The Cultural Work of Sejong the Great

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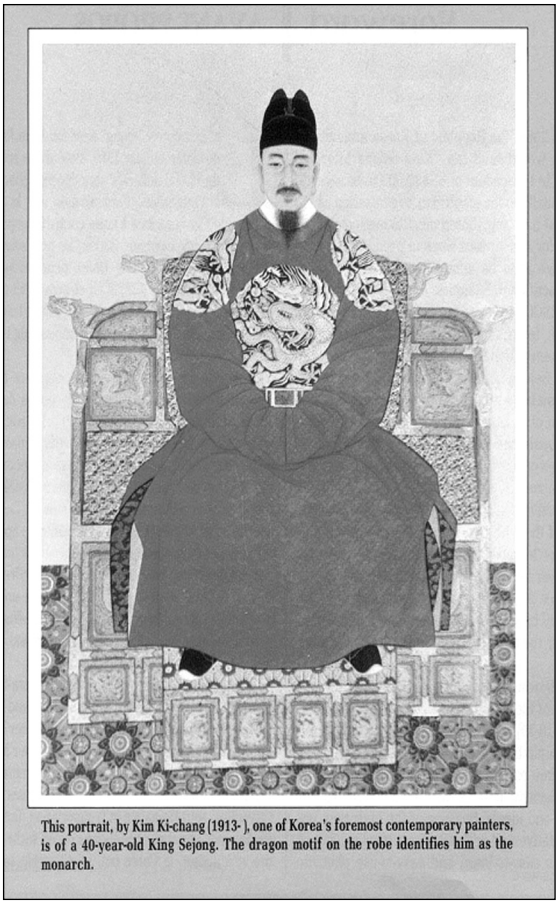
Many kings have ruled in the world since organized political life began, but the list of truly great ones is comparatively short. Any such list would surely have to include a Korean Monarch, Sejong (r. 1418-1450), the fourth king of the Chosŏn Kingdom (sometimes called the Yi dynasty, 1392-1910), who is universally regarded by Koreans as the wisest and most gifted ruler of their long history. The basis for this proud regard lies primarily in Sejong's having invented the Korean alphabet, an absolutely unique system of writing which Koreans consider to be the very soul of their national culture.

Koreans have always known that King Sejong first announced the new alphabet during the winter of 1443-1444, and that he formally proclaimed it as "The Correct Sounds for the Instruction of the People" (Hunmin Chŏng'ŭm) in October, 1446. But the full modern understanding of this event did not become possible until 1940, when an exhaustive commentary which had been joined to the original proclamation came to light in the small town of Andong, in the southeastern part of Korea. The commentary went into detail on the technical rationale for the shapes of the original twenty-eight letters (only twenty-four are used today) and revealed the alphabet to be the conscious and closely reasoned invention of a highly original mind. Western historians of writing, guided by the evolutionary and diffusionist development of writing in their own tradition, had explained the alphabet – which first came to their attention in 1799 – as a derivative of various known Indian or Tibetan scripts, and even today such uninformed speculation can still be found in western reference literature. But for the most part the world now recognizes this script as the unique and amazing invention that it is. The life and career of its inventor, less well known, deserves attention not only in connection with the alphabet, but more broadly for its own intrinsic interest.



This portrait, by Kim Ki-chang (1913-), one of Korea's foremost contemporary painters, is of a 40-year-old King Sejong. The dragon motif on the robe identifies him as the monarch.

Sejong's Accession and Early Reign

Of all Korean kings, Sejong is the most remembered. He is the king who appears on the postage stamps and money, whose name identifies boulevards, cultural centers, foundations and prizes. But the blaze of his halo has turned him into a saintly, mythic figure, and ironically obscured many of his

achievements and human qualities. To genuinely understand him, it is necessary to turn away from all the statues and hagiography and see this great man securely in his time and place.

The political culture which produced King Sejong, eschewing charisma and personality as the chief criteria of royal greatness, rather emphasized Confucian morality and conformance to the image of the "sage" (sŏng) established in the Confucian classics. Even in his lifetime, the king's persona was sacralized. The most powerful political figures could only approach him with utter deference, while the common people, on the relatively rare occasions when he left his palace for some necessary royal function, actually had to cover their windows and turn away from him lest their gaze sully his sagely presence. Inevitably, however, even this solemn aura had to be broken by the exigencies of practical government and politics. Officials could argue vigorously with him over policy and administrative matters; indeed, the Confucian concept of loyal remonstrance obligated them to do so. Sejong was denounced, for example, for spending so much of his workday on the alphabet, and there were plenty of other matters over which he and the bureaucracy were from time to time at loggerheads. In such circumstances, the king's personality and character could hardly remain hidden. Even the common people, though deprived of direct impressions or "news" in the formal sense, could hardly have been unaware of what manner of man sat on the nation's throne.

Very little is known of Sejong's early life. He was born on May 7, 1397, the third son of Yi Pangwŏn, himself the son of Yi Sŏnggye (King T'aejo), the founder of the Chosŏn dynasty. Yi Pangwŏn had played a major role as aide to his father in the establishment of the new dynasty, and after he himself came to throne as King T'aejong (r. 1400-1418) he laid strong administrative and political foundations for the new state. In 1404, T'aejong selected his eldest son, Prince Yangnyŏng, as crown prince, and the younger Sejong (then known as Prince Ch'ungnyŏng) would seem to have been destined for obscurity along with his ten other brothers. But in the end it was Prince Yangnyŏng who faded into obscurity. He remained crown prince almost to the end of his father's reign, but was suddenly deposed in 1418 and replaced by his younger brother Sejong. Less than two months later, T'aejong abdicated and Sejong came to the throne (September 7, 1418). He was at that time twenty-one years old.

The reasons for this sudden turnabout are unclear. Given that Prince Yangnyŏng had been criticized for his weakness of will and indecisive character, the conventional thinking is that Sejong's superior intelligence simply made him the more appropriate choice to succeed his father. But if personal character had been the sole criterion, that would have been apparent much earlier; why wait for years to effect the change? It is the very suddenness of the change, and the quickly following abdication, that compel attention. They suggest that T'aejong intended to surprise his bureaucracy. With more than one qualified heir, some senior officials, anxious for more power for the bureaucracy, might have wanted the weaker Yangnyŏng to succeed. Doubtless many of them, anticipating his succession during his fifteen years as designated successor, had cultivated his friendship. For T'aejong to now replace him with Ch'ungnyŏng (Sejong), and then abdicate while he himself still had a few healthy years left, would enable him to decisively set the course of the kingdom for decades to come. If such was indeed T'aejong's plan, he succeeded admirably.

When Sejong came to the throne in 1418, the administrative and political structure of the Chosŏn dynasty had already been laid out by T'aejong. Sejong kept that structure running smoothly, and refined it from time to time, but thanks to

T'aejong's foundations he did not find it necessary to be constantly preoccupied with administrative or political matters. But neither did he waste this stability by resting on his oars and giving himself over to a life of ease and comfort, as he might easily have done. Although he did not leave an explicit personal declaration of the policies he would follow, numerous casual remarks and the overall results of his reign allow us to see that he wanted to build a state in which Confucian institutions in both public and private life would be carefully cultivated, in which defense and security would be prudently attended to, in which agriculture, the "foundation of the state," would be brought to new levels of strength, and in which culture and education would be developed in a manner to compare favorably with the standards of the leading Chinese dynasties. National pride was an important element in these plans. Korean culture was not merely to imitate Chinese culture, but was consciously seen to require a distinctive Korean dimension. And this would serve the highest political purposes: in an inter- national system in which Korea was in suzerain relationship to the Ming dynasty in China, Korea would create a self-defined standard of Confucian culture that would support a separate Korean legitimacy independent of China.

From Sejong's youth his intelligence and studiousness had been remarked by all, and in his encouragement of learning after he became king he was as much a participant as the presiding spirit. To serve as the guiding institution for his cultural policies, Sejong looked to an existing institution called the "Hall of the Wise" (Chiphyŏn chŏn). Established in 1399, it had languished on organizational charts until 1420, when Sejong reorganized it as an active organ of applied research, a kind of fifteenth-century Korean think tank. He staffed it with the best and the brightest young men that he could find. In 1426, a program of research grants was established, in which young men of unusual gifts could devote themselves to advanced study away from the daily pressures of an official career. The library for the Hall of the Wise was completed in 1428. Education and scholarship were fostered throughout the kingdom, and books were collected and purchased, often in China, occasionally in Japan. In every way, Sejong worked to set a scholarly yet also pragmatic tone for his government.

The attention given by Sejong to study and research did not detract from his primary duties as king; in no sense was he a scholarly escapist. He opened his court each day at dawn (as was the custom in East Asian kingship), and after the ceremonial visits of his senior officials went directly to work on state affairs. He rarely accepted the opinions or arguments of petitioning officials without asking questions and contributing his own remarks, and not infrequently these were more to the point. In thousands of recorded discussions of this kind, he showed an evenness of judgment and a lack of prejudice. On one occasion, during a regular review of the national statutes, the question arose whether polo should be designated as an official support for the military. The relevant officials were against it on Confucian grounds (it supposedly diverted officers from full attention to their duties), and also because leaders of the preceding Koryŏ dynasty had reportedly pranced at polo while the Mongols were burning the country. Sejong admitted that the Koryŏ rulers had played it excessively, even to the detriment of the state, but he could see no harm in it as a military sport and indeed confessed his admiration for the skill and agility required of good players. (It probably helped that T'aejo, Chosŏn's founder and Sejong's grandfather, had excelled at the game.) He insisted that polo be reflected in the national statutes, "and, if later, people would denounce it, let them not play it." Such examples of flexibility and common sense gleam like scattered gems throughout the *Sejong sillok,* the official chronicle of his reign.

Sejong's Cultural and Scientific Projects

In his own time and later, Sejong was famous for the number and quality of his cultural projects. It would be quite impossible to describe these at length, but a short summary will at least suggest the range of activity and the close involvement of the king himself in the work.

To begin with the humane sciences, Sejong ordered the compilation or revision of the official annals of the reigns of his three predecessors on Chosŏn's throne, and followed closely the activities of the "Spring and Autumn Hall," which held the official archives of the state. He established the procedures by which, after the death of each king, that king's official chronicle, or *sillok,* was to be compiled, and he began the practice of making extra copies for storage in four branch archives in different regions of the country. Because of this foresight we still have these records today, the main Spring and Autumn Hall copies having been destroyed in 1592 during the disorders caused by the Hideyoshi invasions. Beginning in the reign of Sejong's son Sejo (1455-1468), the annals were printed. Today, the collected annals of all of Chosŏn's kings over 518 years take up over 115,000 pages printed in the traditional format, and are collected in a modern edition (the *Chosŏn wangjo sillok)* of 31,000 pages in 51 large volumes. Another of Sejong's historical projects was the compilation of the official history of the preceding dynasty, Koryŏ. Although much valuable source material had already been lost or dispersed by his time, and in spite of lingering political problems involving the treatment of some key events and personalities of late Koryŏ, the *Koryŏ sa* is remarkable for its coverage, coherence and organization. Both in this dynastic history and in the royal annals, the historiographical methodology was influenced by long-established Chinese and Korean precedents, but the historiographical quality of the work inspired by Sejong is outstanding by any criterion and shows a special dimension that can be credited to him.

The geographical projects of Sejong were of equal scope. In 1434, detailed maps of the kingdom were prepared, although they have unfortunately not survived. They were based on previous cartography and records, but principally on a thorough survey of the nation completed two years earlier. A final, comprehensive gazeteer based on this work can be found in the appendices to Sejong's annals, and is now a rich source of information on early Chosŏn administration and local lore. A draft of the original survey for a single province still survives, showing the thoroughness of Sejong's overall plan. The survey recorded the formal details of administrative geography: population, irrigation facilities, key economic crops, local manufactures, regional defense, education, important mountains and waterways, communications, boundaries, regional distances accurate to the foot, and useful information on the social and family system. All this provided a solid foundation for later maps and gazeteers.

Agriculture and agronomy attracted Sejong's interest at an early date. He ordered surveys of agricultural conditions throughout the kingdom, the collection and improvement of cropping techniques, irrigation methods, and tools, and the comparative study of Chinese agriculture. Several Chinese farm handbooks were edited in versions incorporating local Korean practice and distributed throughout the nation. In order to more accurately measure Korean agricultural productivity and to more fairly assess crop value for taxation purposes, rain gauges were devised and installed, careful rainfall records were maintained in each district town, and soil types were studied and classified according to specifications of six grades of fertility. This work not only rationalized

and enhanced the national taxation system, but improved the quality of life for the peasantry.

Medicine and pharmacology were other fields in which Sejong's busy academicians labored with much energy. As in agriculture, this research involved extensive local surveys of regional medical practice and medically efficacious herbs and substances. Between 1443 and 1445, a giant medical encyclopedia in 365 volumes was organized and completed. Although it does not survive today, its rich research provided a solid foundation for the later *Tong'ŭi pogam* (1610), which even today is frequently seen on the reference shelves of practitioners of traditional Chinese medicine throughout East Asia.

Sejong had a deep interest in music, and assigned a brilliant musicologist named Pak Yŏn to conduct research in classical Chinese and Korean musical theory, court music and musical instruments. Much new music was composed for official court functions; the scores for some of these compositions have been preserved in Sejong's annals. This research resulted in the recovery or reconstruction of older music and musical instruments, and is today highly regarded by all who specialize in the classical music of East Asia.

Nor were mathematics and the observational sciences ignored. Beginning in 1433, Sejong's astronomers, led by Chŏng Ch'ŏl, conducted studies of the various calendrical systems that had been used in China or Korea. The results – laid out in all their mathematical detail in the appendices to Sejong's annals – were embodied in the design of a battery of observational and demonstrational instruments developed during the 1430s, and in a spectacular clepsydra (water clock) built in the palace to indicate the nation's standard time. This work too served as a foundation for later research, contributing particularly to the weight-driven clock and demonstrational armillary sphere built in the 1660s, and a privately-made weight-driven clock which also incorporated some later western features derived from Jesuit astronomical works compiled in China.

Military science was advanced by studies of earlier works on strategy and tactics, and by developmental research in artillery and pyrotechnical weapons. In the Sejong annals we find an interesting series of technical reports sent to the king directly from the proving grounds.

Printing technology had a long developmental tradition in Korea, going back to the world's earliest known xylographically (i.e, by wood block) printed text, dated 751, and the world's first cast metal movable typography, achieved in 1252. The Chosŏn kingdom produced its first font of metal movable type in 1403. Three fonts appeared during Sejong's reign – in 1420, 1434, 1436, and one just after his death, in 1450; of these, the "*kabin*" font of 1434 has received the greatest acclaim from printing connoisseurs and historians. Printing, however, is more than just fonts. Many problems involving inks, papers, matrix materials and design, and other areas, had to be identified and solved in order to make type-casting technology actually practicable on a wide scale. The bulk of this experimentation was carried out during Sejong's reign.

This background sketch of Sejong's various scientific and cultural projects demonstrates a remarkable procedural consistency. The king would identify an area for special research, designate the researchers from among people of appropriate talent or the staff of the Hall of the Wise, and follow the progress of the project through reports and his own personal reviews. In some cases the projects ended with a formal report or publication (as in the case of the provincial gazeteers or the scores of the court music), or with the design and production of certain items (as shown by the rain gauges, musical instruments, cannons). Sejong is the only king of the Chosŏn dynasty to have special appendices in his official annals devot-

ed to such projects. In the modern edition these take up several hundred closely printed pages.

A Political Problem in Mid-Reign

Although Sejong was a very strong monarch, the Korean monarchy itself had serious institutional and political limitations. In theory, the king was not only the head of government, whose person was sacred and whose word was law, but the very father of the state, the apex of the hierarchical pyramid that formed the structure of both government and society. In practice, however, he was closely checked by the higher bureaucracy, especially by formal organs of remonstrance which had the responsibility of scrutinizing the actions of the king and the government as a whole. In addition, the official royal tutors, nominally in charge of the king's Confucian formation, had traditionally exercised remonstrance functions as well. The king who wished to execute policy had to steer it between all these censorial forces and also among various administrative organs. In China, which also had a Confucian system of government, there was a despotic tradition that allowed the ruler to override and even to dismiss, humiliate, or even execute such critics. But in Korea the bureaucracy had genuine countervailing power that usually ruled out such monarchical caprice; the king had to fight and persuade. There were times, indeed, when the king seemed to be all alone in his government.

One such case was the controversy over the crown prince's administrative powers, which consumed so much of the court's time and energy in the last thirteen years of Sejong's reign. From around the mid-1430s, Sejong did not enjoy good health, and in 1437 he was sufficiently ill to announce that he wished to turn the lesser matters of state over to the crown prince, reserving for his own decision only high political matters and appointments and national security issues. His official tutors, who were concurrently high appointees in the various ministries and departments, argued that this was too sensitive and radical an innovation, one strongly opposed by all the traditions and precedents of Confucian rule. The filibuster was so vigorous that Sejong had to drop the matter. But three months later he raised it again, this time with his chief state councillor, the venerable Hwang H'ŭi, complaining specifically of rheumatic difficulties. Hwang, who was then seventy-four and would live to be ninety, seems to have been too healthy to understand the king's problem. He assured Sejong that he was only forty, in the prime of life, and that in such prosperous and stable times as Chosŏn then enjoyed there was no precedent for turning responsibilities over to the crown prince. Hwang's reservations were not without some merit; such an administrative arrangement, which came close to dual monarchy, was perhaps easier to propose than to carry out. It was not always easy to decide what was "major" and what was "minor," and bureaucrats could understandably have cause to worry about the consequences of misjudging such a question. The old Confucian adage was: "There are neither two suns in the sky, nor two rulers in the kingdom." So on this occasion too, Sejong dropped the matter. Twice in the next two years he pressed further for administrative help from the crown prince, but still in vain. "In two or three years, you will have to follow my wishes," he warned his officials.

But nothing happened in two or three years, and Sejong's health did not improve. In 1442 he again raised the issue, revealing that his eyes were troubling him so much that he could not keep up with paperwork. Treatments at the hot springs of Ich'ŏn had given relief but no cure. But again the senior bureaucracy turned a deaf ear. Finally, in 1443, tired of any further discussion and having exhausted every possibility for harmonious com-

promise, Sejong issued an edict, composed by himself and citing precedents from Korean and Chinese history, in which he decreed that henceforth the crown prince would handle all but major decisions for the last half of every month, and that his ministers would all assemble and swear their loyalty to the crown prince. This edict hit the court like a shock, unleashing all the pressures that had been building since 1437. Protests flowed in from all agencies of the government. The personnel of the six administrative departments closed their offices and marched in a body to the palace. Memorials and protests arrived in a flood. What was new, and intolerable to the officials, was that the crown prince would actually preside at court. This involved extremely complicated issues of precedent and ceremonial. The very relationship between lord *(kun)* and liege *(sin),* at the inner core of Confucian concern, was at stake. But now it was Sejong's turn to be implacable. Each memorial was no sooner presented than it was denied, in spite of the fact that many of the protests were reasonable enough in raising the fundamental problems that would flow from the division of royal power.

The king's determination now set the stage for a compromise along the lines originally proposed, even though the actual effecting of the plan involved two more years of haggling. Finally, in June of 1445, the crown prince began officially to handle routine administrative affairs. The drain all of this had caused on Sejong's already poor health can be imagined, as can the tensions that had been created in the relationship between king and court.

The last years of this controversy over-lapped the period – roughly 1442 to 1446 – when Sejong was working intensively on his alphabet. Inevitably, that too would become a matter of bitter debate, not least because the king had assigned certain administrative details concerning alphabetic research and publication to the Office of Deliberation *(ŭisa ch'ŏng),* the very same organ that, under the crown prince, would decide the so-called "minor affairs."

The Invention of the Alphabet

The alphabet project developed in the same way that the other cultural projects had: a need was identified, researchers were appointed, a final report was published, and actual publication projects using the alphabet were launched. There were only two factors that were new: Sejong himself was the chief expert and principal researcher, and the project was marked by controversy from the day it was announced.

The need for an effective Korean script must have become evident to Sejong from some of his earlier projects. For example, in 1431, in connection with the pharmacological survey, numerous Korean plants with no standard Chinese name had to be written in phonetic transcriptions using Chinese characters. An alphabet would have obviated that problem. In 1433, a survey of popular songs and ballads was conducted "in all towns and districts" by the Board of Rites, which counted music among its many responsibilities. The results of this project are not known, but surely there would have been many problems in transcribing the Korean words of the songs. Korea had a long tradition of writing Korean vernacular poetry in the phonetic medium of Chinese characters, but no consistent notation method had ever evolved even for the standard language, let alone for the dialectal needs of the "towns and districts. " (Such a development had occurred in Japan, as shown by the Chinese-character-based script known as *manyogana.* But such a development could not occur in Korea because the phonology of its language was vastly more complex than that of Japanese.)

Then there was the matter of standardizing the Korean pronunciation of Chinese characters. This question seems to have aroused considerable concern in the early Chosŏn dynasty. In 1416, in King T'aejong's time, a Korean riming dictionary, or possibly a Korean edition of a Chinese riming dictionary, had been compiled, but it evidently did not meet Korean needs, because Sejong made a renewed attack on the problem. Before he died in 1450, his chief phonological scholar, Sin Sukchu (1417-1475), had carried out at his direction studies of the phonological systems of both the Yuan and Ming dynasties, and had edited a Korean dictionary, entitled "The Correct Rimes of the Eastern Country" *(Tongguk chŏngŭn),* which was intended to define correct Sino-Korean pronunciation. All of this demonstrates on the part of Sejong not only a clear concern with Sino-Korean phonology, but also an unusual level of expertise in this very rarefied area of Chinese studies.

The Korean pronunciation of Chinese characters was an area of concern for scholars and the highly educated members of the bureaucracy. Yet they were but a small minority of the total population of Korea. What of the common people? Sejong also had their particular needs very much in mind. In 1444, in justifying his alphabet to his critics, he urged the necessity of reforming legal procedure in connection with the recording of testimony: those who could not read the complicated Chinese character transcriptions of witnesses' statements were put at a serious disadvantage, one that he proposed to rectify by using the alphabet to record the testimony in the original vernacular. And his proclamation of the alphabet in 1446 emphasized his special distress that ordinary people were unable to read or write.

This royal concern for the literacy of the common people seems to have been first manifested in 1434, on the occasion of the publication of a collection of morality tales that Sejong had ordered compiled in order to promote consciousness of Confucian ethics. This work, entitled "The Three Bonds and True Examples of their Practice, with Illustrations" *(Samgang haengsil to),* was concerned with the three basic Confucian relationships: those between parents and children, seniors and juniors, and husband and wife. Three hundred and thirty inspiring stories exemplifying these "three bonds" were culled from Chinese and Korean history and rewritten in Chinese versions, each filling a single printed page. But Sejong clearly saw the essential problem: if the people could not read Chinese, how could they be uplifted by the stories? Adding an illustration for each story was helpful but hardly met the difficulty, as the king acknowledged. "Since the common people generally do not know Chinese characters," he lamented, "even when this book is distributed how will they be able to act upon it unless someone shows them how to read it? … Let everyone, in the capital and out, exert themselves in the arts of teaching and instruction; let everyone seek out people of learning and sophistication, without regard to class status, strongly urging them to teach people to read, not excluding women of all ages … May the hearts of the people profit by morning and advance by evening, let there be none who do not feel an opening of their natural goodness."

What Sejong evidently had in mind at that time was a kind of nationwide tutorial in the text of "The Three Bonds." His prescription followed the traditional Korean reading pedagogy for Chinese: using Sino-Korean pronunciation, one teaches the student to pronounce a Chinese text out loud; the student then memorizes it and absorbs instruction on its meaning; and as the same procedure is repeated with more and more texts, he or she gradually learns to read. While Sejong's wishes were noble enough, he himself surely realized that they were unrealistic. The

idea for a new and different approach – the direct promotion of national literacy through the creation of a national phonetic script – may indeed have been conceived at this time. In any case, we know for certain that a decade later, within a few weeks of his announcement of the alphabet, Sejong was talking of a Korean translation of "The Three Bonds."

However that may be, no sign of any work on the alphabet is evident during those nine or ten years. But in late 1443 or early 1444, Sejong suddenly announced to his court that he had completed a phonetic script of twenty-eight letters which could be functionally classified as "initial, medial, or terminal sounds" and arranged in syllabic groups. Soon after this we hear of a demonstration class of clerks being assembled to learn the script, printing technicians preparing alphabetic textual material (unfortunately not described), the launching of a major research inquiry into the phonology of a Chinese riming dictionary, *Yun hui* (compiled 1292), and of course the plans for "The Three Bonds" in Korean. These announcements had a powerful effect on the capital; indeed, they precipitated a political crisis.

It seems that Sejong's alphabet plans had found major opposition among the senior officials, including some even in the Hall of the Wise. In fact, Sejong had found it necessary to go around the Hall and locate the phonological research project in the Office of Deliberation. The academic attack was led by Ch'oe Malli, who had also been a prominent opponent of the proposed administrative role for the crown prince. Ch'oe at that time occupied the highest research position in the Hall. From his long protest memorial, sent to the king early on March 5, 1444, we can see that he was basically an elitist who believed that literacy meant Chinese literacy and should be the privilege of the ruling class. To him, a phonetic script was a "barbarian matter" and not something a cultured country should have. He protested against using the "unattested" alphabet to "lightly revise the rime books already perfected by the ancients." He thought that mass literacy would destabilize Korea's social order, and he was skeptical that accurate transcription of trial testimony could bring any improvement in the quality of justice. He complained that Sejong had acted precipitously, without consulting his high officials, and lamented that the king was spending so much time on such things when he should be attending to the real business of government, and that even the crown prince was being diverted from his absorption in "the learning of the sages. "

Sejong was clearly angered by these arguments. He summoned Ch'oe Malli and the six academicians who had joined in his protest and point by point demonstrated the errors in their thinking. "How," he wondered as he looked over Ch'oe's memorial, "can these words be the informed and reasoned words of Confucian men? What utterly useless, commonplace Confucian men!" Although the king had his way, the views voiced by Ch'oe were widely held in officialdom and in the upper class, and would have a significant effect on the early history of the alphabet.

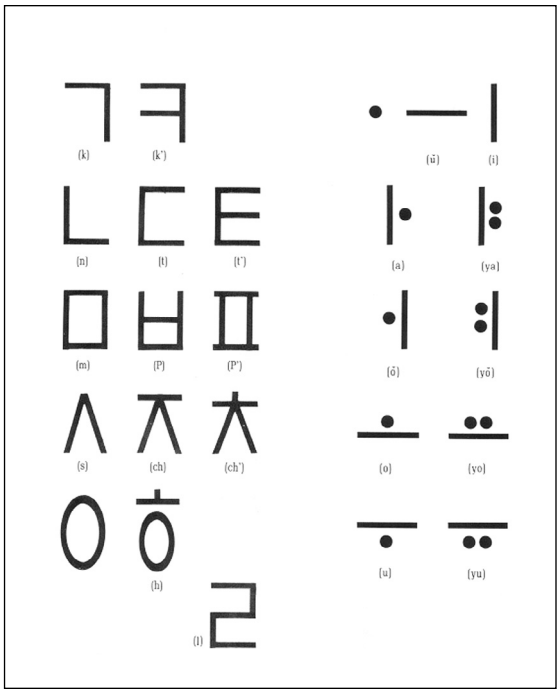
During the following two years, the phonological research went forward, the alphabet was refined, and various orthographical problems were confronted. But the most valuable product of this period was a thorough theoretical defense of the script, carefully conceived on Confucian principles and based on a highly sophisticated understanding of phonetic articulation. It was entitled "The Correct Sounds for the Instruction of the People, with Explanations and Examples" *(Hunmin chŏngŭm haerye)*. This was the commentary mentioned earlier, the long-lost text of which was found in the old house in Andong in 1940.

Among the many fascinating details in this doc-

ument is an explanation of the shapes of the letters. The seventeen consonants are classified according to the five basic categories established by Chinese phonologists during the eleventh century. These were velars, dentals, labials, alveolars, and laryngals. The letters for the velar sounds k and k' were based on an upper-right angular shape which was said to represent the outline of a tongue pressed against the soft palate, where these consonants were articulated. The dental letters *n, t,* and t' were based on a lower-left angle, representing the outline of the tip of the tongue touching the gum in back of the teeth. The labial letters for *m, p,* and p' were built on a square, representing the mouth and lips. The graphs for alveolar sounds *s, z, ch, and ch*' were based on an the shape of an inverted "v", said to represent the incisor teeth which are clearly visible during articulation of these sounds (the Chinese name for this category was "incisor sounds"). Finally, the laryngeal letters for h, and the glottal stop, etc., were based on a circle, representing the larynx.

Vocalization was analyzed in a three-part scheme, front vowels symbolized by vertical line, mid-vowels by a horizontal line, and back vowels by a thick dot. The eleven individual vowel signs and fifteen diphthong combinations were then constructed using various combinations of these three strokes.

Thus Sejong's system was not only based on the best linguistic science of his day, it literally engraphed that science. And his recognition of an independent phonetic category for vowels went completely beyond the Chinese theory from which he had started. On the other hand, his provision that the letters, though they constituted a genuine alphabet, be written in syllabic blocks rather than sequentially in a line, shows an accommodation to the basic East Asian habit of writing a single syllable as a single graphic unit. No other alphabet in the world has such a feature.



The commentary went on to rationalize the phonological structure of the alphabet in terms of what might be called a Confucian physics, which in turn was correlated, in the Confucian manner, with ethics, music, and the sequence of the seasons. This section, not easy to summarize, was designed to convince men trained in Confucianism of the fundamental appropriateness of a phonetic script.

The commentary continued with orthographical explanations concerning initial consonants, vowels, and final consonants, and laid out a system of diacritics to indicate pitch levels, or accents. It concluded with a long list of sample Korean words demonstrating possible combinations of the letters.

The Korean alphabet is thus revealed to be a script like no other. It was conceived and invented by a true genius, and explained in theoretical terms that, for their time and place, can be called scientific without hesitation or scruple. Phonetic evolution and various orthographic reforms since Sejong's time have rendered three of the original consonants and one of the vowels obsolete, and the letter shapes, originally rather geometric, have gradually

become streamlined. But in its fundamental design and structure, the alphabet has not changed since it was invented.

But it proved to be easier to create a theoretically ingenious alphabet than it was to change social and cultural attitudes toward writing and literacy. It is true that the Buddhists, under the patronage of Sejong and especially of his son Sejo (r. 1455-1468), quickly realized the benefits of an alphabet for the production of popular translations of religious texts, and that women took up the alphabet almost immediately for purposes of informal writing and correspondence. But neither the Buddhists nor women had much influence in public education. Sejong tried to encourage Confucian scholars to use the alphabet for translation and educational work, but it was nearly a century before there was any significant response to his initiative. By the early seventeenth century the alphabet began to have an impact on the growth of vernacular literature, but in the main classical Chinese still held sway. Predictably, opposition to the alphabet was the greatest in the bureaucracy, which not only retained Chinese in its traditional exclusive role until the latter part of the nineteenth century, but even continued to favor the old character-based systems over the alphabet in many vernacular applications. During the eighteenth and nineteenth century, however, trends in Korean society and the gradual breakdown of the traditional class structure brought major changes in political and cultural attitudes. The vigorous growth of Korean nationalism created many champions of native Korean culture, and of all the treasures that they claimed from the national past, the alphabet was the first and the greatest. Sejong's wisdom was recognized and his vision vindicated, and in the end his "Correct Sounds" enjoyed the respect and gratitude of all Korean people.

For approximately the last hundred years, Koreans have called their alphabet by the name “Han’gŭl, " or "Han script." The syllable *han* is significantly ambiguous, yielding three different but legitimate translations for the name: "the Korean script," "the great script" and "the one script." This last reflects the desire of most modern Koreans to use Han’gŭl unmixed with Chinese characters, which because of the Chinese origin of a part of the Korean vocabulary was once a popular option but which in more recent times has encountered steady resistance throughout the culture.

Sejong’s Last Years

Throughout his reign, Sejong had worked to perfect Confucian institutions in government and administration, and to strengthen Confucian values in Korean education and life. Although in this he followed the long established policies of T'aejo and T'aejong, he also was in accord with his own deeply felt convictions, nurtured by a lifetime of study and research in the Confucian classics and in Korean and Chinese literature, music and history. But he was not because of this hostile to Buddhism, in the manner of most Korean scholars and government officials throughout the long history of the Chosŏn dynasty. Indeed, in the last years of his life, Sejong turned more and more to the comforts of Buddhism, and this increased the distance that had been growing between him and many of his senior officials. Sejong had actually shown Buddhist sympathies early in his reign, and the agencies of remonstrance had fought him on this ever since 1426, when they petitioned him to have removed from his throne hall a Buddhist prayer engraved in the exotic Siddharn script on one of the ceiling beams. On that occasion Sejong had gone along with their wishes, and he also followed earlier dynastic precedents in applying strict standards for the licensing of monks, severely restricting the number of Buddhist temples that could be maintained throughout the country, and

limiting the amount of land that they could hold. But insofar as he personally was concerned, he was not only open-minded but positively cordial to Buddhism. In 1428, he admitted monks to the palace on his birthday. "The monks' robes mixed with the officials' caps and insignia, and the Indian music clashed with the sounds of the gongs and reed organs." This aroused a protest which he dismissed without discussion. Such complaints continued throughout his reign, some of them coming, not surprisingly, from the ever combative Ch'oe Malli. Things came to a head in 1448 and 1449, when Sejong had a shrine built on the palace grounds. The bombast that followed was particularly bitter; the students of the Confucian university even went on strike, and conducted a demonstration outside the palace.

During this same period, Sejong composed – in Korean, using his alphabet – hundreds of devotional Buddhist poems, all dedicated to the memory of his wife, Queen Sohŏn, who had passed away in 1446. Sejong himself passed these last years on a reduced schedule, attending to important business but spending much time in study and thought, finding what peace he could.

In the early months of 1450, his accumulating pains became too serious for his physicians to alleviate. He died on March 30, 1450, in the thirty-second year of his reign, at the age of fifty-three. The name Sejong, by which he is known to history and which means something like "epochal ancestor," was chosen for him at that time.

NOTE

"The Cultural Work of Sejong the Great" was written in 1990 as a proprietary paper for the Overseas Information Service (Haeoe Kongbogwan) of the Republic of Korea, which used it in a brochure prepared for ceremonies to inaugurate the King Sejong Literacy Prize, held in Paris under the joint auspices of the Korean government and the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). The prize was established by the Korean government; the selection of winners is decided annually by UNESCO.

The paper was translated into French and appeared in both French and English in the bilingual brochure prepared for the occasion. In a mutual understanding with the Overseas Information Service, there was no indication of my authorship in the brochure, which was distributed by both the Korean government and UNESCO. In the intervening years, copies of the brochure have become completely unavailable. Since neither my text nor the brochure itself was ever copyrighted, I have decided to prepare copies in a new format for free distribution, with my authorship now indicated.

—GARI LEDYARD November, 2002

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