

*2009 King Sejong Essay Contest*

**Second Place: Alexx Engles**

## Thoughts on King Sejong the Great

Alexx Engles

Growing up in America and living in Korea for only brief periods of time, I never received a formal education on Korean history. As a child, my mother would sometimes tell me stories about great Koreans, King Sejong being one of them, but these stories were often more like fairytales, something to lull me to sleep, rather than to educate and inspire me. To learn about King Sejong as a real person and real leader was both exciting and eye-opening. Though this shouldn't be the case, to read about an honest ruler living only to serve his people, is so rare that it is almost unheard of. King Sejong's story should be communicated to everyone—not only to educate and inspire, but to remind people that goodness exists, because too often it feels as though our governments are overrun with corruption, the antithesis of King Sejong's rule.

Throughout the reading, I caught myself at times still thinking of King Sejong as a fairytale hero, or a transcendental god of some kind. It's hard to believe that he actually existed, but the amazing part is that he did and during his life, never thought of himself as a hero or a god, but instead placed himself among the commoners and the so-called barbarians. His character and actions never once implied that he considered himself superior to his subjects.

I think the story that best illustrates King Sejong's character is the story about a commoner named Cho Won. As the ruler of Korea, King Sejong would have been perfectly within his rights in punishing a mere commoner who dared to condemn his own Majesty, yet King Sejong did not do so. Instead, he chose to look at it from the commoner's perspective and forgave Cho Won for his indignation, which was actually justified when the king examined the

context of Cho Won's condemnation. King Sejong refused to punish the man even at the advice of his councilmen. This story exhibits King Sejong's modesty as well as his love and understanding for common people.

It is unfortunate that King Sejong is atypical in comparison to other rulers. In fact, the mythological glow that surrounds him in my mind is at least partially due to the fact that he was a man of character who lived in ancient times. And it is extremely saddening that we have had so few rulers and important people in our world since the 1400s that have shared King Sejong's virtues and noble characteristics. In an ideal world, King Sejong would not have to be thought of as King Sejong "the Great" because he would have done what is expected of any competent ruler. Instead, even with the abolition of monarchies, our ruling classes throughout the world are still often riddled with corruption and greed. Today, many of our leaders seem to represent the antithesis of King Sejong. Though hopefully this idea is changing, it is almost as though we have become so cynical and disillusioned that we *expect* the ruling class to be fixated with luxury and power instead of common people. We expect them to refuse those in need, and we think of the destitution that the lower classes are forced to live in as a fact of life. King Sejong combated all of these issues throughout his life, quite successfully, and is a shining example of upright morality and spirit—the tragedy is that there aren't more people like him.

My mother would tell me stories about people like King Sejong and I would often fall asleep dreaming of them as fictional characters in my imagination. However, it is both heartening and inspiring to know that King Sejong truly existed and never considered himself to be the hero that so many people construct him as. Instead, he lived as a simple man doing what he felt was right for his country and his people. His life and accomplishments have been a huge

source of inspiration for me. Though I am still unsure of what I want to do with my life, I feel that King Sejong's character will be a guiding light for the type of person I wish to become. I hope to never compromise my own morals or character but instead maintain them no matter what I do with my life, as King Sejong did. Even if I never succeed in the ways King Sejong did, I hope that I can live my life as a person of respectability and unwavering morality. Though I certainly admire his ability to improve life for his people in various ways, such as inventing an entire alphabet for their use, I feel that it is his modesty, compassion, and genuine love for mankind that makes King Sejong a historical figure worth revering and celebrating.