*2020 RAS Korea Essay Contest*

In early 2019, RAS Korea received four essays from high school students at Dongducheon Foreign Language High School. Those essays are published in Transactions Vol.93. Many fellow students expressed interest in future submissions, so the essay contest was organized.

RAS Korea received several submissions to the contest. Entrants came from foreign language high schools located throughout Korea. The judges were challenged in choosing the winners from an exceptional group of enthusiastic young scholars-to-be. The officers and council are proud of these young people and their interest in Korean history and culture. We wish them well in their future studies and hope to see them excel in their chosen fields of study.

Besides the first-place winner, whose submission is printed below with minimal editing, the judges also honored three other students.

*Runners Up*

Yoonsung Cho, “The Korean Minjokseong,” Dongducheon Foreign Language High School

Yeeun Choi, “The Cherishable Island of Korea, Dokdo,” Daeil Foreign Language High School

*Honorable Mention*

Juhyun Lee, “The Development of Women’s Rights in Korea from the Joseon Dynasty to Present: Focusing on Korean Literature,” Myeongdeok Foreign Language High School

Congratulations to all!

*Your Memory, Our Memories*

Park Jiwon

What do you remember? What did you do in your past times and how did you grow up? Here, we have a buddy called Korea. Although Korea underwent many hardships and difficulties through time, he stood firm. In a short time, he jumped over several obstacles and grew up exponentially. However, in his heart, strands of sad memories remain tangled to this day.

Among pains left, the biggest baggage of Korea is “comfort women.” On the face of it, the word seems to mean things like ‘caring women’ or a female housekeeper. But actually, it has a more serious meaning than it looks. Comfort women were military sexual slavery to satisfy the Japanese army during World War II. Young teenagers to mature women, the Japanese army allured innocent women to go to Japan with them, lying that there are great occupations and opportunities to earn money. Because people were so poor at that time, for the burden of supporting a family, many young women got involved in that half reluctantly. But so different from what Korean girls dreamed, they had to suffer from everyday rapes and violence which was worse than a nightmare. Genocides for no reason commonly happened. Time passed for more than 70 years from then, but we could not hear any apologies from Japan.

However, Japan is deceiving the world by manipulating the mass media and distorting documents. There is no information about ‘comfort women’ in their school textbooks and the politicians even shout out that ‘comfort women’ never existed. The voice of truth from the victims of Japanese Military Sexual Violence is fading away, blocked from the barriers of the distortion. Now, most of the girls who became the gray have gone with their memories buried in their hearts. We are afraid of losing memories.

I struggle to find a piece of memories inside of Korea. Since I am interested in history and culture, I participated in many activities of introducing Korea’s culture to the world and correcting documents of distorted history, as a member of VANK. Thankfully, because I am a student at a foreign language school, I was able to learn many stories from many different countries. Meanwhile, the voice of a stranger hit my ears. I could hear a little voice from a corner of our history textbook. I went near and paid attention to what she says. It was about Vietnamese women’s memory, which was a historical event sharing with our country.

When I finished listening to her story, I was thunderstruck. It was hard for me to believe that Korean soldiers exerted sexual violence and even massacred Vietnamese women during the Vietnam War. I was ashamed that the Korean army did something similar to the Japanese army who we despised. After the sexual violence, the Korean soldiers returned to Korea abandoning the women and the children between them, twice hurting the children left without their fathers and the Vietnamese women who had to take care of them alone. These facts were hard to find in our textbooks, and what we have learned. It is a hidden history that ordinary students would not learn if they were interested in history or had no chance.

As well as comfort women, the background of Lai Đại Hàn[[1]](#footnote-1) is one part of Korea’s culture and history. If we think of the tough path that we walked, we would never neglect the pains of the Vietnamese women from our violence. Although Korea gave so many agonies to Vietnamese women, I believe that we are the ones who can empathize and hug them the most since we have similar pains. Concealing a shameful thing just makes one more shameful. Koreans, especially students, have the right to learn the balanced fact of history. Remembering the right memories will be the cornerstone for being the established nation so that we can truly be qualified to receive an apology from Japan.

While writing my essay, I am concerned about Lai Đại Hàn becoming a reason for justifying the comfort women. I want to make sure these two incidents are different matters so that Korea and Japan should not find the point of compromise from each other but should make a sincere apology to each of the damaged countries.

Prior to the distortion, it is true that memories are easy to be remembered to one’s advantage since remembering is such a selective and personal matter. In a similar way, history has turned into a subjective story. Nevertheless, history does not lie. There are people, the living witnesses who remember. History textbooks are not a diary. It is not only important to listen to the sound of the inner side, but crucial to extend our sights to the world and pay attention to what other countries remember. This helps us to face the truth as it is, and thus, results in a deep understanding of our own country which can finally reach the real respect between countries.

I dedicate this essay to our precious memories. I wish for the world to be a heartwarming place where people embrace each other’s bad memories and share happy memories.

*Jiwon Park, born on May 17, 2002, is a student at Daejeon Foreign Language High School. Jiwon is a club member of Voluntary Agency Network of Korea (VANK) and participates in several of the group’s activities related to Korean history and promoting Korean traditions to the world.*

1. Editor’s note: Lai Đại Hàn is a Vietnamese term for a person of mixed ancestry born to a South Korean father and a Vietnamese mother due to sexual assault by Korean soldiers during the Vietnamese War. They often live at the margins of Vietnamese society. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)