwen bing paiwen*).33 In other words, without images, the text would not have had to bear nonlinear forms. In a similar vein, the layout of this manuscript has been said to correspond to the diagram of the cosmic model (*shitu*), which makes the peculiar layout of the manuscript the outgrowth of various geometric diagrams.

Despite the shared idea of rotating texts, *The Chu Silk Manuscript* also differs from spiral letters: the multiple texts perch on a single page; there is a hierarchy among them; and the images force the writer to predetermine the textual directionality.
Palindromic Poems

In medieval China, palindromic poems, most famously *The Picture of the Turning Sphere* (*Xuanjitu*), gained popularity. This textual form, consisting of 840 characters in 29-by-29-line square form, can be deciphered in as many as 7,858 different ways, which “upset the habit of linear scanning involved in reading.”34 The development of various palindromes was closely related to the nonliterary texts widely circulated in this period. By the Tang period, astro­

graphical images had become part of everyday life for ordinary Chinese people by virtue of the availability of calendars and almanacs.35 People needed to have cognitive sensibility to capture the “circular” configuration of Heaven embedded in the medieval Chinese imagination and its textual manifestations.36 Calendrical designs and astrological charts thus required their users to apply “leaps,” “rotations,” and “re-positions” to extract the needed information. These unconventional ways of handling texts with calendrical information might have influenced the composition of “circular texts” in poetic compositions.37 The guideline for reading overlaid on Lady Su’s poems clearly confirms this argument, which is analogous to 3-by-3 square composition and *mi* (Ch.) pattern radius, which is the artistic and architectural patterns stemming from *Luoshu*.38 The magico-religious imagination, derived from the *Luoshu* magic square and the *Hetu* diagram, persisted in medieval China, which ingrained the nonlinear proclivity in literary production.

The organizing principle of medieval Chinese palindromes, originating from the *Luoshu* magic square, demanded careful design of textual space before filling it with content, which could have involved consideration of the total number of characters and their division based upon the metric rules of Chinese poems. In this respect, it appears improbable that spiral letters originated from Chinese palindromes. However, this idea of rotating texts embedded in Chinese palindromes and moral implications connected to it had been known to Chosŏn women and figured prominently in the development of similar textual configuration in their embroideries before they attained vernacular Korean literacy.39

Women’s Epistles in Heian Japan

Some epistles written by aristocratic women in Heian (794–1185) Japan also show nonlinear textual layouts, seemingly analogous to Korean spiral
letters. The writers began by radically indenting to the middle of the page and leaving generous upper margins. When there was no space remaining at the lower left edge, they continued to write on the upper margin and then moved on to the blank space on the right side of the page, which was called “sleeve writing” (J. sodegaki).\textsuperscript{10} Although Japanese letter writers did not rotate the page, the sequence of textual movement—first to the center of the page, moving to the upper margin, and then to the right margin—is identical to that of Korean spiral letters. Just like Korean spiral letters, the parts written on the upper margin and the blank space on the right are not marginal, but the continuation of the contents. This sectioning of letters and crowding the words thrived as an epistolary vogue in Heian Japan; it was not the result of an effort to save paper.\textsuperscript{41}

Besides this example of “sleeve writing,” other examples in the manuscript cultures of the Heian period reveal the meticulous manipulation of textual spaces. For instance, “scattered writing” (J. chirashi gaki) developed in Kana composition and spacing, in which the columns neither start at the same height nor stay straight all the time. The quaint and unpredictable nature of textual layouts, some argue, played a significant role in expressing the emotional sensitivity of each writer.\textsuperscript{42} The same examples, however, helped other scholars to debunk the nationalistic historiography in Japan, which ascribes to this Heian calligraphic tradition unique ethnolinguistic attributes. The operation of calligraphy in this period, for instance, included something specific to both Heian culture and the Tang calligraphic legacy; “scattered writing” was the Heian variation of the Tang calligraphic model in its smoothing of the strict striation of space.\textsuperscript{43} If this argument holds true, the sleeve writing in some Heian epistles, which derails the reading of vertical columns from right to left, could also be explicated as an attempt to go against the linearity embedded in the Chinese calligraphic tradition.

Despite the affinity in textual layouts between sleeve writing and spiral letters, there is no evidence showing that Heian manuscript culture had been transmitted to Korea. Writers and readers of Heian letters, moreover, never rotated their letters. Nevertheless, the commonality between these two cases suggests an interesting factor that might have contributed to the development of peculiar textual layouts in both countries. Both forms came from female brushes in the inchoate stage of vernacular culture in the respective societies. That is, with multiple options, the users of the new linguistic mode displayed the propensity to flout preexisting textual conventions. Just
as some Heian letter writers attempted to defy the strict striation in Chinese calligraphic styles through either “scattering” texts or sectioning them in “sleeves” of the page, Chosŏn letter writers defied the linear textual layouts by rotating the given page to generate spiral forms.

Although nonlinear texts developed in China and Japan exhibit some commonalities with Korean spiral letters, there is no evidence that the spiral forms were derived from them. The combination of rotating the given page and sectioning a single text appeared only in the Chosŏn epistolary practices.

SPRAL LETTERS IN PRACTICE: FOUR HYPOTHESES

With no evidence of outside influences in the development of spiral letters, the bibliographical analysis of spiral letters allows us to reconstruct how writers and readers could have handled them. The remnants of bodily engagement by both writers and readers help us figure out possible motivations behind the popularity of spiral letters.

Saving Textual Space

First, letter writers may have been attempting to save paper by packing all of the content onto a single sheet without moving on to a second page. All existing studies remarking on spiral forms simply present this hypothesis as the sole explanation, apparently attributed to the insufficient supply of paper in the Chosŏn period. Although not completely groundless, this claim holds relevance only in two cases. First, the literary Chinese letters with only one or two lines added in the narrow upper margins could be understood this way. However, these letter writers turned the page by 90 degrees only once in most cases; thus, their letters did not develop full-fledged spiral effects that would require bodily movement integrated into the reading and writing processes from beginning to end. The other case is letters written on preprinted or prestamped stationery with lines (figure 2.5). Because letter writers could not fit all the content into the generously spaced lines at the center of the sheet, they often used the marginal space by applying spiral effects several times. Even in these cases, however, we cannot establish a solid logical connection between the intention to save textual space and the decision to rotate the given page. If paper had to be fully used, it would have made more sense to focus on controlling font size and line spacing. As
Figure 2.5. Song Myŏnghŭm’s (1705–1768) letter written on printed stationery (top) and a woodblock for the production of stationery for letter writing (bottom). Daejeon Municipal Museum, hyangsa nŭkch’ŏn 1543 & sŏnsa kit’ak 2331. Photo courtesy of Daejeon Municipal Museum.
shown in the case of Heian letters, the letter writers did not have to rotate the page even when moving on to different textual sections. The idea remains arbitrary at best, regardless of its potential functionality.

Letter writers’ seemingly inconsistent use of spiral effects also makes the claim that they were saving textual space unconvincing. Some wrote spiral letters but others did not. Even frequent users of spiral letters sometimes did not write in spiral form. While some densely spaced letters did not employ spiral forms, some other letters with vast blank space bore spiral forms. This unpredictability invalidates the space economy argument.

Crossed letters from Victorian England offer good examples of how the intention to save paper could give rise to complexity in textual space. The above image is Jane Austen’s letter to her sister, Cassandra (figure 2.6). The right half contains two separate passages of writing, one written over the other at a right angle. British letter writers crossed their letters in this way to save postage, which was charged by the number of sheets of paper. The letter writers’ economic considerations overwhelmed the efficiency of reading, which prompted the development of this eccentric letter form. Crossed letters, however, continued to be used even after the introduction of Penny
Black postage in 1840, through which letters of up to half an ounce were to be delivered at a flat rate of one penny. This indicates that crossed letters appealed to some British writers for reasons other than saving textual space. Likewise, we cannot explain why Chosŏn letter writers rotated the page only with the preservation theory due to other possibilities discussed below.

**Calligraphic Aesthetics**

Upside-down forms, which also required writers and readers to rotate the given page, thrived in texts produced in the countries under Muslim jurisdiction. Korean spiral letters particularly resemble spiral texts popular in Yemen. The Yemeni writers strove for calligraphic exquisiteness by applying spiral effects, through which the contents determine the textual forms and vice versa. Therefore, as the second possibility, Chosŏn letter writers may have been concerned about the aesthetic quality of their letters. However, they do not appear to have considered textual elegance when employing spiral effects.

First, there are a considerable number of spiral letters that continue to the back of the page (figure 2.7). As seen in this image, the writer tried painstakingly to write legibly on the back by placing the lines of text between lines already written on the front of the page. Nevertheless, in many cases, the doubling up of writing on front and back made the texts smudged, due to the sheerness of the paper. In the Chosŏn epistolary culture, this use of backs of pages was associated with letter writers’ sociocultural positions in terms of both gender and linguistic mode. I have found many more women’s letters written on both sides of the page than men’s letters, and vernacular Korean letters addressed to women tended to continue to the backs of the pages. Women’s spiral letters sloppily written on low-quality paper hardly show artistic consideration.

Second, the calligraphic albums compiled by Chosŏn elites do not exhibit their special appreciation for spiral letters. Most of these collections, in which original letters were pasted into blank books, were put together by lineage groups to accentuate the literary and intellectual heritage of their families. Other collections compiled manuscript letters of prominent scholars, influential political figures, and highly regarded calligraphers. Amid these attempts to preserve either ancestors’ handwriting or the good calligraphy of renowned figures, there is no sign of a preference for spiral forms.
The writers’ fame or illustrious pedigree governed the value of writings more than graphic peculiarity in their spatial layout.

Even with no apparent preference for spiral letters, letter albums occasionally include manuscript letters with the 90-degree spiral effect, which the album compilers created from originally linear letters. They repositioned the letters to fit them to the size of the album pages. The letter in figure 2.8 is such a case. Two lines on the upper margin were cut and pasted from the left edge. This letter is extraordinary in that the first four lines from the right edge are actually the ending part. We can assume that the letter writer left a
margin on the right side of the page in the expectation of using it as the outer cover after folding it, which ended up becoming writing space for the contents running over from the leftward progression. Because the album compiler added information about the letter writer in the upper-right corner of the page, moreover, all these textual elements make readers meander over the page to make sense of all textual information. These cases, however, were hardly expressions of the compilers’ aesthetic predilection for spiral letters. They ended up damaging the original letters by cutting them up. The ubiquity of spiral letters could have suggested this particular textual form as the template for dealing with the incongruous sizes of original letters and album pages.

The third factor that makes the consideration of aesthetics less likely is the letter writers’ choice of calligraphic style. As much as male literati’s masterful calligraphy signified their industrious body control for moral perfection, female writers’ skillful hands in vernacular script fulfilled their
bodily discipline as virtuous women. Many vernacular Korean spiral letters were written in “scowling” style (hyobinch’ê), which developed as Korean writers crudely imitated the cursive styles in literary Chinese calligraphy (see figure 2.7). Although some texts written skillfully in this style might look beautiful and elegant to our modern eyes, it was geared more toward fast and efficient writing than heightening aesthetic value. The style was generally considered disorderly, disgraceful, and messy; letters written in it were difficult to decipher. The desire for speedy writing overrode the opportunity to execute bodily discipline in composing letters. In reaction, eunuchs and court ladies invented the palace style (kungch’ê) for elegant vernacular Korean calligraphy. By the late nineteenth century, palace style had become the favorite calligraphic choice. Although palace-style calligraphy originated from the notion of the ugliness of scowling style, many correspondents continued to write their spiral letters in this style even in the nineteenth century. This testifies that letter writers did not associate spiral forms with calligraphic elegance.

Ch’ômch’al, Together Read!

Given that letters were widely read by Confucian literati in communal and public settings and that there was no technology to replicate texts, spiral movement may also have made the group reading of a single sheet easier and more efficient. Spiral letters divided into four parts heading in four different directions could be read in serial order by a group of readers surrounding the given text and rotating it. The readers may also have moved themselves around the text when their group was too big, just as spectators at modern art galleries and museums shift to view an artwork simultaneously. The earliest full-fledged literary Chinese spiral letter that I discovered was written during the Japanese invasion in the late sixteenth century (figure 2.9). It was sent by a court minister to the army chief recruiter on the frontline in 1592. This letter discusses concern about the delay of the Chinese rescue army, which would not enter Korea at the border. The urgency of the matter might have required the writer to apply spiral effects to let officers around the chief recruiter join in reading by surrounding the given text. Spiral letters may also have been used for the opposite reason: to control readership more effectively than could be done by reading texts aloud or posting them in public. Reading aloud was probably the most common method of sharing texts in many premodern societies. It was effective in disseminating
information but not suitable for dealing with sensitive issues to be shared only among a small number of people. Spiral letters could have been the ideal alternative for confidential small-group communication.

Examining board games popular during the Chosŏn period helps us to reconstruct the social practices involving a group of people sharing a non-linear text. The oldest existing example goes back to about 350 years ago, and the earliest record of board games appeared in Stories Collected by Song Hyŏn [1439–1504] (Yongjae ch’ongghwa). The games were as diverse as the Diagram of Promotion in Official Positions (Sŏnggyŏngdo), Diagram of Achieving Buddhahood (Sŏngbulto), and Diagram of Scenic Spots.
These games for both entertainment and didactic purposes bear textual layouts heading in four directions, just like spiral letters (figure 2.10). People had to sit around the board to play, similar to the way readers had to surround spiral letters in order to share them. Epistolary practices seem to have hybridized with other forms of social interactions involving various textual components.

Figure 2.11 shows Kim Hongdo’s painting produced in the late eighteenth century. Art historians titled it Appreciation of a Painting. However, the paper held by a group of men who surround it is blank. These men could be appreciating a painting, as the art historians suggest. However, they could also be examining a blank sheet of paper for future use or reading a text together, as I propose in the usage of spiral letters. Because Kim never included text in his paintings when books appeared in them, we can assume that he could have also omitted the text in this image. It was common across premodern East Asia that a group of people shared both calligraphies (texts) and paintings (images) while surrounding them. Whatever this paper really was for, the painting shows that there was a perception in the Chosŏn that a group of people would surround a single sheet of paper for their shared project.

More substantially, ch’ŏmch’al, which literally means “together, read,” a frequently used epistolary expression since the late sixteenth century, suggests the group reading of a single letter. Another notable expression is kaksŏ, which means “writing letters separately to each addressee.” In most cases, this expression was used in negative statements, such as “mang mi kaksŏ” or “pyŏng mi kaksŏ,” which respectively mean “too busy to write letters to each addressee” and “could not write letters to each addressee due to sickness.” These phrases suggest that one letter was addressed to a group of people and read jointly. There also appears an expression, ch’ŏnsŏ, that means the joint authorship of letters. Both reading and writing letters developed into communal practices in the late Chosŏn period, which also could have affected the physical forms of texts.

Communal reading is observed in other societies, where it has completely different social and cultural implications from the Chosŏn case. For instance, several children sat around and shared a single Hebrew primer in medieval Jewish communities in Arabia and Egypt, where writing facilities were scarce and there were not enough books to meet the demand. While sharing one book, four or more Jewish children easily learned to read it sideways, upside down, and from all possible corners. Thus they became capable
Figure 2.10. Ch’ŏnggu namsŏngdo. Image from National Folk Museum of Korea (민속 민속 030061). 105×141 cm. Photo courtesy of the National Folk Museum of Korea.
of reading a text turned upside down with the same fluency as a text right side up.\textsuperscript{62} However, spiral forms do not appear in Hebrew texts of this region. Similar reading practices did not necessarily entail analogous physical forms of texts in different reading environments.

Considering the contents of spiral letters and the circumstances in which most were exchanged, the possibility of communal reading is rather slim.
Nevertheless, we cannot simply rule it out, given that we do not have any definite explanation about the usage of spiral letters. As Freeman Dyson convincingly claimed to show how scientific breakthroughs have emerged from seemingly impossible ideas, “Absence of evidence is not the same thing as evidence of absence.”

*Epistolary Vogue*

Spiral letters could also have been a popular epistolary style during the late Chosŏn period. After full-fledged spiral letters in vernacular Korean began to appear in the late fifteenth century, spiral forms frequently appeared regardless of both the gender of letter writers and the choice of linguistic modes (figures 2.12 and 2.13). Although some writers did not apply spiral forms, those who did generally applied more radical effects than infrequent users. Yun Tonggyu was such a case. As a pupil of Yi Ik (1681–1763), a leading Namin scholar of the early eighteenth century, Yun in his remaining letters exchanged with his teacher and colleagues mostly addressed academic issues, discussing Neo-Confucian metaphysics. He was a habitual user of spiral forms, and his letters exhibit several traits. First, as seen in figure 2.13, he tended to leave a wider upper margin, which made his letters evenly divided upon the horizontal axis. As the amount of content in the upper margin increased, each section created through spiral effects had equal significance in terms of the amount of information it carried. Second, blank spaces clearly demarcate each textual part. This unmistakable sectioning made it easier for readers to map out the spiral movement. Yun in some cases enclosed accompanying papers (*pyŏlchi*), mostly in the form of academic treatises, in which he delved more deeply into the philosophical issues brought up in the main letters. Remarkably, he never used spiral effects in these attachments. His propensity to apply extreme spiral effects to his letters never carried over to his formal writings, which attests that spiral forms were a vernacular textual style popular only in letter writing.

Chosŏn letter writers’ sensitivity to the spatial layout of texts gave rise to another unique letter form. By the nineteenth century, “boomerang letters” were being used among male letter writers. To compose a boomerang letter, the writer began by indenting to the middle of the page and then left generous spacing between lines (figure 2.14, 1–9). Reaching the end of the page, he returned to the beginning and continued to write in between existing lines while radically indenting them from the top of the page (figure 2.14, 10–22).
Figure 2.15 shows a more complicated mechanism of writing and reading. The writer, in this case, applied the boomerang process one more time, which made the letter-reading practice like cracking a secret code.

When both spiral and boomerang effects appear on the same page, the writing and reading practices become even more complex (figure 2.16). In all the cases that I have found so far, the spiral effect takes priority over the boomerang effect, as seen in this letter. Intriguingly, this particular letter was written by proxy (ch’ŏnsa), and we do not have any clue whether it was the sender’s decision or the proxy writer’s improvisation to apply spiral and boomerang effects. The letter writers expected addressees to follow this textual layout by common sense, without any instructions. The Chosŏn letter writers could have found it amusing to add complexity to their letters, making them visually cryptic and intellectually challenging to read.

The persistent appearance of crossed letters in the late nineteenth-century Anglophone world also corroborates the entertainment theory (figure 2.6). Although this particular form was started to save textual space, English letter writers continued to use it even after the Penny Black took effect in 1840.
The crossed letters produced after 1840 therefore had nothing to do with the intention to save postage. Here, it is helpful to examine how Jane Austen commented on crossed letters in her novels. In *Emma*, for example, Austen describes how Miss Bates admired the exquisiteness of crossed letters that she received from her niece, Jane Fairfax. Writing a perfect crossed letter without messing up the page took skill, which made the exchange of letters
Figure 2.14. Ch’oe Ikhyŏn’s (1833–1906) boomerang letter written in 1903. Image from Han’guk Koganch’al Yŏng’uho, ed., Chosŏn Sidae Kanch’alch’op Moŏm, 236–37. Arrows added by the author. Photo courtesy of Taunsaem.

Figure 2.15. Song Pyŏng’iil’s (1854–1903) letter to his wife (1890). Image from the National Folk Museum of Korea (민속 minsok 032082). 42 × 26.5 cm. Arrows added by the author. Photo courtesy of the National Folk Museum of Korea.
more enjoyable. Thus, some nostalgic letter writers lamented when this particular form went out of fashion.66

The perception that reading texts in unconventional ways is fun still holds true in the present digital age. Several websites and smartphone apps allow users to flip texts upside down or reverse word order in their cell phone text messages or social media postings. One such website states, “flip your text vertically, giving your friends a tough time reading what you typed. . . . Surprise your friends with Funny text.”67 In a similar vein, we may well assume that Chosŏn letter writers could have elaborated on spiral forms and boomerang effects for the purpose of maximizing the amusement of writing and reading letters.

Considering that there were no letter-writing manuals explaining how to draft or decipher spiral letters, their users seem to have trained themselves not through a systematic learning process but through their exposure to and embodiment of spiral forms in everyday social interactions. The users of spiral letters thus could have established and reinforced a cohesive and close

Figure 2.16. Yu Hujo’s (1798–1876) letter written in 1871. 46.5 × 32 cm. Image from Kukhak Chinhŭng Yŏn’gu Saŏp Ch’ujin Wiwŏnhoe, ed., Andong Kosŏng Yi-sssi Imch’ŏnggak p’yŏn, 166. Arrows added by the author. Photo courtesy of the Jangseogak Archives at the Academy of Korean Studies (entrusted by Andong Pŏphung Kosŏng Yi-sssi chongga Imch’ŏnggak).
relationship. They were bound as members of the same textual community, not only by the shared contents but by the preference for particular textual layouts.68

THE POLITICS OF READING: COMPLEXITY IN KOREAN TEXTUAL CULTURE

Each of the four possibilities presented above by no means represents the sole definitive motivation for Chosŏn letter writers to produce spiral letters. Different letter writers might have had disparate reasons for employing spiral forms. Even the same letter writers could have had different purposes in using the same form on different occasions. As a new “textual technology,” spiral letters did not simply “fill” a predetermined social purpose. Their roles were cocreated with the forms themselves by their makers and users.69 More importantly, the functions of spiral letters were not static but could change over time.

In my opinion, the development of spiral letters demonstrates how the users of the Korean alphabet endeavored to embrace preexisting cultural norms in their epistolary practices. Since the invention of vernacular Korean script in the mid-fifteenth century, male elites had disdained it as the “vulgar script” (ŏnmun), using only literary Chinese in official and public settings. The ease for all social actors, regardless of their gender, social status, and generation, in learning and mastering vernacular Korean script threatened elite domination, which hinged upon the classical tradition of literary Chinese. Thus male elites, most famously Ch’oe Malli (?–1445), discounted the effortless attainment of vernacular Korean literacy as vile and claimed that it would prevent people from delving into Neo-Confucian scholarship through “straining one’s mind and laboring one’s thought (kosim nosa);” consequently, ignorance of “the sage’s script,” meaning literary Chinese, would wipe out the moral effects of Confucian education.70 This argument echoes the reason some Confucian literati objected to translating classical Chinese texts into vernacular Korean. A legitimate way to train scholars to become ideal Confucians demanded that they willingly endure intellectual burdens to acquire knowledge. Until the end of the nineteenth century, literary Chinese remained the official written language for government records and Confucian scholarship in spite of the availability of the easy Korean alphabet.71

Women letter writers seem to have embraced this dominant discourse embedded in Confucian tradition; they might have appropriated a peculiar
textual technology to make their writings appear more sophisticated and complex visually, whatever the contents: spiral letters. The elevated visual and spatial complexity heightened the intellectual challenge for both letter writers and recipients. This dovetailed with the contemporary written culture prizes strenuous learning of difficult Confucian texts. Because male elites communicated with their female family members via vernacular Korean letters, they were exposed to these more complex writings. They ended up employing the form in their letters written in literary Chinese. Spiral forms thus prevailed as a popular trend of self-fashioning.

The development of full-fledged spiral forms in vernacular Korean letters exchanged in domestic settings offers an intriguing parallel with the rise of the “feminine hand” (J. onnade) Kana script in medieval Japan. The widely accepted historiography demonstrates that Japanese aristocratic women who were excluded from training in Chinese writing helped create and popularize this expedient phonetic script, which sparked the rise of vernacular literature in women’s everyday activities. However, as some studies have claimed, Kana was not a phonetic liberation through a new writing system but a choice between complicated and simplified calligraphic styles. No evidence confirms that using Kana should be perceived as feminine in Heian Japan. Therefore, there is danger in understanding Kana as an indication of the autonomy or dominance of “female/feminine culture.” Likewise, use of the spiral form neither was limited exclusively to women’s letter writing nor meant that Chosŏn women had attained cultural and textual autonomy. The complexity and sophistication embedded in this form were derived from the existing intellectual values that male Confucians advocated. Nevertheless, women’s letter writing had crucial impact on Chosŏn written culture, because many male elites imported this new “spatial genre” into their literary Chinese letters for their own purposes. Spiral letters are an important example of how letter writers co-opted day-to-day communicative practices to interact and negotiate with preexisting cultural norms and the already established power structure.

**SPIRAL FORMS AS A VERNACULAR TEXTUAL STYLE**

Male elites were drawn to the organizing principle of spiral letters performing complexity; however, they might have balked at its origin in female hands in domestic correspondence. The playful layouts of texts could not match the seriousness of writings that they produced in the public domain.
for official purposes. However, this does not necessarily mean that spiral letters developed as isolated cases only in domestic epistolary interactions. Male elites did deliberate on academic issues or crucial political problems in their spiral letters. For instance, An Chŏngbok, an eighteenth-century polymath, elaborated on the Confucian method of reading in his spiral letter sent to Chŏng Hyŏktong (d.u.). An guided Chŏng’s study by explicating how the reading of Confucian classics and poems could be interconnected in terms of the genres’ shared pursuit of understanding the relation between human nature and sentiments.75 Meanwhile, a spiral letter that Yi Tansang (1628–1669) sent to his fellow Sŏin scholars, ruminated on the Yŏngnam scholars’ joint memorial in order to refute their argument on state ritual issues (see figure 6.1).76

Comparison of these manuscript letters with the same letters included in the published writing collections of An and Yi demonstrates that spiral forms did not enter the realm of formal writings through the printing and publication processes. Without exception, all letters in the writing collections of Chosŏn literati take linear form, vertical columns proceeding from right to left, even if the original manuscript letters were in nonlinear forms.77 The spiral letters written by An and Yi were no exception. When they were shifted from manuscripts to print, the spiral effects were straightened up and interspersed lines were rearranged in reading order (see figure 6.1). In theory, however, it was not impossible to retain the spiral forms when using woodblock printing. One of the advantages of woodblock printing was preserving the calligraphic styles of original manuscripts by employing the same techniques used in carving images.78 The peculiar spatial layout of spiral letters was not deemed legitimate enough to be included in printed books.

Having letters published also meant that the compilers inspected and edited the contents to make them acceptable for public readership. An’s letter was actually included in his writing collection, as it was in manuscript form.79 However, Yi’s letter went through a thorough editing process. The contents of the printed version were not only substantially truncated but also purposefully paraphrased by the editor.80 Presumably the editor of An’s writing collection considered the style and tone of An’s original letter already good enough to be circulated among readers other than the addressee. The case of Yi’s letter, however, shows that the original was not suitable for publication in the editor’s eyes.

Thus, spiral forms were truly a vernacular textual style. How they were undone and rearranged is analogous to the ways other vernacular elements
such as idu and kugyŏl were removed from the initial drafts of literary Chinese texts written by male elites when they were put into print.\textsuperscript{81} Letters bearing spiral forms remained in the domain of the vernacular; thus, the male letter writers might have used them to indicate that their missives were not yet ready for circulation through printing and publication. Male elites’ letters that we now read in printed versions could be radically different from their original manuscripts in both content and textual layout.

**EFFORTLESSNESS AS A NEW TEXTUAL NORM**

The undeniable influences of colonialism and the encroachment of Western capitalism, however, triggered the decreasing popularity of nonlinear texts in Korea. Spiral letters were scarcely used after the 1890s, when the introduction of modern newspapers printed with Western technology brought in a new written culture.\textsuperscript{82} As Western Protestant missionaries began to enter Korea, they immediately made the dissemination of the Bible translated into vernacular Korean the key evangelical apparatus. Led by American Methodist Mary F. B. Scranton in 1888, Protestant missionaries mobilized the so-called Bible Women, who were referred to as kwŏnsŏ puin (a woman who recommends books [the Bible]) in Korean. These Korean women, who sold gospel tracts and Christian materials, made it their mission to teach many illiterate women they encountered to read vernacular Korean.\textsuperscript{83}

Transgressing the traditional social values and Confucian patriarchy, the Protestant Bible Women were instrumental in spreading Western written culture to Korean readers. Protestant missionaries applied two significant elements of Western writing to their publications in vernacular Korean script: horizontal reading and word spacing.\textsuperscript{84} Under the predominant influence of literary Chinese written culture, no punctuation had appeared in vernacular Korean texts before this period. Pre-twentieth-century readers of literary Chinese texts mainly relied on either the context or the parallel structure of sentences,\textsuperscript{85} which also affected the shape of vernacular Korean texts. Although writers and readers were familiar with blank spaces left in front of terms referring to political dignitaries and their behaviors or possessions, which functioned as reverence marks (p’yŏnggwŏl), the idea of word spacing had been unheard of.\textsuperscript{86} While horizontal reading was confined to Korean primers for foreigners (figure 2.17),\textsuperscript{87} word spacing prevailed more widely, along with ideas of social equality and popular sovereignty. An American missionary, Homer B. Hulbert (1863–1949), initially suggested
applying word spacing to Korean in 1896.\(^8\) He pointed out that without word spacing, the same sentence could generate several different meanings. The first vernacular Korean newspaper, the *Independent* (Tongnip sinmun), published in the same year, shared this new idea (figure 2.18). The editorial in the first issue made clear that the paper was using vernacular Korean to reach a wide readership regardless of gender, status, and class. Echoing Hulbert’s disquisition, it stated that the continuous passages without any break in existing vernacular Korean texts made it difficult to tell whether a certain character formed a word with the preceding character or the following one. Thus, people had to read the same text several times to determine its meaning. Despite the ease of learning vernacular Korean script, the editors opined, reading a letter written in vernacular Korean usually took more time than reading one written in literary Chinese.\(^9\) Effortless reading with word spacing, which subsequently facilitated silent and solitary reading, was essential for the enlightenment movement of this period.\(^{10}\)

![Figure 2.17](image)

**Figure 2.17.** Ross, *Corean Primer*, 6–7. C. V. Starr East Asian Library, UC Berkeley (5973.07.7099).
The combination of new social thought, the mass production of newspapers, and the introduction of word spacing created a general readership. Newspapers in pure vernacular Korean script with word spacing facilitated effortless reading, which subsequently promoted the spread of political information, thereby promoting social equality. This contrasted with spiral letters, which added complexity to texts to emulate the literary Chinese
written culture associated with Confucianism. The disappearance of spiral letters coincided with the fall of old Confucian values and the rise of readable vernacular Korean newspapers that advocated new Western values aiming to level social stratification and Confucian patriarchy.91

The rise and fall of spiral letters as a spatial genre reveal how the experiments in physical shapes of letters were closely related to cultural power in this period. The social, cultural, and political realities of Chosŏn Korea engendered a unique notion about the spatial layout and meanings of texts. Remarkably, spiral letters’ increasing popularity happened simultaneously with some male Confucian elites’ attempts to redefine their relationship to the broader Confucian civilization by embracing letters as academic texts. This is the focus of the next chapter.