

## **A Humble King**

King Sejong the Great was an emperor like no other. Recorded as saying among his own administrators that "laws should be founded on compassion and morality," he took care to found his leadership on the same basis. King Sejong was above all a humanist: self-effacing, humble, and empathetic. He was capable of perceiving the minutest need for the meanest individual as demonstrated by his decision to put water jugs in prisons so that inmates could cool themselves during the summer. He put justice at the forefront as seen in his edicts charging his officials to the highest standard of conduct in overseeing laws and administering succor. The public good was uppermost in his mind always as he tried to lead his people by serving them, directing him to foster cultural and scientific advancement, to promote education with the typographical improvement of printing presses so literature could be publicly disseminated, in his revamping of land tax so that nobody was unfairly exhorted, and in his concern for the well-being and happiness of the solitary farmer he was willing to talk to and ask about.

There is no doubt that his greatest achievements in advancing the state of Korea were driven by his love for his people. The progression he made in the areas of science: medicinal, forensic, astronomical, and meteorological, were based on his concern for the livelihood of peasants as well as nobles. He wanted an improved standard of living to be beneficial to all regardless of class and gender, and if anything his equanimity of mind and sense of fairness was extensive and surprising—it was not just the bodily needs of his people that he was concerned with. Despite the pains he took to protect his people when it came down to famine, agricultural production, and biases in the judicial system, he also cared about the spiritual and mental needs of Koreans. This led him to be especially zealous about the printing press so that knowledge would be spread for the benefit and edification of all, leading him to even compile an

anthology on farming techniques so that all regions and areas of Korea would be able to sustain themselves. He was humble enough to where he felt works from the past and works from other countries were worthy of research and evaluation, all so he could glean some choice morsels of knowledge that would feed the development of his country. Other works published in the realm of literature and science were there for the common good, while King Sejong's decision to make laws publicly accessible reflected his desire to help his people improve themselves outside the corporeal realm.

His compassion and concern for the people was matched by an exacting standard for those in power along with him though. King Sejong was demanding when it came down to the responsibilities of his officials, willing to argue points with them in political discussions, subject them to punishment for lax guardianship of their regions, and demand a standard of excellence from them that he adhered to. He treated people well, but he made sure that those with responsibility would likewise use their power for excellence instead of shoddiness. Likewise, his choice of officials was rooted off of merit, intelligence, and talent as opposed to social standing, leading him to have a wider range of technically proficient individuals under him who helped promote the scientific movement forward Korea made in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. He definitely did not base his sense of worth on family and hierarchy, but on proved potential, seeing through the social distinctions of noble families or "vulgar" masses to the individual.

It was in fact his wish to help the individuals, from the intellectually blessed nobles and scholars who would have had the benefit of education, to the working commoner who would have had no opportunity to advance his mind, that King Sejong made one of his greatest scientific findings through the Korean writing system of Hangul. This invention of his was by far his best as it sprang not just the nexus of Korean learning but also stands as a mark of King Sejong's personality in his humble dedication to his kingdom. Logical, ingenious, and easy to learn, it was at first opposed by his court as being crude in comparison to the Chinese characters the educated were currently using. However, the one thing

Sejong did not want was for his people to stay in ignorance, and he pushed his new language system through. As a result, people were given a linguistic tool to express thoughts and emotions that they had been unable to before with the Chinese system, reshaping Korean expression and communication in a unique way.

All in all, King Sejong was indeed worthy of his title as "Great" for he advanced his nation based on idealistic notions of goodwill, humanity, and love that other rulers would never have thought of using. Instead of war, he promoted peace; instead of pursuing the further consolidation of political power he bettered conditions for the peasants who could do the least for him. He was a true altruist, letting his health suffer for the sake of those around him, and a true leader that became great by making himself small.