

"Buddhism and the Korean Alphabet"¹

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This paper aims to clarify the relationship between King Sejong's (r. 1418–50) invention of the *Hunmin jeongeum* (Correct Sounds to Instruct the People) or the Korean alphabet and his attitude toward Buddhism. To this end, I conducted an in-depth investigation of relevant records in *Sejong sillok* (Veritable Records of King Sejong; hereafter, *VRKS*) and analyzed the king's view of Buddhism, the relationship between the Korean alphabet and Buddhism, the translation of Buddhist texts into the newly invented alphabet under his guidance, his royal power, and the state of his attention to government affairs. This research led me to conclude that the king maintained a positive and pious stance toward Buddhism throughout his reign. Such an attitude played a significant role in the invention of the Korean alphabet and its development in the then Korean society and his strong royal power 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.

King Sejong's reign, characterized by an anti-Buddhist policy in favor of Confucianism, has been considered the most glorious period not only of the Joseon dynasty (1392–1910) but all Korean history (Jeong 1982: 3). Among the twenty-seven monarchs of the dynasty, he was the king most frequently referred to in *Joseon wangjo sillok* (Veritable Records of the Joseon Dynasty), reaching 2,000 quotations (Jeong 1998: 23). He is still considered the greatest king in Korean history and contemporary Korean CEOs are eager to successfully imitate his knowledge management (Park 2006: 99). King Sejong had numerous achievements, the greatest of which was the invention of the Korean alphabet (Kim 1972: 185; Heo 1982: 37; Gang 1987:34; Hong 198: 67) and it was an epoch-making event in the history of Korean culture (Shim 1999: 235). In addition, the Korean alphabet is truly one of the great achievements of human invention (Kim-Cho 2002: 13).

Numerous academic works about King Sejong emerged after Korea's liberation from Japan in 1945 (Yi 1982: 7) and researchers' interest to date has concentrated on the language, history, culture, political philosophy, and scientific technology of his time (Park 2006: 7). The king's national management has been another field of study (Bae 2005: 47–56; Chung 2005: 5–24; Park 2005: 57–89; Pu 2005: 25–46). Research on the Korean alphabet has attracted a great deal of scholarly attention,² primarily focusing on the motive and purpose of its invention, its origin, and the principle

¹ This research was conducted as part of the project, “*Sejong ui yugyo jeok gukka gyeongyeong yeongu*” (A Study of King Sejong's Confucian Statecraft), sponsored by The Academy of Korean Studies in 2006.

² A recent computer search on the web site of the National Library of Korea (<http://www.nanet.go.kr>) found 170 books, 176 theses, and 345 articles on *Hunmin jeongeum*.

of its usage (Yi 2004: 29–33; Yu 2005: 131). Studies of the Joseon period by Korean academe have focused on Confucianism and research on King Sejong and the Korean alphabet has been conducted within this scope. However, the relationship between King Sejong and Buddhism as well as the Korean alphabet and Buddhism has been understudied.

It is important to investigate the historical background of the Korean alphabet, in particular, its relationship with Buddhism. Records, including the *VRKS*, written about the invention of the alphabet suggest the possibility of Buddhist influence on the alphabet and Buddhism during the Joseon dynasty 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 religious circumstances, when Buddhism was suppressed by the government in favor of Confucianism (Yi 2001: 32). There are few works about Joseon Buddhism and even more that focus on the anti-Buddhist policy³ but the reality of the Buddhist circles remains an important topic for discussion (Kim 2002: 265–266).

King Sejong held a dualistic attitude toward Buddhism and the Korean alphabet was a historical product of his reign. Accordingly, the relationship between the king and the alphabet as well as Buddhism needs to be examined in relation to the historical background of the time (Kim 1984: 1–2). Studies of the relationship between the Korean alphabet and Buddhism have been conducted in various ways, which include Sanskrit as the origin of the Korean alphabet (Yi 2001: 89–118; Yu 2003: 340; Hwang 2005: 222–234; Park 2006: 121–122), sacred Buddhist numbers such as the numeral 108 reflected in the Korean alphabet and Buddhist texts translated into the language (Kim 1982; Kim 1989: 159–162; Kim 1991: 236–238; Kim 1992: 64–84; Shim 1999: 235–245), the style of the book *Hunmin jeongeum* (Kim 1989: 159–160),⁴ and Buddhist texts translated into the newly invented Korean alphabet (Yi 1980: 48; Geum 1982: 50; Gang 1984: 51–55; Gang 1987: 232; Kim 1992: 75). In addition, it is said that King Sejong's belief in Buddhism as well as his creation of the Korean alphabet were only political products of his national business (Toron[Yi Taejin] 1993: 278; Kwon 1993: 279; Yu 2005: 142; Mun 2006: 51; Pak 2006: 124–127). Nevertheless, there has been little research on the relationship between King Sejong's Buddhist views and the Korean alphabet.

The subject of this article is important in that an in-depth examination of the philosophical background during the reign of King Sejong (Geum 1982: 44; Yu 2005: 145), the relationship between royal power and Buddhism in the early Joseon period (Toron[Yi] 1993: 277), and the private life of the king, including his Buddhist activities (Yi 1982: 7) is of great significance for further research. It is argued that King Sejong planned to create the Korean alphabet around 1431 (Yu 2005: 150) or 1435 (Ledyard 1966: 84) and this research will also focus on that time. There continues to be debate among scholars as to the inventor of the alphabet. While some consider King Sejong its sole

³ A representative scholarly achievement of this topic was done by Han Ugeun in 1993.

⁴ *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 2005: 97–100. The Book *Hunmin jeongeum* was registered as the Memory of the World by the UNESCO in 1997.

inventor (Yi 1956: 207; Yi 2001: 67), others argue that the king with his assistants created the alphabet (Gang 1987: 237; Kim 1984: 14; Kim 1989: 158–159; Kim 1992: 74; An 2004: 7–12; Yu 2005: 148). However, the majority of scholars consider the king as the overseer for the project. This paper regards King Sejong as the leading figure in the invention of the Korean alphabet.

Veritable Records of the Joseon Dynasty, including the *VRKS*, is important and official material for the study of Joseon Buddhism (Han 1993: iii; Yi 2002: 73) and the *VRKS* contains the most important data on King Sejong's reign. However, conventional works on the Korean alphabet and Buddhism have neglected an in-depth analysis of the *VRKS* but this essay will utilize it as its primary source. In addition, this article will suggest the necessity 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 the Korean alphabet and Buddhism, and by extension, to broaden the scope of scholarly research on King Sejong.

I. King Sejong and Buddhism

Veritable Records of King Sejong contains 791 records related to Buddhism from the reign of King Sejong with many more positive records of Buddhism than negative ones.⁵ The royal family, the gentry, and the rank and file still believed in Buddhism contrary to the anti-Buddhist policy of the Joseon government (Yi 1980: 44-45). In particular, King Sejong's attitude toward Buddhism was twofold. He curried favor with Confucianism officially, but he was interested in Buddhism privately (Yi 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 i.e., praying for rain, health, and the happiness of the dead, which were sponsored by the royal household, were performed during his reign and many of these rituals were supervised by government officials (1/10/4 ff., 2/29 ff., 3/94 ff., 4/8/5 ff.).

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 who misconduct themselves, and the punishment of Confucian scholars who intruded into temples, had been the most debated policy of his reign (Yi 1982: 17-18). In this context, the king repeated throughout his reign that he was not a Buddhist follower (1/1/11,⁶ 2/7/17, 3/1/3, 6/4/6, 7/7/15, 23/leap11/25) and even claimed in 1421 that Buddhism almost disappeared in Joseon society (3/12/13). The king's anti-Buddhist activities in *VRKS* are as follows: the abolition of temple servants (1/11/27-28); the prohibition of Buddhist mourning ritual (2/9/16, 2/11/7); the abolition of prayer for royal longevity

⁵ The Compilation Committee of National History, <http://sillok.history.go.kr/inspection/inspection.jsp?mTree=0&id=kd> (2006. 5. 8).

⁶ The date is read as reign year/day/month. King Sejong ascended the throne in 1418 and his first year of reign was 1419.

(*yeonjong hwanwon*) (3/12/13), the prohibition of monks' procession (*gyeonghaeng*) in the capital area (4/2/19), the prohibition of the lantern festival in the royal palace (5/3/18), the prohibition of Buddhist ritual in celebration of the king's birthday (5/4/10), the abolition of Buddhist mantra on the chair in the Building of Court Administration (*Geunjeongjeon*) (8/10/13), and the 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 monks in number, and the ostracism of Buddhist rituals from national rites and this policy was quite successful during the reign of both King Taejong and King Sejong (Kwon 1993: 210). However, the actual situation was inconsistent with traditional scholarship.

Even King Taejong, who was considered successful in abolishing Buddhism, became a believer in Buddhism late in his career (Gang 1987: 222) and King Sejong also favored Buddhism from the outset of his reign. In addition, the laws regarding monk certification (*tocheobje*) were strict under both Kings Taejong and Sejong, but they were in fact unused (Kwon 1993: 200-201). There were quite a few monks and the economic power of the temples was relatively strong. The record from 1439 indicates that registered monks reached the tens of thousand and although there wasn't a lot of developed land during the Joseon period, the fields owned by temples were very spacious (21/10/10).⁷

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 to rejecting Buddhism.⁸ The king disapproved of the Office of Censor General's (*saganwon*) anti-Buddhist policy (3/7/2) of the abolition of monastic institution (6/2/13), the prohibition of the lantern festival by the general public (10/3/22), the opposition of feeding monks (21/4/1), the prohibition on performing Buddhist rituals (21/4/18), release of Confucian scholars who fought with monks (24/8/12), the punishment of officials who performed Buddhist rituals (31/6/19), and the abolition of the Buddhist shrine at court (31/8/6). King Sejong's favoritism toward Buddhism was stronger in his middle and later career than in 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 they included the abolition of the Buddhist shrine in the inner court, the integration of Buddhist orders, the prohibition of the entry of monks into the capital area, and the prohibition of entering the monkhood by juveniles. 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, he was in favor of Buddhism from his initial reign.

⁷ 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.

⁸ For example, King Sejong did not admit even the memorials from the then Prime Minister, Hwang Hui (30/7/22; 30/7/26).

As was recorded numerous times in *VRKS*, 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 at the royal household were an important phenomenon in his reign (Geum 1982: 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 performed without suspension. 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). 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% of the gentry class were engaged in Buddhist mourning rituals (14/3/5; Han 1993: 151-179). In addition, the general public also maintained their 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. One can therefore assume that King Sejong's Buddhist views played a significant role in the creation of the Korean alphabet.

II. 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 2002: 265) and when the alphabet was officially promulgated to the public in 1446, he was a staunch believer in Buddhism. High-ranking officials, including Prime Minister and other influential government officials from the Office of Inspector General, Office of Censor General, and Hall of Worthies were strongly opposed to the king's positive attitude toward Buddhism. Nevertheless, the king's pious faith did not change and would not accept his subjects' advice even when their memorials were rational (Yi 1980: 42).

King Sejong himself began performing Buddhist rituals in 1438 (Gang 1992: 9). When the Festival of Water and Land (*suryukhoe*), a Buddhist ritual of offering food to water sprites and hungry ghosts, was held at the edge of Han 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). A plan to create the Korean alphabet was established around that time. The record of 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 Buddhism (15/2/16).

King Sejong argued in 1435, "Even those monarchs who attempted to promote moral activities after the Han and T'ang dynasties [in China] could not abolish [Buddhism] completely and

Buddhism has lasted up to the present time. There must be something important in it" (17/5/18). In the record of 1437, the king also pointed out, "While some monarchs in history sided with Buddhism and their kingdoms lasted longer, others were in opposition to 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. The verbal evidence of 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.

The period from 1438 to 1450 was characterized by conflict between King Sejong and his subjects over Buddhism (Gang 1992: 9-12). Confucian scholar-officials submitted numerous memorials against Buddhism to the king in 1438 (21/4/19). The record of 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, who am less virtuous than them, eradicate it to perfection?" (21/2/15). In response, his subjects complained while 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 T'ang 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 remonstrated me against Buddhism for long and I am the person 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. In addition, the creation of the Korean alphabet was a product of the king's faith in Buddhism.

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 (Gang 1987: 227-228). The record of 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 with the Crown Prince. Therefore, I take it for granted that whatever minute things they are, I need to take care of them, not to speak of the Korean alphabet" (26/2/20), thus manifesting 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 *Seokbo sangjeol* (A Detailed Biography of the Buddha Śākyamuni; hereafter, *DBBS*) and *Worin cheongang ji gok* (The Songs of the Moon's Reflection on the Buddha's

Lineage; hereafter, *SMRBL*), were translated into the Korean script; and as far as Buddhist activities are 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 the Buddhist shrine beside the palace to pacify his disturbed mind, which was caused by his own illness and successive loss of his beloved queen and princes. According to the record of 1450, King Sejong also copied a *dhā rani* text and attempted to make monks recite it (32/1/4).

In short, an analysis of King Sejong's attitude toward Buddhism manifests 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 more pious than before and its result was the translation of Buddhist texts into the vernacular script.

III. King Sejong's Faith in Buddhism and the Compilation of Buddhist Texts into the Korean Script

After the invention of the Korean alphabet, King Sejong translated Buddhist texts into the Korean script (Yi 1980: 66).⁹ *Yongbi eocheonga* (Songs of the Flying Dragons to Heaven) was the only Confucian text published simultaneously with the creation of the Korean alphabet and the others were Buddhist works (Gang 1987: 223; Kim 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. King Sejong ordered the translation of only mandatory books for the people (Yi 2001: 65), including Buddhist scriptures. It is also evident that the king aimed to propagate Buddhism and popularize Buddhist texts in the Korean alphabet (Yi 1980: 64; Gang 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 (Gang 1987: 221). King Sejong's faith in Buddhism was probably an important factor in the compilation of Buddhist works into Korean script (Yi 1980: 42-44).

According to the record of 1446, King Sejong said, "When the queen died in the reign of Tai-tsung during T'ang [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. Is there anyone who does not perform Buddhist rituals for their parents?" (28/3/26). "You oppose Buddhism based on good sense of all ages and thus may be called sagacious subjects. I do not know righteousness and only respect Buddhism, thus may be referred to as an ignorant monarch" (28/3/28). While responding to this, his subjects said, "The king is firmly believing in Buddhism" (28/10/4), thus admitting his faith in Buddhism as *fait accompli*. King Sejong acknowledged himself that he was a pious Buddhist follower (28/10/4). In that context, the king

⁹ For Buddhist influence on Korean literature, refer to Kim 2004: 439-441.

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.

The Songs of the Flying Dragons to Heaven was one of the greatest achievements of King Sejong's reign (Gang 1984: 54; Yi 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 five years (Im 2001: 310). Its content is composed of a eulogy on the founding of the Joseon dynasty, heavily influenced by Buddhism (Gang 1987: 249). *A Detailed Biography of the Buddha Śākyamuni* was clearly a product of King Sejong's Buddhist piety (Yi 1980: 46). After the death of his beloved queen, King Sejong ordered his son, Prince Suyang (Later King Sejo, 1455–1468), to compose a book in classical Chinese for the repose of his dead queen. It was then translated into the Korean alphabet within one year after the promulgation of the script in 1446. This meant that the Korean script and Buddhism were already in close relationship before the promulgation of the alphabet. After reading *DBBS*, King Sejong himself composed *SMRBL* (Gang 1992: 16–18). These two books were composed for a Buddhist ritual for the repose of the king's queen (Kim 1991: 236–238).

Intellectuals were not engaged in King Sejong's translation project of Buddhist texts into the Korean alphabet. The compilation of *DBBS* and *SMRBL* is contrary to the foundation spirit of the Joseon dynasty (Gang 1992: 3). After King Sejong created the Korean alphabet, Confucian scholar-officials were reluctant to use it (Yi 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 (Gang 1987: 230–232).

Translations of Buddhist texts into the Korean script were the best way to diffuse the alphabet to the general public (Choe 1993: 225). Therefore, King Sejong made an effort to educate the masses through the translated Buddhist texts, including *DDBS* (Geum 1982: 46; Choe 1993: 224). In the prefaces of *DDBS* and *SMRBL*, King Sejong said that the purpose of translating Buddhist texts into the vernacular language was to make the people understand the contents more easily (Choe 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 (Yi 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 the king who will 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 while 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). His subjects responded to the king again by saying, "The state is not your own, but your ancestors. How could you not be concerned about the eternity of the state?" (30/7/19). The king reacted to them, "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).

The record of 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). Later, King Munjong (1450-52) stated that King Sejong was not a Buddhist believer and his Buddhist activities resulted from successive mourning for his family members (Gang 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 prayer for rain worked, the king ordered a rule be made to hold a Buddhist ritual for 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 the record of 1450, the final year of King Sejong, he criticized Confucian scholars who memorialized him against his faith in Buddhism and called them "scholars who knew little of the world" or "scholars of disheveled hair" (32/1/18).

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

IV. 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 and freedom from state affairs made it possible.

King Sejong was under the influence 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 (*sangwang*) and matters were decided in consultation with him (Yi 2001: 28). King Sejong succeeded to the political basis of his father. The abdicated king continued to hold military power until 1422 (Choe 1982: 25) and even up to 1425. After that, King Sejong exercised his strong royal power. In fact, scholars viewed King Sejong's royal power the strongest among all Joseon kings.

King Sejong embarked on strengthening his royal authority around 1430, when he planned to create the Korean alphabet (Jeong 1982: 55). As a result, the king was relatively free from the influence of his subjects and the law. In addition, he could spend funds on holding Buddhist rituals at

his discretion. The Censors could impeach higher officials 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 (Jeong 1982: 4) and, in particular, they flourished most from 1427 to 1430. However, King Sejong did not tolerate the Censors who attempted to violate his own right. In addition, politics during the time of King Sejong basically depended on the king's individual ability (Jeong 1982: 59–60). Therefore, King Sejong could exercise his sovereign power concerning his faith in Buddhism.

The power structure of King Sejong is divided into two periods around 1436 with his physical condition as a standard (Choe 1982: 25). When his health took a turn for the worse, he entrusted the Crown Prince (later King Munjong) with state affairs. It is believed that the king devoted himself to the creation of the Korean alphabet during the period.

King Sejong suffered from various illnesses. Although he felt a pain in his leg 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 with an aggravated ophthalmic ailment in 1432. In particular, his headaches, dysentery, diabetes, and gonorrhoea became so intense that he could not manage the administrative business in 1437 (Yi 2001: 44). Therefore, the king attempted to have the Crown Prince make decisions (Choe 1982: 25–27). Cataracts, senility, and memory failure made it difficult for the king to manage political affairs properly in 1438. As a result, he sought to appoint his Crown Prince as a regent (Yi 2001: 33). After 1439, the king's health grew worse and thus suspended royal lectures that had been held from the very beginning of his reign (Gwon 1982: 72–96). The Crown Prince eventually took charge of government business in lieu of King Sejong in 1442 and took on all state affairs beginning in 1443 (Yi 2001: 22–25).

In short, King Sejong could exercise his strong power after 1430, when he planned to invent the Korean alphabet. However, the king began to feel ill around that time and the Crown Prince seemed to have been 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, did to him, King Sejong feigned illness on purpose 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 (Jeong 1982: 57). If so, King Sejong was probably healthy enough to create the Korean alphabet. In addition, his malingering might have been an excuse for putting his heart and soul into the invention of the alphabet.

Common views about the relationship between King Sejong and Buddhism are as follows: "King Sejong adopted a very strong anti-Buddhist policy in the initial stage of his reign" (Yi 1980: 44–45; Gwon 1993: 210); "King Sejong only recognized and protected Buddhism" (Gang 1987: 229); " King Sejong had no clear perception of Buddhism until the seventh year of his reign" (Han 1993: 89); *"The Veritable Records of the Joseon Dynasty* includes more records against Buddhism than those

favorable toward it" (Kim 2002: 290); and "The invention of the Korean alphabet is a matter foreign to Buddhism" (An 2004: 15). However, this research demonstrates that these views need to be reviewed. They were derived from an incomplete examination of *VRKS*, the primary source of this paper. This article illustrates the significance of a meticulous analysis of the primary data. I have also greatly benefited from the digitization of the veritable record which enabled an easier search for contents relevant to the paper. As a result, this research showed that the digitization of important data will enable richer academic discourse.

Conclusion

This paper examined the relationship between King Sejong's faith in Buddhism and his creation of the Korean alphabet and its development thereafter. For this purpose, relevant records in *Veritable Record 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, King Sejong's Buddhist piety became an important factor for the creation and development of the Korean alphabet. In addition, the king's strong power and his freedom from state affairs around the time of the invention of the alphabet enabled its creation. This research also suggested the necessity for reexamining common views related to Buddhism during King Sejong's reign and the importance of an in-depth analysis of the primary source and the digitization of the data for richer scholarly discourse.

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