

King Sejong the Great: the Father of Literacy for Everyone



Source: King Sejong the Great Memorial Society (www.sejongkorea.org)

King Sejong the Great (1397-1450, ruled 1418-1450) was the 4th king of the Joseon Dynasty of Korea. Sejong is one of only two Korean rulers posthumously honored with the appellation “the Great,” the other being Gwanggaeto the Great of Goguryeo, due to his remarkable achievements in many fields during his regency.

King Sejong strengthened the Korean military by creating various military regulations and supporting the advancement of Korean military technology,

including cannon development. He also was credited with science and technological advances; a farmer’s handbook with efficient and brand-new farming techniques was published, and new significant scientific apparatuses were designed, such as water clocks, armillary spheres, sundials and so on. Moreover, he highly supported literature and encouraged high class officials and scholars to study at the court, thereby creating a native alphabet for the Korean language, “*Hangeul*” – one of the greatest accomplishments during his reign.

Before the creation of *Hangeul*, only members of the highest class were literate. *Hanja* was typically used to write Korean by using adapted Chinese characters, while *Hanmun* was sometimes used to write court documents in classical Chinese. One would have to learn the rather complex *Hanja* characters in order to read and write Korean. King Sejong presided over the introduction of the 28-letter Korean alphabet with the explicit goal of achieving literacy for Koreans of all classes. He also attempted to establish a cultural identity for his people through unique script. First published in 1446, anyone could learn *Hangeul* in a matter of days. Persons previously unfamiliar with *Hangeul* could typically pronounce the Korean script accurately after only a few hours of study. King Sejong is truly acknowledged as the “father of literacy for everyone.”

There are approximately 6,000 languages known worldwide, and it is said that more than half of them will disappear within this century. Among the 6,000 languages that exist on Earth, there are a mere 100 languages that have their own writing systems. A language having its own unique writing system is an important prerequisite for determining the survival of the language.

Hangeul, promulgated by King Sejong the Great in the 15th century, is the native writing system of the Korean language. It is comprised of 24 *Hangeul* letters, 14 consonants and 10 vowels. Its name at the time of its promulgation was *Hunminjeongeum* meaning, “the proper sounds for the education of the people.” *Hunminjeongeum* was created in 1443 to educate the majority of the people who had been unable to learn difficult Chinese letters. The modern name, *Hangeul*, was coined by Ju Si-gyeong in 1913, meaning “great script.”

Hangeul, with the meaningful background surrounding its birth, enjoys a high reputation globally, ranging from its outstanding originality and philosophy, scientific and systematic design, and aesthetic integrity for potential cultural and economic development.

Above all, *Hangeul*’s cultural value was officially recognized when it was registered with UNESCO as a “World Heritage in the Field of Recording” on October 1, 1997. In Korea, October 9 every year is designated as “*Hangeul* Day” to renew people’s recognition of *Hangeul*’s value and to honor the accomplishment of King Sejong the Great, its inventor. On *Hangeul* Day, colorful commemorative events take place. Currently, the literacy rate of the United States, the world’s lone superpower, is a mere 85%, and China’s literacy rate stands at just 73%. In contrast, thanks to the scientific and systematic writing system, *Hangeul*, Korea’s literacy rate is close to 100%. For this reason, UNESCO awards the “King Sejong Literacy Prize” to individuals and groups who contribute to fighting illiteracy on September 8, every year.



Hangeul: the Proper Sounds for the Education of the People
with the World

The Korean government has put forth multilateral efforts to let the entire world know the excellence, importance and value of *Hangeul* and to promote the globalization of *Hangeul*. As part of this endeavor, the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism has pushed ahead to establish the *Hangeul* Museum since 2009, and the museum had its groundbreaking ceremony and officially began construction on July 13, 2011.

The *Hangeul* Museum, scheduled to be constructed on the premises of the National Museum of Korea in Seoul, is expected to make the visitors 1) generally understand the past, present and future of *Hangeul*, 2) actively participate in various experience study programmes aiming at the awareness of the principle and value of *Hangeul*, and 3) see diverse *Hangeul*-related exhibitions, performances and events.

Opening in 2013, this museum will contribute to providing the world with a valuable opportunity to seek the infinite potential of *Hangeul*, as well as join in eclectic activities. By doing so, it will be a stepping stone to accelerate practising and globalizing *Hangeul* worldwide, develop different cultural products for *Hangeul*, and stimulate many industries with the cultural contents of *Hangeul*. Finally, it will set the stage for domestic growth engines.

What is the UNESCO King Sejong Literacy Prize?

The UNESCO King Sejong Literacy Prize was created in 1989 through the generosity of the Government (Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism) of the Republic of Korea.

The Prize honours the outstanding contribution made to literacy over 500 years ago by King Sejong, who created “*Hangeul*,” the native phonetic writing system for the Korean language. *Hangeul* was created the explicit goal of having Koreans from all classes read and write, and it is still a valuable model and reference for the world today in terms of the promotion of literacy.

The UNESCO King Sejong Literacy Prize rewards the activities of governments or governmental agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) displaying merit and achieving particularly effective results in contributing to the fight for literacy. It gives special consideration to the creation, development and dissemination of mother-tongue languages in developing countries.

The Director-General of UNESCO finally selects the winners after a rigorous scrutiny by a UNESCO-assembled international jury. The Prize consists of a sum of 20,000 USD, a silver medal and a certificate.

Sponsored by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, the Korean National Commission for UNESCO (KNCU) has annually hosted the official invitation programme for the prize winners since 2009 in commemoration of the 20th year of establishing the prize. Promoted during “*Hangeul* Week,” which includes “*Hangeul* Day (October 9),” this programme

gives the winners the opportunity to experience various *Hangeul*-related events and go to historical places, thereby giving them the chance to recognize the value and importance of *Hangeul* in terms of literacy.

Winners of the UNESCO King Sejong Literacy Prize

Year	Winner	Country
1990	Kerala Sastra Sahithya Parishat (KSSP) Trivandrum (Kerala Science Popularization Movement)	India
1991	Institute of Adult Education, University of Ghana	Ghana
1992	Puduvai Arivoli Iyakkam Pondichery, India	India
1993	Illiteracy Eradication and Adult Education Project, Ministry of Education	Jordan
1994	National Union for Tunisian Women (UNFT)	Tunisia
1995	Pilot Literacy and Training for the Improvement of the Quality of Life of Rural Women (PROCALMUC)	Ecuador
	All-China Women's Federation (ACWF)	China
1996	Culture and Education Department of the Armed Forces, Ministry of Defense and Aviation	Saudi Arabia
	Club UNESCO Dibwa Dia Ditumba	Zaire
1997	Notre Dame Foundation for Charitable Activities Inc's 'Women in Enterprise Development' (WED) Programme	Philippines
	Togolese Cotton Company (SOTOCO)	Togo
1998	General Authority for Literacy and Adult Education (GALAE)	Egypt
	Permanent Illiteracy Eradication Group (Groupe Permanent de Lutte contre l'Illettrisme) (GPLI)	France
1999	Directorate for Adult Literacy and Training, Ministry of National Education	Niger
	Ministry for the Promotion of Women and Human Development (PROMUDEH)	Peru
2000	Juvenile Education	Iraq
	National Literacy and Basic Education Directorate	Senegal
2001	Tianshui Education Commission, Gansu Province	China
	Alfatibonit/Alfa Desalin Project	Haiti
2002	Bunyat Literacy Community Council (BLCC)	Pakistan
	Egypt-based Regional Centre for Adult Education (ASFEC)	Egypt
2003	Tembaletu Community Education Centre in South Africa	South Africa
	International Reflect Circle (CIRAC)	CIRAC
2004	AlfaSol (Solidarity in Literacy) presented by the Government of Brazil,	Brazil
	Steering Group of Literacy Education in Qinghai Province presented by the Government of China	China
2005	AULA Cultural Association submitted by the Government of Spain	Spain
	GOAL submitted by ACTIONAID International	Sudan
2006	Mother Child Education Foundation (ACEV)	Turkey
	Youth and Adult Literacy and Education Chair of the Latin American and Caribbean Pedagogical University of the Republic of Cuba	Cuba
2007	Children's Book Project	Tanzania
	Tostan	Senegal
2008	People's Action Forum programme: Reflect and HIV/AIDS	Zambia
	Tin Tua's Literacy Programme	Burkina Faso
2009	Nirantar's project "Khabar Lahariya (News Waves)" in Uttar Pradesh	India
	Adult Education and Training Programme (EdFoA) of the General Directorate of Adult Training	Cape Verde
2010	Family Literacy Project (FLY) of the State Institute for Teacher Training and School Development in Hamburg	Germany
	National Literacy Service	Burundi
2011	"Bilingual Literacy for Life" programme of the Institute for the Education of Adults	Mexico

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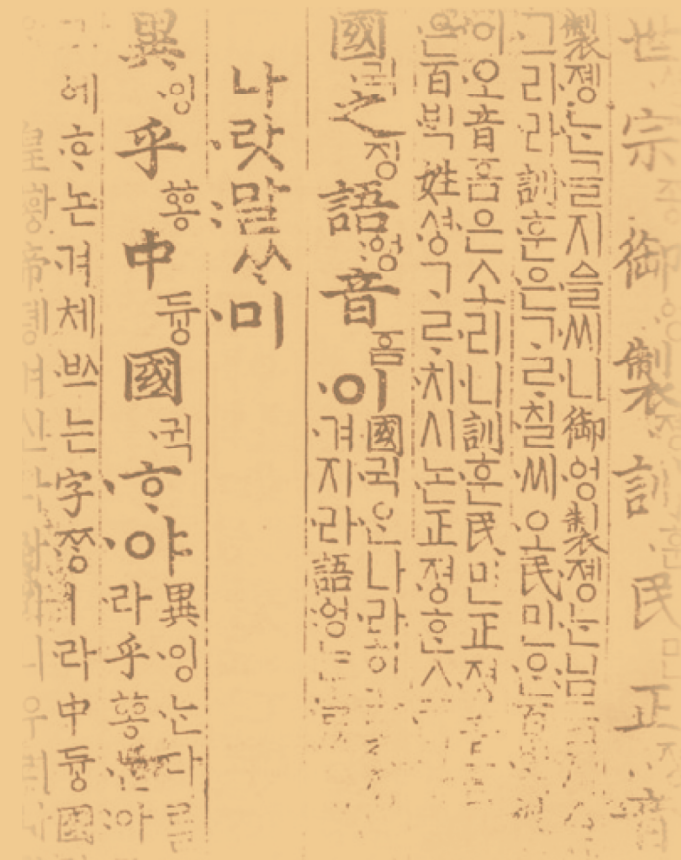


United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization



United Nations
Literacy Decade
2003 - 2012

유네스코 세종대왕 문해상 UNESCO King Sejong Literacy Prize



유네스코한국위원회
Korean National Commission for UNESCO



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Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism