

Theme 2.5, Transmission of Traditions, China and Korea

Chinese Influence

The Chinese influence on the Korean Peninsula began as early as the second century BCE, when the Han dynasty established military outposts in the northern part of the peninsula. Waves of immigration and cultural influences from China continued to flow into Korea over the next 1500 years. Most significantly, in the fourth century CE, the Chinese introduced Buddhism. By the early seventh century, Buddhism was beginning to flourish in the state of Silla, which unified the peninsula for the first time in 668. With Buddhism came other Chinese cultural influences: written language, literature (including poetry written in Chinese styles), and Confucian political ideas and institutions. Confucianism was useful to the rulers of Silla's successors, the Koryo and Choson dynasties. It established a moral basis of rulership and sanctioned a social hierarchy dominated by scholars steeped in Confucian classical texts. The members of this scholarly elite had to master many texts in order to pass examinations.

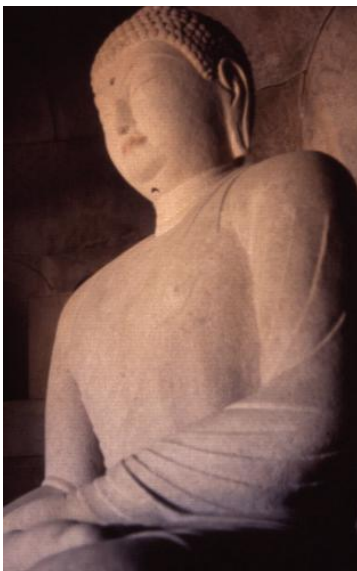
Buddhism and Printing

Buddhist believers created a demand for more and cheaper texts in Tang China. The Chinese printing technology used wooden carved plates and later wooden moveable type. The Koreans extended this technology in the eleventh century to metal molds, in order to print Buddhist texts with Buddhist images repeatedly. By the thirteenth century, both Confucian and Buddhist texts were reproduced using metal moveable type. The establishment of a Korean government printing office at this time demonstrates the importance of printed text to the Korean elite.

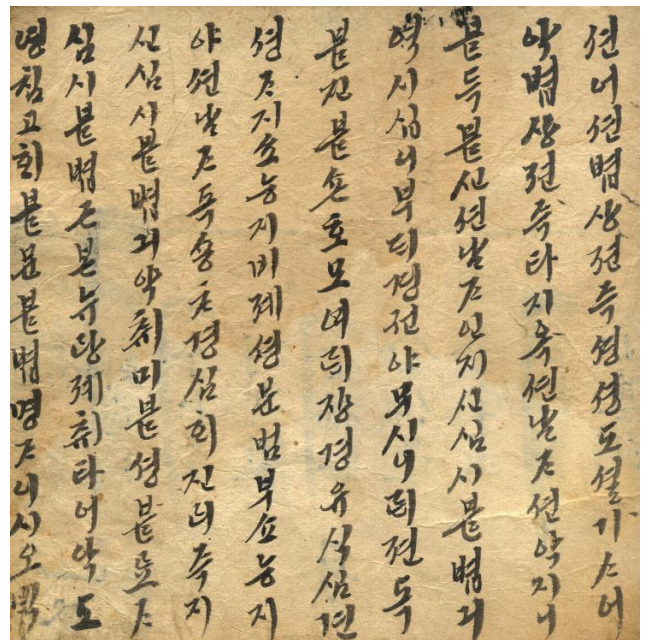
Han'gul

In the fifteenth century, King Sejong developed the writing tradition further when he commissioned the invention of Han'gul, the native phonetic writing system for Korean language. King Sejong declared in 1443,

The sounds of our language differ from those of Chinese and are not easily communicated by using Chinese graphs. Many among the ignorant, therefore, though they wish to express their sentiments in writing, have been unable to communicate. Considering this situation with compassion, I have newly devised 28 letters. I wish only that the people will learn them easily and use them conveniently in their daily life. (Sejong, "Hunmin Chongum [Proper Sounds To Instruct the People]" in *Sourcebook of Korean Civilization*, eds. Peter H. Lee and Donald Baker, trans. Ch'oe Young-ho, [New York: Columbia University Press, 1993–1996] 516–517.)



(Left) DETAIL OF KOREAN BUDDHA SOKKURAM (751). Courtesy of Robert and Sandra Mattielli.



(Right) HANGUL CALLIGRAPHY (n.d.). Courtesy of Robert and Sandra Mattielli.