Korean Heritage Essay Contest Winners

Group 2 – English, Grades 9-12
8th Annual Essay Contest, 2002-2003:
Contributions & Challenges of Korean Americans

Winners – Group II – English, Grades 9-12

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Group 2, 1st Place

**Korean American Composer and Activist**

Michael Wine

Bronx H.S of Science, 11th grade
Teacher: Richard Schweidel
Principal: Valerie Reidy
Superintendent: Dr. Norman Wechsler

*Author's Statement:*

Earl Kim was a professor at Princeton and Harvard who believed that every note of a musical piece should have a meaning. He would say, “I am reducing everything to its maximum.” Mr. Kim composed violin caprices for Isaac Perlman and put texts by Samuel Beckett to music. During WWII he was a U.S. Army combat intelligence officer. He was the president of Musicians Against Nuclear Arms, and expressed his opposition to “all forms of censorship of the arts” by refusing to join a music panel of the National Endowment for the Arts.

“I am an American composer who happens to be Korean,” ¹ says Earl Kim, a son of immigrants who was a professor at Princeton and Harvard. He was born in Dinuba, California where he began piano lessons at age nine. His studies brought Mr. Kim from Los Angeles City College to the University of California at Los Angeles, and finally to Harvard where he taught for 23 years until 1990. To Mr. Kim, it was of utmost important that every note of a piece of music have a meaning.

“I am reducing everything to its maximum.”² This is how Mr. Kim described his spare, elegant, refined, elusive, beautiful and profound compositional style. He composed violin caprices for violinist Isaac Perlman. Mr. Perlman premiered the former’s Violin Concerto with the New York Philharmonic at Avery Fisher Hall. Mr. Kim also put texts by Samuel Beckett, among others, to music. He would create melodramas involving spoken words and spare instrumental accompaniment. His last major work, “The White Hour” was for chamber orchestra.
Mr. Kim studied music composition and theory with Arnold Schoenberg at UCLA and with Ernest Bloch at the University of California, Berkley. At this time his education was suspended for an assignment as a combat intelligence officer with the United States Army Intelligence Service during World War II. After returning to Berkley, he studied with Roger Sessions for a few years and then taught at Princeton for five years until 1967.

In addition to his instructional and compositional work, Mr. Kim was a pianist and did lieder recitals with Bethany Beardslee, Benita Valente and Dawn Upshaw. He also was a vocal coach, conductor and president of Musicians Against Nuclear Arms, an organization he co-founded. To raise money for Physicians for Social Responsibility, Earl Kim participated in a contest at Avery Fisher Hall. He refused an invitation to join a music panel of the National Endowment for the Arts in 1990 to express his opposition to “all forms of censorship of the arts”. He wrote a letter to the *New York Times* in support of this view.

I selected Mr. Kim because I admire his honesty, sincerity and dedication to his work and steadfast morals. He achieved a great deal even though he started out with very little. From Earl Kim, I learn the value of unique ideas. Just as he developed a unique style of expression and succeeded in his career, I hope to do the same.

1 This quote is from [http://www.news.harvard.edu/gazette/2000/05.25/kim.html](http://www.news.harvard.edu/gazette/2000/05.25/kim.html), The Harvard Gazette Archives.
2 This quote is also from [http://www.news.harvard.edu/gazette/2000/05.25/kim.html](http://www.news.harvard.edu/gazette/2000/05.25/kim.html).

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I, being a Korean American, have always wondered about the Korean American’s most unrecognized contribution to American Society, sports. I have often asked my friends, Korean or not, if they knew of any professional Korean athletes in America. I would commonly hear the names Chan Ho Park, the Texas Ranger’s pitcher, or Se Ri Pak, the two time LPGA champion; both are Korean immigrants and both are tremendous athletes. To that end, I assumed that Korean immigrants had not contributed much to American athletics. However, after delving through Korean American history, I have learned that Korean immigrants have brought upon generations that have played and still play a much bigger role in American sports than most people realize.

Aside from the more obvious contributions to American society, such as the establishment of churches, Presbyterian in particular, or the introduction of Korean customs and foods, Korean immigrants have also contributed quite a bit to sports in America. One man who deserves much credit for showing how much Korean Americans can contribute to American sports is Dr. Sammy Lee, the son of Korean immigrants who served as an inside and outside observer of the Korean populace. Aside from the traditions that Korean immigrants have brought to the United States, the Korean participation on sports in America is quite possibly the most unrecognized contribution.
immigrants. He was a two-time consecutive gold medallist when representing the United States team in the platform diving competition in the 1948 and 1952 Olympics and the first Asian American man to win a medal. In fact, the Olympic hall of fame track and field runner, Bob Mathias referred to him as “…the greatest platform diver ever” on NBC’s pre Olympics presentation of 2000. Dr. Lee’s father, Soonkee Lee, was his inspiration to win the medals. After Soonkee told Dr. Lee of the Olympic games, he said: “papa, someday I’m going to be an Olympic champ”. Dr. Lee still contributes to American society by producing his highly acclaimed “Sammy’s Cool and Dry” towels, which are now commonly used in the Olympic games.

But Korean immigrants have contributed more to sports than just Dr. Sammy Lee. Koreans do not have such a large role in football, baseball, or basketball, but a number of Koreans do play professionally in other areas. The sport that I now want to discuss is Taekwondo. Being one of the most widely practiced sports in the world, including in the United States, Taekwondo is a major contribution from Korean immigrants to American society. Throughout the United States, there are a countless number of Taekwondo schools, run by both Korean and non Koreans. I attended Taekwondo school in my youth, and the diversity of people I have seen in my class was amazing, thus showing how people in America have taken interest in this sport. The sport of Taekwondo originated in Korea, but it was the Korean immigrants to America that introduced and taught the sport to the Americans.

The aforementioned Korean immigrant contributions are only but a few. I am sure that all of the contributions that I have not mentioned are all important, but the few that I have mentioned are what are admired most about the Korean immigrant contribution in sports. By acknowledging the accomplishments and contributions of our ancestors and the fellow people of our nationality, we can further admire our heritage.

Being born in America, I have never been to Korea nor do I have the faintest idea of how life would be there, except for the customary food of course. My father being a realtor and my mother being a nurse has helped me understand what the people who have emigrated from Korean have brought to America. They have traveled here and upheld respectable and outstanding jobs and brought a great deal of quality to the American workforces, which in turn reflect upon the American society. The continuing generations of Korean Americans will continue to uphold these ideals and will continue to contribute in a positive way.
Although Korea has been around for millennia, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries Korea suffered under the rule of Japan. It took a long struggle for Korea to break away from Japan, and many patriots gave their all to make Korea an independent nation. Even those who immigrated to the United States tried their best to see this come true. One such person to fight for Korean independence was Ahn, Chang-Ho.

Ahn, Chang-Ho was born on November 9, 1878 in Pyongyang. His father was a farmer. (Dosan Ahn Chang-Ho) Ahn was well educated in Confucianism and with this he developed a unique philosophy in life, which, in turn, he applied in liberating Korea from Japan. He did many things to unite Koreans in the fight. One of the first things he did was to try and overthrow the Japanese government in Korea. In 1884, he was among the people who participated in the Kapsin Political Upheaval. Although unsuccessful, Ahn—who took the pseudonym Dosan, or “Island Mountain”—left Korea as a political refugee and in around 1903, he came to the United States with Rhee Syngman, another political refugee and fellow leader in the Korean independence movement (Mayberry 10). (Rhee would become the first president in South Korea.) (Alberts)
In 1902, Ahn took action by establishing a fraternity group to gather together the few Koreans that lived in California at the turn of the twentieth century. This would serve as a model for the Korean National Association, which was founded in 1909 (Mayberry 21). In 1907, Ahn returned to Korea, and there he founded schools such as the Taesong School in Pyongyang, and “and set up the Taeguk Publishing Company and a ceramics company, thereby making an effort… for education…” (Dosan Ahn Chang–Ho), which goes to show how devoted he was to educating youth. In fact, he believed that from the Korean liberation movement would arise a generation of great leaders (Mayberry 22). He also created the Hung Sa Dan (Young Korean Academy) later on when he returned to the United States. He stayed in America for several more years.

Ahn realized that Koreans could not sit about waiting for the Japanese to let them be free, and that “Korea would be freed only after a long struggle.” (Mayberry 22) However, he was by no means preaching for violence and bloodshed. He said, “To pick one orange with care in an American orchard will help our country,” (Moses) meaning that in this way, Korean workers could be productive and save more money to help in the independence movement.

The effort and soul that Ahn Chang–Ho put into his work to free Korea from Japan is worth the admiration of every Korean person. He was one of the few leaders, willing to stand up for what he thought was right. Moreover, he died on March 10, 1938, while incarcerated in a Japanese prison. As the phrase goes, all gave some, and some—such as Ahn—gave all. His dedication to Korea, even when he was in the United States, deserves to be emulated by all.

Bibliography

Group 2, Honorable Mention

Coming to America

Seung Ho Chang
Bronx H.S of Science, 11th grade
Teacher: Richard Schweidel
Principal: Valerie Reidy
Superintendent: Dr. Norman Wechsler

Author’s Statement:
America is a land of opportunities. However, along with the opportunities there are hardships that one must endure. But the pain will be eased, once one achieves his dream in America.

A century ago, a group of desperate Koreans arrived to work and live on American soil. Contributing labor to the nation, they struggled and persevered to stay alive within America to make the best possible lifestyle for their future generations. As more and more Koreans sought new lives in America, new businesses appeared in Korean-American societies: restaurants, local grocery stores, and Tae Kwon Do studios. Equipped with the ideas of Confucianism and given a wide variety of opportunities, Korean immigrants were able to survive and strive in America.

Once an immigrant but now a citizen of the United States of America, Hyung Soon Chang, who is my mother, worked hard when she came to America for the first time. Settling in New York City, which is one of the busiest places of the world, my mother endured much hardships and pain. Because my mother was pregnant with my young brother, Daniel, it was even harder for her to adapt to a radical change.

At first, acceptance into society was difficult because of her limited ability to speak or read English. Many times my mother would work till she was exhausted and she would become depressed of the bad treatments that others would give her. An example is when she would go shopping. Still with my baby brother in her, she
would take me by the hand and walk along New York City blocks to go to the local grocery store. That is not the bad part, however, my uncle would not even give her a ride to the store. The good news is that my mother’s neighbor, who is a very good friend of hers, would be there to help her in any way possible.

However, reliance on her friend was not the solution to the daily problems she faced. The only answer, as she had said, was her faith in God. As a devout Christian, my mother would pray daily so that she may overcome all the problems she encountered.

Eventually my mother adapted to the lifestyle of an immigrant. And as I grew older so did my mother. She had a couple of jobs but none had her favor, because she would always have to get up early in the morning and come back home late at night. She hated this and so did I.

But only recently my mother finally caught a break: the chance to purchase a pre-owned store. My mother got excited and would “praise the Lord”. She finally purchased half the ownership of the Korean catering service/take-out restaurant.

This is the story of a motivated woman who came from a high-class family in Korea to live a new life as a low-class immigrant. This is also America because the contributions of all, including Americans immigrants, make up the United States of America. This is how a Korean immigrant traveled over the seas to come to live in a nation of nations to look for a better life.
Group 2, Honorable Mention

Creating an Innovative Culture

Eric Jo

Forest Hills H.S., 10th grade
Teacher: Mrs. Sussman-Kim
Principal: Stephen J. Frey
Superintendent: John Lee

Author’s Statement:
In my essay, I honor my uncle, Tae-Hyung Jo, who succeeded in America against great odds. I believe in and want to follow his philosophy. And his philosophy of success is of working hard, never giving up and combining the best parts of one’s life experiences.

My uncle’s name is Tae-Hyung Jo. He majored in math and graduated from a university in Korea.

He has lived in America for more than 17 years now. He told me about starting his new life in America. When he arrived he did not have any money at all. He also did not have a place to sleep. However, he found two jobs. One was as a pamphlet giver and the other was as a cleaner in a store. He worked more than 12 hours a day, six days a week. He worked so hard just to feed himself. Great endurance was required of him. He never expected to be in the situation he was in. Many times he thought about going back to Korea, but he desperately needed to succeed in America. He had promised his parents that he would come back home with pride. All that hard work was worth it. He bought a small house. He started tutoring math. He continued to study English.

After living in America for several years, he finally adapted to American life. He started eating American food despite the fact that he is a vegetarian. He learned to cook American food. And most amazingly of all, he started using a fork! He signed up for a green card. And even though he wanted to remain a Korean citizen, he got American citizenship so he could return to Korea. He lost a lot, but he also gained much.
I chose my uncle as the subject of this essay because he has succeeded in America and I believe in his philosophy. My uncle told me that adapting to the culture of another country is very difficult, but if you take the best parts of the new culture and add them to the best parts of your native culture, you will create an innovative culture of your very own.