

2009 King Sejong Essay Contest

First Place: Diana E. Betancur

True Greatness

Unlike other sovereigns of his time, King Sejong the Great did not distinguish himself through military strength nor through the cold pragmatism sometimes considered necessary for governing a nation. King Sejong's supreme achievement was in fact a very simple one, and all the greater for its simplicity. Through his humility and compassion, King Sejong proved that rulers need not be tyrannical, that rationality need not be hard-hearted, and that a government can indeed protect its most vulnerable citizens.

Despite his position as an absolute ruler, King Sejong appears to have harbored an unusual degree of humility. Rather than fret about his perceived elegance, King Sejong made decisions based on the needs of his people. If collecting tributes of regional delicacies caused his people hardship, then the tributes were not collected. If Cho Won made a rude remark about the King, yet his words stemmed from indignation at a governor's irresponsibility, then he was not to be punished. If the King's horse ate a handful of rice belonging to a farmer, then the farmer received a sack of rice in recompense. In each situation, King Sejong could have easily asserted the dignity of his office. He could have eaten well while his people suffered. Cho Won could have punished quite strictly for the insult to his sovereign lord. The farmer need not receive anything in recompense, for it is the duty of a subject to show loyalty to his lord in every possible occasion. But such action would have been uncharacteristic of the great king. Sejong's overriding concern for his people dictated a humility unknown to the people of his age and show just how far ahead of his time he was.

The king's farsighted approach to ruling is even more evident in the creation of Hangeul. Modern linguists have applauded the creation of a such a beautifully rational script. This seems a contradiction in terms. Too often the rational and practical are interpreted as cold, dry, and

emotionless. But King Sejong's endeavors were full of a deep and profound emotion. He empathized with the common people and their need for writing system fit for their tongue. He ignored his own poor eyesight and other infirmities to develop Hunmin Chongum. His work was here, as elsewhere, a labor of marvelous love. That Hangul faced opposition from those who would underline the differences between poor and wealthy only emphasizes the sagacious vision of King Sejong. The powerful will always oppose programs made to strengthen the weak. A king who saw it as his duty to protect the interests of all his people would have to encounter resistance. Like all worthy enterprises, Hangul has withstood the test of time in addition to the original attacks by privileged sectors of society.

King Sejong's all-encompassing love for his people evidences itself in the most striking fashion as affected the most lowly members of his society. It is not an easy task to care for the aristocracy, which can be capricious and demanding. Nevertheless the support of rich and powerful can be crucial in order to continue a monarch's reign. It is much harder to care for the underdogs of society, for the farmers and the prisoners, for the women and elderly, who have not the resources to give any practical aid. These individuals have only their undying devotion and loyalty to offer. Yet King Sejong commissioned research to help the farmers make the most of their land and made decrees to ensure humane treatment of prisoners. He threw banquets in honor of the elderly and gave female servants maternity leave. Such considerations were not undertaken in the West until many centuries later. Truly King Sejong deserves tremendous praise for his humanitarian efforts.

King Sejong the Great deserves his title far more than the numerous other rulers across the globe who have been thus glorified. Authoritarian leaders across continents and ages have sought glory for themselves and their posterity. King Sejong sought only the good of his people.

His legacy rings a clear note of hope for all who prefer to trust in the innate virtue of humanity.