

King Sejong the Great:

Human Potential Incarnate

He was an anomaly.

In a time of self-glorification and selfish monarchies, Europe's struggles over succession and the Hundred Years' War, he was guided solely by his sincere wish to help his people, the "People of the Heavens". In his words, "The duty of a king is to love his people." More astoundingly, he was successful in his endeavors; not a mere idealistic visionary, he dedicated his life to seeing real results in improving living standards and easing suffering, and created an alphabet that would, in the future, gain the respect and admiration of linguists worldwide. He would later be known as King Sejong the Great, one of Korea's most celebrated and cherished figures and a face on the Korean currency, an enlightened ruler before The Enlightenment in Europe and a Renaissance man before the term existed.

On the 15th of May, 1397, a baby boy was born to Queen Wonkyong and King Taejong. It was a time of change as the traditions of the Koryo dynasty gave way to the Choson, and while things had settled mostly by the time Sejong would take his seat as King of Korea, capable leadership would be crucial for the success and survival of the fledgling Choson dynasty. It is questioned whether his older brothers faked incompetence as rulers in order to have their younger brother named Crown Prince; true or not, Sejong's ascendance to the throne was fortunate if not a blessing.

As a child and young man he had been an avid reader; inquisitive and bright, he never underestimated the human capacity for learning or the

importance of education. He had a thirst for knowledge that would prove to be unquenchable throughout his lifetime. He made education into an urgent priority and appointed teachers with the specific job of overseeing the *Kyong-yon*, where he held discussions with other scholars. It eventually would develop into the *Chiphyonjon*, the prestigious Jade Hall of Scholars.

Every action, every thought of his seemed to be motivated by the people. Incredibly unpretentious, unselfish, and unbiased, he looked past social classes, race, and rank to see the actual person and the potential behind all the trappings of society. Never a rash man and never allowing the notions and accepted practices of the time to cloud his judgment, he changed imprisonment laws and extended the maternity leave of female servants to 130 days; fathers were given 30 days off as well. He expressed concern for prisoners, foreigners, and peasants alike, and said to the Ministry of Justice after a slave had been beaten to death, "Even though a man is a slave, he is no less a man". When a soldier was killed while carrying stones for the *Kangnyong* Apartments, he gave the family of the deceased man 100 bags of rice, but his grief remained. "I have given a hundred bags of rice to the household of the dead man, but what can be done to help their distress?" he said. After the death of his son, officials urged him to punish the Royal Doctor. Even though his grief, he was reasonable and insisted that the doctor be unharmed.

He was of the belief that everything of the ruler should be for the people: his actions, motivations, thoughts, work, and his very existence. As people starved during droughts, he went hungry as well. His life's philosophy was simple: everything is for the people and the people alone.

His reforms and passions spanned across music, learning, technology, science, law, and astronomy. He was unlimited and limitless, embodying the idea of *I can* – make a difference, do something, do anything. He was realistic with his concept of time, and patient. His land tax reforms took around 17 years to complete. The new system took into account the differing climates and levels of productivity of each region, to be taxed accordingly. He worked with the

musician Pak Yon to find a way to tune instruments, create new instruments and improve existing one, compose music, and create the *Chongganbo*, a new form of musical notation. The *Hyangyak Chipsongbang* (Great Collection of Native Korean Prescriptions) and *Uibang Yuchwi* (A Classified Collection of Medical Prescriptions) were published and post-mortem examinations practiced under his reign. He sought to make the law known to everyone. Officials warned him against this, declaring that the common folk would find loopholes in the laws, and crime rates would increase. Sejong was of the belief, however, that if aware of the law, people would instead be able to obey them.

The list of his accomplishments and virtues are overwhelming; it is difficult to find any fault with the ruler, and it is more difficult to believe that such a man even existed. Most notable, however, was the creation of *Hangul* in 1443. The Korean and Chinese languages are different, but Chinese characters were used for writing, making it especially difficult for commoners to learn. *Hangul* was his laborious effort to create a written language original to Korea and simple for all people, learned or not, to use. It was born from the sweat, toil, and honest wish for national literacy from King Sejong the Great, and faced much opposition from officials. In fact, for centuries Chinese characters continued to be used. Said Choi Manli, a senior scholar of Jade Hall, "...I fear that the people will fall into laziness and never make efforts to learn."

Hangul is brilliant in its simplicity and effectiveness, with great care and thought lovingly poured into each letter. Each letter takes into consideration the Eastern philosophy of *yin* and *yang* and the five elements. Noted linguist Geoffrey Sampson said, "...Hangul must unquestionably rank as one of the great intellectual achievements of humankind." Even the letters' appearance is illustration of the way the sound is created in the mouth. Koreans finally had a language, brilliant and uncomplicated, to call their own. Sejong's dream for all people to be able to fully express themselves can be seen today in the newspapers, books, and products of Korea today. Each magazine article and advertisement, each novel lining the book shelves, and each folded newspaper is

a tribute to a king who devotedly toiled over *Hangul* despite his failing health and the disheartening opposition of other scholars.

It is unfathomable that any man could be described with only positive words. It is astounding for a man's character to have been nothing but an endless depth of love for his people. It is inconceivable that such an unselfish man of principle could have existed during a time of brutal kings. King Sejong the Great was a king of the ineffable.

Death claimed him at the age of 53, taking one of the noblest figures in Korean history. Never has someone posthumously been so alive; he is alive in the street and performing arts center and university and Korean Won note bearing his name and face. He is alive in textbooks and history books, alive in the memories and conscious of the people who came centuries after his death and never knew him. Interestingly enough, dedicated to the preservation of history, King Sejong himself would be preserved in history as a timeless leader and advocate of human potential itself. He was the epitome, embodiment, and form incarnate of the human potential for greatness, and impossible to forget; who could forget a man who, within his 32 years of reign, rocked the old ideology and assumptions of a country so that a better life became something to be expected?