

King Sejong the Great: The Everlasting Light of Korea

Like most Americans, I had never heard of King Sejong and I probably would not have learned about him had I not joined **Dahn Yoga**. The **Dahn Yoga** centers provide a little experience of Korea because we remove our shoes, bow, have tea sitting on the floor, and speak a few Korean words. That sparked my interest in learning more about Korea.

King Sejong and the Korean Alphabet

The first surprise was to learn that linguists consider the 24-character Korean alphabet ("hangul") to be the best in the world. Author John Man says that hangul is a star among alphabets with a status normally reserved for classic works of art. Linguist Geoffrey Sampson ranks the invention of hangul as one of the greatest achievements of mankind! Hangul is considered one of the crowning achievements of Korea's 5,000-year history.

Learning about hangul led me to the discovery of the remarkable story of King Sejong the Great who created the alphabet in 1443 to make it easier for his people to read and write. The elegant simplicity of hangul has allowed Korea to establish a literacy rate of 97.9%, helping to make it competitive in the global market. Hangul is not only simple to learn but is also well-suited to the digital

age – over 500 years after its creation! Hangul contributed to Korea's becoming one of the most wired nations with the second highest PC usage in the world.

UNESCO created the King Sejong Literacy Prize to recognize the value of hangul in fighting illiteracy, not only for Koreans, but for other peoples who adopted it as their writing system. UNESCO designated hangul as part of the world cultural heritage. The Korea.Net site has a wonderful 14-minute online video about hangul. There is another fascinating video about hangul at:<http://www.leechvideo.com/video/view2723747.html>.

Hangul is the only alphabet designed intentionally and with its principles documented from its inception. Its five primary consonants are scientifically based the vocal organs and the other consonants are derived from those. King Sejong was 500 years ahead of the West in studying the relationship between vocal organs and letters. Koreans celebrate this monumental contribution to their culture each year on Hangul Day, October 9.

King Sejong's Other Accomplishments

The book King Sejong the Great introduced me to King Sejong's other accomplishments and remarkable character. The catalog of his many achievements during his reign from 1418 to 1450 defies belief! His devoted work had one goal – to create a better life for his people. King Sejong was a man of great vision and deep love. In the West, he would be considered a Renaissance man and a philosopher king, but he was much more. He was a Buddha-like or Christ-like figure – so rare for any monarch.

King Sejong was a scholar who read deeply and broadly. He created a hall for scholars in his court to facilitate advances in knowledge in a wide variety of disciplines. The result was that of the 60 scientific achievements in the world in the 15th century, 29 were made in Korea while only 5 were made in China and 26 in the rest of the world!

King Sejong's other accomplishments include the following:

King Sejong sponsored innovations in printing. The moveable printing process developed under King Sejong's sponsorship was more advanced than the printing type developed by Gutenberg in Germany in 1455.

King Sejong and his scholars published "A Calculation of the Motions of the Seven Celestial Determinants" that used new standards of measurement. It is regarded as one of the most impressive astronomical achievements of its day. Only China and Arabia performed such accurate astronomical calculations.

He promoted Chang Yongsil (a scientist of "low class") over objections of the aristocrats. Chang later created the world's first rain gauge, a sundial, and a water clock. Rain gauges were installed throughout the country and accurate records of rainfall were kept 200 years before Europeans began the practice.

King Sejong sponsored revolutions in medicine, agriculture, and astronomy. He facilitated publication of a medical encyclopedia created by his scholars. He encouraged literature and the arts. The form of musical notation that King Sejong created is still used today.

King Sejong's Character

While there were many monarchs in the 5,000 years of Korean history, only King Sejong was given the title "Great" by the Korean people. King Sejong is remarkable not only for his many accomplishments, but because of his sterling character. His humility, devotion to his people, and vision may be unequalled by any monarch in history.

King Sejong's rule sponsored:

1. An improved standard of living
2. Maternity and paternity leave for government servants
3. Reform of the criminal justice system and land tax
4. Respect for the rights of prisoners
5. Consensus rule
6. Compassion, forgiveness, and simplicity in the court
7. Peace with nomadic peoples considered "barbarians"

King Sejong stands above not just other Korean monarchs, but rulers elsewhere. His many accomplishments alone earned him a place in world history. However, it is King Sejong's character that makes him rare if not unique among the world's rulers. These qualities reveal a saint-like nature rarely found in any head of state. King Sejong embodied Taoist concepts of leadership.

Most rulers think that their people exist to serve them and spend vast fortunes waging war on other peoples. So, for King Sejong to see his role as one of service to his own people and to seek peace with other peoples is remarkable. The depth of King Sejong's character is revealed, in part, by the fact that he chose to share times of famine with his people by not eating.

Conclusion

King Sejong defines what a leader should be. His example is a guiding light which invites each of us to excel and to expect more of our leaders. In that way, he continues to serve us all. King Sejong is not just a Korean hero. He is a world-class hero who should be widely known and whose inspirational example should be followed everywhere now even over 500 years later. What a different world it would be if just a few nations were led now by people of comparable vision and character.

Korea has so much to offer in terms of its past and present -- including its legendary leaders and wonderful alphabet. Yet, many people in the West are unfamiliar with Korea's rich history. . The book about King Sejong helps make more people aware of his legacy and creates a more enlightened world.