



The Sejong Cultural Society  
www.SejongSociety.org

2006 & 2007  
Sejong Writing Competition

# Winners Essay



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## Sejong Cultural Society Programs

<b>Upcoming Programs</b>
The Fourth Annual <b>Sejong Music Competition</b> (November 2007), Winners Concert (January, 2008)
The Third Annual <b>Sejong Writing Competition</b> (TBA in the beginning of 2008)
The Second <b>Sejong Korean-American Music Composition Competition</b> (TBA in spring of 2008)
<b>Programs completed</b>
<b>Sejong Music Competition</b> (first, second & third annual competitions in 2004, 2005, & 2006)
<b>Sejong Writing Competition</b> (first & second annual competitions in 2006 & 2007)
<b>Sejong Korean-American Music Composition Competition</b> (first competition in 2005)
<b>“East Meets West: Music with Korean Themes” Concert</b> Part of “Silk Road Chicago 2006 Summer project” (Aug 19, 2006)
<b>Programs in Planning Stages</b>
<b>Sejong Art Competition</b> (TBA, 2010)

## About the Sejong Writing Competition

The goals of the Sejong Writing Competition are to discover talented children and young adults in writing and to encourage them to write about Korea. Through this writing competition we hope to promote awareness and understanding of Korea's cultural heritage among our younger generations growing up in the United States.

The organizational goal is to promote harmony among people of various ethnic backgrounds and to bridge Asian and western cultures through our programs.

This competition is open to all pre-college students residing in the US regardless of their ethnic background. Essay must be written specifically on the following topics:

**Divisions**      Senior Division (grades 9 – 12)  
                         Junior Division (grades 8 or younger)

### **2007 Essay Topics**

- ◆ My most influential encounter with Korean culture
- ◆ Walking in two cultures, Korean and American
- ◆ Building bridges between the generations  
(i.e., the relationship between 1<sup>st</sup> generation Korean-Americans and 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Korean-Americans or adoptees)

### **2006 Essay Topics**

- ◆ How does the situation in North Korea affect Korean identity in America ?
- ◆ The challenges and rewards of living with 1st generation Korean American parents. Or (If you are an adopted Korean, “The challenges and rewards of living with adoptive parents”).
- ◆ Influence of Korean-American culture on US culture
- ◆ Describe an event in your life and discuss what it taught you about being a Korean American in America.

## Sejong Writing Competition Winners List

<b>2006 Senior Division</b>		
1 <sup>st</sup> Place	Clara Yoon	West Bloomfield, MI International Academy (10 <sup>th</sup> grade)
2 <sup>nd</sup> Place	Jennifer Kim	Virginia Beach, VA Frank W. Cox High School (12 <sup>th</sup> grade)
3 <sup>rd</sup> Place	Jessica Lim	Northbrook, IL Glenbrook North High School (11 <sup>th</sup> grade)
Honorable Mention	David Kim	Fairlawn, OH Copley High School (10 <sup>th</sup> grade)
	Susan Lee	Green Oaks, IL Libertyville High School (11 <sup>th</sup> grade)
	Eric Whitney	South Barrington, IL Barrington High School (12 <sup>th</sup> grade)
<b>2006 Junior Division</b>		
1st Place	Jiyoung Kim	Hoffman Estate, IL Plum Grove Junior High (8 <sup>th</sup> grade)
2nd Place	Sarah Honchul	Poquoson, VA Poquoson Middle School (7 <sup>th</sup> grade)
3rd Place	James Paik	Wilmette, IL Highcrest Middle School (6 <sup>th</sup> grade)
Honorable Mention	Noella Kang	Rolling Meadows, IL Plum Grove Junior High (8 <sup>th</sup> grade)

2007 Senior Division		
1 <sup>st</sup> Place	Jay Lee	Glenview, IL Glenbrook South High School (11 <sup>th</sup> grade)
2 <sup>nd</sup> Place	Christine Sun-Ah Kwon	Fort Lee, NY Fort Lee High School (12 <sup>th</sup> grade)
3 <sup>rd</sup> Place	Cecilia Ahn	Fort Lee, NY Fort Lee High School (11 <sup>th</sup> grade)
Friend of Pacific Rim Award	Candice DiCiano	Northfield, NJ Mainland Regional High School (11 <sup>th</sup> grade)
	Caroline Eui-Kyung Kim	Lincolnshire, IL Lake Forest Academy (12 <sup>th</sup> grade)
	Joohee Kim	Tenafly, NJ Tenafly High School (10 <sup>th</sup> grade)
	Alina Lee	Ellicott City, MO Centennial High School (12 <sup>th</sup> grade)
	WenFang Li	Vestal, NY Vestal Senior High School (10 <sup>th</sup> grade)
	Kenneth Lee	Okemos, MI Okemos High School (10 <sup>th</sup> grade)
2007 Junior Division		
1 <sup>st</sup> Place	Eunice Lee	Asheboro, NC South Asheboro Middle School (8 <sup>th</sup> grade)
2 <sup>nd</sup> Place	Michael Chung	Los Angeles, CA Curtis School (4 <sup>th</sup> grade)
3 <sup>rd</sup> Place	Andrew Song	Palatine, IL Plum Grove Junior High (7 <sup>th</sup> grade)
Friend of Pacific Rim Award	Rachel Falsey	New Glarus, WI New Glarus Middle School (8 <sup>th</sup> grade)
	Lillian Hexter	Boston, MA Boston Latin School (7 <sup>th</sup> grade)
	Katherine Yujin Kim	Chestnut Hill, MA Edith. C. Baker School (8 <sup>th</sup> grade)
	William Oliver Lafiandra	Woodstock, CT Woodstock Elementary School (3 <sup>rd</sup> grade)
	Yeri Lee	Upper Arlington, OH Hastings Middle School (8 <sup>th</sup> grade)
	Jeong Bin Moon	Champaign, IL Edison Middle School (8 <sup>th</sup> grade)
	Soyun Mun	Champaign, IL Jefferson Middle school (7 <sup>th</sup> grade)
	Stella Tu	Northbrook, IL Wood Oaks Jr. High School (7 <sup>th</sup> grade)

## ***Topic: Influence of Korean-American culture on US culture***

2006, Senior Division, 1<sup>st</sup> place  
**Clara Yoon** (West Bloomfield, MI)  
10<sup>th</sup> grade, International Academy

### **All The More Gilmore, All The More Korean**

“Are Koreans really like that?”

My friends turn to me and gaze at me with questioning eyes. I feel as though I should either laugh or cry, because my friends are asking me about something that is such a part of my life. It is funny that they are so intrigued, yet it saddens me some that they really do not comprehend.

The Korean wave or “*hallyu*” seems to be a rather recent trend, and I have seen the beginnings of an interest in Korean culture. One way that Korean culture has entered American culture, however, has been around since 2000 and is incredibly popular among people of all races. Oddly enough, the Korean culture is not even represented by Koreans.

I tune into this showcase of Korean culture whenever I can. It is one of my favorite television shows, called “Gilmore Girls.”

Admittedly, the show revolves around a Caucasian mother and daughter, but the Korean characters of Lane and her mother (played by Keiko Agena and Emily Kuroda, respectively) play substantial roles throughout the series. The glimpses into Korean culture in the show are fascinating in that I can recognize aspects of my own life. Even though neither Keiko Agena nor Emily Kuroda is Korean and many things are exaggerated out of proportion, I feel that “Gilmore Girls” puts the Korean culture out there for Americans to become interested in.

A recent episode of “Gilmore Girls” focused on the wedding of Lane. Lane’s grandmother had come to visit. Hilarity ensues when it is revealed that Lane’s grandmother is a strict Buddhist and insists upon a traditional Korean wedding. Lane and her husband-to-be don traditional Korean wedding clothing and the Korean ceremony commences. I was delighted at any snippet of Korean that I heard spoken and made mental notes about what they said so I could tell my friends later.

An earlier episode involved Lane’s band mates coming to Lane’s home for a dinner with several Korean guests. The guests perform a song with traditional Korean instruments (including instruments as the *gayageum*, the *jang-go*). I have always admired Korean traditional music and seeing such music being performed in such a mainstream show made me swell with pride. I had attempted to learn how to play the *jang-go* in Korean school and instruments such as the *gayageum* looked incredibly difficult to master, and so my admiration increased. Later on in the episode, when one of Lane’s band mates gets up from the dinner table, a little Korean boy yells for him to sit down. This was supposed to be a reflection on how Koreans are, but I had never experienced such a strict enforcement of manners. As I understood it, this was an exaggeration with the intent to be humorous.

Seeing such displays of Korean culture make me proud and make other Korean-Americans proud. However, how does this influence American culture?

Because “Gilmore Girls” is such a popular television show (it is the WB’s highest-rated show), it reaches an immense audience of many different kinds of people. The Korean culture is something altogether new for many of them. It is completely different from the culture that they are used to and with this peek into a life completely foreign to them, they become intrigued. When people become curious, they are motivated to learn more about this unknown thing. This causes Americans to have more of an open mind and be more encouraged to learn more about other cultures around them. America is a diverse country, after all, and we live in a global community. Americans begin to realize that other cultures have different ways and they become more accepting.

My own friends have asked me about the Korean culture after watching “Gilmore Girls.” They ask me if I understand what was said in Korean, and they ask me if I act the way that the Koreans on the show act. I patiently answer their incessant questioning. I might pretend that I am

annoyed by their pestering, but on the contrary, I am proud. I do not mind flaunting my Korean background and if the attitudes of Americans become more open to other cultures, Korean culture can become rooted into American culture.

Ocean waves follow other ocean waves. The “Gilmore Girls” wave precedes the *hallyu* wave, and I predict that the *hallyu* wave will bring me even more questions and even more pride.



**Clara Yoon**

Clara is a 16-year-old sophomore who had been born in Massachusetts but has lived in Michigan for most of her life. Clara enjoys singing in the A Capella choir at school and is also active in the Model UN and Drama Clubs. Clara also has taken up several leadership roles in the school community, like being Student Council

Vice President.

Clara entered this competition because she felt very strongly about her Korean pride and also wanted to make her parents, her personal heroes, proud. After writing this essay, Clara felt that Korean culture has made some progress in being spread throughout American culture, but there is still room for improvement.

Clara plans to continue telling all her friends about the Korean wave and will continue to embrace her Korean background.

**Topic: Describe an event in your life and discuss what it taught you about being a Korean American in America.**

2006 Senior Division, 2<sup>nd</sup> place  
**Jennifer Kim** (Virginia Beach, VA)  
12<sup>th</sup> grade, Frank W. Cox High School

Calling myself a child piano prodigy is too much of an overstatement. But I can tell you that the first nine years of life was spent either at my piano teacher Carmela Cecere's studio, in front of my Yamaha, or at Drew University where numerous auditions and competitions in New Jersey were held. I don't exactly remember why I started taking piano lessons; my mother adamantly claims that I begged her.

My first piano teacher was a middle-aged Korean woman. She taught me the basics and helped me to build the foundation that I would need to further my piano studies. But after listening to my plinking and plunking the same two songs for a year, my determined mother got a hold of the phone number of a renown teacher in Chatham, a half-hour drive from where we resided. I vividly remember my first lesson with Carmela Cecere. She was an elderly Italian woman with a high but brusque voice that made even adults edgy. She smelled of expensive perfume and had a countenance like no other. Honestly, I was terrified of the woman.

The first question she asked me was my Korean name. When I told her it was 'Minjee', she decided she would call me by my Korean name instead of my American name, Jenny. And that is how the next three years and 81 lessons were- everything was done *her* way. Each week, I was assigned four scales, drills, chords, a technique, 10 studies, and three pieces.

With not much homework to do in the second and third grade, I spent four to five hours practicing each day with my mother attached at the hip in order to prepare satisfyingly for my next lesson. I practiced before I went to school, after-school, and before I went to bed.

Yes, it was tedious, painful, and much too intense for a 7-year-old who should have been playing House or with Barbie dolls. There were few occasions where I was so overworked I would cry, but nonetheless, I would be back on that bench pounding furiously away the next day. I'd like to say that my lessons went smoothly after clocking many hours in front of the piano, but Carmela always seemed to find something that I needed to fix or do better. No doubt, there were tears at these lessons. Her motto was "Have a tissue. That's why I put a box of tissues on the piano." I even witnessed her making a high school boy break down.

In the spring of 1996, Carmela thought I was ready to compete. She entered me in the Russell E. Lanning Competition, an event sponsored by The Piano Teachers Society of America. My mother had a party dragging me from dress shop to dress shop until we finally settled on a pink flower-patterned dress. I was a tomboy at heart, but I didn't have a say on what I was to wear.

I worked harder than ever to get ready for the competition. That day, my whole family drove to Drew University. I was fidgety while I waited for my audition time, but once the judges called my name and I stepped into the room, all of my fear disappeared and my confidence took over. I could breathe again after I left the room, and a week later, I received an ecstatic call from Carmela saying I had won in my age group. As one of the 12 winners of the competition, I was to perform with winners from various competitions at Carnegie Hall. I had no clue where or what Carnegie Hall was, but my parents and their friends and especially Carmela made a big fuss of it. I started to realize what all of the ado was about when I stepped out onto the mammoth blinding stage as my name was announced. Looking out into the audience, I saw a second and third tier in addition to the regular seating, and all of the seats were occupied. Surprisingly, I wasn't nervous at all as I played "Buzzing Bee" by Nevin. I bowed to thunderous applause and that was the end of it. Even after I played, I still couldn't grasp completely what had just happened. I know now, 10 years later, that I had the opportunity to do what not many 7-year-olds or even famous musicians are able to do.

I studied with Carmela for two more years before I moved to Virginia Beach, during which I competed in the same competition, this time both as a soloist and a member of a trio. The two other girls in the trio were my friends and we spent our weekends practicing endlessly. While we would've liked to use piano as an excuse to have sleepovers, our mothers used sleepovers as an excuse for us to practice. I again had the honor to perform at Carnegie, playing my solo piece and the trio number called "Evening Prayer," which Carmela arranged for us. That year, I knew what playing at Carnegie Hall meant to me and I savored every second of it.

By performing at Carnegie Hall, not only did I represent kids my age or New Jersey, I represented my people, Korean-Americans. I didn't realize this until I was older and aware of the struggles that my parents and other immigrants had endured to provide a better life for the succeeding generations. Because of the first Koreans who took the chance and immigrated to America, I was able to grow up in a culture where many doors and opportunities are present to me. I know that I must work twice as hard as other students in order to succeed in today's world. Because of Carmela's mentoring, I have had a strong work ethic and will have one throughout college and for the rest of my life. Playing at Carnegie as a child helped me to realize who I am: a Korean-American.



### **Jennifer Kim**

I was born in NYC. As a young girl, I aspired to become a pediatrician, but after taking my first journalism class as a sophomore in high school, I quickly changed my mind to becoming a journalist. My newspaper advisor was the one who introduced me to this competition and I submitted an essay because the topics were so unique from the other essay competitions I've entered. While writing this essay, I

discovered that I write better personal narrative essays than any other kind of essay.

I write for the teen section of the local newspaper, the *Virginian-Pilot*, and I served as the editor-in-chief of my school newspaper, the *Falcon Press*. I still play the piano, as well as the violin. During my free time, I love to hang out with my family and friends and go to the beach.

My hero is my mom, who was always there for me, during the hard times and the bad, and whether I failed or succeeded. I will attend New York University in the fall as a Broadcast Journalism major, and I aspire to one day become a news anchor for one of the major broadcast stations.

***Topic: The challenges and rewards of living with 1st generation Korean American parents***

2006 Senior Division, 3<sup>rd</sup> place  
**Jessica Lim** (Northbrook, IL)  
11<sup>th</sup> grade, Glenbrook North High School

I know the casual claims that all second generation Korean American children make when regarding their parents, all of which I do not refute. Those stereotypes are clearly evident in my mom's shrill voice as she adamantly demands that I study my math textbook or in my dad's obvious obsession with his new karaoke machine. I was raised in a household where my hands quickly grew accustomed to the smooth keys of a piano and grades were a top priority. I have suffered through countless hours of Korean school and Sunday school and summer school, but as overbearing as my parents are, they are, above all, selfless.

Every night the fluorescent lights in the basement burn my dad's eyes through his glasses that are twenty years old, the lenses scratched and outdated. He wears them because he is convinced that time will not allow him to get new ones, his sleeves always grazing his cheeks as he wipes away those stubborn tears caused by dust and fatigue that seep into his lab coat. He's a dental technician, my dad. He does not get the chance to see the way the lazy afternoon rays flood the living room or how the snow slowly coats the bare tree branches in our front yard when winter finally comes because he is downstairs making a living, hopelessly replicating the American dream. He is this man who would let me fall asleep on his stomach as a baby, whose voice echoes through the vents when he sings karaoke tunes, who says he loves me and hugs me, but always seems too busy to figure out who I am. But that is the inevitable catch-22 of life, the unattainable balance between trying to make a living and cherishing what you are living for.

My mom, on the other hand, is a housewife, the most underappreciated job in any society. She lies awake next to me as I study until the sky turns pink and warm in the distance, hoping that her presence is support enough. She cleans the house and does the laundry and prepares dinner in clothes that she bought years before, the colors faded and the threads tired and worn. Instead of indulging in a shopping spree, she saves that money for me, so that I never have to be the one who tries to hold back my tears in the car as I drive home, tired of living in a place where my tongue can not seem to grasp the harsh syllables and dialect of those surrounding me, tired of folding the shirts and ironing the pants until the monotony drowns me, tired of naively wishing that one day I will be able to take a vacation before my joints ache from sitting still and my spirit remains forever stagnant.

It is sacrifice, this virtue that I see in their actions every day as they find their happiness in my simple successes. And I do feel the undeniable guilt that spurs me to live out their silent dreams of being a respected doctor, to achieve a position in society where I will never have to worry about taxes or if I have enough money to send my child to the college of their choice. But I do want to make them proud, as cliché as that may seem, because I want to be the one that can buy them a nice car and send them on an exotic vacation so that they realize their sacrifices were never made in vain. And although I wish things could have been different, that my dad did not have to work until three in the morning or that my mom did not have to pass time by washing the dishes, I have come to understand that despite all the pressure and high expectations my parents have burdened me with throughout the years, it is nothing compared to the sacrifices they have made in their lifetimes. So through all the tears of wishing I could lead a more normal life, where my parents did not push me to get straight A's or to be at the top of my class, I know that that it is because of them that I will always strive to be better. That is my reward.



**Jessica Lim**

I was born in Chicago and have lived in picturesque suburbia ever since. I participate in various clubs at my high school, such as Spanish National Honors Society, Model UN, Science Club, National Honors Society, and volunteer at the local hospital. And although I enjoy being an involved student, I also love just catching a movie with my friends, eating *galbi* at a family barbeque, and sleeping for long periods of time.

While continuing my passion for creative writing, I also hope to pursue a career in medicine and become a doctor.

I entered this competition because it offered me an opportunity to express my gratitude towards the struggles my parents have undergone as first generation Korean-Americans. It is an appreciation that I have never been able to confess to them openly. But through this essay, I was able to break out of the God complex that many teenagers suffer from and acknowledge the sacrifices my parents have made so that I could have a better life. And as cliché as that may sound, it is the reason why my parents are my personal heroes.

**Topic: Describe an event in your life and discuss what it taught you about being a Korean American in America.**

2006 Junior Division, 1<sup>st</sup> place  
**Jiyoung Kim** (Hoffman Estate, IL)  
8<sup>th</sup> grade, Plum Grove Junior High School

The resounding rhythms of drums, accompanied by the loud reverberating tones of another timeless instrument, echoed through the room bustling with a motley group of people who were gathered together for a cultural festival. The bright colors decorating the room harmonized as audiences gathered to watch the performances of people from all around the globe, applauding at their distinct cultures and traditions. In the midst of all this commotion, the significance of one performing group was almost overlooked. The group is called *samulnoree*, a form of music originating in Korea. The people performing included members of all different ages, including me. Garbed in the traditional clothes of the olden entertainers, which would be loose white pants and shirts under a black silk shirt with sleeves in the national colors, red, blue, and yellow, we entered the stage. We seated ourselves, ready for another recital that we had practiced so long for. The venue was the Navy Pier cultural fair, a place we went for performances almost bi-yearly. Although the consistently rapid drumming tired out our arms quickly, the exciting underlying pulse, the heat of the air, and the passion to play the music fueled us on. I didn't realize it then, but the truth is that in that moment, my mind was soaring from the pride I felt from being a Korean American in America; I learned so much about how important my culture was from that moment in downtown Chicago.

The mere idea of performing in front of such a large crowd hadn't really crossed my mind before that moment. When I realized that this was actually it, I felt a strange sensation in my chest as I walked out with my drum. I later recognized it to be a sort of vivid pride that grew as I continued to perform. Every second of enthusiastic pulsations sent another shock of dignity through my system and I couldn't help but to start smiling at my fellow performers. The light was on us, the cameras were rolling, and I could feel myself enjoying the idea of truly spreading our culture throughout America. I knew that as a Korean American, I had a lot of potential to show America just how devoted Koreans were to the things they did. My Korean pride never subsided and just managed to grow every time I went to the drums for a performance. I couldn't shake the honor I felt and I knew that the virus had spread from me to my fellow performers, who were just as proud of themselves for being able to do a service to the community of Korean Americans. I recognized that while it may have been harder for us to adjust to their society, in the end, our culture would help enrich the Americans' culture, leading to a distinct equality between us both.

It never really struck me as a life altering point in my life when I decided to join the *samulnoree* team. At that time, *samulnoree* was just a little activity to spend my time doing, but I never knew it would grow to become a passion the way it has now. You could say that I truly started enjoying it when we finally began getting places to perform at, but the one moment that truly made me love it was at our Navy Pier performance. The thrill of being able to share Korea's culture finally hit me when I realized how important this was to spread our land's history. Not only that, but this performance was also the one where we finally got to interact with other cultures and the audiences. After all the acts had gone, the Indians and we joined together to create rhythmic beats through improvisation. I knew how important it was for them too, to have their culture recognized and visible to the world. The excitement brewing in the room as we played was well worth all the days of practice. What was even better was that at this Navy Pier performance, we were also allowed to stay onstage and let the people who were watching learn to play as well. It was almost enriching to see all the people who wanted to try the instruments out and learn how to play them. I, myself, was teaching a little girl and it was definitely the highlight of the whole entire performance to be able to do this. I realized the power of each individual's native culture and how unique each must seem when

compared to others. It definitely taught me about Korea and how we have come so far in developing as a country. Through this revelation, I grew to become a proud Korean American, with a steadily growing love for my native country.

Korean culture has become an important part of my heart and I can't say that my pride hasn't grown enormously as well. I feel like through this experience, I've managed to learn so much more about my culture and it's taught me to be proud of it. Nothing else has really been able to boost my ethnic pride this much and I realize that being able to express the culture of the land I come from truly is the best way to feel the reality of the influence of Korea on America.



**Jiyoung Kim**

I am 14 years old. I'm just a typical girl who likes being with friends, playing guitar and piano, listening to music, writing, drawing, and playing tennis.

My dreams for the future stem from my hobbies since I want to be an author or a musician, preferably with the guitar. Writing is a big part of me and it helps me get a lot of my thoughts out.

Writing for this competition has helped me realize the importance of my heritage. When I first heard about it from my tutor, I just shrugged it off. After seeing the topics, I realized that I had a lot to say about being a Korean American. I think that's what really made me want to enter.

By entering this competition, I learned a lot more about how much I really love my Korean heritage. Before this, I kind of took it for granted and never thought too much about it, but writing it out definitely helped show me the importance of my heritage.

I thank my parents who would most definitely be my heroes, for being there for me all the time. They've gone through some stuff but they've always beaten the hardships and I want to learn from them.

**Topic: Describe an event in your life and discuss what it taught you about being a Korean American in America.**

2006 Junior Division, 2<sup>nd</sup> place  
**Sarah Honchul** (Poquoson, VA)  
7<sup>th</sup> grade, Poquoson Middle School

It was the first day of school and everyone was excited to see their friends again after a long summer. My circle of friends and I were as talkative as ever, though only one of them was in my homeroom. As we took our seats another girl entered, a Korean girl. The teacher asked if she could sit with us. We said yes. She stayed quiet as the teacher explained to us that she had moved here from Korea, and she didn't speak much English. We nodded in understanding and introduced ourselves. The girl's name was Jimin. If it hadn't been for Jimin, I probably wouldn't know as much as I do know, for I learned so much from her.

All of my friends immediately befriended Jimin and made her feel welcome. If she didn't know something, and I couldn't explain it, then they would step in and help. If she still didn't get it, then we pulled out her translator, which has saved us multiple times. We would type in the word and push enter whenever we saw the correct entry. She would smile and nod and say, "Oh, I get it!"

We have all learned a little bit of Korean in the process of helping her. We have also learned about Korea, and what her life was like in Korea. We have learned about Korean music, and that Korean kids are a lot like us. They like music and sports and just having fun. Sometimes, I think that she wouldn't be able to live here if she didn't have good friends to have fun with.

My dad is in the military, so I know what it is like to go to other places and have to make new friends. Jimin was really lucky to make so many new friends, so quickly. She didn't have to worry about not understanding words, because she knew that she would have someone to explain them to her. Sometimes, she even teaches me new things. We have so much fun helping Jimin, and she understands so much now, it is hard to believe that she once had trouble knowing what things mean and how to format sentences.

A lot of people at our school take Spanish as one of their electives. We spend five or six years learning all of the fundamentals of the language. Jimin has learned almost everything about the English language and our history in a year. I usually say that she is way smarter than me, because she has moved to a new country, learned the language, learned the culture, learned the history, and she is learning art now. Without Jimin, this would have been just another school year; instead it is an exciting new adventure. She has taught me more than school can ever teach. She has taught me to always help others, even if they are of a different background.

I didn't know that day that she would become one of my best friends. I didn't know that I would become a sort of tutor for her. My best friend and I have helped her so much this past school year. We have watched her learn new words and how to form her sentences. She has gone from leaving out "to" and "the," to knowing where to put certain adjectives and adverbs, to being able to tell where to put "who" or "whom" and how to change verbs to past tense. Helping Jimin this year has taught me how hard it is to go to a country where you don't know the language, culture, or history, and learn it all in a year or less, something I *just* learned no matter how many countries I have visited.



### **Sarah Honchul**

My name is Sarah and I am 13 years old. Right now I live in Poquoson, Virginia. My dad is active duty military. I have lived all around the world including Japan, Florida, Maryland, Texas, and Montana, and I have visited China, Singapore, Australia, Canada, and many different states.

I entered my essay into this contest because I had to write an essay either about Korea or India for school. My friend and I decided to write about Korea since one of our best friends is from Korea. Our teacher gave us the rules and encouraged us to enter into the contest.

From writing this essay, I learned that I didn't just teach Jimin, but she also taught me. Jimin has also helped me to explore the culture and language of another country.

One of my goals in the future is to get into the Air Force Academy in Colorado. I also want to write and play the flute more.

Some of my hobbies are sports, especially soccer, Girl Scouts, reading, writing, and playing my flute. Like most American girls, I also like to watch movies, hang out with my friends, and listen to my CDs or the radio.

My personal heroes are my parents because they love me and help me when I need it. They also have helped me to travel the world and I have realized that the Earth is a big place and it isn't all about me.

## ***Topic: How does the situation in North Korea affect Korean identity in America***

2006 Junior Division, 3<sup>rd</sup> place  
**James J. Paik** (Wilmette, IL)  
6th grade, Highcrest Middle School

North Korea is one of the last communist nations in the world, and naturally, the North Korean people suffer for it. Their dictator, Kim Jung Il, was ranked second in Parade Magazine's "Worst Dictator 2006." The land is struck by poverty and famine, and when foreign countries try to help, *Kim Jung Il* diverts the funds to building up his military forces and buying and selling nuclear weapons. But how does this affect Koreans thousands of miles away from the chaos, in America?

If I recall, I used to be called a communist in elementary school, because people wanted to manipulate the fact that I was related to North Koreans. Back then I suffered from what I thought was low self-esteem, but really, I was just weak. Most of the time, I was just like any other kid, but sometimes, I was mistaken for a North Korean person, and people would ask, "So, are you a good Korean or bad Korean?" Personally, I found that offensive, because the people living in North Korea aren't bad, they're unfortunate. The only real bad person is Kim Jung Il for treating the people like this. So I thought I would ask some people about how Korean identity is recognized in America, and I got quite a few answers.

First, some people believed that the corruption of North Korea results in stereotypical prejudice against Koreans dwelling in America. They said that we Korean Americans are thought of as bad because of our background. Two of the people I interviewed said that all of North and South Korea is bad, perhaps thinking that the horrible circumstances facing North Koreans also apply to South Korea. A teacher at my school said that these days, most Korean Americans have not been able to escape being affected by the North Koreans.

Not everyone I interviewed could provide me with an opinion. A substantial number of people were unfamiliar with the current events in North and South Korea. In fact, 42% of the 76 people I interviewed said that they didn't know anything about this topic, or said that they didn't read about it in the newspapers or watch the news. In retrospect, this is understandable because students are often busy with school and adults are occupied with work.

Other, more informed, members of my school community contributed additional insight. One teacher stated that people who know the Korean community in the United States know that the Koreans here are not responsible for the behavior of the leader of North Korea and for the condition and poverty of the people who currently live in North Korea. At my school, a paraprofessional commented on the effect of the media, stating that often people's views and opinions are skewed by the messages of the news and journalists: "I feel people spread false assumptions about North Korean people." He meant that the media broadcasts false messages about the general race of Koreans, so that ridiculous claims are made about Koreans in America.

Another teacher commented that he thought that social statements directed at Koreans weren't made favorably, while a staff member thought that since Americans have more contact with South Koreans than the North Koreans, they might not mistreat South Koreans. I also interviewed a very nice substitute teacher who stated that, "North Korea is under rule by a cruel person, and all you can do is either go with his belief and become a victim, or become a martyr and take part in a public execution." What I realized from that was if others could know what she knew, then they wouldn't look down on Korean Americans, because they would recognize that North Koreans have no choice. The last teacher I interviewed told me that in her opinion, people needed to be educated on both sides of the issue to make a sound decision. She believed that all people have the right to a fair and honorable government and society, no matter what.

One of my friends said that when a Korean is seen on the streets, a person's first impulse is to think of them as a North Korean, because of the situations there. In his personal opinion, however, he

thought that North and South Koreans were all equal, no matter what political leader they had. Another person stated that “Korean Americans shouldn’t be discriminated against just because North Korea has an idiot for a leader.” Surprisingly, when asked to provide their views about how Koreans are perceived in America, 19% of the people I interviewed only said that Korean Americans are discriminated against, without stated anything more. This simple nature of this answer shows how much the situation in North Korea is affecting Korean American identity. As a possible remedy, one student stated, “The North Korean government should rethink its ways and work to the benefit of the people.”

Lastly, I had to interview some actual Koreans to get their point of view on what it was like being a Korean in America. A friend of mine commented that some people think that all South Koreans are bad and cannot be trusted. So obviously, she had been discriminated against or misunderstood before. Two other Koreans said that they had been disrespected before because of their background, and it hurt them. Another Korean gave me an answer from his heart: “I think that the situation in North Korea affects Korean Americans for the worse because the uninformed people sometimes say ‘You communist!’ or something hurtful, but if this situation in North Korea turns to the worst case scenario, it will be much worse.” I could tell that he had been misunderstood before, just like me and the other 3 Koreans I interviewed, and it meant a lot to me for him to tell me that.

In conclusion, the public seems to have a variety of views on the way Korean Americans are treated in America today based on the North Korean situation, but one thought consistently emerged: Everyone thought that the poverty, famine, and weapons in North Korea made Korean Americans much worse off. In my opinion, Korean Americans are mistreated sometimes not because of ignorance, but because some people are not as well informed about the situation in North Korea. We should help North Korea, not only for their own cause, but to mend the division between two people (North and South Koreans), for Korean American dignity, and for the welfare and safety of our North Korean brethren.



**James Paik**

I am a typical 11-year old boy living in the suburbs. I enjoy sports such as tennis, soccer, and basketball. As for an instrument, I’ve been playing violin for almost 5 years now, and I will start viola soon. In my free time, I like to read. In the future, all I know is that I want a job that would help people beyond the idea of material service, but something more like money management or legal services.

I entered this contest because I wanted to inform the Korean Community about what modern Americans think about, and also what other Koreans would think about international situations. Additionally, I wanted to see for myself what other people think and care about. I learned that many people have different opinions about other countries situations, and independent thought is the most important type of thinking. Not to forget, the process of entering a contest, as I learned, is grueling. Sending in an application form, taking surveys, and the essay itself were all very challenging and time consuming.

My role model has to be my sister, Sue, she is always hard-working and diligent, and never gives up and in any situation, she stays persistent and on task. She is my definition of hard work. I also appreciate my family very much for their support and inspiration. My family always gives me mental and emotional support whenever I face a challenge.

## *Topic: Walking in Two Cultures, Korean and American*

2007 Senior Division, 1st place  
**Jay Lee** (Glenview, IL)  
11th grade, Glenbrook South High School

I looked away from the television and gave my mom the most bewildered, perplexed look that my face could make. My mom had just spent the last fifteen minutes rambling on about our family's upcoming trip to Korea, and I had done more than a decent job of ignoring her, when I heard breaking news that captured my attention.

"We're going to extend our stay in Korea for a few more days," she told me. "We've decided that we should go see Seorak Mountain."

My disbelief and frustration quickly turned into exasperation. It was bad enough that my parents were making me take a month out of my precious summertime to go on this trip. Despite speaking fairly decent Korean and thoroughly enjoying Korean food, Korea was the last place I wanted to be. Now my parents wanted to elongate the trip to visit some puny mountain? I could feel my cries of vexation building up inside me.

"Why on earth would we do that?" I shot back fervently. "We've seen mountains here in the United States four times the size of it! There's nothing special about it that makes it worth visiting!" "Still, it's a Korean landmark," she replied. "It's a symbol of Korean pride."

Her argument did anything but win me over. Korean pride meant about as much to me as some Korean phrase that I was not familiar with. Like many of the Korean-American friends that I have, I grew up with my fair share of Korean culture shoved down my throat. I was taught that the hours following school were to be devoted to practicing my cello, that my weekends were to be spent in Korean school, and that my summer was to be spent in summer school. Seeing the dozens of other Korean-American kids growing up in similar environments, my heart began to harden towards the strict nature of Korean culture.

My life as a Korean-American underwent a drastic adjustment once I entered high school. Firstly, I entered the period in my life when I could become the person that I, not my parents, wanted to become. Additionally, I was exposed to a side of Korean culture that I had never really noticed: an extreme pride in being associated with Korea. The high school that I attend, Glenbrook South, has a student population that is one-fifth Korean. I found that lunchrooms and hallways were often segregated between the Koreans and the Caucasians, which, much to my surprise, was the doing of the Koreans. Desiring to be around people that also grew up in the midst of Korean culture, it seemed as if the Korean-Americans were unwilling to assimilate themselves with the rest of White America, and I could not help but wonder if this pride in the Korean culture had gone too far. I realized that this excessive pride was always around me, as I never understood Korea's obsession with Chan Ho Park, the mediocre baseball pitcher, nor my dad's insistence that our family subscribe to *KoreAm Magazine*, despite its lackluster quality of writing. My inability to comprehend the source of all this fanaticism only left a bad taste in my mouth.

One consequence of this segregation was that it became increasingly easier for everyone to stereotype the Korean-Americans, as they seemed to travel around in one, homogenous pack. With my newfound freedom to develop into the person that I wanted to be, I committed myself to avoiding the stereotypical behavior of the Korean-American student. I swore to myself that I would not play DDR, drive an import Japanese car, or dye my hair yellow. What made matters worse was that such segregation made me convince that I had to pick sides, and that by being friends with all Caucasians, I was somehow deserting the Korean-American side. As far as I was concerned, the Korean side of me had died.

Despite my adamant objections, our family borrowed my aunt's car, booked a condo, and took the four hour trip to Seorak Mountain. The weather was cloudy and gloomy, doing little to help my

already cynical expectations for the Mountain. Yet, as I tried to make out the mountainside in the midst of the haze and fog, I enjoyed a moment of cloudless clarity. Physically, what I saw was no different from what I had expected: an impressive, but not overwhelming, mountain. However, my moment of epiphany came with my realization of this excessive pride in Korea. Staring at the 5,000 foot peak of the mountain, I felt the sense of pride that my mother had been speaking of. Sure, it was nothing in comparison to the majestic sight I had seen last year at Mt. Rainier in Seattle. But the difference lay in the fact that Seorak Mountain was unquestionably, undeniably Korean. The dirt, trees, and cliffs of this mountain were filled with the same values and ideals that I was raised with. I understood that the strict environment that I was raised in was only because my parents possessed the hardworking, diligent nature of the Korean culture. I became ashamed that I bought into meaningless stereotypes, while avoiding the true identity that I had as a Korean American.

As I continue on my maturation process, I realize that I still have a long, broad journey ahead of me. Although I have the power to become the person that I want to become, I understand that my parents did me a big favor when they raised me in the Korean culture. I look forward to the day when I can push my son to appreciate classical music, work hard for an education, and take him for a visit to Seorak Mountain.



### **Jay Lee**

Jay Lee is a 17-year-old junior who was born and raised in the suburbs of Chicago. Jay combats the boredom that is associated with suburbia by being as active as possible. He enjoys writing for his high school's newspaper (The Oracle), and is an active member in Business Professionals of America, the Darfur Activism Club (STAND), Pep Club, and the Lacrosse Team. Outside of school, you'll most likely find him hanging out with his friends, shooting hoops, serving at his church's youth

group, or playing air-guitar in front of his mirror.

Listening to music, watching movies, playing and watching sports, eating, and laughing are just a few of Jay's hobbies. He also really wishes that he was musically talented, but he has finally come to terms with reality.

Jay's main short term goal is to attend the University of Illinois to study Journalism. Long-term goals include traveling to Africa, getting a job that he loves, catching a ball at Wrigley Field, and finally becoming mature.

His personal hero and savior is Jesus Christ, and he is blessed that God has placed quality people in his life for him to look up to, such as his parents, sister, and pastors.

Jay entered the Sejong Writing Competition because he wished to not only take advantage of an opportunity to exhibit his meager writing ability, but to share and express his own personal experiences of balancing the cultures of America and Korea and impart what little wisdom he has. Jay has yet to fully discover his identity as a Korean American in America's so called pluralistic society, but he remains confident that he will eventually.

## Topic: *Walking in two cultures, Korean and American*

2007 Senior Division, 2<sup>nd</sup> place  
Christine Sun-Ah Kwon (Fort Lee, NJ)  
12<sup>th</sup> grade, Fort Lee High School

### Korean American

It's hard for Koreans to let loose because self-restraint is drilled into them long before the alphabet. I figured this out in pre-school when my friends found embarrassing, but appreciated post-its in their lunch boxes and I was packed a single napkin. There were other differences. In pre-school, when peers found embarrassing but appreciated "I love you" post-its in their lunch boxes, I was packed a single stiff napkin. Questions arose. "Why don't you ever say you love me?"

"Asians just don't", was my mother's response, which I have found to be true. After all, there are rules to follow when raising child prodigies. You can't say my parents didn't try. I remember my mom painting "C, D, E, F, G, A, B" (the piano keys) on my nails. I chipped the polish off. I grew up religious, too. Instead of going to mass, though, I climbed up on the roof of the church and waited for the bells to ring so I could read Roald Dahl in peace. I skipped "hagwon" to hide in the park, trying to find gold or catch worms in the middle of regenerating their tails. Somehow, even in the blurry self-awareness of a nine-year-old, I knew it didn't get better than this.

I would wake up on Mondays, tying loose ends and fitting back into my body. It still does not fit like a glove. I may charm boys and surf crowds at shows, but there are always the insecurities that promised to leave at fourteen but never have. A while back, when another Korean student turned around to perfunctorily ask: "What did you get?", I asked in return, "Do your parents ever say they love you?" He thought about it and replied, "Does it matter?"

Well, I think it does. I grew up an outsider from the culture, separated by my own sense of identity. The jars of *kimchee* that my grandmother buried underground, to me, looked like hacked up body parts jammed into makeshift graves. Growing up, my friends had Sweet Sixteens, Bat Mitzvahs and even Quinceañeras. Every time my father picked me up from these elaborate events he had me tell him about the monogrammed napkins, the six-layer cake. He scorned such decadence, but at the same time was proud that I was so well assimilated, so jaded, so American.

Am I, though? Our parents exhaust themselves under the fluorescent lights of laundromats and nail-salons—their ears inured to the rush of quarters clinking, legs aching for some sweet release, eyes tired of the same old world. We are expected to study, to practice the flute, to learn extra languages, to find a cure for some impossible disease or at least reach the Ivy-League. They live the American reality so we can live the dream.

The dream never worked out for me. I am not good at math, and classical music gives me a headache. I spend summer afternoons riding the A-train, sketching faces as people sleep to the roar of the subway. I am loud and impulsive. I am honest to the point of un-cool.

I am.

I am.

I am?

At seventeen, I can look back and recognize the small things, the bigger picture. At graduations, it was never "I'm so proud of you, honey", but the silent pride, the broadening of shoulders, the absence of words speaking volumes. Love in syllables and half-smiles. Is this what it means to be Korean?

I flinch at the harsh sounds of America as I walk the streets of New York with my grandmother, hearing how profane profanity is in her gentle presence, all the while, her eyes wide, taking in the bright lights and something new and glorious. Sometimes, I feel it too. Maybe we're all immigrants here. Is this what it means to be American? To be part of something moving, changing, swallowing—

Yeah, I feel it too.



### **Christine Kwon**

I entered this competition to see if anyone would recognize some of his or her own feelings in my writing. Between two cultures there is so much lost in translation; I wanted to bring to light some details that are often overlooked. From writing this essay, I've realized that identity is amorphous, and can only be defined as the space between culture and experience.

My appreciation for language stems from my grandfather, who was the only fluent English speaker in the family. I admired his flawless elocution, his heavy New York accent. He was a multi-lingual beast sometimes, roaring in a frenzied Spanish, teaching me Chinese characters in the cool summer breeze, speaking to me always in Korean so I would not forget where I stood among the motley brew of people called Americans.

Grandpa was a rebel. We slept past twelve, we ate when we were hungry, we discovered what made us happy and we went after it (hence the frequent trips to convenience stores for lottery tickets and popsicles). He made it okay to break the rules. He said it was impossible to truly succeed in anything without taking risks, and he let me taste the thrill of crossing the line so I would not be afraid to do it alone.

So I write to remember my grandfather: his philosophies, his stinky brown loafers. My approach to writing reflects his approach to life, which is to be spontaneous, to go with gut reactions, to find the arrow of life in order to draw the tangents.

Other than that, my short term goal in life is to attend Yale University in a few months. Once there, I want to write fiction, prepare for medical school, perform scientific research, and take some art classes.

## ***Topic: My most influential encounter with Korean Culture***

2007 Senior Division, 3<sup>rd</sup> place  
**Cecilia Ahn** (Fort Lee, NJ)  
11<sup>th</sup> grade, Fort Lee High School

The night dawned young on a senseless Friday evening, and I was sitting in a restaurant staring at a menu. An aging Asian man sitting on the adjacent table snuck a peek over towards my drifting eyes and wondered what a Korean girl was doing with a curly-haired Hispanic boy. Ignoring his cold stare, I sipped tea from a grey ceramic mug, scanned the four-page menu, and finally decided on the *sullungtang*. A group of rowdy *soju* drinkers let out a silly clamorous cheer, and I lifted my eyebrows with an inquisitive curiosity.

With a raised voice, I asked David what he wanted to order. A sweaty-fingered waiter then power-walked to our table, and pushed his falling glasses up towards his face with his thumb. He took out a pen and a piece of paper, and, in English drenched in a Korean accent, mumbled, "What would you like to order?" David glanced at me with a mischievous smile, and with a British accent, said, "Ah yes, young lad, I would like to taste your *yookgaejang*, and *soondae*. My lady has not yet had the opportunity to place her order, so if you will, please focus your attention on her." Blushing, I pointed at the picture of the *sullungtang* in the menu. The waiter hesitatingly glanced at David with a sense of interest and bewilderment, scribbled something on the paper, stuttered a "thank you," and walked to the refrigerator to take out five *soju* bottles, which the drinkers were persistently signaling for.

I took out the wooden chopsticks from its paper cover, and broke the two sticks apart. "My next challenge in life," exclaimed the frustrated David, "is to master the art of using chopsticks!" I shook my head in laughter, fixed his hand posture, and witnessed his first taste of the epitome of Korean food and culture – *kimchee*. He slowly, but steadily, picked up a piece of *kimchee* and placed it inside his mouth. Chewing on it, he looked at me with beaming eyes, and smiled with satisfaction seeping through his sanguine cheeks. Dramatically changing to a French accent, David said, "Tis like having a light *croissant* and a *cappuccino* on a cold Sunday morning while sitting on top of the Eiffel Tower with your lover!"

A group of people wearing *hanboks* walked in, and David eyed them until the hostess led them to a table. He traced the designs on the *hanboks* with his fingers in the air like a brandishing wand, and he asked me if I owned one. I told him about *choosuk*, Korean New Year's, and my grandparents' birthdays. Wearing *hanboks* to these events were a must in my family, so I, inevitably, had to have one. He looked at me, and with a German accent, said, "My dear, I would love to see you in one of these elaborately decorated dresses one day for I believe that you will look absolutely stunning!"

I watched the waiter hastily approach us and place two bowls of soup and a plate of *soondae* at our table. David stared at the *soondae* with intense curiosity and apprehension, and blurted in a Scottish accent, "My, my! Looks like haggis!" I giggled and watched him use his chopsticks to put a piece of *kimchee* and *soondae* into his mouth. He then sipped *yookgaejang*, and coughed as the hot and spicy soup scorched his throat. His curious fingers reached for the *gochu*, and he bravely dipped it in the *dwenjang*. I watched him put the *gochu* into his mouth, and a loud crunching noise was followed by teary eyes. As he wiped his tears away, I asked, "You ok, David?" "I'm Hispanic!" he exclaimed, "I'm used to the spiciness." I chuckled and handed him a napkin. David asked, "Is this a typical meal in Korea?" The corners of my lips twitched upwards, and I proudly gave him an affirming nod.

Living in America as a first generation Korean, I grew up rejecting my heritage and thrusting myself in American culture because I wanted to be accepted by my peers. However, my attempts were futile, and I found myself stuck between two worlds – the Korean world, which I was ignorant to, and the American world, which I had grown accustomed to. This meant that I didn't quite fit into either realms – I was labeled as an Asian in American society, thus, I was, and, currently am not,

viewed as a full American. On the contrary, I was labeled “too Americanized” by Korean culture, thus I was not, and currently am not, seen as a full Korean.

I was oblivious to famous Korean stars like Rain and Super Junior, I didn’t watch Korean dramas most of my Asian friends were obsessing over, and I refused to speak Korean. However, I realized I must be proud of my heritage instead of being ashamed of it when I had dinner with David. Meeting someone who was so interested in Korean culture made me recognize how unique Korea is, and undermining its distinctive customs only made me a hypocrite because I advocated love and awareness for all traditions.

Yes, I am a Korean-American, but I am still impacted by small daily events that teach me more and more about myself and about my country.

**Cecilia Ahn**

I entered this competition to share my struggle with my identity, and I learned more about my journey to find myself. My goal in the future is to create a balance between both worlds.

I enjoy spending time with friends and meeting new people. My personal hero is my mom, who has been a role model in my life.

## ***Topic: Building bridges between the generations***

2007 Junior Division. 1<sup>st</sup> place  
**Eunice Lee** (Asheboro, NC)  
8<sup>th</sup> grade, South Asheboro Middle School

My parents gave me the look. The look they gave me when I was not studying. The disappointment in their faces was pretty obvious; they wanted me to finish another ten pages. Secretly I yelled in my head, "This is my summer vacation!" The inner me plotted to throw my textbooks at my neighbor's vicious pit bull. I put on my poker face, but emotionally sulked back to my desk. I imagined what my future life would be like going to an IVY League College, winning numerous prestigious awards, but instead, I would be wanting my passion for freelance writing and missioning to grow. Just as my head was nodding off, I snapped back into reality, realizing my future plans to travel the world were definitely going down the drain.

Recently, I went to the Atlantic Opening *Taekwondo* Championships where I competed in *poomse* (forms). I remember myself, standing among the busy crowd listening vaguely to the opening speech Master Han, from our Academy, was giving. As Master Han introduced each *dojang* master from at least five different states, everyone quieted down. Afterwards, a group of women came out to sing the Star Spangled Banner in an a-cappella version. I remember those women harmonizing, not missing a single rhythm, and the tone of their voices balanced. As soon as the last voice ceased, the spectators jumped up to their feet and gave a standing ovation. When the noise was brought down, a floating pink blossom swept up the stairs. While I strained my eyes to see clearer, Master Han introduced his sister-in-law. She gracefully took the mike and started singing the National Korean Anthem.

It struck me then, not with the beautiful story and spirit of the song, but with the deep, satisfying meaning it had to go with it. The words tell about the rare and radiant beauty of Korea: how *Naamsaan's* pine trees are like armor, how the *Tong Hai* Sea and *Pakdoo* Mountain stand firm no matter what tries to penetrate, and how God will bless Korea forever. I remember getting goose bumps and a strange feeling sensation that seared my body with chills. Toward the last part of the anthem, I scanned the crowd until my eyes rested on my father's face. He was standing up, with his back hunched over from years of labor and his eyes lost and preoccupied faraway in his mind. His roughened hands were at his side, looking lonely.

I ran to his seat where he barely even noticed me as I grasped his hand. Just by looking into the rivulets of wrinkles in it, I could see the stories he had along with the hardships he had gone through. Plunging into a moment of past experiences, I pictured his life with the childhood tales he had told me when he was my age. I imagined the harsh and severe winters in Korea, where he and his siblings had to warm up icy water on the stove for hours before being able to bathe. With no car in that generation, I thought of my dad walking around Seoul with one pair of worn rubber shoes and only his school uniform to wear. Then I suddenly thought of my life, and how I could get hot water in just seconds before getting cranky because I wasted all of it and how I complained that I don't have enough shoes when I have four pairs along with outfits to go with them. I was amazed at the fact that after my ignorance and rebelling against them, they still loved me enough to tell me to go do some more workbook pages. I finally understood that working right now would pay off in the future.

I realized that my new respect for the authority of these two people came from their self-control and the ability to silence me. They silenced me not always physically by words, but with their experiences; humbling all the times I had 'endured'. The effort they put in to support me amounts to so much and I know now that it is only by their love that keeps them from kicking me out. I want to make them proud, not from memorizing textbooks with the countless levels of algebra, but for all of the times they had scolded me and taught me the right way to live. I have no clue how much they do

without telling me, but I definitely know that what I become in the future will branch off from their positive influence on me and I will make them proud by showing how much I learned from them.



**Eunice Lee**

I am 13 years old. I live in Asheboro, North Carolina, known for its country foods and hospitality. Life here is very family oriented and even people on the streets come to help each other out.

In my busy schedule, I love to practice Taekwondo and volleyball along with all sports, and playing the piano and flute. Laughing and smiling are a must in my life.

In the future, I hope to incorporate my love for kids with God's work and spread His love toward as many people as I can. Whether I become a psychologist (which is what I am pursuing), a missionary, or a teacher, I hope to promote Jesus Christ. Honestly I can say that He is my personal savior and hero. In all the times when I felt like trashing my drafts, He was the one who kept my light bulb fixed throughout this competition. Thank you God!

At first, I was so amazed that there was such a thing as a Korean-American competition. I was and still am amazed. I entered this competition to express my opinions on my relationship with my parents and I can tell you that we truly bonded while hearing stories from their past and being able to accept our differences. I hope that from all the sacrifices they have made for me, I am a reward to them as much as they are to me.

## ***Topic: Building bridges between the generations***

2007 Junior Division, 2<sup>nd</sup> place  
**Michael Chung** (Los Angeles, CA)  
4<sup>th</sup> grade, Curtis School

### **Looking For the Past**

The *Namsan* Tower rests on top of a mountain next to a radio tower. The ancient walls on the hillside are turreted so that soldiers could ward off enemies with bows and arrows. I stand there imagining soldiers getting ready for battle. I imagine them aiming at their foe, feeling confident that they will win, but fearing they will lose. A gentle breeze slides dead leaves down the side of the mountain.

One afternoon, we search for my mom's old houses. I think how great it would be to see them with no harm done. I was born in the United States and have always lived there. However, my parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents, were all born in Korea. I want to know my heritage better by experiencing what my mom has experienced. I want to find a bridge to my mom's past. By seeing the room where she played piano, the model trains she and her brother played with, and the living room where she watched Tom and Jerry cartoons on TV.

The first house, located in Hu Am-Dong, where she lived until she was three, has been converted into part of a hospital. As we drive past, I feel disappointed that the house hasn't been preserved the way it should have been. The "Hospital" sign on top of the building tells me they've probably changed the insides. I wish I could go back in time and see the house the way it was when my mom lived there. I feel really sad. "I didn't know it was changed into a hospital," my mom says.

The second house that my mom lived in, located in Yeon Hee-Dong, has been demolished and replaced by two condos. She grew up in that house. We get out of the van and follow the street up a hill to find the house. "I know it's here," she says. We spend about fifteen minutes looking. We come to a wall with a space in the middle. "This used to be my wall," she recalls. But what happened to my huge gate?" We walk down back to the van and drive back to the hotel.

In America, I am proud to talk about my culture with my friends. I tell them how well developed Korea is now and about our history. On that trip with my mom, I was trying to find a bridge backward, but now I am trying to build a bridge forward, even though we have failed to find my mom's old houses. The past is like those dead leaves sliding down Namsan-I realize that the bridge is not in the piano or anything else. The bridge is in my parents' stories, the Korean traditions that we keep alive in our home, and my love for Korea. I am proud to be a Korean-American. Every time I walk off a plane in Seoul, I smell a certain smell. I've never smelled it anywhere else. It's indescribable. It makes me feel I'm home.



### **Michael Chung**

I am a ten-year-old student at the Curtis School in Los Angeles. I entered my essay into the contest because I am proud of my ethnic background. All of my ancestors were born in Korea, which I have visited many times. I love the Korean culture-the food (especially bul-go-gi and kal-bi), the language, and the historical sites and sights. I wanted to write about a recent trip to Seoul where my mom and I searched for her past. Through writing this essay, I learned that building bridges isn't accomplished only by

touching or seeing what my ancestors had. Although many historical landmarks remain, but many "unimportant" buildings are demolished and get replaced by other buildings. By exploring my thoughts, I realized I could also connect with my heritage by listening to my parents stories, which have a big effect on my imagination. Through these stories, I can imagine Korea in the past.

Someday, I want to start either a computer company or a car company. My hobbies are Lego's and biking. My personal interests include the piano, the violin, and cars, especially the DeLorean. My personal hero is Bill Gates because he created the first software for personal computers.

## ***Topic: My most influential encounter with Korean Culture***

2007 Junior Division, 3<sup>rd</sup> place

**Andrew Song** (Palatine, IL)

7<sup>th</sup> grade, Plum Grove Junior High

As I perceive the drum beats crashing through the air, I look into my fellow performers' intense eyes, and I can't help but grin as my mallets strike my silky *jangoo*. My instrument, an oak drum shaped like an hourglass and representing rain, sends beats that mingle with the *bbuk*, a flat bamboo, cylindrical bass drum that represents clouds. As we play, the hollow *jangoo* and the thundering bass of the *bbuk* fuse together to create a melody that only Korea has dared to create. As we peer at the Korean dancers prancing on the colossal stage midst the audience staring with engrossed interest, the *jing*, a giant, brass 26-inch gong, which is the instrument of wind, suddenly gongs, creating fluctuating tones that serenade through our ears. The colors and hues of our traditional garments, *hanbok*, harmonize with the aromatic scents of marinated and steaming *bulgogi*, a traditional Korean dish, coming from the cooks. Suddenly, the *gghengahri*, the lead instrument of lightning which is a 5-inch gold plate, crashes into our quartet, creating an ancient Korean melody that tells the stories of emperors and empresses during deep-rooted eras. The underlying pulse, emotions, and my energy fill me with a strength I had not known before. I feel energized and full of pride at playing my drum to present Korean culture to American society at Navy Pier. However, this glorious Saturday would cause me recollect some fateful memories.

Before my fateful encounter with *samulnoree*, which means "four instruments playing," I was ashamed of my Korean heritage. I was only in 4<sup>th</sup> grade and was subject to lots of teasing. As I timidly sauntered through the congested halls of my school, I had heard a 6<sup>th</sup> grader yelling cruel remarks about my heritage. Instantly, I felt dreadful as those comments kept echoing in my head. Trying to ignore all memories of those events, I would block out all traces of those remarks and would attempt to get to the library without any more teasing or insults. Although years have passed, I still received painful comments about my heritage. It would have been cool if Oprah was Korean or some movies took place in Seoul, the capital of Korea. Sometimes, it seemed there was no Korean culture to look at to be proud of. I felt like all of the Korean culture in America seemed to be tainted by the image of Korean-Americans. Communism in N. Korea and the poverty stimulated others to suspect me. Remarks of nuclear bombs and N. Korea's cruel dictator would leave an imprint in my head. However, my feelings about all this changed on one fateful Saturday morning.

Almost as soon as I had risen to my clock, I was whisked away to Korean School. I was in 4<sup>th</sup> grade and was eligible to join the school's *samulnoree* group. As my instructor, *Hanmo*, taught me the basics of playing the *jangoo*, I began to tap away at the rhythm that had been played by professional players for 7 years. Korean culture has so many hidden aspects that I had never heard about. *Samulnoree* showed me that it was not just some mallets striking drums, but an elegant art that has been in Korea longer than the USA existed. Several weeks into Korean School, I finally understood the enormity of the culture that was founded in Korea. Soon, I began to enjoy beating away on my *jangoo*. All of my teachers and instructors helped me to see just how many secrets I had not uncovered before.

On the day of the performance, I was prepared to show the world just how devoted Koreans are to their traditions. I wanted people to take Korean heritage seriously; I would keep playing until I wouldn't be able to play anymore. To me, showing my nation's pride and culture was the most significant accomplishment that I could hope for. My heart was soaring at this chance to prove that Koreans were a traditional and proud group of people. Every single step sent a spine-tingling chill through my body as I walked out towards that stage. As the lights shone on our faces, revealing our concentrated expressions, we elevated our arms getting ready to strike the first beat. Bong! That first note harmonized and blended so beautifully, it took an unprecedented turn and echoed and fluctuated

throughout the whole room. After a dramatic pause, our hands bounced with the mallets on the perfected skins of our instruments. I just couldn't help but smile! The rapid drumming tired out my arms but it was worth it.

That performance and others following presented to the world the beautiful culture of Korea. Korea's culture is an ancient art that has a lot of potential to show the world. *Samulnoree* has become a part of my soul and has aided me in perceiving not just the obvious aspects like *kimchee* but the fact that I was not weaker than everybody else and had an important culture to enlighten the world with.



### **Andrew Song**

My name is Andrew Song and I'm a 12-year-old 7th grader at Plum Grove Junior High. I have been swimming competitively for several years as well as playing soccer. I was on the math team for the '06-'07 year. I have played piano for 7 years and clarinet for 4 years. My favorite hobby of all is "getting that extra dollar and brownie from my Sabio Academy English teacher, Ms. Dee".

My goal in the future is show the world how wonderful it can be to have a good education. I believe it is the utmost importance to receive a good education. Whether it is becoming a teacher or giving speeches about education, I want to show to the world the treasures of an education.

When it comes to heroes, I think a little differently. Heroes are people who have saved you, changed you, and left a lasting impression. My life so far has been pretty smooth. No one has really changed my life. Sure, I look up to my family and teachers but they are role models. Role models who I am used to and will see every day. As for heroes...not yet.

I entered this competition because I was inspired by other people to do so. This really gave me a chance to tell the world my words. I learned to look deeper inside myself and find that little spark of confidence. I learned that my Korean heritage is too awesome for unworthy eyes to see... Just kidding!

## About the Judges



**Heinz Insu Fenkl** is an author, editor, translator, folklorist, and the director of the Interstitial Studies Institute at the State University of New York, New Paltz. His fiction includes *Memories of My Ghost Brother*, an autobiographical novel about growing up in Korea as a bi-racial child in the '60s. He was named a Barnes and Noble "Great New Writer" and Pen/Hemingway finalist in 1997. He has also published short fiction in a variety of journals and magazines, as well as numerous articles on folklore and myth.

He lectures regularly for The Korea Society on a variety of topics including Korean animation, comics, literature, and folktales.

**Fenkl** was raised in Korea and (in his later years) Germany and the United States. Graduating from Vassar, he studied folklore and shamanism as a Fulbright Scholar in Korea and dream research under a grant from the University of California. Before his appointment to his current position at New Paltz, he taught a range of courses at Vassar, Bard, Sarah Lawrence, and Yonsei University (Korea), including Asian/American Folk Traditions, East Asian Folklore Korean Literature, Asian American Literature, and Native American Literature, in addition to Creative Writing.

He has published translations of Korean fiction and folklore, and is co-editor of *Kori: The Beacon Anthology of Korean American Literature*. He also writes regular columns on mythic topics for *Realms of Fantasy* magazine.

**Heinz** lives in the Hudson Valley with his wife, writer and artist Anne B. Dalton, and their daughter Isabella Myong-wol.





Born in Korea in 1938, **Ty Pak** lived through his country's liberation from Japan in 1945, its division under US and Soviet occupation, and the trauma of the Korean War, 1950-53, during which his father died. After getting his law degree at Seoul National University in 1961, he worked as a reporter for the English dailies, Korean Republic and Korea Times, until 1965 when he came to the US and got his Ph.D. in English at Bowling Green State University, Ohio, 1969. After a year's post-doctoral work at UC Berkeley, he taught in the English Department, University of Hawaii, from 1970 to 1987, when he took early retirement to devote himself to writing.

*Guilt Payment* (1983), a collection of his 13 stories, critically acclaimed and widely adopted as a textbook at many US college campuses, is sold at such national chains as Barnes & Noble and Amazon.com. His latest books, *Cry Korea Cry*, a novel, and *Moonbay*, a collection of 7 short stories previously published in various journals, have enjoyed rave reviews. His fiction explores the aspirations, idealism, and angst of Korean Americans, as they strive to carve out a destiny for themselves and their children in the American mainstream.

As one of his scholarly admirers has remarked, Ty Pak's "prime merit ... is the unflinching confrontation with the voids and wounds, both psychic and physical, that drive and inhibit a generation of Koreans born to division, war and a homeland that is not whole either."

His scholarly work in over 40 articles and monographs has appeared in *Language*, *Lingua*, *Semiotica*, *Journal of Formal Logic*, and other learned journals.

**Ty Pak** has been invited to speak by various universities, civic groups, and local high schools on Korean American literature. In 1984 he chaired the Korean American Literature Panel at UCLA and in 1989 he was on the Asian American Writers Series at UC Berkeley and Cal State Hayward. He spoke on Korean American literature at the Korean American Student Conferences, Harvard and MIT (1990) and Rutgers (1999). In 1991 he was Visiting Professor of Creative Writing at Occidental College. In 1999 he spoke at UCLA, University of Hawaii, George Washington University, and University of Maryland, and in 2001 he gave a seminar on his fiction at the joint invitation of the Reischauer Institute of Japanese Studies and the Korea Institute, Harvard University. In March 2002 he spoke on Asian American Literature at the Writing Department and Asian Students Association, Wellesley College, and on Korean Literature in January 2003 at MIT.

Married and with three children, **Ty Pak** now lives in Honolulu, Hawaii.

*"Judging for the essay competition was a positive and rewarding experience. As a member of the first or immigrant generation, not quite belonging either to the old we had renounced or to the new we had adopted, I have lived with a vague sense of guilt for having condemned my posterity to the same kind of limbo, to second-class citizenship. But these young people, second or third generation, have no such complexes, no hang-ups. Far from being ashamed of or disadvantaged by their heritage, neither in perception nor in actuality, they have grabbed life by the horns and forge ahead triumphantly, proudly. Our exodus from Korea so many years ago was not a craven flight or an easy way out but a gutsy, admirable act, a pioneering, empire-building adventure and outreach. Moreover, in this global high tech age of instantaneous communication and transportation, national and geographic boundaries are merely accidents to our individuality, decorative, not structural. What endures is family, affection for one's friends and relatives, whose strength in turn underpins and inspires compassion and love for one's community, country, and world.*

*My only regret is that we could not give prizes and honorable mentions to every contestant. They were all good, had a point to make, often a powerful and moving message to impart, and should feel proud of their accomplishments and not feel discouraged by the omission in any way. While joining us in congratulating the winners and wishing them god speed, I want the rest of the contestants to adopt a tolerant, even superior attitude: some kind of ranking had to be established and the standards or determinants were, like everything else in life, personal, quirky, even arbitrary. Keep up the good work, everybody! "*

*~ Ty Pak*



**Jinyoung Kim** does a lot of reading and editing for general arts-related issues for The Korea Society (not just visual art curating); she also writes much of their catalogue copy. She is a senior program officer in the Arts at The Korea Society. Prior to joining The Korea Society, Kim worked at several art galleries and institutions, including the Kim Foster Gallery in Chelsea, New York, the Whitney Museum of American Art, The Japan Society, Sotheby's Auction House and Galerie Bahk in Seoul. In addition, she wrote for several Korean art magazines and a Korean daily newspaper, Chosun Ilbo from 1999 to 2004. Kim holds an M.A. in art history from Columbia University, an M.A. in art administration from the Fashion Institute of Technology, and a B.A. in art history from Hong-Ik University. She is a mother-to-be and a wife to a very loving husband. They currently reside in Manhattan.

*"Experiences stem from openness to see and feel - from curious and willing minds. I felt that all of the participating writers showed beautiful open hearts and intellectual maturity to capture the world we all live in. Through diverse individual experiences, they gave unity to Korean identity. I could not help but wonder what will 'being Korean' would mean in 10 or 20 years from now. It was truly an honor and pleasure to have a chance to glimpse into their experiences and to dwell upon what has been and will be mine. I hope these essays will serve as stepping stones for the writers and guiding lanterns for others who ponder upon the same issues - to remind that we share more than we can imagine. Thank you and keep writing! "*

*~ Jinyoung Kim*

**Junse Kim** has received a Pushcart Prize, a Faulkner Short Story Award, and the Philip Roth Residence in Creative Writing at Bucknell University. His fiction and creative nonfiction have been published in the *Ontario Review*, *ZYZZYVA*, and *Cimarron Review*, as well as two anthologies: *Pushcart Prize XXVII* and *Echoes Upon Echoes: New Korean American Writing*.



*"The essays for the Sejong Writing Competition were creative in their approach to topic, thorough in research, and most importantly, full of heart. These youths have added a refreshing new tone to the collective American voice."*

*~ Junse Kim*



**Ann Lee** has a Ph.D. in East Asian Languages and Cultures from Columbia University, and a B.A. from Harvard University. She has taught at the University of Southern California, U.C. Berkeley, Loyola Marymount, and the University of Washington.



Currently she is teaching in the Department of Korean Language and Literature at Kyung Hee University in Seoul, Korea. Her book *Yi Kwang-su and Modern Korean Literature: Mujong*, was published by the Cornell East Asia Series in 2005.

*"I found these essays to resonate with my own experiences. I too have had the agonizing experience of being new at school, of having to go to piano lessons, of worrying that my grades at school weren't good enough, of being told to stay home when I wanted to be with friends.*

*These essays reminded me of how, in the words of Anne LaMott in *Bird by Bird*,*

*'writing and reading decrease our sense of isolation. They deepen and widen and expand our sense of life: they feed the soul. When writers make us shake our heads with the exactness of their prose and their truths, and even make us laugh about ourselves or life, our buoyancy is restored.'*

*I liked the way these essays took me to a place of remembrance."*

*~ Ann Lee*

## King Sejong The Great

**King Sejong the Great** (1397-1450) was the fourth ruler of the Joseon Dynasty of Korea (1418-1450). Under his guidance, the native Korean alphabet, Hangul, was created, as was the rain gauge and some important striking water clocks and sundials. He established the Hall of Worthies (집현전; 集賢殿; Jip-hyeon-jeon) in the royal palace and gathered intellectuals from around Korea. The scholars of the Hall of Worthies documented history, drafted documents, and compiled books on various topics including poetry, music, medicine, and meteorology. He made improvements in the movable metal type for printing that had been invented in Korea around 1234. This invention was about 200 years ahead of Gutenberg's invention of printing. He initiated the development of musical notation for Korean and Chinese music, helped improve designs for various musical instruments, and encouraged the composition of orchestral music. Sejong was also a writer. He composed *Yongbi eocheon ga* ("Songs of Flying Dragons"), *Seokbo sangjeol* ("Episodes from the Life of Buddha"), *Worin cheon-gang jigok* ("Songs of the Moon Shining on a Thousand Rivers"), and the reference *Dongguk jeong-un* ("Dictionary of Proper Sino-Korean Pronunciation"). Sejong was also a humanitarian



**Sejong the Great, (1397-1450)**

who proclaimed that there must be three trials before a final judgment is reached, and he prohibited brutality in the punishment of criminals, such as flogging.

**Hangul** (Korean alphabet) was invented in 1446. King Sejong published this Korean letter as *Hunmin chong-um* (the right sound to teach people), describing the reasons for creating Hangul, numbers of alphabet, its system and principle, and its usage. Korean alphabets are made of ten vowels and fourteen consonants. While consonants are designed after the shape of person's mouth and tongue, the vowels were designed after the nature.

Professor G. Sampson, computer department at Sussex University in England, commented on Hangul as follows: *"There is no doubt that Hangul is the greatest writing system in the world from a scientific viewpoint. There is no precedent in the world, as Hangul was made according to certain principles. Above all, Hangul is a scientific system, invented systematically following the shapes of vocal organs as they make sounds. The writing system reflects the characteristic of the sounds...Each letter of han-gul was made in this way, with the shapes of the vocal organs in mind. Many Western scholars and intellectuals who are knowledgeable about the scientific aspects of Hangul are very impressed by the principles behind its invention."*

Prof. Byun of the computer department from Dong-Kuk University in Korea had said that "The computer, which we think of as all-powerful, is driven by the repetition of two numbers--0 and 1--according to certain rules, but it has propelled the world into the information age almost instantaneously. The same is true with Hangul. It is a characteristic of Hangul that the limited code of 24 letters, after several rules are applied, creates an unlimited number of sounds."

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### **Our Mission**

The Sejong Cultural Society was formed to advance awareness and understanding of Korea's cultural heritage among people in the United States. Our emphasis is on presenting contemporary music, literature, and fine arts utilizing traditional Korean themes, but expressed through western media.

The major target audience of our program is children in the United States growing up in a multicultural and multiethnic society. We aim to promote harmony among people of various ethnic backgrounds and to bridge Asian and western culture through our programs.

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