

Kindling the Flame of the Korean Spirit

By: June Lee, grade 8

The lunch bell rings, and most students pour noisily into the corridor. However, fifty of us gather in a small classroom, preparing for the week's international fair meeting. Each one of us excited to share something special about our country's culture. For me, there is one thing that stands out above all others about my heritage: the Korean spirit.

1919 was an especially tumultuous year for Koreans all over the world. After nearly a decade of forced military occupation under neighboring Japan, the country finally rose as one in revolt. The March 1st Movement had begun.

Early in the day of March 1st, 1919, a single cry pierced the facsimile morning calm, "Mansei! Daehan Dongnip Mansei!". Slowly, more voices took up the chant, growing ferociously louder and louder, until the cheer roared through the streets. Koreans stepped out from the hidden recesses of doorways, leaving behind the shelter of their homes to stand shoulder to shoulder with their fellow countrymen, exhibiting a pride that had cowered for nearly a decade. Korean flags appeared at the hands of nationalists, and a vast sky of fluttering Taegukgi's rose proudly above the daring protestors. Sheltered only by their mutual loyalty and a canopy of boundless determination, the wall of protestors, thousands-strong, marched toward the Japanese capitol.

For 12 months, news of this first march in Pagoda Park flamed through the hearts of Koreans like a forest fire, lighting independence marches all across the country. Despite the

peaceful basis of the revolts, over 17,500 unarmed demonstrators were murdered by Japanese police, and 63,000 wounded or arrested. Every independence fighter that marched for Korea became aware of the risks and inevitable penalties; however, they continued to urge more protests. The Korean Spirit had become stronger than fear of reprisals by the Japanese police.

Their pain at the hands of the Japanese was tolerated, accepted even, for the sake of the descendants they would never have the chance to meet. Each blow by the club was defied in the hope that their memory would be honored, and the sacrifice imitated when their country felt need of it in the future. Over the course of the next half-century, new generations were tested again and again as Korea was rebuilt from the detritus of the Korean War. Nevertheless, Koreans stepped up to the challenge every time, and the spirit of a proud kingdom climbed higher, woven into cities of towering skyscrapers.

That indomitable Korean Spirit emerged again during the 1997 IMF crisis, when Korea's economy plummeted dangerously near the default line. Realizing the impending disaster, Koreans willingly called on the memories of their ancestors, and ceded nearly every metal treasure they owned, from wedding rings to athletic medals, resulting in a country-wide donation of 10 million dollars, or 20 tons of gold. With such devotion and support to Korea's firmly rooted government, Koreans created a bridge miles-thick between their nation and its people, briskly boosting it into the exclusive club of countries with the top 13 highest GDP's.

In recent years, this ironclad economy has far outpaced many of its past competitors, namely European nations including Greece, Israel, etc. The flame of the Korean independence fighters must be passed on to future generations, not only Korean, but nationalities scattered

across the globe, in order to preserve such near-failing economies all over our planet today. The lessons learned from the martyrs' sacrifice are those that will easily raise every third-world country from shame, and need to be pressed into each global citizen's conscience today.

Because most protestors were shot on the spot, they would not even live to see the dreams of their lives fulfilled, but they partook willingly in the Samil movement with the belief that their tears and blood would someday build a nation stronger and brighter than any that had ever been seen before. This nation would be powerful enough to sustain itself from outside attacks but adept enough to build an economy from the memory of its ancestors' sacrifice. It was understood that following generations of Koreans would understand how sacrifice, unity, and an antipathy for violence built up their homeland and embrace its promise for a peaceful and flourishing future.

To build a world in which no people will suffer as the Koreans of the Samil movement did, we as students must strike the match for a peaceful revolution. In order to eliminate inter-racial hatred before this generation takes power, I believe we must educate our peers on the rich culture and history behind our homeland by starting student-led international fairs in elementary, middle, and high schools. Acceptance for our differences begins at the bottom line, and learning about the traditions and past of new countries will strengthen our stance as the future multi-cultural leaders of America.

Despite living an ocean away from the home and graves of our family, we, as proud Korean-Americans, must keep within our hearts always, the tiger spirit and fiery love our ancestors had for their country. By keeping these alive in our souls and living by the standard

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they set for us long ago, the spirit of the Korean rebels will never die, but burn brighter with every passing generation.