

2009 King Sejong Essay Contest

Third Place: Gyong Min Kang

Sejong the Great

King Sejong was given the title of King of the Joseon Dynasty in 1418, shortly after a period of political turmoil in Korea. Indubitably, he then began to disprove the well-known Machiavellian theory of power hungry and selfish individuals. His rule went on in a most peaceful state, owing to his unique interpretation of his position relative to the rest of the nation. Sejong believed that it was the temperament of tyranny to try to impose one's ways onto others and he accordingly honored the wishes of the people above all else. To him, the crown implied not power, but the responsibility to bring together the Korean people—not below him but—right beside him.

Sejong was concerned with the interests of the common people. He was consistent in overseeing the conditions and locations in which they worked, and made sure that the workers were satisfied. The direct contact he had with the people proved his amiability and earned him their trust. Sejong would occasionally see parched rice fields, and his heart would be tinged with an urgency to help. After thorough examinations of the fields, he would order his courtiers to resolve any inadequacies he spotted. As he said in his 5th year of reign, if the working people were in good health then the country, too, would be “stable and prosperous” (“King Sejong the Great”). The common people and their conditions stood as the determining factor of the nation’s success.

Overtime, Sejong’s courtesy remained manifest in his actions as a leader. At one point during his 14th year of reign, his horse had eaten rice from a farmer’s store without any payment. The King immediately recognized this as a wrongdoing on his own part and requested that the farmer be compensated. Sejong’s disposition was one of humility

and he never assumed that his power earned him an advantage over any other. Even when confronted with personal issues, Sejong did not waver in this humility. When his father was in poor health, Sejong became ill while taking care of his father. He ate little food, mostly vegetables. Ultimately, many people fretted that Sejong was not taking proper care of his own body. His response was that the vegetables were enough for sustenance and that if individuals such as the monks could live off of it, he could as well. His title as the King made no difference in his standards of living.

Further, Sejong constantly sought to maintain equity amongst himself and his people. In his 14th year of rule, he invited a group of poor elderly individuals to a banquet at the Royal Palace—establishing the first time the elderly had been invited to the palace. The Royal Secretariat was reluctant in carrying out Sejong’s invitation and tried to dissuade Sejong. The King countered in firm conviction, “I hold these banquets to honour the dignity of old age, not to measure rank and status” (“King Sejong the Great”). Sejong understood that the class under which the people fell was a meager means of categorization, rather than a true elucidation of their natures and values. To him, he and the elderly were one and the same as human beings. He asked that they not bow down before him and instead he stood up to greet each of them.

What’s more, the King closed his eyes to not only class and rank, but also the status of citizenry. When the nomadic tribes of the North were in trouble, he ordered the Commander-in-Chief Kim Jong-So to lend aid to the people of that area. Despite the fact that these people were not a part of his kingdom, he saw no disparity between them and his own. The affluence of his kingdom was dependent upon that of all others around it. Unity was a quality he wished to see pervade the nation.

In addition to working on domestic and social affairs, Sejong worked on fair political rulings by waking early daily and hearing reports from his ministers and the governors of each province. The issues of the nation were not left unheard or unattended. And on top of that, they were addressed individually and with the people's interest in mind. As Sejong's health deteriorated, however, his efforts went towards creating a universal alphabet for the Korean language. The significance of this is the resulting establishment of literacy for both the common people as well as the privileged aristocrats. Before the invention of this alphabet Hangeul, Chinese characters were prominently used to write, but it built a drastic barrier between the underprivileged and privileged. In recognizing the separation caused by using Chinese script, Sejong created Hangeul, which was finally completed in 1443. This creation of Hangeul reaffirmed his desire to equate all people in the nation.

Ultimately the way Sejong expended his years as King still affects me today. It lends me a sturdy conscience of what is unjust today. Having recently viewed a "Liberation in North Korea" presentation, I admire Sejong that much more for what he sought to do while in power and for what I imagine he would do if he was still in power today. During that presentation, I saw the faces of my people—and surely Sejong would say the same as all Korean people to him were his own—distorted by cruelty of privation, brutality wrought by reckless leaders, and degradation by separation and mutiny. No day has since passed where those images do not dwell and recap their effects of paining my soul. Feeling the throes of pain in my people, I have chosen to not cast away those painful moans in ignorance, but take them with me when I am awake and asleep so that I know what I must do. "Liberation in North Korea" works to spread awareness of this

North Korea crisis and its injustices. I hope to contribute to the cause of “Liberation in North Korea” in some way, and more importantly, I intend to do it with Sejong’s philosophy in mind—that is, “may courtesy and humility arise in all men, so that we may dwell in lasting harmony and peace” (“King Sejong the Great”).

But where Sejong affects me most is in his giving me the opportunity to connect with my grandmother, my parents, and the many people with whom I share a common ancestry, heritage, and culture. The alphabet that he created has prevented what could have been the limits of communication with my family and friends. To this day, Hangul does not discriminate against different levels of class and status, but instead brings people, such as my family, together. And on top of that, it is Sejong’s invention that will allow me to follow through with my grandmother’s one wish—a poem for her written by me in Hangul. To be able to go from English to Hangul in a form of expression is a privilege I appreciate incredibly. I believe this is what Sejong sought out to accomplish: the erasure of harmful disconnects between people, and the emergence of eternal harmony and love. Indeed, dubbing King Sejong the appellation “the Great” was no mistake.

Works Cited

“King Sejong the Great.” [Korean Spirit and Culture Promotion Project](http://www.koreanhero.net/kingsejong/index.html#).

<<http://www.koreanhero.net/kingsejong/index.html#>>.