Few people in the history of the world can take credit for inventing an alphabet. One who could was Sejong, king of Korea in the fifteenth century. This was not the only achievement of this outstanding ruler of the Yi, or Choson, dynasty. As you read, think about the immense influence that a ruler such as Sejong can have on a country. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.

King Sejong (1397–1450)

Korea reached the height of its medieval culture during the 32-year reign of King Sejong. While he is best known for inventing and introducing the Korean alphabetical writing system, Sejong had many other interests that he applied for the good of the country.

Sejong became king in 1418 or 1419, when he was in his early twenties. Soon afterward, he brought together a group of scholar-officials to study and do research in the Hall of Worthies. They published works in history, language, law, music, astronomy, and medicine. Because Sejong also encouraged the development of typecasting and printing from copper plates, Korean presses could publish the scholars’ work. The king sometimes rewarded craftsmen working on new technology by sending them gifts of extra wine and food.

Sejong believed that people had to be well fed and comfortable before they could become wise. He said, “The people are the root of the state, and food is an indispensable necessity of the people.” Throughout his reign, he took a hand in improving agriculture through science and technology. In 1429, he issued a practical farm manual called “Straight Talk on Farming,” which gave advice about planting and plowing techniques. He personally carried out experiments with growing better grain harvests. To help farmers avoid droughts, Sejong had his scholars devise a rain gauge to measure rainfall accurately; it was so advanced that modern rain gauges are much like it.

King Sejong is most famous for devising a new system for writing the Korean language. Like other countries in Asia, Korea had been influenced by Chinese culture and had used Chinese ideographs in writing. The two languages are totally different, however. For several years, Sejong personally worked with scholars to create a 28-letter phonetic alphabet to represent the sounds of Korean. To make sure the system was practical, the king first used it to publish a translation of a Chinese classic “Songs of Flying Dragons.”

The alphabet was officially published in 1446 as Hunminchongum, “Correct Sounds to Instruct the People.” One official who had worked with the king wrote an essay congratulating the “heaven-endowed sage” for creating an alphabet that could reproduce “even the sounds of wind, the cries of cranes... and the barking of dogs.” Still used in Korea today, the system is now called hangul (“Great Letters”).

Questions to Think About

1. How did King Sejong encourage science and technology in Korea?
2. What were the reasons for creating a new writing system for Korea? What was the advantage of the new system?
3. Identifying Ideologies From his actions as king, what beliefs do you think Sejong held about the responsibilities of a leader?