

# King Sejong: A Reign of Benevolence

## I. Respect and Care for the Elderly

Six hundred years ago, in the capital city of Korea, an unprecedented event was taking place. A banquet was being held at the palace in honor of the elderly. Every elderly person in the capital was invited, regardless of his or her social status. King Sejong the Great, the fourth monarch of Joseon Korea, both planned and hosted the event.

The King held a banquet for the elders at Geunjeong Hall. He told the guests not to bow to him, and instead rose from his place to greet them personally. A total of 155 guests were attending, ranging from those of lowly birth to the former State Councillor Yi Gui-ryeong. While many of the other guests were singing, giddy with wine, Yi addressed the king, “Sire, I am 88 years old, and I bear witness that no king before you has treated the elderly with such respect. For this, I add a dozen years to my age, and raise this cup of wine in your honour.”

– *Sillok* (3 August, 1443)

Yi attended the celebration again in the following year, and once again recalled his old age, wishing long life for the King. The King responded with kindness.

Yi Gui-ryeong, aged 89, said, “Since I am too advanced in years to repay your majesty’s kindness, I bring only my old age as an offering for your long life.” To this, the King replied, “I am aware of your kindly wish, old friend. In former years, your health seemed poor, but this year it seems fully restored, and so I rejoice.”

– *Sillok* (22 August, 1434)

The annual royal banquet for the elderly at the palace began in 1432, the 14<sup>th</sup> year of Sejong’s reign. At first, the Royal Secretariat tried to have the lower classes – such as servants, butchers, courtesans, and shamans – excluded from the gathering. However, Sejong intervened.

“We respect the aged because we value their old age, not their rank and status. Therefore, invite all senior citizens from the highest to the lowest.”

– Sejong (17 August, 1432)

As a result, all distinctions of class and gender were removed, so that anyone over the age of 80 was invited, including women, those with disabilities, and refugees. For the first time, the Queen and the royal princesses took charge of the banquet for the female guests. At the banquet organized by the King, the elderly guests enjoyed themselves to the full with singing and dancing.

“Satisfied with good food and wine, they went home peacefully, leaning on canes or holding on to their children. It was a truly wondrous occasion, the fruit of a peaceful age.”

– Sejong (22 August, 1434)

Finally, in 1440, the annual banquet honoring the elderly was enshrined as law in the National Code, and designated as an official ceremony.

“It is easy to pass a law, but difficult to ensure that it is followed. Since the current law of celebrating the elderly is truly admirable, let it be observed in perpetuity and never repealed.”

– Sejong (August 11, 1440)

## **II. A King who Served the People, Not Himself**

Monarchy is the oldest political system in the world. Of the many kings in history, benevolent rulers have been few, while self-serving kings have been plentiful. Many kings feasted in opulent palaces, when the majority of their subjects had barely enough to survive. Empress Consort Wu of the Tang Dynasty had 100 different dishes prepared for her at every meal, and in the case of another king and queen from the Qing Dynasty, the cost one day’s catering was equivalent to a half year’s subsistence for an ordinary subject.

Most tragic of all, however, were the kings who did not value the lives of their people. Henry VIII, for example, executed tens of thousands for their beliefs, while other kings waged unnecessary wars, or commissioned huge construction projects that took the lives of many. The juxtaposition of kingly glory and common misery is an all too common tale. However, in the dark history of kings, there are a small number who shine brightly, and among these is King Sejong the Great.

### III. Ruling with Justice and Compassion

The publication of farming guides, the invention of the rain gauge, and the Angbu Ilgu clock that displayed both the time and the seasons — all these innovations were the result of Sejong's boundless love for the people. After Sejong's coronation, a severe drought ensued lasting a decade. The King believed himself responsible, and lived in a small hut for two years. He refused to drink wine, even when administered as part of his medicine.

The heavens know that I am king without virtue, therefore they condemn me by sending this drought. Knowing this, how can I drink wine to benefit myself?

– Sejong (3 May, 5<sup>th</sup> Year of Sejong's Reign)

When his courtiers insisted that he take the medicine, Sejong explained,

“I know that a cup of wine cannot change the will of the Heavens. But even so I must repent.”

–Sejong (6 May, 1423)

Sejong's devotion to the people was visible from his actions, not his words alone. By reducing the allotment of land to his princes, he greatly reduced the amount of property owned by the royal family (12 January, 1437). Avoiding extravagance, he introduced simplicity to the palace and to regal attire (25 March, 1431). Royal decrees were issued using scrap paper (21 August, 1432) and taxes were lowered during times of famine or flood, to ease the burden on the common citizen. His goal was to keep his people from all harm, and if harm did become them, he was filled with sadness and remorse.

I learned that Kang In Soo was killed by a falling stone while carrying a rock at the Kang-Nyeong Hall, and this fills me with great regret. Ever since inheriting the burden of office from my ancestors, I have refrained from acting in my own interest, but because the Hall was small and leaked in the rain, I commissioned repairs, thinking the task would be a brief one. However, the work took longer than expected and it has still not finished. I should have shown restraint and stayed in my former dwelling, but in my attempt to mend the leaking roof, a life has been lost. Rebuilding the palace already showed my lack of virtue, and now that a person has died, my fault is even more apparent. Although I give one hundred sacks of rice to

recompense his family, how could I console them in their grief?"

– Sejong (18 September, 1433)

Sejong, who truly believed that the interests of his people were one with his own, always held himself responsible if the people faced misfortune.

“I hear nowadays that there are many bandits on the roads. This brings me great shame, for these men have likely lost their homes and livelihoods because of my failure to provide for them.” (October 9, 1444)

September 29, 14th year of Sejong’s reign, during the harvest season.

While passing a certain field, King’s horse ate a handful of barley. The King said, “The farmer toiled long and hard to raise this crop. Since my horse has eaten it, he should have due recompense.” With this he ordered that the farmer be given a sack of rice. (September 29, 1432)

Sejong was a king who agonized over taking a glass of wine during the drought, and apologized for the loss of a handful of crops at harvest. This considerate and benevolent mindset led to a series of innovative reforms during his reign that benefited all his subjects.

In 1430, Sejong enacted a law granting the female servants in government office maternity leave of 130 days – 30 days before giving birth, and a further 100 days after birth. In 1434, he granted paternity leave of 30 days to husbands so that they could take care of their wives and newborn children.

Sejong was lenient towards offences committed against the crown, while strict towards the wrongs committed against the people.

One day, a man leaped in front of the King’s carriage. The officials demanded that the man face a heavy punishment for his insolence. Sejong said, “It is not right to punish a man who lost his way out of confusion.” (March 26, 1429)

When an arrow shot by one of his officials landed in King’s residence, he forgave the person

involved and let it pass. (February 23, 1432)

Likewise, when a commoner was found guilty of grave slander against the king, despite the ministers' petition for punishment, he simply overlooked the incident as if nothing had happened (April 25, 1424)

On the other hand, when a local magistrate embezzled public property and rice intended for the poor, Sejong decreed a heavier punishment than normal, declaring that "plundering rice and starving people to death is incomparably worse than bribery."

Sejong took care to enact laws that helped the weakest members of society.

The King decreed to the Ministry of Justice:

"Being imprisoned or tortured is an ordeal for any man. For children and the elderly, it is even more pitiful. From this day forward, no one below the age of 15 or above 70 is to be imprisoned, unless the charge is one of murder or robbery. Persons below the age of 10 or above the age of 80 shall under no circumstances be tortured or detained, and any verdict passed in their case must be given on the basis of many testimonies. Let this be known throughout the country, and let all who disobey be punished." (November 27th, 1430)

Frequent examples of Sejong's concern for the people can be found in the Royal Annals.

"Formerly, I had no fear of the summer heat, but in recent years I have begun to suffer from it. When I put my hands in cold water, the heat seems to disappear. It occurred to me that those enclosed in prison walls must be more susceptible to the heat. Some may even die from it, which is tragic indeed. During the hot months, I suggest that we provide cold water frequently to those in prison, so that they may bathe their hands and avoid the burning heat." (July 2, 1448)

In addition, he abolished brutal forms of torture, and prohibited striking areas of the body where vital organs were at risk.

Pregnant convicts were to have their sentences postponed until one hundred days after giving birth. If both parents were imprisoned and no one could take care of their children, the government would take full responsibility for their care.

Male and female convicts were segregated, different prisons were built for the hot summer and the cold winter, and doctors were sent in regularly to ensure that sick convicts could receive proper medical treatment.

[“In the end, we set punishments hoping that we need never carry them out.”](#) (August 21, 1424)

This was Sejong’s approach to law – rooted firmly in benevolence.

Sejong’s selfless rule became the standard against all subsequent kings measured themselves throughout the subsequent 500-year history of Joseon Dynasty.

When emphasizing the need for caution in enforcing legal punishments, the ninth king of Joseon, Seongjong, said, “Sejong’s virtuous attitude of saving and protecting life was richer in compassion than that of a hundred kings before him.”

The 22<sup>nd</sup> king of Joseon Dynasty, King Jeong Jo held King Sejong up as the ideal ruler, and once remarked “King Sejong the Great laid the foundations of peace and prosperity for our country”.

#### **IV. Care for the Disabled**

Life in ancient and medieval times was difficult, but for disabled people it was particularly harsh. In Europe, it was common to refer to the disabled with special names such as cripple, fool or madman.

In Korea, however, those with disabilities were not a target of persecution, but treated with care and shown sympathy for their misfortune.

During the Koryo and Joseon Dynasties, we find them referred to as ordinary people who happened to suffer from critical or incurable illness. In this way, disabilities were considered

to be one the many medical conditions that befall mankind, and so the person was not considered separate or inferior.

Myeong-tong-si, the world's first organization for the blind, was established during the early Joseon dynasty. The government provided a building, and encouraged the residents' economic independence by giving them license to take part in rain ceremonies, or play musical instruments at royal palaces.

During times of famine or natural disasters, people with disabilities, together with others in need, were always among the first to be saved.

King Sejong, in particular, placed great emphasis on the importance of these public welfare policies. He made efforts to ensure that they covered not only those in the capital city, but also extended to all those with disabilities throughout the country.

The Ministry of Justice reported:

“A blind man named Kim Seong-gil from Hamgil Province has been sentenced to death.”

The King had the sentence reduced, showing leniency on the grounds that the plaintiff was suffering from an incurable condition. (November 5, 1446).

In this way, Sejong made a practice of commuting sentences for people with disabilities. And if they were ill-treated, severe punishments followed swiftly for those responsible.

In Sejong's day, a physical disability was no obstacle to holding government office.

Heo Jo, who served under Sejong as the Minister of Personnel and State Council, was born with a spinal deformity. Kwon Jeon, who served as the professor of the Jade Hall of Scholars, was disabled in both his hands, but was nonetheless able to leave his mark on history as one of the Six Loyal Officials, and as a highly accomplished scholar.

“The Royal Annals of Sejong provide us with such striking examples, that one is led to wonder whether anyone in former years ever cared so deeply for the unseen sufferings of his people and his country, or for the disadvantaged in its society.”

## **V. A Compassion Undimmed by Suffering**

Sejong's personal life was full of grief, including a rift between his parents, the murder of his uncle and his father-in-law, the loss of his first daughter the Princess Jeongso, his two sons, and finally his beloved Queen. Even in the midst such grief and suffering, he dedicated his life wholly to his responsibilities as the leader of a nation.

On February 17, 1450, the day of Sejong's passing, the historian of Sillok records that there was not a single person who did not shed tears.

The existence of a leader who ruled for the people, with actions and not with words alone, remains a great blessing and source of pride for the Korean people.

The story of King Sejong's benevolence goes beyond that of an individual in history. Today, the word 'Sejong' embodies (epitomizes) a true leader who practices the philosophy of Hongik Ingan, bringing benefit not only to his own country, but to the entire world.