



Over 64,000 woodblocks are housed at Jangpangak, a special storage facility of the Advanced Center for Korean Studies in Andong, North Gyeongsang Province, where Lim No-jig is a researcher.
Ahn Hoon/The Korea Herald

Bringing Joseon treasure to light

Confucian printing woodblocks a great resource for modern Koreans, scholar says

By Claire Lee

ANDONG, North Gyeongsang Province — Scholar Lim No-jig was born in Andong, home to hundreds of “jongga” — the prestigious households descended from distinguished Joseon-era scholars through the eldest son of each generation.

HERALD INTERVIEW

“Although I wasn’t a member of a jongga family, I certainly benefited from the region’s rich culture, which is heavily influenced by Joseon’s Confucianism and ethics,” Lim said during an interview with The Korea Herald in his hometown.

The scholar heads the Woodblock Research Center, a unit of the Advanced Center for Korean Studies in Andong. The center specializes in studying thousands of Joseon woodblocks from the region — mostly produced and used to print scholarly writing and poetry by Confucian scholars.

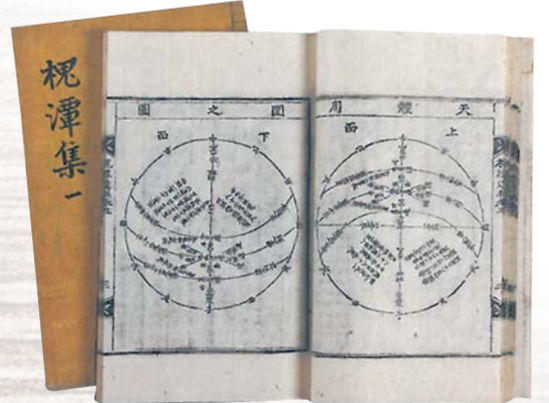
Lim is considered a pioneer of Joseon woodblock studies, as he initiated a project in 2002 to collect printing blocks that had mostly been in possession of individuals and families.

Among Lim’s collection are writings by Yi I and Yi Hwang, two of the most prominent Korean Confucian scholars of the Joseon Dynasty.

Although there are more than



Lim No-jig, a head researcher at the Advanced Center for Korean Studies who specializes in Joseon printing woodblocks, poses for a photo during an interview with The Korea Herald in his office in Andong, North Gyeongsang Province.
Ahn Hoon/The Korea Herald



60,000 panels housed at Jangpangak, a special storage facility of the Woodblock Research Center, Lim had to start from scratch.

It required him to visit each jongga and persuade the heads of the families, many of whom thought it was disrespectful to their ancestors to store their relics outside their homes.

He told them the blocks would be completely safe at his institute, and it would be more meaningful for the relics to be studied so the public can learn about them better.

“Many found the idea difficult,” Lim said. “Some thought of it as selling

their souls.”

While many family members knew the blocks were important, some were not aware of their historical value. A number of them had their family relics stolen, while not fully understanding what the blocks really were or represented.

One time, a head member of a jongga had his blocks stolen from storage just a day before Lim’s scheduled visit to collect them for storage at the research institute.

“As a researcher, such theft cases really disheartened me because sometimes the family members couldn’t even tell which of the relics were stolen,” Lim said.

But there were lucky occasions as well. For instance, at a jongga house, a “hanok,” he accidentally came across a woodblock being used as the raised wooden floor of the house’s shrine.

What he found was a map of the Korean Peninsula, China and Japan

which was carved onto the wooden panel during the Joseon Dynasty.

“I was actually there to collect some ancient texts,” he said.

“And as I was leaving the shrine, it felt as if something was tugging behind my back. I turned back and touched the underside of the raised wooden floor. I could feel the carved letters with my hands.”

The writings carved on the blocks include poems, scholarly writings on Confucian thought, and letters scholars wrote to each other. Letters, in particular, were a great way for Joseon scholars to discuss their academic interests and opinions with each other at a time when transportation was limited.

Joseon poetry, on the other hand, offers a rare glimpse into the lifestyle of Joseon scholars, who valued scholarship, appreciated nature and loved to write.

“It’s not common for today’s scholars to write poems,” he said. “But Joseon scholars wrote poems almost every day. They would write poems at the same frequency at which they ate.”

Lim said the texts carved on the blocks, which have been recommended by the Korean government for inclusion on UNESCO’s Memory of the World Register, can be a great resource in many ways for today’s Koreans.

“One of the things that makes it hard for us to promote the importance of these blocks is that the texts are in Chinese characters, and Koreans no longer read Chinese every day,” Lim said.

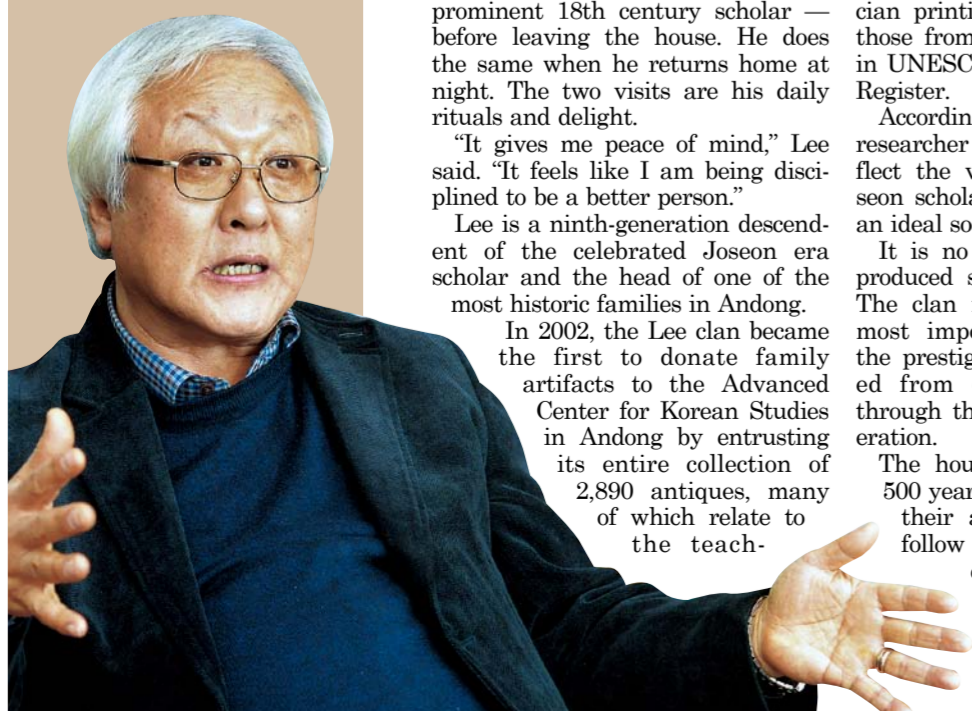
“But these writings really tell us where we should be heading as Koreans. They are our history and our reference books. They tell us what to do as well as what not to do. That is why I think it is important to translate the texts into modern-day Korean and make them more accessible to the public.”

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HERALD INTERVIEW

▼ Lee Pang-soo, a ninth-generation descendant of Lee Sang-jeong, a prominent 18th-century Joseon scholar, speaks during an interview with The Korea Herald in Andong, North Gyeongsang Province.

Ahn Hoon/The Korea Herald



Preserving family traditions in 21st century

By Claire Lee

ANDONG, North Gyeongsang Province — In his beautiful old “hanok” property in a famous traditional village, there is a shrine to Lee Pang-soo’s distinguished ancestor Lee Sang-jeong.

Every morning, the 64-year-old pays respect to his ancestor — a prominent 18th century scholar — before leaving the house. He does the same when he returns home at night. The two visits are his daily rituals and delight.

“It gives me peace of mind,” Lee said. “It feels like I am being disciplined to be a better person.”

Lee is a ninth-generation descendant of the celebrated Joseon era scholar and the head of one of the most historic families in Andong.

In 2002, the Lee clan became the first to donate family artifacts to the Advanced Center for Korean Studies in Andong by entrusting its entire collection of 2,890 antiques, many of which relate to the teach-

ings and philosophy once shared by their ancestor.

“(Knowing that they are safe,) I sleep so much better now,” Lee said.

Mostly texts written by Lee Sang-jeong and printing woodblocks, the relics have been an important source of research for scholars. The Korean government in February recommended the country’s Confucian printing woodblocks, including those from Lee’s clan, for inclusion in UNESCO’s Memory of the World Register.

According to Park Soon, a senior researcher at ACKS, the blocks reflect the very consciousness of Joseon scholars who sought to realize an ideal society in Confucianism.

It is no surprise that Lee’s clan produced so many of those blocks. The clan is considered one of the most important Korean “jongga,” the prestigious households descended from distinguished ancestors through the eldest son of each generation.

The households have more than 500 years of history, carrying over their ancestors’ traditions that follow the neo-Confucian principles of the late Joseon era.

Jongga’s traditional practice of ancestral worship, as well as its heavy emphasis on schol-

arship and ethics, have been considered one of the greatest cultural legacies of Korean Confucianism.

North Gyeongsang Province boasts more than 120 jongga properties, including Lee’s, that are designated as national and provincial assets.

But being the head of a jongga in the 21st century is not easy. It means having to constantly navigate Chinese characters to study your ancestors’ teachings and skip work to hold countless ancestral worship rituals and family gatherings.

“I have to say it’s a lot of pressure,” Lee said.

“In the past, being the eldest son of a jongga was considered a full-time job. It can’t really be a job now, and you have to somehow make time to take this responsibility.”

Born in Andong, Lee was educated in Seoul and lived in Daegu for many years before returning to his family property in Andong about six years ago. While living in Daegu, he would visit his Andong home at least three or four times a month to perform “jesa,” a memorial service for his ancestors.

His wife also had a lot of duties, having to provide and serve vast amounts of food for frequent family gatherings and guest visits, as well as jesa and other ancestral rituals. Home-cooked jongga meals are still considered the finest traditional Ko-

rean cuisine today.

“I have a tremendous respect for my wife,” Lee said, adding that his daughters don’t want to marry into a jongga family because they have seen the hardships endured by their mother.

“And I also feel indebted to her. I was born into this family but she didn’t have to choose this life.”

As the eldest son of his jongga, Lee is obligated to perform ceremonies for his father, grandfather, great-grandfather and great-great-grandfather, as well as his great-ancestor Lee Sang-jeong. There are about 60 jesa ceremonies to hold every year. He always attended, even on weekdays, when he was living in Daegu and Seoul.

He was also expected to attend whenever important guests visited his Andong home. One of the best known jongga traditions is to pay respect to one’s guests and offer them finest food and hospitality.

“I would so often have to tell my boss, ‘I have to go home tonight. I have a jesa to attend,’ when he needed me to do something,” Lee said.

“And he would tell me, as a joke, ‘You sure have a lot of ghosts in your family.’”

Lee, who studied economics at university, started studying Chinese classics about 20 years ago, to better

understand his ancestor and scholar Lee Sang-jeong’s works. He hopes his 27-year-old son, who is majoring in biotechnology, will do the same one day.

“I just felt like I needed to learn and be prepared so I could at least answer questions whenever people call me about the work of my ancestor Lee Sang-jeong,” he said. “That’s what I expect my son to do as well.”

Although he never studied Confucianism in school, his ancestor’s Confucian teachings left in writing — to be humble, frugal and respectful to both children and elders — are what remind him of who he is and provide directions in his everyday life.

The influence is almost spiritual, he said, as it motivates him to focus his mind to behave properly. Being a descendant of a Joseon scholar means to be a serving person, with a sense of integrity and respect, he said.

“My friend, who is a pastor, recently told me, ‘What’s the point of keeping the books of one’s family tree nowadays? Isn’t it more efficient to simplify things now?’” he said.

“But it is the remaining record of our history. ... The lives of our ancestors in the past can show us where we should be heading in our future. We become purposeless without our tradition.”

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