

# King Sejong's Buddhist Faith and the Invention of the Korean Alphabet: *A Historical Perspective*

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## Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between King Sejong's (r. 1418-1450) faith in Buddhism and his invention of the Korean alphabet and its development thereafter from a historical perspective. The king's strong power, free use of funds, and his freedom from state affairs around the time of the invention of the alphabet enabled its creation and his interest in Buddhist activities. For this purpose, relevant records in *Annals of King Sejong* were examined in chronological order. The following major issues were analyzed: the relationship between King Sejong's view of Buddhism and his invention of the Korean alphabet; the king's faith in Buddhism and the compilation of Buddhist texts in the vernacular language; and the king's authority and governance. Unlike commonly held views, King Sejong maintained a favorable attitude toward Buddhism from the initial stage of his reign. In addition, he was already a staunch Buddhist before he invented the Korean alphabet. After the creation of the script, the king's faith in Buddhism became stronger and resulted in the compilation of Buddhist texts into the Korean script. Therefore, it is highly probable that King Sejong's Buddhist piety became an important factor for the creation and development of the Korean alphabet.

**Keywords:** anti-Buddhist policy, Buddhist faith, Buddhist texts, digitization, Hunmin jeongeum (Korean Alphabet), King Sejong, *Sejong sillok*, *Seokbo sangjeol*, *Worin cheongangji gok*

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## Introduction

King Sejong (r. 1418-1450) held a dualistic attitude toward Buddhism and Hunmin jeongeum (Correct Sounds to Instruct the People), or the Korean alphabet, which was a historical product of his reign. Accordingly, the relationship between the king, the alphabet, and Buddhism needs to be examined in relation to the historical context of the time (Kim W. 1984, 1-2). It is also important to investigate the relationship between the king's Buddhist faith and the Korean alphabet. Historical records, including *Sejong sillok* (Annals of King Sejong), the primary source used in this paper, suggest the possibility of Buddhist influence on the alphabet and the fact that Buddhism during the Joseon dynasty (1392-1910) played a much greater role in society than previously thought (Kwon 1993, 279). In addition, King Sejong's view of Buddhism was not just a private matter, but reflected the suppression of Buddhism by the government in favor of Confucianism (Lee Sung-Mu 2001, 32).

This paper examines the relationship between King Sejong's Buddhist faith and the invention of the Korean alphabet from a historical perspective. To this end, I conducted an in-depth investigation of relevant records in the *Annals of King Sejong* in their chronological order and analyzed the king's view of Buddhism, the relationship between Buddhism and the Korean alphabet, the translation of Buddhist texts into Korean using the newly invented alphabet under his guidance, the extent of his royal power, and his attention to government affairs. The *Annals of King Sejong* contain the most important information on King Sejong's reign. However, conventional works on

\* Funded by the Academy of Korean Studies grant in 2006, this paper was originally presented with the title of "Buddhism and the Korean Alphabet" at the 3rd World Congress of Korean Studies, Jeju National University, Oct. 27-30, 2006. After "King Sejong's Buddhist Faith and the Creation of the Korean Alphabet" was submitted for review for publication at the *Korea Journal*, the Korean version of the title was changed to "Sejongui bulgyo sinang-gwa Hunmin jeongeum" (King Sejong's Buddhist Beliefs and the Creation of the Korean Alphabet) at *Dongyang jeongchi sasangsa yeongu* (The Review of Korean and Asian Political Thoughts) in March 2007c.

the Korean alphabet and Buddhism have neglected an in-depth analysis of this source text. In addition, the *Joseon wangjo sillok* (Annals of the Joseon Dynasty)<sup>1</sup> is also a valuable official source for the study of Joseon Buddhism (Han 1993, iii; Lee B. 2002, 73) as well as the research topic dealt within this paper.

King Sejong's reign has been considered the most glorious period not only of the Joseon dynasty but in all of Korean history (Chung D. 1982, 3). Among the twenty-seven monarchs of the dynasty, King Sejong was the monarch most frequently referred to in the *Annals of the Joseon Dynasty*, mentioned no less than 2,000 times (Chung K. 1998, 23). He is still considered the greatest king in Korean history, and contemporary Korean CEOs are still eager to successfully imitate his methods of knowledge management (Park 2006b, 99). King Sejong boasted numerous achievements, the greatest of which was the invention of the Korean alphabet (Kim W. 1972, 185; Heo 1982, 37; Kang 1987, 34; Hong 1998, 67), an epochal event in the history of Korean culture (Shim 1999, 235). In addition, the Korean alphabet is truly one of the greatest achievements in the history of human invention (Kim-Cho 2002, 13).

Numerous academic works about King Sejong emerged after Korea's liberation from Japan in 1945 (Yi S. 1982, 7), and the interest of researchers to date has concentrated on the language, history, culture, political philosophy, and scientific technology of his time (Park 2006b, 7). The king's style of state management has generated another field of study (Bae 2005, 47-56; Chung Y. 2005, 5-24; Park 2006a, 57-89; Pu 2005, 25-46). Research on the Korean alphabet has attracted a great deal of scholarly attention,<sup>2</sup> primarily focusing on the motive and purpose of its invention, its origin, and the principles of its usage (Lee Sang-Hyeok 2004, 29-33; Yu M. 2005, 131). Studies of

1. These *Annals* were registered on the UNESCO Memory of the World list in 1997. For Korea's Buddhist contribution to the Memory of the World, see Kim Jong-myung (2007b).
2. A recent computer search on the web site of the National Assembly Library of Korea (<http://www.nanet.go.kr>) found 170 books, 176 theses, and 345 articles on Hunmin jeongeum.

the Joseon period in Korean academia have focused on Confucianism, and research on King Sejong and the Korean alphabet has been conducted well within this scope of inquiry. There are a few works about Joseon Buddhism<sup>3</sup> and even more that focus on the anti-Buddhist policy,<sup>4</sup> but the reality of the Buddhist world remains an important topic for discussion (Kim S. 2002, 265-266).

Diverse studies of the relationship between Buddhism and the Korean alphabet include the theory that Sanskrit was the origin of the Korean alphabet (Lee K. 2001, 89-118; Yu H. 2003, 340; Hwang 2005, 222-234; Park 2006b, 121-122), the idea that sacred Buddhist numbers such as the numeral 108 are reflected in the Korean alphabet (Kim K. 1989, 159-162; Kim K. 1991, 236-238; Kim K. 1992, 64-74; Shim 1999, 235-245), the style of the Hunmin jeongeum text (Kim K. 1989, 159-160),<sup>5</sup> and the translation of Buddhist texts into the newly invented Korean alphabet (Lee B. 1980, 48; Keum 1982a, 50; Kang 1984, 51-55; 1987, 232; Kim K. 1992, 75). It is also said that King Sejong's belief in Buddhism, as well as his creation of the Korean alphabet, were merely the political products of his endeavors related to national affairs (Toron [Yi Taejin] 1993, 278; Kwon 1993, 279; Yu M. 2005, 142; Moon 2006, 51; Park 2006b, 124-127). Although there is no textual evidence that verifies a direct relationship between King Sejong's Buddhist faith and his creation of the Korean alphabet, historical sources suggest it is highly probable. Nevertheless, there has been little research on such a possible relationship between King Sejong's Buddhist faith and the Korean alphabet.

A pioneering work on Korean Buddhism, the *Joseon bulgyo tongsa* (A Comprehensive History of Korean Buddhism, 1918) deals

3. For Buddhism under Confucian dominion during the Joseon dynasty, see Buswell (1999, 134-159).
4. A representative scholarly achievement of this topic was done by Han U-geun in 1993.
5. Hunmin jeongeum refers to both the newly invented Korean alphabet in 1443 and the book of explanations and examples of the alphabet promulgated in 1446. For the limitations of the book, see Kim Juwon (2005, 97-100). The Book *Hunmin jeongeum* was registered as the Memory of the World by the UNESCO in 1997.

extensively with the Korean alphabet, including its origin (Lee B. 2002, 573-640). However, it does not discuss the relationship between King Sejong and Buddhism. Scholars of Korean Buddhism have regarded Takahashi Tōru's *Richō bukkyō* (Buddhism during the Yi Dynasty, 1929) as an essential work on Joseon-era Buddhism. In the chapter titled "King Sejong's Buddhism" (Takahashi 1929, 115-163), Takahashi examined Korean Buddhism during the reign of King Sejong, primarily focusing on the records of the *Annals of King Sejong*. However, the content of his work was often selective and erroneous.

Japan avidly sought *Goryeo daejanggyeong* (Tripitaka Koreana) from Korea from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries, and the *Tripitaka* was an important diplomatic item between the two countries during that period. According to the *Goryeosa* (History of the Goryeo), Japan began requesting the *Tripitaka* from Goryeo Korea (918-1392) in 1388. In particular, the *Annals of the Joseon Dynasty* indicate that the Joseon government gave the *Tripitaka* to Japan at its request more than fifty times between 1396 and 1556. In fact, the frequency with which Japan requested it from the Joseon government was much more than what was recorded. Japan also requested the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā Sūtra* (Scripture of Perfection of Wisdom) from the Joseon government around the same period more than twenty-five times (O 1994, 85-98). In addition, the *Tripitaka Koreana* served as the *textus receptus* for *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*, the Japanese edition of Buddhist literature in classical Chinese, which has been most widely used among scholars of East Asian Buddhism (Kawase 2005, 89). However, Takahashi's book never mentioned Japan's frequent demand for the *Tripitaka Koreana* from Korea in days past.<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, Takahashi's work was selective with regard to Buddhism during the reign of King Sejong. In addition, it did not mention the relationship between the king's Buddhist faith and his creation of the Korean script.

6. For the significance of the *Tripitaka Koreana* in the Cultural Sciences in the modern globalized world, see Kim S. (2002, 154-181).

The subject of this article is important in that an in-depth examination of the philosophical background during the reign of King Sejong (Keum 1982a, 44; Yu M. 2005, 145), the relationship between royal power and Buddhism in the early Joseon period (Toron [Yi Tae-jin] 1993, 277), and the private life of the king, including his Buddhist activities (Yi S. 1982, 7), is of great significance for further research. It is argued that King Sejong planned to create the Korean alphabet around 1431 (Yu M. 2005, 150) or 1435 (Ledyard 1966, 84), and this research also focuses on that time. There continues to be debate among scholars as to who actually invented the alphabet. While some consider King Sejong its sole inventor (Yi S. 1956, 207; Lee K. 2001, 67), others argue that the king created the alphabet with his assistants (Kang 1987, 237; Kim W. 1984, 14; Kim K. 1989, 158-159; 1992, 74; An 2004, 7-12; Yu M. 2005, 148). However, the majority of scholars consider the king to have been the overseer for the project. This paper regards King Sejong as the leading figure in the invention of the Korean alphabet.

This research led me to conclude that the king maintained a positive and pious stance toward Buddhism throughout his reign. This attitude appears to have been closely related to the invention of the Korean alphabet and its development in Korean society at the time. Also, his strong royal power, free use of funds, and freedom from state affairs around the time of the invention of the alphabet enabled him to invent the phonogram and to promote its usage.

This article suggests the need for reexamining commonly accepted theories regarding Buddhism during the reign of King Sejong. This paper hopes to clarify the relationship between King Sejong and Buddhism as well as Buddhism and the Korean alphabet, and by extension, to broaden the scope of scholarly research on King Sejong.

### King Sejong and Buddhism

The *Annals of King Sejong* contain 791 records related to Buddhism from the reign of King Sejong with many more positive records of

Buddhism than negative ones.<sup>7</sup> The royal family, the gentry, and the rank-and-file still believed in Buddhism, despite this being contrary to the anti-Buddhist policy of the Joseon government (Lee B. 1980, 44-45). In particular, it is said that King Sejong's attitude toward Buddhism was twofold. He curried favor with Confucianism officially, but was privately quite interested in Buddhism (Lee K. 2001, 31-32). However, it is difficult to distinguish the king's attitude toward Buddhism from the perspective of his official duties versus his private life. In spite of the strong opposition from anti-Buddhist Confucian officials, Buddhist rituals praying for rain, health, and the happiness of the dead, sponsored by the royal household, were frequently performed during his reign, with many of these rituals having been supervised by government officials (1/10/4<sup>8</sup> ff., 2/29 ff., 3/94 ff., 4/8/5 ff.).<sup>9</sup>

King Sejong's favoritism toward Buddhism, which included the support of Buddhist rituals for the repose of the dead royal family, maintenance work on monastic structures, the foundation of temples, the protection of monks guilty of misconduct, and the punishment of Confucian scholars who intruded into temples, had been the most debated issue during his reign (Yi S. 1982, 17-18). In this context, the king repeatedly stated throughout his reign that he was not a follower of Buddhism (1/1/11, 2/7/17, 3/1/3, 6/4/6, 7/7/15, 23/leap11/25) and even claimed in 1421 that Buddhism had almost disappeared from Joseon society (3/12/13). The king's anti-Buddhist activities in the *Annals of King Sejong* included abolition of temple servants (1/11/27-28), prohibition of the Buddhist mourning ritual (2/9/16, 2/11/7), abolition of prayer for royal longevity (*yeonjong hwanwon*) (3/12/13), prohibition of monks' processions (*gyeonghaeng*) in the capital area (4/2/19), prohibition of the lantern festival in the royal palace (5/3/18), prohibition of Buddhist rituals in celebration of the

7. The National Institute of Korean History, <http://www.sillok.history.go.kr/inspection.jsp?mTree=0&id=kd> (May 8, 2006)

8. The date is read as reign year/month/day. King Sejong ascended the throne in 1418 and his first year of reign was 1419.

9. For religions of Korea in practice, refer to Buswell (2007).

king's birthday (5/4/10), abolition of Buddhist mantras on the chair of the building of court administration (Geunjeongjeon) (8/10/13), and prohibition of the lantern festival except in temples (13/4/6). The core of the anti-Buddhist policy in the early Joseon period was the confiscation of monastic estates and servants, the reduction of temples and number of monks, and the removal of Buddhist rituals from national rites; this policy was quite successful during the reign of both King Taejong (1400-1418) and King Sejong (Kwon 1993, 210). However, the actual situation was inconsistent with the conclusions drawn by traditional scholarship.

Even King Taejong, who was considered successful in abolishing Buddhism, became a believer in Buddhism late in his career (Kang 1987, 222) and King Sejong also favored Buddhism from the outset of his reign. In addition, the laws regarding monk certification (*docheopje*) were strict under both Kings Taejong and Sejong, but they were in fact not applied (Kwon 1993, 200-201). There were many monks and the economic power of the temples was relatively strong. The record from 1439 indicates that the number of registered monks reached tens of thousands, and although there was not a lot of developed land during the Joseon period, the fields owned by temples were very spacious (21/10/10).<sup>10</sup>

In spite of lasting attacks on Buddhism by Confucian scholars, King Sejong never completely abolished Buddhism. The official reason was that Buddhism had a long tradition from the time of his ancestors (1/11/29-30, 6/2/7, 6/3/8, 8/10/27, 13/12/26, 14/1/4, 14/3/5, 15/3/16). In addition, numerous records point out that the king never accepted his subjects' memorials advocating the rejection of Buddhism.<sup>11</sup> The king disapproved of the Office of Censor General's (Saganwon) anti-Buddhist policy (3/7/2), such as the abolition of

10. The fields totaled 7,982 *gyeol*. In 1428, one *gyeol* meant thirty-five square steps (*bang 35 bo*) (Yi 1984, 60b). However, the exact land measure of one *bo* at that time was unknown.

11. For example, King Sejong did not admit even the memorials from the then Prime Minister Hwang Hui (30/7/22; 30/7/26).

monastic institutions (6/2/13), the prohibition of the lantern festival by the general public (10/3/22), the opposition to feeding monks (21/4/1), the prohibition from performing Buddhist rituals (21/4/18), the release of Confucian scholars who had fought with monks (24/8/12), the punishment of officials who had performed Buddhist rituals (31/6/19), and the abolition of the Buddhist shrine in the court (31/8/6). King Sejong's favoritism toward Buddhism was stronger in the middle and later days of his career than it was at the beginning. Accordingly, the king's anti-Buddhist activities were limited to a few items. A record from the middle of his reign (21/4/18) indicates that these included the abolition of the Buddhist shrine in the inner court, the integration of Buddhist religious orders, the prohibition of the entry of monks into the capital area, and a prohibition on minors entering the monkhood. Verbal evidence by a high-ranking government official also proves this. He said, "King Sejong abolished three to five great abuses of Buddhism" (28/3/26). Therefore, King Sejong did not administer a strict anti-Buddhist policy, but rather was in favor of Buddhism from his initial reign.

As was recorded numerous times in the *Annals of King Sejong*, the performance of various Buddhist rituals for the benefit of the royal family was an everyday affair during King Sejong's reign. In opposition to Confucian scholars' strong rejection of Buddhism, energetic Buddhist activities in the royal household were an important phenomenon in his reign (Keum 1982b, 315). Various Buddhist rituals for curing illness (1/10/4, ff.) and praying for the happiness of deceased royal family members (1/10/9, 2/7/15, 4/5/15, 4/7/9, 4/8/19, 5/5/9, 6/5/9, 6/5/23, 9/9/22, 14/1/2, 1/4/19, ff. 28/3/29, 30/9/29) were continuously performed. Buddhist activities on the official level such as prayer for rain (7/7/15, ff.) were also performed throughout King Sejong's reign.

During King Sejong's reign, subjects' households also continued to perform Buddhist rituals (9/1/3, ff.), and about 60 to 70 percent of the gentry class engaged in Buddhist mourning rituals (14/3/5; Han 1993, 151-179). In addition, the general public also maintained a strong belief in Buddhism (2/8/22, ff.). Therefore, it is evident that

Buddhism remained popular in Joseon society even during the king's reign.

### King Sejong's View of Buddhism and the Creation of the Korean Alphabet

When King Sejong embarked on the creation of the Korean alphabet, he was in favor of Buddhism. He was already a believer in Buddhism when he invented the alphabet in 1443 (Kim S. 2002, 265), and when the alphabet was officially promulgated to the public in 1446, he was a staunch believer in the religion.<sup>12</sup> High-ranking officials, including the prime minister and other influential government officials from the Office of the Inspector General (Saheonbu), the Office of Censor General, and the Hall of Worthies (Jiphyeonjeon) were strongly opposed to the king's positive attitude toward Buddhism. Nevertheless, the king's pious faith did not change and he would not accept his subjects' advice even when their anti-Buddhist arguments were rational (Lee B. 1980, 42).

When the Festival of Water and Land (Suryukhoe), a Buddhist ritual of offering food to water spirits and hungry ghosts, was held at the edge of the Hangang river in 1432, numerous Seoulites, regardless of their social status, gathered together, providing an opportunity for the revival of Buddhism in society (14/2/15; 21/4/19). The plan to create the Korean alphabet was established around that time. A record from 1433 indicates that King Sejong criticized his subjects' antinomic attitude toward Buddhism. According to the king, while they officially opposed the king's positive attitude toward Buddhism, they privately believed in the religion (15/2/16).

King Sejong argued in 1435, "Even those monarchs who attempt-

12. Buddhist texts translated into the Korean script related to King Sejong manifested that the king was primarily interested in merit making rather than focusing on Buddhist doctrine, which is contrary to the idea that he was a man of higher Buddhist knowledge (Choe 1968, 39).

ed to promote moral activities after the Han (BC 206-AD 219) and Tang (618-907) dynasties [in China] could not abolish [Buddhism] completely and Buddhism has survived until the present day. There must be something important in it" (17/5/18). In a record from 1437, the king also pointed out, "While some monarchs in history sided with Buddhism and their kingdoms lasted longer, others opposed that religion and their kingdoms were short-lived. How can young Confucian scholars recognize the principle of the haps and mishaps of life?" (19/7/29). These examples represent the king's positive attitude toward Buddhism. Verbal evidence from his subjects in 1438 also proves this: they said, "The king recently tends to believe in Buddhism" (20/10/21). However, it appears that the king already believed in the religion. King Sejong himself began performing Buddhist rituals in 1438 (Kang 1992, 9).

The period from 1438 to 1450 was characterized by conflict between King Sejong and his subjects over Buddhism (Kang 1992, 12-19). Confucian scholar-officials submitted numerous memorials against Buddhism to the king in 1438 (21/4/19). A record from 1439 indicates that the king defended Buddhism and said, "Even imperial monarchs of old could not abolish the abuses [of Buddhism] completely. How can I, being less virtuous than them, eradicate it to perfection?" (21/2/15). In response, his subjects complained by saying, "The harm of heterodoxy [Buddhism] reached this level. However, [the king] does not prohibit it" (21/4/18). They further argued in 1441, "As the ruler of all people, the king became a staunch Buddhist" (23/leap 11/18; 23/leap 11/24). However, King Sejong responded to them while maintaining, "Successive monarchs of China after the Han and Tang dynasties believed in Buddhism without exception. I also follow suit" (23/leap 11/22), thus claiming that he himself was a pious Buddhist. In addition, the king defended his faith in Buddhism straightforwardly and turned a deaf ear to his subjects' counsel. He said, "You subjects have remonstrated me against Buddhism for a long time and I am the one who rejected your advice. An ancient figure taught that a subject might memorialize to the monarch up to three times. Your memorials were unaccepted and

you'd better resign from government service. Why don't you resign?" (23/12/2). Therefore, it is evident that King Sejong was already a pious Buddhist believer before the invention of the Korean alphabet.

King Sejong was not engaged in Buddhist activities from 1442 to 1446 and Confucian scholar-officials also remained silent about the king's association with Buddhism at that time (Kang 1987, 227-228). A record from 1444 proves that the king devoted himself to the creation of the Korean alphabet. The king said, "My old age made me entrust national affairs to the crown prince. Therefore, I take it for granted that however minute things they may be, I need to take care of them, not to speak of the Korean alphabet" (26/2/20), thus demonstrating that the king himself was active in creating the alphabet. In 1446, when the Korean alphabet was promulgated, King Sejong said, "I am suffering from various illnesses these days and waiting for the day of my death at the palace" (28/3/28). It appears that the king was still closely associated with the Korean alphabet at that time because Buddhist texts, including the *Seokbo sangjeol* (A Detailed Account of the Buddha) and *Worin cheongangji gok* (Songs of the Moon's Imprint on a Thousand Rivers), were translated into the Korean script. And as far as Buddhist activities were concerned, King Sejong was always the sole decision maker (30/7/19). Records from 1448 to 1450 (30/8/5, 31/2/25, 32/1/18) also indicate that the king established a Buddhist shrine beside the palace to pacify his disturbed mind, which was caused by his own illness and the successive loss of his beloved queen and princes. According to a record from 1450, King Sejong also copied a *dhāranī* text and attempted to force monks to recite it (32/1/4).

In short, an analysis of King Sejong's attitude toward Buddhism from a historical perspective suggests that his creation of the Korean alphabet was closely related to his faith in Buddhism. After the invention of the Korean alphabet, King Sejong's faith in Buddhism became even deeper than before and its result was the translation of Buddhist texts into the vernacular script.

### King Sejong's Buddhist Faith and the Translation of Buddhist Texts

After the invention of the Korean alphabet, King Sejong translated Buddhist texts into the Korean script (Lee B. 1980, 66).<sup>13</sup> *The Yongbi eocheonga* (Songs of the Flying Dragons to Heaven) was the only Confucian text published simultaneously with the creation of the Korean alphabet. The others were Buddhist works (Kang 1987, 223; Kim S. 2002, 265). For example, forty books were translated into the vernacular language in the fifteenth century, twenty-nine of which were Buddhist texts, or sixty percent of those translated. King Sejong ordered the translation of only mandatory books for the people (Lee K. 2001, 65), including Buddhist scriptures. It is also evident that the king aimed to propagate Buddhism and popularize Buddhist texts in the Korean alphabet (Lee B. 1980, 64; Kang 1992, 12-19).

Usage of the Korean alphabet and the translation of Buddhist texts into that language depended on the royal family who believed in Buddhism (Kang 1987, 221). King Sejong's faith in Buddhism was probably an important factor in the compilation of Buddhist works into the Korean script (Lee B. 1980, 42-44).

According to the record of 1446, King Sejong said, "When the queen died during the reign of Taizong [627-649] in Tang [China], the crown prince asked to build a temple. Why can I not do so? . . . Now, my queen passed away. When her children planned to publish Buddhist texts for the repose of their mother, I permitted this. . . . Is there anyone who does not perform Buddhist rituals for their parents?" (28/3/26). "You oppose Buddhism based on the good sense of all ages and thus may be called wise subjects. I do not know righteousness and only respect Buddhism, and thus may be referred to as an ignorant monarch" (28/3/28). While responding to this, his subjects said, "The king believes firmly in Buddhism" (28/10/4), thus admitting his faith in Buddhism as a *fait accompli*. King Sejong

13. For Buddhist influence on Korean literature, refer to Kim Jongmyung (2004, 439-441).

acknowledged that he was a pious Buddhist follower (28/10/4). In that context, the king eventually promulgated the Korean alphabet in December of 1446. The king's belief in Buddhism was strengthened after the promulgation of the Korean script and many Buddhist texts were translated into that language, which suggests that Buddhist publications were in close relationship with the king's religious piety.

*Songs of the Flying Dragons to Heaven* was one of the greatest achievements of King Sejong's reign (Kang 1984, 54; Lee K. 2001, 109) because it was the first book composed in the newly invented Korean alphabet. The king's deep interest in this book led elite groups of the time to participate in composing this text over a period of five years (Im 2001, 310). It is composed of a eulogy to the founding of the Joseon dynasty, heavily influenced by Buddhism (Kang 1987, 249). *A Detailed Account of the Buddha* was clearly a product of King Sejong's Buddhist piety (Lee B. 1980, 46). After the death of his beloved queen, King Sejong ordered his son, Prince Suyang (later King Sejo, r. 1455-1468), to compose a book in classical Chinese for the repose of his dead queen. It was then translated into the Korean script within one year after the promulgation of the alphabet in 1446. This meant that the Korean alphabet and Buddhism were already in close relationship before its promulgation. After reading *A Detailed Account of the Buddha*, King Sejong himself composed *Songs of the Moon's Imprint on a Thousand Rivers* (Kang 1992, 16-18). These two books were composed for a Buddhist ritual for the repose of the queen (Kim K. 1992, 236-238).

Intellectuals were not engaged in King Sejong's translation project of Buddhist texts into the Korean script. The compilation of *A Detailed Account of the Buddha* and *Songs of the Moon's Imprint on a Thousand Rivers* is contrary to the foundation spirit of the Joseon dynasty (Kang 1992, 3). After King Sejong created the Korean alphabet, Confucian scholar-officials were reluctant to use it (Yi S. 1956, 208). They were anti-Buddhist as well as against the creation of the Korean alphabet. Their primary concern was with the flourishing of Confucianism and the spread of Chinese characters. Therefore, they were strongly against both the Korean alphabet and Buddhism (Kang

1987, 230-2).

Translations of Buddhist texts into the Korean script were the best way to diffuse the alphabet to the general public (Choi B. 1993, 225). Therefore, King Sejong made an effort to educate the masses through the translated Buddhist texts, including *A Detailed Account of the Buddha* (Keum 1982a, 46; Choi B. 1993, 224). In the prefaces of *A Detailed Account of the Buddha* and *Worin seokbo* (A Biography of the Buddha Śākyamuni on the Moon's Reflection), King Sejong said that the purpose of translating Buddhist texts into the vernacular language was to enable people to more easily understand the content (Choi B. 1993, 224-225). In addition, books for ordinary people who had no access to classical Chinese were given the reading of Chinese characters in the Korean alphabet. Buddhist texts belonged to this category (Lee K. 2001, 156-159). Therefore, King Sejong's faith in Buddhism and the translations of Buddhist texts into the Korean script were in direct relationship. After the compilation of Buddhist texts into Korean, the king became more interested in Buddhism.

According to the record of 1448, King Sejong was a staunch Buddhist who acted arbitrarily without consultation. He said, "My will was already decided. . . . I am not a king to be brought under the control of powerful vassals. . . . An independent decision is necessary for sure things" (30/7/18). This attitude continued until his death in 1450. When his subjects said, "Buddhist activities are gradually increasing lately. . . . The king's faith in Buddhism went to extremes" (30/7/19), King Sejong did not accept their remonstrance by saying, "Your logic is based on the law. However, the law is not for the ruler, but for the ruled. . . . I am immoral and will not observe it" (30/7/19).

A record from 1449 indicates, "The king [Sejong] lost two princes in succession and his queen died soon after. Grief-stricken, he came to believe in the theory of karma" (31/02/25).<sup>14</sup> Later, King Munjong (1450-1452) stated that King Sejong was not a Buddhist believer and that his Buddhist activities resulted from successive

14. For a discussion of King Sejong's Buddhist view, see Kim Jongmyung (2007a).

mourning for his family members (Kang 1987, 235). However, King Sejong made clear again that he was a Buddhist (31/5/28). He also argued, "Buddhist activities do not fall under the jurisdiction of you [subjects]" (31/6/14). In addition, when a prayer for rain worked, the king ordered a rule be made to hold a Buddhist ritual in appreciation (31/6/9). When his subjects opposed the performance of this ritual, the king even moved his residence to another place (31/7/1). In a record from 1450, the final year of King Sejong's reign, he criticized Confucian scholars who memorialized against his faith in Buddhism and called them "scholars who knew little of the world" or "scholars with disheveled hair" (32/1/18).

Therefore, we can say that King Sejong's translation project of Buddhist texts into the Korean script also developed along with his faith in Buddhism.

### King Sejong's Power and Governance

How could King Sejong devote himself to the invention and development of the Korean alphabet? His strong royal power, free use of funds, and freedom from state affairs made it possible.

King Sejong was under the shadow of his father, King Taejong, in the early period of his reign. As soon as he ascended the throne in 1418, he set up King Taejong as the abdicated king and matters were decided in consultation with him (Lee K. 2001, 28). King Sejong succeeded on the political basis of his father. The abdicated king continued to hold military power until 1422 (Choi S. 1982, 25) and even up until 1425. After that, King Sejong exercised his strong royal power. In fact, scholars viewed King Sejong's royal power as the strongest among all Joseon kings.

King Sejong began strengthening his royal authority around 1430, when he planned to create the Korean alphabet (Chung D. 1982, 55). As a result, the king was relatively free from the influence of his subjects and the law. The censors could impeach officials higher than themselves; therefore, the censors' activities can serve as a good guide



to explain the power structure of the times. It was during the reign of King Sejong that their activities were regularized (Chung D. 1982, 4) and, in particular, they flourished most from 1427 to 1430. However, King Sejong did not tolerate the censors who attempted to curtail his own rights. In addition, politics during the time of King Sejong basically depended on the king's individual ability (Chung D. 1982, 59-60). Therefore, King Sejong could exercise his sovereign power concerning his faith in Buddhism.

The power structure of King Sejong can be divided into two periods around 1436, based on his physical condition (Choi S. 1982, 25). When his health took a turn for the worse, he entrusted the crown prince (later King Munjong) with the affairs of the state. It is believed that the king devoted himself to the creation of the Korean alphabet during that period.

In addition, King Sejong could spend funds on holding Buddhist activities, publishing Buddhist texts, and translating them into the newly invented Korean alphabet at his discretion. In fact, free use of funds by the king was a tradition from the previous Goryeo dynasty (918-1392) (Kim Jongmyung 2001, 293-5). When his subjects argued by saying, "The state is not your own, but your ancestors. How could you not be concerned with the eternity of the state?" (30/7/19), King Sejong reacted by saying, "National property is none other than royal possession. . . . I as the ruler can use it arbitrarily both in my public and my private life" (30/7/21). Buddhist activities were private affairs of the royal household and the expenses for these activities were in principle supported by the private properties of the court (Han 1993, 105). King Sejong was the leading figure in the invention of the Korean alphabet. Buddhist texts were published by a publishing house run by the royal family and translated into the Korean script under the auspices of the royal court. In contrast, the majority of his subjects strongly opposed the publication of Buddhist texts as well as the creation of the Korean alphabet (Lee B. 1980, 45-48). Therefore, it is believed that King Sejong's free use of funds enabled him to create the alphabet and hold Buddhist activities, including the translation of Buddhist texts into the Korean script.

King Sejong suffered from various illnesses. Although he suffered from leg pain and had a boil on his back before his enthronement, he was quite healthy in the early days of his reign. However, he was troubled by headaches, dysentery, palsy, and diabetes beginning in 1425 and an aggravated ophthalmic ailment in 1432. In particular, his headaches, dysentery, diabetes, and gonorrhoea became so intense that he could not handle administrative affairs in 1437 (Lee K. 2001, 44). Therefore, the king tried to have the crown prince make decisions (Choi S. 1982, 25-27). By 1438, cataracts, senility, and memory failure made it difficult for the king to manage political affairs properly. As a result, he sought to appoint his crown prince as a regent (Lee K. 2001, 33). After 1439, the king's health grew worse, and royal lectures *gyeongyeon* that had been held from the very beginning of his reign were suspended (Kwon 1982, 72-96). The crown prince eventually took charge of government business in lieu of King Sejong in 1442 and took charge of all state affairs beginning in 1443 (Lee K. 2001, 22-25).

In short, King Sejong could exercise his strong power after 1430, when he planned to invent the Korean alphabet. He was also able to use funds at his discretion. However, the king began to feel ill around that time and the crown prince seemed to have become a *de facto* ruler beginning in 1437. King Sejong argued that he entrusted the crown prince with state affairs due to health reasons. However, his transfer of the throne to his son may have been politically motivated. As his father King Taejong had done with him, King Sejong purposely feigned illness to transfer the throne to the crown prince while he was alive. King Sejong eventually ordered all of his subjects to call the crown prince king (Chung D. 1982, 57). If that was the case, King Sejong was probably healthy enough to create the Korean alphabet. In addition, his falsified illnesses might have been an excuse for pouring his heart and soul into the invention of the alphabet.

Regarding the relationship between King Sejong and Buddhism, common knowledge holds that "King Sejong adopted a very strong anti-Buddhist policy in the initial stage of his reign" (Lee B. 1980, 44-45; Gwon 1993, 210; Buswell 1999, 139); "King Sejong only recognized

and protected Buddhism” (Kang 1987, 229); “King Sejong had no clear perception of Buddhism until the seventh year of his reign” (Han 1993, 89); “The *Annals of the Joseon Dynasty* include more records against Buddhism than those favorable toward it” (Kim S. 2002, 290); and “The invention of the Korean alphabet is a matter foreign to Buddhism” (An 2004, 15). However, this paper demonstrates that these views need to be re-examined since they were derived from an incomplete examination of the *Annals of King Sejong*.<sup>15</sup> This article illustrates the significance of a meticulous analysis of the primary data. It has also greatly benefited from the digitization of the entire record, which enabled an easier search for relevant content. As a result, this paper also demonstrates that the digitization of important data enables richer academic discourse and deeper levels of inquiry.<sup>16</sup>

### Conclusion

This paper examined the relationship between King Sejong’s faith in Buddhism and his creation of the Korean alphabet and its development thereafter from a historical perspective. For this purpose, the relevant records in the *Annals of King Sejong* were examined in chronological order. The following major issues were analyzed: the relationship between King Sejong’s view of Buddhism and his invention of the Korean alphabet; the king’s faith in Buddhism and the compilation of Buddhist texts in the vernacular language; and the king’s authority and modes of governance. Unlike the commonly held views, King Sejong maintained a favorable attitude toward Buddhism from the initial stage of his reign. In addition, he was already a

15. Scholars of Korean Buddhism have regarded Jajang (fl. 636-50) as the pioneer of *hoguk bulgyo* (state-protecting Buddhism). However, the most common misunderstanding found in conventional Korean scholarship in regard to the role played by Jajang in Silla Korea was also resulted from the lack of a proper analysis and understanding of the available first-hand source materials (Kim Jongmyung 1995, 53).

16. For benefits from and challenges to the digitization of the *Tripitaka Koreana*, see Kim Jongmyung (2006, 181-202).

staunch Buddhist even before he invented the Korean alphabet. After the creation of the script, the king’s faith in Buddhism became stronger and resulted in the compilation of Buddhist texts into the Korean script. Therefore, it is highly probable that King Sejong’s Buddhist piety became an important factor in the creation and development of the Korean alphabet. In addition, the king’s strong power, free use of funds, and his freedom from state affairs around the time of the invention of the alphabet enabled its creation. This paper also suggested the need to re-examine common knowledge related to Buddhism during King Sejong’s reign, as well as the importance of in-depth analysis of primary sources coupled with the digitization of data that will enable richer scholarly discourse.

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## GLOSSARY

<i>dharani</i> (Skt.)	陀羅尾	<b>Sejo</b>	世祖
<i>docheopje</i>	度牒制	<b>Sejong</b>	世宗
<b>Geunjeongjeon</b>	勤政殿	<i>Sejong sillok</i>	世宗實錄
<i>Goryeo daejanggyeong</i>	高麗大藏經	<i>Seokbo sangjeol</i>	釋譜詳節
<i>gyeonghaeng</i>	經行	<b>Suryukhoe</b>	水陸會
<i>gyeongyeon</i>	經筵	<b>Taejong</b>	太宗
<b>Hunmin jeongeum</b>	訓民正音	<i>Taishō shinshū</i>	大定新修
<b>Jiphyeonjeon</b>	集賢殿	<i>daizūkyō</i> (J.)	大藏經
<i>Joseon bulgyo tongsa</i>	朝鮮佛教通史	<b>Taizong</b> (Ch.)	太宗
<i>Joseon wangjo sillok</i>	朝鮮王朝實錄	<i>Worin cheongang ji gok</i>	月印千江之曲
<i>Richō bukkyō</i> (J.)	李朝佛教	<i>Worin seokbo</i>	月印釋譜
<b>Saganwon</b>	司諫院	<i>yeonjong hwanwon</i>	年終還元
<b>Saheonbu</b>	司憲府	<i>Yongbi eocheonga</i>	龍飛御天歌

(Ch.: Chinese; J.: Japanese; Skt.: Sanskrit)