

Change is hard for people to accept, and power is hard for people to give up. This is particularly so when people with power and control are forced to change from the very ways that allowed them to have and maintain power and control in the first place. With the start of Korea's Joseon Dynasty, which lasted from 1392 to 1897, Korea's highly exclusive and elite nobility class was faced with such a fundamental change which greatly threatened its authority and status. In 1443, the dynasty's fourth sovereign, King Sejong the Great, invented and tried to introduce a whole new alphabet and writing system unique to the Korean language, called Hangeul, to overthrow Korea's historical reliance on Classical Chinese for writing purposes. Despite intense political and social opposition from his royal court and the nobility, the visionary King Sejong righteously and with foresight persevered in advocating Hangeul in order to promote greater educational opportunities and literacy among his people, to restore and further advance true Korean culture and literature, and ultimately to establish cultural independence and national identity.

King Sejong the Great reigned from 1418 to 1450 during the early stages of the Joseon (also spelled as Choson) Dynasty, and he is only one of two Korean rulers to be given the added honorific title of "the Great" in its 6,000 year history. Remembered in Korean history as a scholarly and reform-minded sovereign, "King Sejong's reign was said to be the 'golden age of Korean culture'" ("KOREA: Hangeul"). As such, King Sejong is credited with the creation of the royal academic research institute called the Hall of Worthies (also known as Hall of the Wise), which was responsible for numerous cultural, literary, social, and economic reforms and advancements, in addition to various scientific inventions, including the sundial, the water clock, and the rain gauge ("KOREA: Hangeul"). Moreover, even before the Joseon Dynasty, Korea had already invented the world's first cast metal movable typography in 1252 (Ledyard 11), well

before Gutenberg's more widely-reported invention in 1450. Regardless of these achievements by the time of King Sejong's reign, Korea still lacked one pivotal social and cultural tool – it had no written language of its own, only its oral vernacular – and King Sejong was finally going to change this national crisis once and for all.

This challenge for King Sejong, however, was nearly insurmountable because the Sinocentric history in Korea was long and deep-rooted even as of the medieval times. “The political culture which produced King Sejong . . . emphasized Confucian morality and conformance to the image of the "sage" (sòng) established in the Confucian classics” (Ledyard 8). King Sejong, in fact, promoted Confucianism and tried to spread Confucian ethics in Korea as well. But Sinocentrism in Korea also included the adoption of Classical Chinese as its sole form of writing, which Koreans refer to as Hanja. This overall societal situation created a dilemma for King Sejong in that even the books promoting the basic Confucian relationships and duties were written in Classical Chinese or Hanja, which the majority of the population, the common people, could not understand (Ledyard 14).

The difficulty with, and the restricted access to, learning Hanja was unavoidable in Korea. As widely observed, “the number of Chinese characters [which total in the thousands] a person would have to learn in order to communicate [in Hanja] was too overwhelming for the lower and middle class” (Lui). Furthermore, the obvious fact was that while the “elite and the educated were well versed in Hanja because they had the means and the access to learning this script,” the lower classes “did not have access to Confucian education, struggled to learn, much less understand Hanja and thus found it difficult to express themselves in writing” (“KOREA: Hangul”). Consequently, these key obstacles for King Sejong – Hanja being the only existing writing system in Korea, on the one hand, and the aristocratic class whose social, economic, and

legal power relied on its exclusive knowledge of Hanja (and its abuse of power flowing from this knowledge), on the other hand – meant that King Sejong had to be creative and resourceful.

His resourcefulness, for instance, included creating a secret royal project team to research, study, and invent a wholly unique alphabet system for the Korean vernacular and its phonetics because King Sejong was already aware of the expected opposition from the learned nobility class, which included even those within his royal court. “In fact, Sejong had found it necessary to go around the Hall [of Worthies or the Wise] and locate the phonological research project in the Office of Deliberation” (Ledyard 15). King Sejong’s efforts though ultimately resulted in his announcement to his royal court in 1443 that he completed a phonetic script of twenty-eight letters (twenty-four letters in the present day) which formed a basis of his uniquely Korean alphabet system (Ledyard 15). Then in 1446, when he officially introduced Hangeul in his treatise called *Hunmin Chongum Harye*, which translates to the “Explanation of Correct Sounds for the Instruction of the People,” the postscript to this treatise reportedly explained the simplicity of Hangeul as an alphabet system which “a wise man can acquaint himself with . . . before the morning is over; a stupid man can learn . . . in the space of ten days” (Okrent). As originally intended and envisioned, King Sejong the Great accomplished his primary goal to open educational and literacy access to every Korean; however, his battle had only begun.

Indeed, the opposition to Hangeul was intense and bold since it started directly from his royal court and the highest ranks of his academic institute, the Hall of Worthies. In exercising the “Confucian concept of loyal remonstrance,” King Sejong’s officials vigorously argued and opposed the King’s new alphabetic invention (Ledyard 8). The most forceful opposition came from the King’s chief researcher at the Hall of Worthies, Choe Malli, who was outspoken in describing Hangeul as being “barbaric” in nature. “Only such peoples as the Mongolians, Tanguts,

Jurchens, Japanese, and Tibetans have their own writings. But this is a matter that involves the barbarians and is unworthy of our concern . . . Now, however, our country is devising a Korean script separately in order to discard the Chinese, and thus we are willingly being reduced to the status of barbarians” (“Excerpts from Choe”). The highly esteemed Choe further called the new Korean script as “nothing more than a novelty,” which is “harmful to learning and useless to the government,” and in which “one cannot find any good” (“Excerpts from Choe”).

On a perhaps more significant level, however, was Choe’s criticism of Hangeul based on concerns related to Korea’s historical relations with China, when he pointed to how Korea “consistently tried to follow Chinese system of government,” and how “it would disgrace our policy of respecting China” if China found out about the new Korean script (“Excerpts from Choe”). This reported dilemma certainly had potential political consequences. “The Chinese urged that the new alphabet be stopped with war threats as they feared it would weaken their power over Asia as Chinese had always been the main written language within the continent” (Lui).

Despite such criticism and opposition, King Sejong persevered and strongly defended his linguistic invention, describing his critics as “utterly useless, commonplace Confucian men!” (Ledyard 15). In addition to his desire to better educate his people on Confucian teachings and social duties, King Sejong also wished to address societal inequalities between the classes, including the nobility’s abuse of power and extensive corruption in Korea. For instance, the Korean legal system, which relied solely on the use of Classical Chinese, resulted in the nobility exploiting its educational power and advantage, thereby leading to vast amounts of corruption which hurt Korea’s common people (Lui). An even more grand vision and goal for King Sejong was to create Hangeul for the purpose of promoting his country’s universal literacy and its cultural and linguistic independence.

As the reform-minded and educated visionary and ruler who truly cared for the welfare and education of the common people, King Sejong “understood the frustration of his people. He explained that Chinese script was foreign to his people and that it could not capture the true essence of what his people wanted to express in their native tongue” (“KOREA: Hangeul”). Accordingly, he wanted a new, simple writing system which “his people would be able to learn and use with much ease,” and which, more significantly, allowed for his country’s independence and “clear national identity” (“KOREA: Hangeul”).

King Sejong succeeded in his mission, but the future of Hangeul did not long outlive its creator. As a matter of fact, the true significance of his linguistic invention was not fully appreciated by Koreans until nearly 500 years after its introduction. “The distaste and displeasure for the new Korean alphabet by those loyal to the use of Hanja [Classical Chinese] continued on even after its creator, King Sejong passed away [in 1450] . . . All Hangeul documents were banned in 1504” (“KOREA: Hangeul”). The aristocratic class continued for centuries to oppose the widespread use of the new alphabet system in order to maintain its authority and social status. The crucial fundamental shift away from Classical Chinese to the Hangeul alphabet system, however, began during the mid-nineteenth century.

As the Western powers began to take over China during the nineteenth century, the ripple effect also impacted Koreans and their future outlook. “[T]he superior power [China] did not appear to be capable of protecting its tributary states [like Korea] any more, which meant that the tributary states now had no trustworthy umbrella to protect them . . . that the catastrophe unfolding in China was in fact their own emergency” (An 3). In other words, China’s loss of power in the modern world led to “de-Sinocentrism” in Korea (An 4). Then as Korea experienced the occupation and colonization by Japan, which lasted until 1945 when Japan

finally surrendered to end World War II, the rising Korean nationalism and independence movement embraced the significance of King Sejong's creation of Hangul. Consequently, Hangul was adopted as the nation's official script only after its independence from Japan ("KOREA: Hangul"), and "[i]t was not until the late twentieth century that South Korea fully adopted hangul writing in textbooks and newspapers" after still using mixed script of Hangul and Classical Chinese until then (An 12).

While it took 500 years for King Sejong's vision for his beloved country and people to get fully realized, his legacy of creating a uniquely Korean alphabet system will forever be remembered. In fact, it has been noted that South Korea is perhaps the only country in the world to celebrate its writing system (Livaccari), although both North and South Korea actually celebrate Hangul Day annually as a national public holiday, even if on different dates. The criticism of, and the resistance to, Hangul were sharp and powerful for even its king-creator to tolerate, but King Sejong the Great withstood and overcame the opposition for the sake of his people's welfare and culture, as well as for the country's independence and distinct national identity. His foresight, therefore, was pivotal for his country's future development, as demonstrated by its continued survival and success.

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