



SOURCEBOOK OF
KOREAN CIVILIZATION

VOLUME I

FROM EARLY TIMES TO THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

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Columbia University Press

NEW YORK

Ch'ien spoke like this. When Mencius talked to King Hui of Liang and King Hsüan of Ch'i, he discussed nothing else but the kingly way and also encouraged humane government. If with the qualifications of a King Hui of Liang and a King Hsüan of Ch'i they were capable of practicing the kingly way and effectuating humane government, they can indeed be equated with the founders of the Three Dynasties. Therefore Mencius spoke like this. Do you think he liked big words and did not measure their actual effects?

Now I see that Your Majesty's qualifications are impressive: your humanity sufficient to protect the people, your intelligence sufficient to discern cunning, your resoluteness sufficient to decide on sanctions. But Your Majesty's aspiration to become a sage is not firm, and your sincerity to seek right rule is not genuine. Assuming that you cannot reach the level of earlier kings, you withdraw and refer to your own smallness, giving no thought to advancement and development. I do not know what you have experienced to make you like this. . . . If you make a genuine effort toward self-cultivation and put your sincere mind to pacifying the people, you will be able to find worthies and rule with them, you will be able to correct the abuses and salvage the situation. With a strong aspiration, can there be defeat? Master Ch'eng once said: In ruling a country, to arrive at praying to heaven for a long mandate; in nourishing oneself, to arrive at longevity; in learning, to arrive at sagehood. As to these three things, human effort clearly can bring about such transformation, yet people do not do it. How true are these words! From of old one has never heard of someone who really made an effort and failed to see real results! [24b-25b] MD

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Culture

Once the dynastic foundation was consolidated, the Chosŏn state attained brilliant achievements in many fields. Respect for education and scholarship was a hallmark of the dynasty. There were many incentives for talented young men to pursue careers in scholarship and government service, as scholars and officials were accorded the highest prestige in Chosŏn society. In 1420 King Sejong organized the Hall of Worthies, where selected scholar-officials were assigned to devote their time to scholarly research. From these studies came a number of important publications on the classics, history, geography, linguistics, law, music, agriculture, astronomy, and medicine. Most significant, however, was the invention of the Korean alphabet in 1443.

The early phase of the Chosŏn dynasty was also characterized by brilliant achievements in science and technology. A number of scientific instruments—sundials, clepsydras, armillary spheres, rain gauges—were invented and refined. Moreover, a strong emphasis on the practical application of knowledge to the needs of daily life led to the publication of several manuals for farming as well as medical treatises and compendia of herbal remedies for various diseases. The highly sophisticated advances in book printing developed in Korea at this time easily accommodated these publications.

Invention of the Korean Alphabet

The invention of the Korean alphabet, called *chŏngŭm* (Correct Sounds), is the crowning achievement of the Chosŏn dynasty. Prior to devising its own writing system, Korea had used Chinese graphs for transcription. But because the Korean language is totally different from Chinese, there were many problems in the use of Chinese graphs in a Korean setting. It was to amend this situation that King Sejong (1418–1450) assembled a group of scholars to devise scripts suitable for the Korean language. Under the personal leadership of the king, after many years of painstaking studies, a phonetic alphabet was finally created in 1443. To assure the practicability and wide usage of the newly devised alphabet, King Sejong published a eulogy cycle called *Yongbi ŏch'ŏn ka* (Songs of Flying Dragons) and the translation of a Chinese classic, among other works, using the new script before it was formally proclaimed in 1446.

When the new writing system was officially published, it was called *Hunmin chŏngŭm* (Correct Sounds to Instruct the People). Consisting of twenty-eight letters—seventeen consonants and eleven vowels—the Korean alphabet is wholly phonetic and capable of transcribing almost any sound. Hailed by modern linguists as one of the most scientific writing systems in the world, the script is extremely simple and very easy to learn. In the twentieth century, this alphabet has been called *hangŭl* (Great Letters).

In publishing the *Hunmin chŏngŭm* in 1446, King Sejong wrote a preface explaining his motivation for devising the new writing system, which was followed by a detailed explanation of how the alphabet worked. Chŏng Inji, an official who assisted the king in the invention of the alphabet, then wrote a postscript. Translated here are King Sejong's preface and Chŏng Inji's postscript. ㄸ

King Sejong: Preface to *Hunmin chŏngŭm*

[From *Hunmin chŏngŭm* 1a]

The sounds of our language differ from those of Chinese and are not easily communicated by using Chinese graphs. Many among the ignorant, therefore, though they wish to express their sentiments in writing, have been unable to communicate. Considering this situation with compassion, I have newly devised twenty-eight letters. I wish

only that the people will learn them easily and use them conveniently in their daily life. ㄸ

Chŏng Inji: Postscript to *Hunmin chŏngŭm*

[From *Hunmin chŏngŭm haerye* 26b–29b]

Just as there are enunciations that are natural to heaven and earth, there must also be writing that is natural to heaven and earth. It is for this reason that the ancients devised letters corresponding to enunciations so as to convey the situations and sentiments of myriad things and to record the ways of heaven, earth, and men so that they cannot be changed by later generations.

Yet climates and soils in the four corners of the world are different, and enunciations and material force are likewise diverse. In general, the languages of different countries have their own enunciations but lack their own letters, so they borrowed the Chinese graphs to communicate their needs. This is, however, like trying to fit a square handle into a round hole. How could it possibly achieve its objective satisfactorily? How could there not be difficulties? It is, therefore, important that each region should follow the practices that are convenient to its people and that no one should be compelled to follow one writing system alone.

Although our country's rituals, music, and literature are comparable to those of China, our speech and language are not the same as China's. Those who studied books in Chinese were concerned about the difficulty of understanding their meaning and purport; those who administered the penal system were troubled by the difficulty in communicating the complexity of its legal texts. In the old days, Sŏl Ch'ong [c. 660–730] of Silla first devised the writing system known as *idu*, which has been used by our government and people to this day. But all the graphs were borrowed from Chinese, and frequently there arise problems and difficulties. Not only is *idu* vulgar and baseless, but as a means of linguistic communication, it cannot transmit one meaning in ten thousand cases.

In the winter of the year *kyehae* [1443], His Majesty, the king, created twenty-eight letters of the Correct Sounds and provided examples in outline demonstrating their meanings. His Majesty then named these letters *Hunmin chŏngŭm*. Resembling pictographs, these letters imitate the shapes of the old seal characters. Based on enunciation, their sounds correspond to the Seven Modes in music. These

letters embrace the principles of heaven, earth, and men as well as the mysteries of yin and yang, and there is nothing they cannot express. With these twenty-eight letters, infinite turns and changes may be explained; they are simple and yet contain all the essence; they are refined and yet easily communicable. Therefore, a clever man can learn them in one morning while a dull man may take ten days to study them. If we use these letters to explain books, it will be easier to comprehend their meanings. If we use these letters in administering litigations, it will be easier to ascertain the facts of a case. As for rhymes, one can easily distinguish voiced and voiceless consonants; as for music and songs, twelve semitones can be easily blended. They can be used whatever and wherever the occasion may be. Even the sounds of wind, the cries of cranes, the crowing of roosters, and the barking of dogs can all be transcribed in writing.

Consequently, we were commanded to provide more detailed explanations for all the people to understand. This servant, therefore, along with his other ministers—Ch'oe Hang, Fourth Grade official; Pak P'aengnyŏn, Junior Fifth Grade official; Sin Sukchu, Junior Fifth Grade official; Sŏng Sammun, Sixth Grade official, all in the Hall of Worthies; Kang Hŭian, Sixth Grade official in the Royal House Administration; Yi Kae, acting Junior Fourth Grade official; and Yi Sŏllo, acting Junior Fourth Grade official in the Hall of Worthies—have prepared all the explanations and various examples to illustrate the general outline of the new writing system so that any reader can learn it without a teacher. The subtlety of its profound sources and deep meanings, however, is beyond the scope of our ability to demonstrate fully.

As we humbly reflect, our king, being a heaven-endowed sage, has instituted various systems and institutions that excel those established by a hundred other kings. As for the making of the Correct Sounds, it is not something that has been transmitted from our ancestors but has been achieved by nature. There is nothing in the Correct Sounds that is not based on the ultimate principle; there is no bias such as one finds in the things made by men. Although our country has existed in the eastern corner of the world for a long period of time, not until today has the great wisdom of cultivating a new enlightenment and completing its task been realized. ㄸC

Ch'oe Malli: Opposition to the Korean Alphabet

[From *Sejong sillok* 103:19b-22a]

Although the invention of the Korean alphabet was hailed as a great achievement of the sagely rule of King Sejong, there was a group of scholar-officials, led by Ch'oe Malli (fl. 1419-1444), who strongly opposed the use of Korea's own script. They believed that Korea had long emulated Chinese ideas and institutions and that adoption of Korea's own writing system would make it impossible to identify Korean civilization with that of China. The following text is the memorial submitted by Ch'oe Malli offering his reasons against the use of the Korean alphabet. ㄸC

Twentieth day of the second month of the year [1444]. Ch'oe Malli, First Counselor in the Hall of Worthies, and his associates offered the following memorial: We humbly believe that the invention of the Korean script is a work of divine creation unparalleled in history. There are, however, some questionable issues we wish to raise for Your Majesty's consideration.

1. Ever since the founding of the dynasty, our court has pursued the policy of respecting the senior state with utmost sincerity and has consistently tried to follow the Chinese system of government. As we share with China at present the same writing and the same institutions, we are startled to learn of the invention of the Korean script. Some claim that the Korean script is based on old writings and is not a new alphabet at all. Although the letter shapes are similar to the old seal letters, the use of letters for phonetic value violates ancient practice and has no valid ground. If this becomes known to China and anyone argues against it, it would disgrace our policy of respecting China.

2. Although winds and soils vary from region to region, there has been no separate writing system for local dialects. 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. It has been said that the barbarians are transformed only by means of adopting the Chinese ways; we have never heard of the Chinese ways being transformed by the barbarians. Historically, China has always regarded our country as the state that has maintained the virtuous customs bequeathed by the sage-king Kija and has viewed our literature, rituals, and music as similar to its own. 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. This is like abandoning the fragrance of storax in favor of the obnoxious odor of mantis. Is this not a great embarrassment to the enlightened civilization?

3. Although the *idu* writing devised by Sŏl Ch'ong of Silla is vulgar and rustic, it uses the graphs widely used in China as auxiliaries to our tongue, and hence the graphs are not different from the Chinese. Therefore, even the clerks and the servants sincerely want to study the Chinese graphs. At first they read several books to acquire a rough understanding of the Chinese graphs; only then are they able to use the *idu*. Those who use the *idu* must depend upon the Chinese graphs to communicate their ideas, and a number of people become literate through the use of the *idu* writing. Therefore, the *idu* is a useful aid in stimulating learning. . . . If the Korean script is widely used, the cleric officials will study it exclusively and neglect scholarly literature. . . . If they discover that knowledge of the twenty-[eight] letter Korean script is sufficient for them to advance in their official careers, why would they go through agony and pain to study the principles of Neo-Confucianism? If such a situation lasts several decades, then surely the people who understand the Chinese graphs would be reduced to a very small number. Perhaps they could manage their clerical affairs using the Korean script, but if they do not know the writings of the sages, they will become ignorant and unable to distinguish right from wrong. . . . This Korean script is nothing more than a novelty. It is harmful to learning and useless to the government. No matter how one looks at it, one cannot find any good in it. . . .

His Majesty, having read the memorial, responded to Ch'oe Malli and his associates as follows: You said that the use of letters for phonetic value violates the old practices. Is not the *idu* of Sŏl Ch'ong also based on alien sounds? Is not the main objective of devising the *idu* to make it useful to the people? If it is useful to the people, is not this new Korean script also useful to the people? You and your associates believe the work of Sŏl Ch'ong to be good, yet you reject the work of your sovereign. Why? What do you know about the book of rhymes? Do you know how many vowels there are in the Four Tones and Seven Sounds? If I do not correct the book of rhymes now, who is going to do it? ㄸ

Education and Scholarship

Education was one of the principal areas emphasized by the Chosŏn dynasty. Indeed, the Neo-Confucian state of Chosŏn held an almost religious belief that the ideals of Neo-Confucianism could be realized only through education. Thus, from its very beginning, the Chosŏn dynasty set up a well-planned nationwide school system to offer the Confucian education to qualified students. In the capital city of Seoul, a district school was organized in four of the five districts; local schools called *hyanggyo* were established in every county throughout the country; for higher education, the National Academy (*Sŏnggyungwan*) was organized in the capital. Usually well endowed by the state, these schools became the center for training future leaders of the government, as all the candidates for the state civil service examinations were drawn from them.

From the mid-sixteenth century on, moreover, private academies, called *sŏwŏn*, were organized in the countryside at the initiative of local scholars and in time became important centers of Confucian scholarship in Korea. The private academies were usually endowed richly through private donations, and they also received a royal charter from the king in the form of a name plaque along with a generous grant of books, land, and servants from the government.

The Office of Special Advisers (*Hongmungwan*) was a unique institution in Korea. Originally organized in 1420 by King Sejong as a royal research institute called *Chiphyŏnjŏn* (Hall of Worthies), it was reorganized by King Sejo into the *Hongmungwan* in 1463. Assigned to provide advisory services on all matters dealing with the Confucian classics and literature, this office maintained a library within the palace and offered the royal lecture (*kyŏngyŏn*) for the king. Thus, its officials carried the highest prestige and honor.

Chosŏn kyŏngguk chŏn (Administrative Code of Chosŏn) by Chŏng Tojŏn served as the basic code for the Chosŏn dynasty since its foundation in 1392. The article dealing with the establishment of schools, translated here, describes the structure of the national educational system as envisioned by the dynasty's foremost architect. The description of the National Academy is taken from the *Sinjŭng Tongguk yŏji sŭngnam* (Revised and Augmented Gazetteer of Korea), which was published in 1530. The White Cloud Grotto Academy, organized in 1543 by Chu Sebung, was Korea's first private academy. Fashioned