

THE LEGACY OF KING SEJONG THE GREAT

Chin W. Kim
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
cwkim@uiuc.edu

King Sejong was a 15th-century Korean monarch who invented the native script called Hangul.¹ Although he is best remembered for this feat, he was also the chief architect of a shining cultural monument, achieving remarkable successes in many cultural and scientific fields from arts to astronomy, from music to medicine, and from printing to technology. His compassion, as manifested in the reformation of criminal justice, is briefly reviewed here before the merits of Hangul as a created, not an evolved, script are discussed.

1. Sejong made crown prince

King Sejong was born on May 15 (April 10 in the lunar calendar), 1397, as the third son of King T'aejong, the son of the founder of the Chosun dynasty (1392-1910). As the third son, Sejong was not in line to ascend the throne, but he was a favorite son because of his high intelligence and studiousness. The crown prince, Sejong's oldest brother, liked to indulge in sporting and recreational activities (e.g., hunting, dallying with courtesans), which his father frowned upon. He had little interest in government affairs, and when he realized that his father and court officials wished that Sejong be made the crown prince, he feigned, like Hamlet, to be insane. An unconfirmed popular story has it that he advised his next brother, the second son, not to harbor any ambition for the throne, upon which he (the second son) left the palace to become a Buddhist monk, thus paving the way and giving a rationale for the third son to be appointed the new crown prince. Historians still debate whether this uneventful (i.e., bloodless, compared to power struggles in Imperial Rome) transfer of the crown princship was as peaceful and innocent as it appears or whether there was a secretly planned conspiracy. Whichever is the case, the nation is forever fortunate and grateful that Sejong became the fourth Chosun monarch. It is difficult, indeed almost frightening, to imagine what the nation would have become had Sejong lived his life merely as a king's bother and had not had the royal authority to implement his policies and visions.

2. Sejong's nonlinguistic achievements

Today, King Sejong is primarily remembered as the inventor of the native script called Hangul. Indeed, it is in and by itself his greatest achievement, unprecedented in the annals of cultural and intellectual history of mankind, not just of Korea. We will look at his invention in a later section in more detail and see why his work evokes such universal accolades and admiration. But we are ahead of

ourselves. Let us first look at his 'other' achievements, which are as great a part of his legacy as the invention of the national script.

Sejong's reign, which lasted thirty-one and one-half years until his death on April 18 (February 17 in the lunar calendar), 1450, at the age of 52 began in August 1418 at the young and tender age of 21 when his father ceded the throne to him. During his reign, he brought a renaissance to Korea in the true sense of the word and established a firm foundation for the young state to last five centuries. Sejong's Annals, royal chronicles, written by contemporary historians, consist of 163 volumes with over 11,000 pages. They are the only Annals in the half-millennium history of the Chosun dynasty that contain 'external volumes' or 'appendices'. These consist of 36 volumes (vols. 128-163), classified according to subject areas, e.g., rites and rituals, music, geography, astronomy, medicine, etc. Other Annals are only chronological. This alone indicates Sejong's accomplishments in wide areas of the humanities and science. Kim-Renaud 1992 contains articles written by a dozen or so experts who introduce Sejong's remarkable achievements in their respective fields from arts to agriculture and from music to medicine. It is worth quoting here a passage from her Introduction to the monograph (Kim-Renaud 1992:1):

The first half of the fifteenth century in Korea was marked by an extraordinary level of cultural and scientific creation for which there are very few parallels elsewhere in the world. It can indeed be considered the golden age of Korean history. Korea in this period ... was ruled by a sage king endowed with high intelligence, creative energy, good judgement, and compassion who also worked unusually hard to free the people from poverty, ignorance, and injustice.

Limitations of space do not allow me to go into details about Sejong's great accomplishments in nonlinguistic areas. Suffice it to say with Ledyard (1997:32) that King Sejong

reformed the national music, organized the kingdom's ritual and protocol, laid out and equipped an observatory, corrected the calendar, built a great clock,² standardized weights and measures, invented a rain gauge,³ ordered the country mapped, set the guidelines for the compilation and preservation of history,⁴ investigated agronomy,⁵ medicine,⁶ and pharmacy, improved printing,⁷ and established directions for the moral instruction of his subjects.

Impressive as Ledyard's enumeration of King Sejong's seemingly superhuman work is, it does not include his achievements and contributions in other areas, such as literature, fine and ceramic arts, improvements in the manufacture of musical instruments⁸ and firearms, renovation of the legal and taxation systems, improvements on the economic, military, and diplomatic fronts.⁹ etc. See Kim-Renaud 1992 for detailed descriptions of some of these areas.

3. A compassionate king

Kings are called 'the Great' for various reasons, e.g., for great military conquests and victories, for gaining independence of a colonial state from its masters, for ushering in a golden age of cultural renaissance, etc. Sejong's greatness does not derive from the expansion of the nation's territories with military might, nor from freeing the nation from subjugation — politically, Korea remained as China's vassal state. It derives from his being the architect and engineer behind the glittering cultural and scientific achievements, and from his being a humanitarian and compassionate monarch. I cannot refrain from citing a few instances that attest to the royal compassion and Sejong's sense of justice before moving on to the topic of the invention of the script.

In criminal justice, King Sejong ordered improvements in the management of prisons. He ordered that prisons should be clean so that prisoners will not be infected with diseases, that they should not suffer from severe cold or heat, that they should be fed three meals a day, etc. King Sejong also forbade imprisonment of anyone over 70 or under 15 years of age, and those over 80 and under 10 were not to be imprisoned, even in cases of capital offenses. Those who had aged parents were allowed to serve their sentences near their parents, regardless of where the violation of the law had occurred. Those accused of capital crimes had the right to make three appeals all the way to the king. For those who wanted to appeal an injustice directly, he installed three drums in the city, one near the palace, for people to beat to obtain a royal hearing (Park 1992). When the king had scaph sundials made and distributed them among the army and government offices, he also set two in the streets for the common people (Yi and Jeon 1992). When the king heard of a patricide, he said he was to blame for it. He then compiled a book called *Samgang haengsil* — illustrated stories of the practice of three virtues: filial piety, loyalty, and faithfulness — and had it distributed to the people for education in ethics. His remark on this occasion is revealing (Ledyard 1997:34):

Let everyone, in the capital and out, exert themselves in the arts of teaching and instruction ... let us seek out people of learning and experience, without regard to class status, strongly urging them to gloss and repeat the text, even to 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. Then will our sons think of carrying their filiality to the utmost, our subjects think of pursuing loyalty to the utmost, and our husbands and wives carry the way of marriage to the utmost. ... You of the Board of Rites, put into effect my heartfelt wishes! Enlighten and instruct, in the capital and out.

In an age of feudalism, in which the elite and ruling class wants to maintain the status quo by leaving the masses ignorant, and in a male-dominated neo-Confucian society that early Chosun was, Sejong's policy of enlightenment of the people, regardless of class and gender, is truly remarkable. He is my personal hero,

not because I am a linguist and he was the greatest linguist Korea has ever produced, but because he was a compassionate egalitarian at a time and place in which he could have easily been imperial and maleficent. It is also in this vein that King Sejong devised a new script.

4. Invention of a new script

To give the reader a historical perspective, when King Sejong reigned, Europe was at the dawn of the age of exploration and reformation. Christopher Columbus, Nicolaus Copernicus, Vasco da Gama, and Martin Luther were all born during the latter half of the 15th century after King Sejong's death in 1450.

For more than a millenium, Chinese and Chinese characters had been a part of Korean writing ever since it was declared the official script in the 5th century by a Shilla king, who saw that proper governance of the state and effective communication with local administrators required a written medium.

If Chinese and Korean were sibling languages belonging to the same language family, they may not have remained as strange bedfellows whose consummation was tortuously difficult. But they belong to two different linguistic stocks. One is Sino-Tibetan, the other is Altaic; one is a very isolating language with little morphology, the other a highly agglutinative language with rich affixational morphology. One contemporary court scholar expressed the mismatch well when he said that trying to write Korean with Chinese characters is like trying to fit a square pole into a round hole.

So King Sejong set out to invent a native script. But inventing the script was not a parlor game, nor an intellectual exercise, nor a flash thought, nor even a scheme concocted with a soothsayer and etched leaves in the palace garden on one autumnal morning, as a popular textbook for introductory linguistics would have it.¹⁰ It was years in the making. Like Beethoven, who often forgot to eat or empty the chamber pot while composing, Sejong was preoccupied with the script and drove his court scholars hard. He pondered, he inquired, he quizzed his children, he ruminated. He sent a scholar to China (Liaotung, Manchuria) no fewer than 13 times to consult a Chinese phonologist (Huang Tsan), at a time when the only mode of travel was either on foot or on horseback. Even during the trips to hot springs to soothe his failing health, Sejong immersed himself on the royal palanquin in notes and books about the new script.¹¹

Aside from the formidable intellectual challenge, he also had to fight a political battle. Almost the entire cabinet opposed his project. Mind you that they lived in the age of a Sino-centric world. The culture and politics of Korea were inextricably tied to China, and Chinese writing was the identity-badge of the ruling elite class. It was their exclusive privilege and enjoyment. Civil services and all accompanying amenities derived from the very knowledge of Chinese. Heaven forbid that the masses became literate! A petition from no less a figure than a vice director of the Royal Academy on behalf of a band of Sinophiles is informative. It reads in part:

The nine provinces of the Chinese Hemisphere may differ in customs and local speeches but not in the script. Only such barbaric nations as Mongolia, Tangut, Jurchen, Japan, and Tibet have their graphs. Through the succession of ages, China has regarded us as a civilized nation whose culture, literary material, rituals, and music were modeled after China. Discarding Chinese now in favor of a vernacular script would be identifying ourselves with the barbarians, and this would be like turning away from the fragrance of storax to choose the bullet of the preying mantis. This is certainly a matter of great implication for our civilization!¹²

What drove King Sejong? Why was he so obsessed? His motivation is clearly stated in his introduction to *Hunmin chong'um* [The Correct Sounds for the Instruction of the People], as it was originally called when the new script was promulgated in 1446:

The sounds of our nation's language are so different from those of China that they cannot be represented adequately with Chinese characters. Thus, among the ignorant people, there have been many who cannot express themselves when they want to put their feelings into writing. I have been very distressed by this, so I have newly devised twenty-eight letters, which I hope everyone will learn easily and use daily.

It is unequivocally clear what the king was striving for: a simple writing system for mass literacy. What Sejong devised in the process was more a revolution than an evolution. I think it is safe to say that, except for Hangeul, all writing systems in the world today are evolutionary products. The history of writing is in general a story of borrowing a neighbor's writing system and adapting it to a new language. But Hangeul is a true invention. Of course, inventing a script is not a very proud or significant feat in itself. A Tibetan lama named hP'ags-pa devised the 'New Mongol Script', now known as the hP'ags-pa script, in 1269 for Emperor Khubilai Khan of the new Mongol Empire, the Yuan dynasty. This script was mainly based on the Tibetan script, which in turn was an adaptation from the Uighur alphabet. More recently, a Cherokee chief called Sequoyah devised a syllabary for the Cherokee language in 1820, borrowing heavily from the Roman alphabet.

This is not the place to delve into Hangeul's origin, possible or probable foreign input in its making and/or designing of the letter shapes, the principles of its graphic structure, the aesthetics of its letter shapes, or the degree of the match between the script and the language it represents. (Those interested should consult Kim 1988b and 1997, Kim-Renaud 1997, King 1996, Ledyard 1966 and 1997, Sampson 1985.) A short list of Hangeul's virtues in a summary form is in order, however:

1. It is the world's first and only invented phonemic alphabet.
2. The alphabet reflects in its graphic shapes the interrelationship among consonants. At a glance, one can tell, for example, that a consonant is a

sibilant — for only sibilants contain slanting strokes, or that it is an aspirated obstruent — a stroke is added to an unaspirated homorganic consonant, or that it is a tense consonant — a letter is doubled or geminated, etc.

3. Similarly with vowel letters. The shapes reflect vowel harmony in Korean; one can tell whether the vowel is 'bright' or 'dark' from its shape.
4. Visual distinction between the vocalic and consonantal letters is apparent — vowels are represented with long bars, vertical or horizontal, and consonants with more complex geometric figures.
5. The composite character of diphthongs, both rising and falling, is also represented with complex vowel letters simply by sequentializing the two within a syllable block, much as Daniel Jones transcribes English diphthongs, e.g., [ai], [ei], [ou], etc. A sequence of two vowels comprising two syllables, not a diphthong, would be written in two separate syllable blocks.
6. Similarly with contour tones, i.e., a rising tone is represented with a sequence of a low and a high.
7. The above points (from 2 to 6) suggest that Sejong discerned subphonemic phonetic features, and furthermore, designed phonemic letters that reflected them. Since the letters were combined and written in syllable blocks, Hangul is the only writing system containing all three prosodic components: distinctive phonetic features, phonemes, and syllables.

It is for this truly remarkable and unprecedented feat that King Sejong's genius is admired today.

5. Hymns of praise for the script

The genius of King Sejong does not lie in the possible, but improbable, fact that he alone invented a new script in total isolation. No one creates something out of nothing. Sejong would have been unwise if he had ignored available knowledge about the phonologies and writing systems of neighbor languages. His genius lies in the fact that he did not just imitate or adapt, but created something totally different and, more importantly, much better in its graphic structures, and in its simplicity and elegance than any other existing writing system known at the time, and indeed in the entire annals of writing systems. To borrow Ledyard's words (1997:71),

Foreign alphabets have been copied and adapted to other languages on numerous occasions in world history and in every corner of the globe, but in no other instance has the adaption of a few alien letters been accompanied by so much intellectual inquiry and such a revolutionary alphabetic theory as in the Korean case.

Chung Inji, director of the Royal Academy, who assisted the monarch in the script project, wrote in the postscript to *Hunmin chong'un haerye* [Explanations and Examples for the Correct Sounds for the Instruction of the People], published in 1446 at the time of the royal proclamation of the new script:

These twenty-eight letters are so simple and precise that a smart man can master them in one morning and even a simpleton can learn them in ten days. With these letters, writings can be understood, legal appeals can be made, and melodies can be given verses. Even the sound of the wind, the cry of a crane, the flutter of a rooster, and the barking of a dog can all be written down.

This is obviously a loyal subject's praise of his lord in flowery language. But let us give credit where it is due. King Sejong broke away from the long and entrenched bondage of Chinese logography and devised not just an alphabetic script, but a script based on phonetic features that still preserved syllabic unity in its graphic representation, with all the advantages intact that such syllabaries give to readers. With truly remarkable insight, he perceived the internal relations among segments, and discerned consonantal hierarchy, vowel harmony, the composite nature of diphthongs and contour tones. He then devised a graphic system that reflected these internal relations in a simple and systematic way (see Kim 1988b and 1997, Sampson 1985).

Chung Inji concludes his postscript:

His Majesty is a godsend, and his wisdom exceeds that of one hundred kings ... Though the East has seen many nations come and go, no monarch wiser than His Majesty has existed until today.

A hyperbole by a smitten subject, perhaps. But the extolling chorus reverberates today nearly six centuries later outside the bounds of the Korean peninsula. To cite just a few (chronologically):

The Korean script is a true alphabet in the Greek sense; the simplest and most perfectly systematic of all alphabets (Hope 1959:158).

No other alphabet in the world is so beautifully and sensibly rational ... It is impossible to withhold admiration for it. There is nothing like it in all the long varied history of writing (Ledyard 1966:202).

The transition from syllable to phoneme is a[n] enormous feat of abstraction which may have been accomplished only once in history (Gleitman & Rozin 1973, as cited in Hannas 1997:57).

Hangul must unquestionably rank as one of the great intellectual achievements of humankind (Sampson 1985:144).

[Hangul is] simple, elegant and more systematically structured than any other writing system (Coulmas 1996:458).

These are testimonials, not nationalistic, but scholarly testimonials of the greatness of King Sejong. A man of vision and compassion, and a man of wisdom and renaissance, not only was he the chief architect leading the young nation to

an unprecedented height of cultural and scientific achievements, but also his accomplishments have become the source and foundation of creative energy and high intellect that have made Korea what it is today. And this is the legacy he bequeathed us and this is why we continue to pay our humble homage today.

NOTES

¹ *Hangul* is not the original name, but was given to the script at the beginning of the 20th century by a linguist named Chu Si-Gyong. While *gul* in *Hangul* means 'letters, writing', the meaning of *han* is ambiguous. It could mean either 'great' or 'Korean'. The original name given to the new script is *Hunmin chong'um* meaning 'the correct sounds for the instruction of the people'.

The system of romanization used in this article is a simplified McCune-Reischauer system without a breve on vowels *o* and *u*. The omission of the diacritic is not crucial for this article, and should not distract the reader.

² See Joseph Needham, et al, 1986. *The Hall of Heavenly Records: Korean Astronomical Instruments and Clocks, 1380-1780*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

³ The rain gauges made during the reign of King Sejong were almost all destroyed or lost. The only known extant specimen is in London's Science Museum (Yi & Jeon 1992:99).

⁴ King Sejong ordered four national archives built, one in the capital, and three others in the provinces in secret places. It was a lucky move, for during the Japanese invasion in the 1590s, three archives were burnt and destroyed. Only the Chonju archive survived and with it the only copy of the Annals of Chosun.

⁵ King Sejong distributed rain gauges throughout the country and ordered the local officials to report the amount of rainfall in order to estimate accurately the crop yield as a function of water. He also improved cultivation and fertilizing techniques, and built reservoirs and irrigation systems. The result was that 'cultivators were reaping forty times what they sowed under King Sejong' (Yi & Jeon 1992:99).

⁶ King Sejong showed his concern for the health of the people by ordering the compilation of medical books. A 365-volume compendium on medicine, completed in 1433, contains 10706 prescriptions and 1477 items on acupunctural therapy. The only remaining version of this encyclopedia is in an imperial library in Japan, a booty from the Hideyoshi invasions in the 1590s (Hong & Kim 1992).

⁷ King Sejong felt it was necessary to improve typography (movable metal type) to meet the demand for a greater number of printed texts. So in 1420 he had his craftsmen produce an improved font that could be more firmly attached to the printing plate and thus could be used to print 100 copies a day. 'That was a five-fold improvement in efficiency' (Sohn 1992:53).

⁸ In 1424, King Sejong established *Akki togam* [Office of Musical Instruments] and supervised the construction of new and improved instruments for the ritual

music, such as 7-string zithers, 17-pipe mouth organs, panpipes, various flutes, and stone chimes and bronze bells each consisting of 16 pre-tuned pieces. He also developed a uniquely Korean system of musical notation representing pitch, rhythm, drumbeats, ornaments, etc. in a matrix form with 32 squares. A note an octave lower was written in red, the only case in all Annals of Chosun where red ink was used. (Provine 1992)

⁹ In foreign relations, King Sejong took strong measures against the Jurchen tribes and quelled the Jurchen invasion in 1434, restoring the territory on the northern borders in 1443. He also contained Japanese skirmishes in the south, and eventually opened three trade ports to the Japanese.

¹⁰ Victoria Fromkin & Robert Redman 1983. *An Introduction to Language*, 3rd ed., 152. New York: Holt, Reinhart & Winston.

¹¹ Lee (1997:28) concludes his article with the following wistful description: As the king's procession left for Ch'ongju [a spa site], the royal palanquin must have been filled with the papers on which Sejong had jotted down his notes about the invention of the alphabet and the subsequent alphabetic projects. In writing this essay, as I dug at the traces of what remains today, from time to time I dreamed of what it might be like if I could but see the notes he had with him on that occasion.

¹² Unless specifically cited, translation of the 15th century text is my own from the Korean translation of the original Chinese text by Hong 1946. Translations by Ledyard 1966 were also consulted, but any mistranslation is my responsibility.

REFERENCES

- COULMAS, Florian. 1996. *Encyclopedia of Writing Systems*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd.
- GLEITMAN, Lila A., & ROZIN, Paul. 1973. Teaching reading by use of a syllabary. *Reading Research Quarterly* 8:4.447-83.
- HANNAS, William C. 1997. *Asia's Orthographic Dilemma*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press.
- HONG, Ki-Moon. 1946. *Chong'un Paltal-sa* [A History of the Development of Correct Sounds]. Seoul: Seoul Shinmun-sa.
- HONG, Won Sik, & KIM, Quac Jung. 1992. King Sejong's contribution to medicine. In Kim-Renaud 1992, 103-10.
- HOPE, E. R. 1959. Letter shapes in the Korean Onmun and Mongol hP'ags-pa alphabets. *Oriens* 10.150-9.
- KIM, Chin W. 1988a. *Sojourns in Language*. Seoul, Korea: Tower Press.
- . 1988b. On the origin and structure of the Korean script. In Kim 1988a, 721-4.
- . 1997. The structure of phonological units in Han'gul. In Kim-Renaud 1997, 145-60.

- KIM-RENAUD, Young-Key (ed.). 1992. *King Sejong the Great: The Light of Fifteenth Century Korea*. Washington, DC: The International Circle of Korean Linguistics.
- (ed.). 1997. *The Korean Alphabet: Its History and Structure*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press.
- KING, Ross. 1996. Korean writing. *The World's Writing Systems*, ed. by Peter T. Daniels & William Bright, 218-27. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- LEDYARD, Gari. 1966. The Korean Language Reform of 1446: The origin, the background, the early history of the Korean alphabet. University of California at Berkeley, Ph. D. dissertation.
- . 1997. The international linguistic background of the Correct Sounds for the Instruction of the People. In Kim-Renaud 1997, 31-87.
- LEE, Ki-Moon. 1997. The inventor of the Korean alphabet. In Kim-Renaud 1997, 11-30.
- PARK, Byoung-ho. 1992. King Sejong's contributions to the development of legal institutions. In Kim-Renaud 1992, 111-6.
- PROVINE, Robert C. 1992. King Sejong and music. In Kim-Renaud 1992, 71-8.
- SAMPSON, Geoffrey. 1985. *Writing Systems*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- SOHN, Pokee. 1992. King Sejong's innovations in printing. In Kim-Renaud 1992, 51-60.
- YI, Tae-jin, & JEON, Sang-woon. 1992. Science, technology, and agriculture in fifteenth century Korea. In Kim-Renaud 1992, 95-101.