



Lee Yong-doo, president of the Advanced Center for Korean Studies, looks at a Confucian printing woodblock in Jangpangak.

Korea Times photo by Choi Won-suk

‘Confucianism is cultural genes of Koreans’

Printing woodblocks vie for UNESCO listing

By Bae Eun-jo
ejbae@ktimes.co.kr

ANDONG, North Gyeongsang Province — “Confucianism can serve as the spiritual pillar for the people living in this materialistic and fast-changing age,” said Lee Yong-doo, president of the Advanced Center for Korean Studies (ACKS).

Lee explained that Confucian values have been rooted in Korean culture so deeply over the past 2,500 years that they have become the cultural genes of the Korean people. “The ethical and sociopolitical teachings of the old Confucianism based on self-reflection and idealism may be more valuable now than ever before to bring this society together in the 21st century,” he said.

Located in Andong, North Gyeongsang Province, ACKS devotes itself to collecting and preserving privately-held resources for Korean studies and further research, and promoting and translating them into modern languages for future generations.

Founded in 1995 under the auspices of the provincial government, ACKS boasts the nation’s largest collection of 410,000 materials on Confucianism, the ruling philosophy of the Joseon Kingdom (1392-1910). Over 870 family clans have donated material to ACKS to prevent the historical property from being destroyed or lost.

Among them are over 65,000 Confucian printing woodblocks which await inclusion

in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Memory of the World Register. The UNESCO International Advisory Committee is to reach a final decision in Berlin, Germany, as early as May, 2015.

“Whereas the Haein Temple houses the 80,000 Buddhist woodblocks, widely known as the UNESCO World Heritage Site Palman Daejanggyeong, or the Tripitaka Koreana, we have the Confucian woodblocks,” said Lee. “World significance and outstanding universal value are some of the main criteria to be listed on the UNESCO Memory of the World Register. The Confucian woodblocks are special because they contain the respect and filial piety designed to eternally preserve the ancient spirit of the Joseon scholars from one generation to the next.”

Attentively stored in Jangpangak, an archive exclusively devoted to the printing woodblocks, the Confucian artifacts are well preserved in the cutting-edge facility.

What makes these woodblocks more exceptional is that they are mostly for ancient books, documents, journals and letters written by civilians. They offer a focused glimpse on the everyday life and thoughts of an average citizen during the Joseon era.

Lee admits, however, that translating these old relics written in cursive Chinese characters into modern-day Korean is a long, endeavoring process, requiring broad



Details of the hand-carved woodblocks

Korea Times photo by Choi Won-suk

knowledge of some 40 PhD ACKS researchers and other academics nationwide.

Dubbed “The 30-Plus Year Project,” the ACKS campaign aims to modernize and popularize Confucianism, bringing together historians, philosophers, educators and technicians to digitalize and globalize the ancient classics, in order to shed the old, stale image of Confucianism. “We will become the main force of this long-term venture,” Lee said.

He revealed that a local television network will start airing a historical drama titled “Jingbirok,” next month, which obtained its resources from the ACKS collection. “This is in accordance with where we’re heading. Historical relics show their true value when they’re turned into contemporary cultural content.”

“Jingbirok,” a hand-written memoir by Joseon scholar Ryu Seong-ryong (1542-1607), reflects

on the Imjin War (1592-1598), the Japanese invasion of the Korean Peninsula victoriously repulsed by Admiral Yi Sun-sin (1545-1598), and gives lessons from the historical event to prevent similar tragedies in the future.

In an effort to nurture future Confucianism experts, ACKS operates a Chinese Classics Education Center, an affiliate school offering a 4-year intensified program, some of whose applicants include PhD holders in Chinese literature.

Lovely Grandma Story

“Lovely Grandma Story” is one of ACKS projects to preserve traditional family values and to promote communication between the elder and younger generations. It not only infuses time-honored human values to chil-

dren but also offers working opportunities for older people.

Seven years into the project, over 2,100 grandmother storytellers have been selected to relay their experience and wisdom to children in over 6,000 preschools nationwide. This year, ACKS has chosen an additional 700 storytellers.

“These days, children get to see their grandmother and grandfather once or twice a year,” said ACKS President Lee. “We hope to bring back the warmth and memories of our generation when we used to sit on our grandmother’s lap and listen to fairy tales and old stories.”

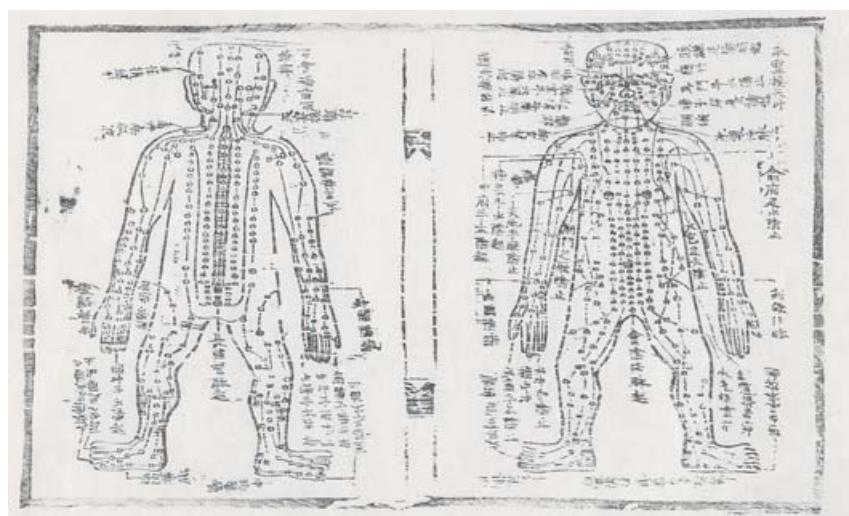
In order to qualify as a “grandmother storyteller,” the volunteers must complete a one-year intensive training on storytelling courses, which focuses on narrating tales based on modernized Confucian textbooks.

Hanging wooden tablets

The hanging wooden tablets in the possession of ACKS contain the meanings of teachings from ancestors and prominent families of the Joseon Kingdom. Often used as the name of their home, the teachings engraved on the hanging wooden tablets served as the guidelines and spiritual foundation of the family.

Mostly manufactured during the Joseon Kingdom, the hanging wooden tablets contain Confucian values, including education, edification and moral guidance, and were generally written by kings, noblemen, writers, calligraphers and Buddhists monks.

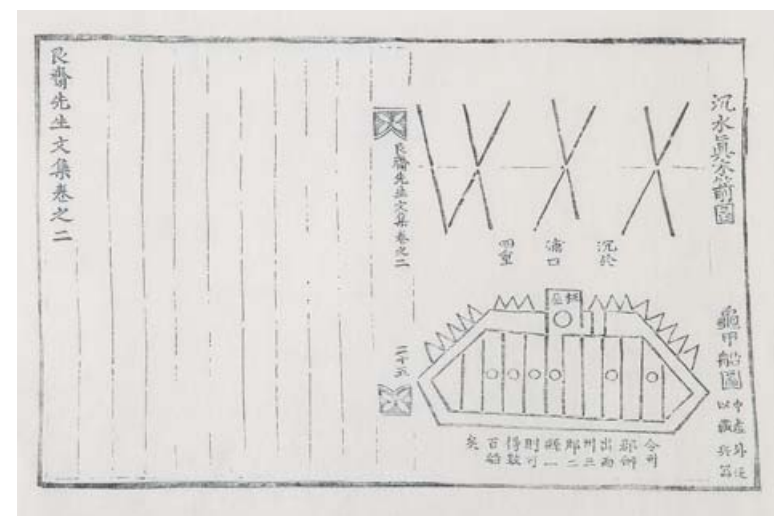
An excellent remnant of Confucian culture, the hanging wooden tablets are invaluable artwork that show the zeitgeist and history of calligraphy.



A print of “chimgyeongyogyae,” written by Joseon era scholar Ryu Seong-ryong, an acupuncture book detailing body organs and acupuncture points. Courtesy of ACKS



A print of “baejayebunryak,” national treasure no. 917. “Baejayebunryak” was a dictionary which contained information on rhymes and verses of Chinese characters widely used by Joseon era scholars.



A print of “ganjaesunsaengmunjib,” a verse collection by Lee Duk-hong, who was a student of renowned Joseon era scholar Lee Hwang (1501-1570). Shown above is a sketch of “Geobuk-sun,” a turtle-shaped naval ship designed by Admiral Yi Sun-sin.