

Jangpangak consists of two archive buildings that can each house up to 50,000 woodblocks.
Ahn Hoon/The Korea Herald



Jangpangak, the woodblock archive

Confucian printing woodblocks reveal untold stories about Joseon society

By Lee Sun-young

ANDONG, North Gyeongsang Province — They say to see the real Korea, one must visit Andong, the home of Korean Confucianism. But even in this historic city, the real gems are hidden far off the beaten track.

One such treasure waiting to be discovered is the collection of tens of thousands of woodblocks housed at Jangpangak, a storage facility in a peaceful little town called Seobu-ri.

Tucked away at the foot of a hill overlooking the hamlet and a nearby lake, Jangpangak is the depository of the 64,226 Confucian printing woodblocks that researchers say hold a special place in world history.

Collected and preserved by the Advanced Center for Korean Studies, the relics, up to 500 years old, are Korea's candidate for the UNESCO Memory of the World Register. A decision on the application is due in June 2015.

Inside Jangpangak

The weather on Dec. 8 was cold and frosty, with the previous night's snow still covering much of the ACKS compound.

Stepping inside Jangpangak was like entering another world, with no hint of the winter chill outside.

The interior looked just like a library, except that what were stored on the wooden shelves were not books, but woodblocks that were carved to print books. The air smelled different, too.

"It's wood, ink, dust and fumigant all combined," said Park Soon, a senior researcher at the ACKS.

"Everything here is automati-



▲ Dating back to 1460, the woodblocks used for the printing of the rhyme dictionary *Baeja Yebu Unryak* are the oldest of all wooden slabs housed at Jangpangak. ACKS

cally maintained — the temperature, humidity, fire prevention and so on," he said. "Our very presence here now is a potential risk factor."

The two buildings of Jangpangak are a typical case of "old meets new."

Centuries-old techniques are used along with state-of-the-art preservation, antifire and antitheft systems.

The temperature and humidity are automatically maintained at ideal levels, but the wooden shelves and floor help absorb excess moisture as needed. In the event of a fire inside, each building is equipped with a fire alarm and a suppression system, using halon gas.

"For ventilation, we took a cue from Janggyeong Panjeon [at Haeinsa Temple, which houses the Tripitaka Koreana woodblocks]," he said.

Just like Janggyeong Panjeon, a 15th-century invention that was registered in 1995 as a UNESCO world heritage for its scientific preservation properties, each wall has an upper and lower window, but the windows have different sizes.

Fresh air flows in naturally through the larger window, and fully circulates within the building before being let out through the windows on the opposite side, he explained.

"When the weather is dry and crisp, we leave all the windows open for ventilation."

Precious timbers

"Most of the panels here have yet to be studied," Park said, adding that the academic study of Joseon-era printing woodblocks began only

about three to four years ago. "Some people may say, why study woodblocks if the print book is available? But these woodblocks reveal stories that can't be learned from the print books," he said.

According to him, woodblocks have a variety of information engraved in or written in ink on the end pieces or on their surfaces that was not actually part of the content of a collection. They include the names of the engravers, as well as those who led the publishing.

"It is a good resource for microhistory studies of local communities at the time," the researcher said.

In a book-publishing culture that is unique in world history, Joseon scholars and intellectuals led the woodblock production in a process that researchers now describe as "community publishing." They decided what to publish, oversaw the entire publishing process and divided up the required costs among themselves.

"Sometimes we find woodblocks with a mark of 'not usable.' They look fine, which means that the problem was the content," Park said.

In such a case of censorship, the printed book of 19th-century Confucian scholar Jang Seok-young leaves out parts mentioning illegitimate children born of a concubine.

"It must have been something that the Jang clan wanted to hide," Park explained. "If we didn't have the woodblocks now, we would never be able to know the whole story."

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- Researchers and other individuals wishing to view the woodblocks in Jangpangak may do so upon permission from the Advanced Center for Korean Studies.
- For an online catalogue of the collection, visit mokpan.ugyo.net/en/index.html.



► Kim Gak-han, one of the few remaining *gakjajang*
Kim Myung-sub/The Korea Herald

Craftsmanship behind Joseon woodblocks

By Claire Lee

Kim Gak-han has spent most of his life working with wood, from cabinetmaking to carving ancient texts and drawing on wood plates.

"Now that I think about it, I think I was destined to do it," the craftsman

HERALD INTERVIEW said in his Seoul studio, which was filled with wood

plates of different sizes alongside countless handmade cutting tools and chisels.

"One beauty of engraving is that you can't think about anything else while you are doing it. It requires your full attention and there is something therapeutic about being completely immersed in your work."

The 59-year-old is one of the few remaining "gakjajang," the traditional Korean craftsmen who engrave letters or pictures on wood plates. Two years ago, Kim was designated a holder of important intangible property No. 106 for his work.

Kim's traditional engraving techniques carry significance as the Korean government in February recommended the country's Confucian printing woodblocks, all carved by Joseon craftsmen, for inclusion in UNESCO's Memory of the World Register.

"I ended up here simply because I just loved what I was doing — carving and engraving," he said. "I never had the ambition to become or achieve something great."

The very basic technique of Korea's traditional engraving consists of carving the wood with a carving knife at a 45-degree angle, which is considered the "basic angle" in Korea's traditional architecture, clothing and art.

The 45-degree angle can be seen in the distinctive shape of the sleeves of hanbok, Korea's traditional garment, as well as the eaves of hanok, traditional Korean buildings.

"Japanese craftsmen hold their cutting knives at a 90-degree angle," Kim said. "The Japanese technique is great for straight lines, whereas the Korean technique is useful for curvy lines — it even enables you to carve circles."

According to Lim No-jig, the head of the Woodblock Research Center in Andong, North Gyeongsang Province, the Joseon woodblocks — mostly produced and used to print scholarly writing and poetry by Confucian scholars — were costly to make at the time.

They were very often produced in Buddhist temples by monks, who also produced paper used to print academic writings and Confucian texts.

"The cost to have one's writing engraved on a single wood plate would be almost equivalent to the cost of buying a male servant at the time," Lim explained. "Only those who belonged to noble families were able to do it."

Yet things are quite different for modern-day *gakjajang*, including Kim. The craftsman had been making a living mostly by making wooden signs for Buddhist temples, teaching engraving classes and selling wooden sculptures and decorative plates before being recognized by the government.

Once, as he was struggling to make ends meet in the 1990s, Kim wrote down all of his career options on paper including becoming a driver, he recalled.

"Of everything I wrote down, I realized engraving and carving were the only things that I actually enjoyed doing," he said.

Born in Gimcheon, North Gyeongsang Province, Kim started working for a local joiner — a carpenter who joins wood together without metal

fasteners — shortly after graduating from elementary school to support his family.

"I couldn't attend middle school because my father passed away when I was in sixth grade," he said. "I didn't have a lot of options. I didn't hate it, but I can't say I absolutely loved working for the joiner."

It was an exhibition organized by Oh Ok-jin, a renowned traditional engraving expert, in Seoul in the early '80s that changed his life. Kim had seriously injured both ankles and was in the capital to receive necessary medical treatment.

"I had been told by my doctor that I might not be able to walk again," he said. "And engraving seemed like something I could do without having to worry about my legs. You just need your eyes and two hands for the job."

What particularly struck him at the exhibition was the engraving *Suseonjeondo*, the famous map of today's Seoul drawn by Joseon cartographer Kim Jeong-ho between 1846 and 1849, on a wood plate.

"I had never seen anything like that before," he said. "I didn't know one could do something like that on a piece of wood, although I had already spent so much time working with wood before. I visited Mr. Oh Ok-jin shortly after and asked him if I could be his student. I started late, but I learned faster than others. After all, I had been an experienced joiner."

So began his career spanning more than three decades, in which Kim became the only holder of the intangible cultural asset title for calligraphic engraving following the late Oh, who died in January.

"It certainly feels strange without Mr. Oh. It feels almost as if I've lost my own father," he said.

"Even if your father is ill, bedridden and can't even speak to you, it's still so much better to have him in your life. His very existence meant a lot to us."

Kim, who has studied the Tripitaka Koreana, an 800-year-old set of Buddhist scriptures engraved on over 80,000 woodblocks, as well as Joseon woodblocks used to print writings by Yi Hwang — one of the most prominent Korean Confucian scholars of the Joseon era — said Korea's traditional calligraphic engraving has its own distinctive style that is distinct from the ones in Japan and China.

"I would say the Korean style can be described as delicate and detail-oriented," he said.

"When you look at the Tripitaka Koreana and the Confucian printing woodblocks, it looks as if they are all carved by a single person — because the style, especially the length and thickness of each and every character, is so consistent throughout. But they were, in fact, carved by many different craftsmen. They all followed their rules strictly and were extremely well trained."

On top of creating copies of the nation's famous Confucian and Buddhist woodblocks, including the UNESCO-designated *Jikji*, for research and restoration purposes, Kim also gives lectures on traditional calligraphic engraving at a number of universities nationwide.

"I really try to make time for teaching because I'm still searching for someone young who would be willing to be my successor and carry on this tradition," he said.

"But I have to say it's been very difficult. There are a lot of people who are into traditional engraving as a hobby, but not many are willing to do this as a vocation. I wish there was more support so whoever followed in my footsteps could make a living just by practicing our tradition, our art."

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Built in 2005, Jangpangak is the depository of the Advanced Center for Korean Studies' collection of 64,226 Joseon-era printing woodblocks. ACKS