# *2021 RAS Korea Essay Contest*

2021 marks the second year of the Royal Asiatic Society Korea High School English Essay Contest. We are honored that the contest is co- sponsored by the Korea Heritage Education Institute (K\_Heritage\_Lab), which has generously donated this year’s prize money, and Asia Development Foundation, which provides administrative support to RAS Korea.

We had significantly more entries than last year. The topic was open, and we received a wide variety of submissions from Korean ESL students at high schools across the country. They wrote on topics about which they felt deeply, from aspects of Korea that make them proud to social problems that must be overcome, looking at the country’s past, present, and future. The five judges had to assess writing quality, choice of topic and handling of it, and what was deemed most appropriate for inclusion in *Transactions*.

The judges were split in their assessments, but the winning entry was the one essay we all agreed on. The first-place essay is printed on the next page with minimal editing to appreciate the essayist’s intense and passionate voice.

All the young writers who participated showed a talent for communicating their ideas and feelings. We were deeply impressed by the response to the contest. Next year, we plan to introduce an essay theme to give the writers a focused direction. We also expect we will have more entries than this year, even though it might make our job of choosing winners even harder.

2021 Judges Panel

# *Korean spirit in the historical poem*

Song Sumin

“I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,” from Walt Whitman’s “I Hear America Singing” displays the patriotism of Americans and shows how Walt Whitman loved his country. Likewise, there are many patriotic poems all over the world. Similarly, Korea has a long history of poetic patriotism revealed in poems. Throughout the past century of hardships, like the independence movement, aggressions by foreign powers and the Korean War, writers have made valuable connections with citizens. When life became difficult, these writings helped our ancestors transcend sorrow and anguish into strong will. Historical Korean poets expressed love and hope, sometimes-even lessons to conquer through the art of poetry. Korean poems speak about the strong love and bond to country, the spirit of resistance and perseverance to a challenging past.

Throughout our history, one of the most sorrowful parts of Korean history is the period of Japanese colonialism. We had lost our national sovereignty to Japan as they tried to persecute Koreans and destroy our culture by preventing the use of the Korean language. Hence, Japan did not want to pervade the independent consciousness of Korea. However, intellectuals, ordinary people, and students continued their anti- Japanese independence movement regardless of gender or age. Among them, Korean poets displayed their sense of resistance, encouraged independence fighters, and preserved the Korea culture by writing poems. Those poets were pursued and threatened their whole lives. If they were captured by the Japanese, they were tortured and even killed. “Peak,” express poet Yi Yook-sa’s, suffering through the resistance movement and soul never gave up and delivered hope. “Finally swept to the northern region / Where to kneel down, no dot to step on” depicts circumstances in which independence fighters had to evacuate to the north from Japan’s repression. In such a worst-case situation like standing on the edge of a precipice, he said, “Thus thinking eyes closed, winter is a rainbow made of steel.” It was his manifest; he is always looking for a rainbow, the

independence of his homeland. In addition, this line denotes the spirit that Koreans value: patience for what you want even though in adversity. Yi Yook-sa is a great poet and independent activist who wrote a number of resistance poems such as “Green Grape” and “Wilderness.” Nowadays, his poems and life story give young people insight to the past and show his resolve to fight for his country even at the risk of death.

Another example, “Chang-eh-shi” written by Choi Yik-hyeon is set in the period of enlightenment when the Japanese imperialists were ambitious to invade Korea. “Chang-eh-shi” reflects on the loyalty to Korea by showing its willingness to fight with the people of Joseon. The title “Chang-eh-shi” explains when our nation is in hardship, the righteous army will overcome it. In the poem, Choi said, “Even though the body is in seclusion, wishing that it cares about the country.” Choi demanded another Korean uprising with him. Just as standing up the righteous army when Joseon was invaded by the Qing Dynasty. In the next phrase, “What would be the difference if I ask the present or the past?” was Choi’s way of telling his readers to resist Japan without hesitation. In fact, after writing the poem, Choi Yik-hyeon fought against Japan by collecting a righteous army and eventually died in exile. Like this, the reason many Koreans were able to fight together to protect our homeland during the Japanese colonial era was because of the cooperation and patriotism encouraged through the works of Choi Yik-hyeon.

Currently, the pro-democracy movement of Myanmar is drawing international attention. Protesters are asking other countries for help. Among them, Koreans are taking more interest since Korea had a very similar past. We also struggled to become a democracy. Korea had once been governed by a military dictatorship for nearly 30 years. Koreans endeavored to achieve democracy by constantly protesting, including the June democratic uprising and 5.18 movement. Finally, we did it, but we made so many sacrifices. In the poem, “With burning thirst” of Kim Ji-ha, Korean’s thirst for freedom, democracy is expressed well. “Recalling the bloody faces of my friends captured,” shows a horrendous situation at the time. Poetic narrators crave democracy even under oppressive governments and engrave, “I write your name down secretly / with burning thirst with burning thirst Long live democracy!” in his heart. This poem based song thrived throughout the people even though the government banned it as soon as it was released. Like this, the sincere craving of freedom never diminishes, despite the many threats. Koreans certainly had the spirit of resistance when injustices occurred and they do still. As recently illustrated, when President Park stepped down, it was

through peaceful protest and persistence that once again dismantled a corrupt government. As I reread the words of Kim, I think of Myanmar and hope that Myanmar finds freedom and peace.

All over the globe, at one moment or other, we have all faced adversities. From war, corrupt institutions, dictators, human rights violators and now, a global pandemic. However, throughout time, we have used our voices, our words to fight back, get justice, and create peace. Koreans have also constantly tried to resist what they believed was wrong, and they did not give up no matter what difficult situations came. Patriotism and words show that people can work together to overcome all. Historic poets like Choi, Kim and Yi should never be forgotten. Their patriotic words helped lay the strongest foundation to have Korea become what it is today. These poems contain Korea’s own soul, mind, and history. They reveal Korea’s own way of responding to hardship and the spirit our ancestors wanted to leave forever in our hearts.

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**Runners-up**

*Pride Rolled in a Kimbap* by Kim Gyuri, Pusan Foreign Language High School

*Harmony and Balance* by Shin Su-hyeon, Dongducheon Foreign Language High School