

2009 King Sejong Essay Contest

Honorable Mention: Kimberly Fonseca

When thinking of great world leaders of the past, one might think of Alexander the Great or even Winston Churchill. I am sure very few people would think of King Sejong the Great. King Sejong the Great was a truly inspirational leader of Choson Korea. The love and devotion he put into his thirty-two year reign and the loyalty he received in return was more than most leaders experience in a lifetime. The advances that were made in countless fields truly left a mark on the history of Korea.

King Sejong's mentality as a leader reflected in the success of his people. He believed the duty of a king was to serve his country as well as he could and sacrifice himself for the sake of everyone. If his people were suffering it was only fair to suffer with them. During these difficult financial times the tactics used by the king to ensure the well being of the people might be considered useful. It was the duty of the Governor and Chief Administrator of each province to help the residents. During the inspection of the districts if it was discovered that even one person had died of starvation, the person responsible would be convicted of a felony. King Sejong also cared about the criminals in prison. Prisons were built for the different seasons so that the weather was not the cause of deaths. The king cared deeply about the elderly therefore the same was done for them. Similar to today's nursing homes the elderly were placed in buildings where they could work comfortably. King Sejong the Great made Korean history by inviting the elderly to his palace to dine with him. When warned that it was not the best idea to invite the elderly of lowly origin to the banquet, the king replied by saying,

"I hold these banquets to honor the dignity of old age, not to measure rank and status." When they arrived he refused to let them bow before him for they were his guests not his servants. The people who worked for King Sejong wanted the best for him as well. Another example of his devotion is during his reign, he suffered the loss of both his parents and three of his children. He

mourned to the point where people worried for his health. He refused to eat but also didn't want his people to know of his suffering because they had their own problems to handle.

King Sejong lived in an age where kings were brutal and cruel oppressors of their people but the Choson king was far from that. Anyone under the age of fifteen or over the age of seventy was forbidden to be imprisoned unless their crime was either a murder or robbery. Even slaves were no less a person than everyone else. Every person condemned was given the right to appeal against unjust decisions. The king also believed in forgiveness saying,

‘Appreciation of the good must be long-lasting; hatred for the bad must not.’ His love of books and learning greatly benefited everyone. He would read books a hundred times until he learned them by heart. He also expanded his horizons by attending the *Kyong-yon*, where he learned and discussed historical texts with scholars. Attending the *Kyong-yon* led him to establish a royal institute of research, the *Chiphyonjon* or Jade Hall of Scholars. Eighty books and hundreds of pamphlets were published covering everything from politics and history to literature and science. One of the most famous books was the publication of *The History of Koryo*. The scholars were very devoted to their work and the king appreciated everything they did to help further his and the knowledge of his people. The king had so many remarkable projects going on at once but none were simple to complete. The reorganization of the taxation system took twenty-six years to complete, the consolidation of the legislative system, seventeen years, the standardization of national ceremonies, thirty years, and the development of the Korean alphabet. the *Hangul*, ten years.

King Sejong the Great is one of the few leaders of Korea in which Koreans find worth remembering. He established the Peoples of Heaven' believing every person was of Heavenly origin and it was his duty to look after the heavenly race. His care and attention extended far

beyond his kingdom because even the lowest of the low not under his rule, were no less worthy of his respect. Leaders often put on a smile for the public and make a lot of empty promises to gain support but fortunately for the people who lived during the reign of King Sejong that was hardly the case. He truly improved the daily lives of his subjects despite their class or social status. People of power may claim to be unbiased but when it comes time to take a stand for those not as fortunate they cower instead of defending their people. If every leader had even an ounce of King Sejong's integrity I firmly believe the world would be a bit more united.