

2026 3.1. Movement Essay

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I never used to think very much about being Korean. When I lived in Queens, NY, most of my friends were Korean. At church, we spoke English, but everyone had parents and grandparents who spoke Korean. We always ate Korean food at church. At school, lots of kids brought their own food for lunch. I brought 김밥, 어묵, 삼겹살, 보쌈, and 김치볶음밥. Nobody thought it was weird. No one asked strange questions. It was just lunch.

Then my family moved to this town. Wyckoff, New Jersey.

Suddenly, everything felt different.

At my new school, almost all the kids are “American.” My mom tells me not to say that because I am American too. She’s right. I know I am American. But what I really mean is that most of the kids are white. I am the only Asian boy in my class. For the first time, I felt like I stood out just by how I look.

During the first week of school, my mom tried to pack mandu (Korean dumplings) for my lunch. But I told her, “No, just pack chicken nuggets.” Every time she tried to pack Korean food, I said I didn’t want it. I didn’t even give a good reason. I just didn’t want anyone to look at my lunchbox and think it was strange. I wanted to be the same as everyone else.

At lunch, everyone brings sandwiches, chips, and juice boxes. I sat there eating nuggets or peanut butter sandwiches, even though I was thinking about kimchi fried rice. I felt something heavy inside. It felt like I was hiding a part of myself.

Around that time, I watched a movie about Yu Gwan-sun and learned the March 1st Movement.

On March 1st, 1919, Korea was under Japanese rule. Koreans were not allowed to freely use their language or express who they were. They even had to change their names into Japanese. But thousands of people gathered and shouted, “대한독립 만세!” which means, “Long live Korean independence!” They were asking for freedom. But that was not the only thing they were declaring. They were also declaring who they were. They were saying, “We are still Koreans. You cannot erase us. We will still speak Korean!”

One of those people was Yu Gwan-sun. She was only a teenager. Even after she was arrested and put in jail, she kept shouting for independence and kept speaking in Korean. When people asked her why she would risk so much, she answered, “who else would?”

That question made me think about myself.

No one is stopping me from being Korean. No one is putting me in jail. But why am I stop being myself? I choose to hide because I am afraid of standing out.

I told my mom she could pack my favorite Korean food, kimchi fried rice, for lunch.

I felt nervous when I opened my lunchbox. I was scared someone would say it smelled bad. But no one said anything. One asked what it was and I explained it to them. That day, I felt lighter.

My courage is not like Yu Gwan-sun 's courage. But I learned that courage could start small. It can start with taking Korean food for lunch and not feeling ashamed.

Now, when I feel different, I try to remember that being different is not something to hide. It is something to understand and be proud of.

I am Korean. And I am American.

I am Roy Han and 한의영.

Being myself is my own kind of independence.