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Ignorance of Chinese is Ignorance of Korean

Professor Lee Myung-Hak of the Dept. of Korean Literature in Classical Chinese at Sungkyunkwan University tested the literacy level in Chinese characters of 384 freshmen, and 78 of them couldn't even write their own names. That's 20 percent. Moreover, 77 percent of them couldn't write their mother's name in Chinese characters, while 83 percent couldn't write their father's name. Two out of 10 college freshmen cannot write their own names, while eight out of ten cannot write their parents' names. The situation must be similar at other universities. It's not even surprising that only 7 percent of them were able to read the word "ambition," 4 percent could read "honor," while only 1 percent could read "compromise." The situation was no different when it came to writing in Chinese characters, with 71 percent unable to write "new student," 96 percent unable to write "economy" and 98 percent unable to write "encyclopedia." Some wrote "bamboo mat" instead of "university."

Our students do not learn Chinese characters while in school. They have almost completely disappeared from literature textbooks. Only a few schools still teach Chinese characters and usually due to the passion of the school principals. High school students can take Chinese characters as an elective course in their junior or senior year, but hardly any of them sign up for it in scholastic aptitude tests. Existing verbal aptitude tests do not contain questions involving Chinese characters.

Seventy percent of Korean words including most conceptual and abstract nouns are made of Chinese characters. Terminology used in humanities, social studies and natural science are mostly Chinese characters. It is difficult to understand the meaning of words by pronunciation alone, without learning about the meanings of the Chinese characters that represent them. Words such as "recurrence", "repatriation" and "homing" contain the Chinese character that stands for "return." Without knowing that character, you must memorize each of those words separately by sound.

Chinese characters, which are a common method of spelling in Northeast Asia, are important means of communication in economic activities. Learning Chinese characters and developing Korean go hand in hand. In order to cultivate and refine our traditional language, we must master Chinese characters, in which Koreans used to think, learn, communicate and chronicle for almost 2,000 years.

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