



*Annals of the Joseon Dynasty*

# Brought to Life by the Digital Era

The *Annals of the Joseon Dynasty* (*Joseonwangjosillok*) is enjoying a renaissance. With the digitalization of information and ready availability of Internet service, scholars and the general public can now easily access the *Annals* content. Moreover, the *Annals* has served as a wellspring of inspiration for a wide array of creative endeavors, including movies, TV dramas, and publications.

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With the digitalization of the *Annals* content, and its translation into Korean from classic Chinese, even young students can easily research any particular reference or subject area.

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The popular TV historical drama “Daejanggeum” (Jewel in the Palace) has been one of the primary forces behind the remarkable spread of the “Korean Wave” phenomenon to nearly all corners of the world. Yet this drama evolved from a happenstance event. When the producer Lee Byung Hoon was working on the historical drama “Heo Jun,” he came across a noteworthy passage while searching the *Annals of the Joseon Dynasty* for information about Heo Jun (1539-1615), a Joseon court physician who attended the royal family. It was a statement by King Jungjong (r. 1506-1544) who declared: “No one knows my illnesses as well as Jang Geum.”

During the Joseon Dynasty era, since the king’s physicians were all male, it is curious that Jang Geum, a woman who would ordinarily assume the role of a nurse, would be the person most familiar with the king’s physical condition. Due to this incongruity, Lee conducted

additional research on Jang Geum, which eventually led to his creation of the historical drama. As such, the genesis of “Daejanggeum” can be traced to the chance discovery of a single line in the *Annals* about Seo Jang Geum, a nurse from a commoner family.

### Source of Creative Content

The most convenient process to access information about Heo Jun, the protagonist of the historical drama of the same name, would be to look up references about the palace pharmacy, where the court physicians were assigned, by searching the CD-ROM edition or the online version of the *Annals of the Joseon Dynasty (Korean Translation)*.

If you enter “palace pharmacy” into the search text function, a total of 689 references are listed, in a matter of mere seconds. That is, within a few seconds, you can review a listing of all the information about the palace pharmacy, such as its history, organization, and

members, throughout the 500 years of the Joseon Dynasty. Moreover, a search of “palace pharmacy,” and other terms, will undoubtedly yield unexpected gems, along with the relevant match results.

For example, the single line—“No one knows my illnesses as well as Jang Geum”—was included among the list of 689 references. It is possible to access practically all available information concerning the palace pharmacy during the 500-year history of the Joseon Dynasty, as well as unexpected findings, because the digital format of the *Annals of the Joseon Dynasty* includes a complete Korean translation. In this regard, it could be said that digitalization of the *Annals of the Joseon Dynasty* helped to spawn the creation of the “Daejanggeum” historical drama.

In addition, the beloved drama, “The King and I,” about the life of Kim Cheo-seon (?-1505), an eunuch who served under six kings, from the fifth Joseon monarch Munjong to the tenth



- 1 The TV historical drama "Daejanggeum" (Jewel in the Palace), which was inspired by a single reference found in the *Annals of the Joseon Dynasty*, "No one knows my illnesses as well as Jang Geum," has contributed much to the global spread of the *Hallyu* (Korean Wave) phenomenon.
- 2 The historical drama "Heo Jun" is based on the real-life story of Heo Jun (1539-1615), a legendary physician of the Joseon Dynasty. While serving as the palace physician of the king and royal family, several accounts of Heo Jun's experiences have been recorded in the *Annals of the Joseon Dynasty*.
- 3 The film *The King and the Clown* was inspired by the life of the clown Gonggil, who, according to the *Annals of the Joseon Dynasty*, had been punished due to his disrespectful remarks to the king.
- 4 The film *Singijeon*, whose storyline is centered on the development of a Joseon-period rocket launcher, known as singijeon, has been created from an abundance of historical details contained in the *Annals of the Joseon Dynasty*.
- 5 The *Comic Book Annals of the Joseon Dynasty* offers easy-to-understand stories based on the *Annals* content, which has proven popular among students as well as adults.



3

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In 2008, the National Institute of Korean History completed an automation project of epic scale: The entire contents of the *Annals of the Joseon Dynasty*, based on the original copy stored at the Mt. Taebaeksan archives, have been recorded in digital format. The *Annals* have thus been permanently preserved, along with the provision of a full Korean translation of the original Chinese characters.

Yeonsangun (r. 1494-1506), is another prime example of applying dramatic creativity to breathe life into a variety of the characters and accounts recorded in the *Annals*. Its lead characters, as well as Eoeludong, who was featured to add a human dimension to the history-based storyline and enhance its romantic elements, were all derived from the *Annals* texts.

Eoeludong was a notorious seductress during the time of King Seongjong. The daughter of a *yangban* (aristocratic) family, named Bak, she married into a family related to the royal line, but

later divorced, thereby losing her elite social standing. She then descended into a downward spiral, engaging in scandalous affairs until her tragic death. Eoeludong became synonymous with unrestrained sexuality among Joseon society, while the *Annals* include some 100 accounts about her illustrious lifestyle. Through these accounts you can acquire a detailed overview of society's attitude toward Eoeludong, a symbol of personal freedom and individuality during an era when the activities of women were rigidly constrained, along with unearthing a wealth of notable incidents

about her life that can be used to create dramatic stories.

With the *Annals of the Joseon Dynasty* now being readily accessible on the Internet, viewers no longer have to accept the portrayals of historical dramas at face value, since they can compare the dramatic depictions with the actual accounts of the *Annals*, making it possible to independently assess historical episodes from a variety of viewpoints.

### **Blurring of Fact and Fiction**

Along with providing background

information for historical dramas, the *Annals* are also being used as “total contents” and a “multipurpose source” of materials by every segment of Korea’s cultural industry. In this way, specific elements found in the *Annals* are being adapted and expanded in conjunction with other aspects, through a synergy process. The representative example of this process is the highly successful play *You*, which was based on the life of Gonggil, a clown (court entertainer) mentioned in the *Annals*.

The play *You* features distinctive characters and a heartfelt story line, which was derived from the *Annals* detailed accounts about the goings-on of the Joseon royal court. After its opening in 2000, *You* went on to become the most successful original play in Korea. At the awards ceremony of the National Theater Association of Korea, it scored a clean sweep, capturing the awards for best play, best drama, and best actor.

This stage success was then taken to the silver screen, in the form of *The*

*King and the Clown* film. Following its release in 2005, it became the No. 1 box office attraction in the history of Korean cinema, with more than 12.3 million viewers. Moreover, the *You* story line was then adapted into a book, of the same title in that same year, which again enjoyed success as a bestseller. The extraordinary success of *You*, in the fields of theater, film, and publishing, has been attributed to the intriguing character of Gonggil, whose life story had been documented in the *Annals of the Joseon Dynasty*.

Just as with Jang Geum of “Daejanggeum,” the clown Gonggil was discovered by accident. Playwright Kim Taeung, who wrote the script for *You*, learned about an aspect of Korea’s traditional entertainment referred to as “amusing witticisms.” While searching the *Annals* for information on “amusing witticisms,” he came across references to the clown Gonggil.

In this case, “clown” was a term used during the Joseon period to refer

to a performer or entertainer, including those who recited “amusing witticisms” before an audience of the king and court officials at the palace. Thus, to access information on “amusing witticisms” in the *Annals*, you simply have to enter keywords such as “clown” or “performer” into the search function. The search results would include an account of the clown named Gonggil, which reads: “Gonggil quoted the *Analecets* and stated: ‘The king must act as is becoming of a king, a vassal must act as is becoming of a vassal, a father must act as is becoming of a father, and a son must act as is becoming of a son. If the king does not act as is becoming of a king and his vassals do not act as is becoming of vassals, how can I eat, no matter how much grain there might be?’ Hearing this, the king thought Gonggil was disrespectful, and had him beaten and then exiled to a far away place.”

After reading this account, the playwright could only wonder: “What was the motivation for this clown to make

- 1 Visitors look over original volumes of the *Annals of the Joseon Dynasty* at a special exhibition.
- 2 Volumes of the *Annals of the Joseon Dynasty* stored at Seoul National University’s Gyujujanggak Institute for Korean Studies.



2

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such critical remarks in the presence of the king?” He was perplexed about the relationship between the king, the all-powerful ruler, and the clown, who occupied one of the lowest rungs of the social order. This scenario provided the spark for Kim’s creation of the storyline for *You*, which was subsequently adapted to *The King and the Clown* film and the *You* publication.

Indeed, we can only marvel at playwright Kim’s creative mind that so vividly brought to life the Gonggil clown, along with the personalities and incidents, based on the historical accounts of the *Annals*. Ultimately, *You* is the foremost example of how the various historical references of the *Annals*, combined with the convenience of advanced data-processing technology, have contributed to the creation of such rich cultural content for the theater, film, and publishing sectors.

The film *Singijeon*, which is scheduled for release in September 2008, is rooted in the development of the *singijeon*, a military weapon that was first cited in the *Annals of King Sejong*, in 1448. The *singijeon* is a Joseon-period rocket launcher that was based on a prototype designed by Choe Mu-seon during the Goryeo period (918-1392). In the film, King Sejong orders the *singijeon*’s development as a means to bolster the country’s defenses against intrusions by the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) of China. The film’s depiction of historical events and the political situation, involving the personal relationships of vivid characters, have been drawn from the texts of the *Annals*.

The *Annals* contents have been published in a wide variety of book forms as well, including a popular

comic book version. After the initial volume of the *Comic Book Annals of the Joseon Dynasty* was introduced in 2003, its success led to the development of the series, of which a final volume is scheduled for release in 2011. Targeted for young readers, it offers easy-to-understand stories based on the *Annals* content. Moreover, as a result of its sales of 200,000 copies, parents have been clamoring for the publication of an adult version for their own enjoyment. Of note, this comic book version has managed to overcome a commonly held notion that historical materials are difficult to understand, along with proving that the diverse content of the *Annals* can appeal to readers of all ages and generations.

Nowadays, in the history section of a bookstore, you can find a growing number of books that deal with such matters as the educational system of the Joseon royal court, the intimate lives and loves of Joseon royal women, and the intrigue of behind-the-scenes power struggles and palace conspiracies. Along with confirming that reality can be stranger than fiction, the *Annals* serve as an endless wellspring of inspiration for the creation of content for all cultural fields.

### Digital Age Revival

However, it would not have been possible to take even one step along this path without the monumental projects of having the *Annals of the Joseon Dynasty* translated into Korean and converted into digital format. For example, what would have happened when the producers looked for background information for the “Heo Jun” and “Daejanggeum” dramas?

The original *Annals* is of a massive scale: 1,893 volumes in 888 books; 133,968 pages; and 189,867,695 characters. Moreover, this voluminous content is written entirely in classical Chinese; therefore, unless you are highly proficient in classical Chinese, your understanding of the texts will be extremely superficial. Plus, experts of classical Chinese are capable of reading only about 50 pages per day, which means that it would require a period of about 7 years to read all 133,968 pages of the complete *Annals*.

Although an expert of classical Chinese would need seven years to find all references to the “palace pharmacy” in the original *Annals*, with the CD-ROM or online versions, in Korean, anyone who can read Korean could find all of the references in a matter of seconds. Indeed, the digitalization process can be thought of as a miracle and godsend, in regard to data-processing speed and user convenience.

The original *Annals* texts cover a wide variety of subjects over the course of the entire Joseon Dynasty era, including matters related to politics, military affairs, diplomacy, the economy, society, history, prominent figures, and institutions, as well as astronomy, science, medicine, technology, geography, cosmic philosophy, divination, literature, folklore, music, art, religion, thought, ethics, morals, customs, popular sentiments, and everyday social conditions.

The content is particularly noteworthy for the minute detail of the accounts of the whole of society, including the words and actions of the king, his political successes and failures, and the private lives of individuals, not



Thanks to the dedicated efforts of the late Dr. Lee Woong-geun, the entire contents of the *Annals of the Joseon Dynasty* are now available in CD format. This colossal endeavor, which was completed in 1995, required an investment of some 5 billion won and an estimated 100,000 man-days of a team of research specialists. In addition, the National Institute of Korean History operates a website where any Internet user can conveniently access the entire *Annals* contents.

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unlike the newspapers of today. With so many aspects of the 500 years of the Joseon Dynasty having been recorded in the *Annals*, they are truly worthy of being called a treasure trove of historical and cultural information, without precedent the world over.

Yet, before the *Annals* were translated into Korean and digitalized, the extensive content was wholly unwieldy and cumbersome. As already noted, the *Annals* contained so much information that much time and effort would be required to find a particular reference.

Furthermore, the learning of classical Chinese declined rapidly from 1910, while by the 1960s there were ever fewer persons who could read and understand the original *Annals*. As a result, the *Annals* had become extremely difficult for even scholars of Korean history to use as a reference.

To remedy this situation, a project to translate the *Annals* into Korean was launched in 1968, and finished in 1993, representing 26 years of concerted efforts. About 3,000 Korean scholars participated in this endeavor, which

marked the most substantial project in the field of Korean history in modern times.

Equally important was the undertaking of a digitalization project to make the *Annals* easier to use. The *Annals of the Joseon Dynasty (Korean Translation)* comprises 413 books. Still, if someone read 100 pages per day, it would take some four years and three months to read through everything. Moreover, upon completion, without a detailed index, it would be difficult to remember and locate specific references.



In order for the *Annals of the Joseon Dynasty (Korean Translation)* to serve as an effective resource for research, it was necessary to digitalize the contents. For this, an Annals of the Joseon Dynasty CD-ROM Publishing Committee was formed in April 1994, which led to production of a CD-ROM version of the *Annals of the Joseon Dynasty (Korean Translation)* in March 1995, which contains all of the 413 books.

The cutting-edge CD-ROM (three-disc set) includes text information as well as audio and video features. Over 300 million characters can be stored on a single disc with a compact 12-centimeter diameter. And since the basic CD-ROM format conforms to the standards of the International Organization for Standardization (ISO), it can be readily used anywhere in the world.

The CD-ROM is a far more convenient form for accessing information than a regular book. The specific information in an ordinary book must be located from a table of contents or an index of subjects. But with a CD-ROM, you can directly search for the desired contents. The search function is very quick, and you can jump to the relevant location in an instant, enabling easy access to any particular reference. The user-friendly functionality of the CD-ROM is ideal for sorting through the diverse and extensive information of the *Annals*.

Because the *Annals* were written in chronological order, the articles are listed by year, month, and day. The CD-ROM version of the *Annals of the Joseon Dynasty (Korean Translation)* includes an index function, based on the dated table of contents, to coincide with the original's chronological system. Thus, any user with basic computer





Nowadays, a wide variety of books has been published about the stories and information contained in the *Annals*. In fact, the diverse and extensive content of the *Annals of the Joseon Dynasty* is credited with inspiring a broad array of publications, including history books, novels and educational texts.

knowledge can easily access specific information with a few mouse clicks. In light of the almost 1,900 volumes of the original *Annals*, in less time than it would take to even identify the desired volume, a CD-ROM user can access the specific information.

#### **User-friendly *Annals***

In December 2007, the National Institute of Korean History completed a two-year initiative, “*Annals of the Joseon Dynasty* National Online Service Project,” which can be accessed at the website (<http://sillok.history.go.kr>). This online service allows users to view the translated Korean text, the original text in classic Chinese, and images of the original documents. And new features have recently been added.

Of particular significance is the fact that the copy of the *Annals* stored at the Mt. Taebaeksan archives has been recorded in digital images, thereby permanently preserving the original content, in its entirety. There is also a *Genealogical Table of the Joseon Royal Clan*, which lists the social standing, family origin, and career highlights of the various individuals that are covered in the *Annals*, allowing convenient access to an abundance of information on historical figures.

The digital format and online access of the *Annals* has generated a wide variety of benefits. Most notably,

the *Annals* are no longer an exclusive resource of experts of classical Chinese, but are instead available to the general public as well. As a result, the general public’s interest in the Joseon period has steadily swelled, while Korea’s knowledge and cultural-content industry has received an injection of dynamic energy. This was all made possible by combining the *Annals of the Joseon Dynasty* (*Korean Translation*) with cutting-edge data-processing technology.

In order to sustain this positive momentum, it is necessary to develop a glossary of the words and terminology, which are difficult for even history scholars to understand. Moreover, along with the application of advanced data-processing technology, there is a need to conduct further research to supplement the contents in the *Annals*. In addition, with the *Annals* now being accessible online to all Koreans and everyone else in the world, there should be serious consideration of efforts to translate the *Annals* into foreign languages.

If the interests of people in Korea and abroad can be served by revealing the historical and cultural contents of the *Annals of the Joseon Dynasty*, it might be reasonable to expect that another miracle, even more remarkable than the digitalization, will be seen in the creative content industry, as well as the academic and cultural sectors. ●