

Korean Literature in the United States: At the Centennial Year

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Introduction

We will celebrate 2003 as the centennial year of the Koreans' landing on Honolulu on January 13, 1903. In early December 1902, a group of Korean immigrants seeking work in Hawaii sugar plantation left Inchon for Honolulu. Their ship embarked at Shimonoseki, Japan for a few days for inspection and health examination. The ship left Shimonoseki in the evening of December 24, and arrived at Honolulu in the night of January 12, 1903. They spent the first night in the cabin. So we will celebrate January 13 as the centennial day of Korean immigrants to the United States.

We call 7,000 immigrants in between 1903 and 1905 as "the first wave." After the Chosun Dynasty lost sovereignty to Japan, the immigration to Hawaii could not continue.

A great majority of Korean immigrants came to the US after the 1960s. The US immigration policy was generous to Asian people. The Korean students in the 1960s and 1970s remained in the US after their

education. Now, 2 million Koreans live in the US. We call them as the “second wave.”

This essay is to report and to review poets and writers in the “second wave” who use the Korean language, not English, as their main medium. In between the first wave and the second wave, three prominent Korean writers emerged: Yonghill Kang’s “the Grass Roof,” Richard E. Kim’s “The Martyred” and Yong Ik Kim’s “Wedding Shoes” and other short stories. They used English as their language, even though English was their second language. They were followed by Chang Rae Lee and other numerous second generation writers in the last ten or more years.

In the void of the 1970s and 1980s, the Korean poets and writers in the United States published their works in the Korean language newspapers, and attend the Korean churches in Korean language, and organized the Korean literary societies in metropolitan areas in Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., New York, Atlanta, Chicago and San Francisco among others. They dwell on their own Korean language. Only a few of them have attempted to produce their literary works in English.

Their first publication was Jipyongsun (Horizon), a small poetry book.

Since Jipyongsun

Poet Kap Ju Whang in Los Angeles initiated this small poetry

magazine with several new immigrants in the Los Angeles area who were interested in poetry writing. Jonggi Mah and Yearn Hong Choi joined him as the editorial board members. They made their debut as poets in early 1960s via *Hyundai Munhak* (Modern Literature Monthly), the most prestigious literary magazine in South Korea. The first issue was published in 1973. This poetry magazine drew attention from Seoul's daily newspapers. The *Donga Ilbo Daily* opined the *Jipyongsun* as the first literary magazine in the United States, and praised the overseas Koreans' literary efforts. Overseas literary magazines were published in Manchuria and Japan in the 1930s and 1940s. The *Jipyongsun* became the historical literary magazine in the US, according to the daily newspapers.

Ten years later, in 1983, the *Miju Munhak* (Korean Literature in America) was published annually by the Korean Literary society of America which that was organized by novelist Song Sang-ok and poet Kim Ho-gill who came to the US as new immigrants. The Korean Literary society was the first large-scale organization by the Korean poets and writers in Los Angeles that claimed to represent all Korean poets and writers in the United States of America. The poets also organized their own organization in Los Angeles and started to publish their annual poetry magazine, *Oaegi* (The Foreign land). The *Miju Munhak* is now attempting to publish quarterly. Many poets and writers feel their annual publications are not providing enough spaces to their creative writings.

In Los Angeles, literary magazine *Woollim* (Echo) was short-lived, and *Munhak Saegae* (Literary Realm) has been published by poet Ko Won.

In the 1990s, the Korean Poets and Writers' Group in the Washington Area was organized. The group has also been publishing their annual literary magazine, the Washington Munhak (Washington Literature). The Korean literary people in the New York area have also been publishing the New York Munhak (New York Literature) annually. The Korean literary people at Atlanta, Chicago, and San Francisco have been publishing their magazines annually.

In 1996, The Korean Literary Society in Seoul hosted an international conference for overseas Korean literary people, and invited many prominent poets and writers from the US, China, Japan and European nations. It was the first and last big conference of that kind in my life. In the conference, poet Cho Yoon-ho based in Los Angeles proposed a new publication, the Haeoae Munhak (Overseas Korean Literature) annually. In the first issue, he printed a story by Lee Hoi-sung and his dialogue with Yu Mi-ri, two prominent Korean writers who received the prestigious literary prize, Akudagawa Literary Prize, in Japan. Cho attempted to network overseas Korean poets and writers via his magazine.

In 1999, poet Kim Ho-gill based in Los Angeles organized shijo poets in the US and Canada, and published annual shijo magazine. Shijo is not free verse. It has the traditional rhythm in the poem.

In 2002, Los Angeles-based Song Soon-tae published the Munhak America (Literature in America). This magazine is unique in the sense of bridging Korean literature to America and American literature to Korea. In the first issue, Robert Hass's selection of outstanding

American poets and their poems including Elizabeth Bishop, Anthony Hecht, Linda Gregg, John Ashbery, Angela Ball, Anne Carson; John Steinbeck's works; Dialogue with Sidney Sheldon; and Rick Bass's short story. It also introduced several famous Korean poems, essays and short stories in South Korea.

Ignored, Forgotten or Alienated Literature

Despite Korean-American poets and writers' long efforts, no one paid attention to them. I was very disappointed by Marshall Pihl's total ignorance of the Korean literature in the United States, even though he was one of the prominent Korean scholars in the United States. He did not want to know what was going on in the US. He paid attention to what was going on inside Korea. The Korean literature in Korea was his concern. He is not alone. Cornell University's East Asia series contain Korean poetry books and novels, but they do not even consider publishing the Korean-American literature at all.

The Korean studies programs in the American colleges and universities have set up Korean literature classes. The students are the second- and third-generation Koreans. They study Korean classics such as Chunhyangchun, Kuwoonmong, and Hong Gil-dong chun, and contemporary literary works by Choi In-hoon, Hwang Suk-young, Lee Moon-yul, Chon Sang-byung and Ko Un among others. The students' parents are paying their sons and daughters' tuitions and they are the Korean poets and writers in the United States, but the students are not introduced to their parental works at all. This is a sad state. Without the students, the Korean studies program cannot survive. But their

parents' literary works have been totally ignored, forgotten and alienated from their sons and daughters. Ridiculous! The Korean studies programs were financed by one million dollars or more by the Korean Foundation, but they have been operated by the students' enrollments and their parents' tuition payments.

Why is it so?

Pihl and Cornell people think their parents' works do not belong to the Korean literature, and do not have the literary value. I disagree with them. Poet Park Nam-soo's poems such as "Sea Gull" should be read. Yeom Hong Choi's short story has been published in a major college textbook. The Anglo-Saxon White American teachers in the Korean studies programs do not have sense. They don't know who are paying their salaries. Simply they don't paid attention to what is going on in the US. White American teachers in the Korean studies program are just seeking ties with the funding agencies in Seoul, and those who can help the funding for them.

Resistance Poetry

A group of the Korean poets in the US published a couple of resistance poetry books against the Korean military regimes in the 1970s and 1980s. Before and after General Park Chung-hee was assassinated, a couple of Korean poets in the US published political poems to denounce military dictatorship. When General Chun Doo-hwan killed protesting citizens in Kwangju in 1980, seven poets published Bitu Bada (Sea of Rays). In the following year, they

published *Ah, Kwangjuyo, Mudungsaniyo* (Oh, Kwangju and Mt. Mudung" with Korean poets in Japan and *Bitsi Tanun Owol* (May Burning in Pays) in 1983 to dedicate their poems to those who fought against the military rule. Poet Kap Ju Whang led the 7 poets.

Poet Ko won published *South Korean Poets of Resistance* (New York: Cross-Cultural Communications, 1980) with the poems by Kim Chi-ha and other poets in Korea.

Literary Works in English

Ko Won translated the Korean poems and edited *Contemporary Korean Poetry* (Iowa University press, 1970). That was the first major remarkable introduction of Korean poems to the United States. He also published his own poems in English, *The Turn of Zero* (New York: Cross-Cultural Communication, 1974).

During his college days at Indiana University, Yearn Hong Choi published 'America' and "To the Flowers of Indiana" in the *Indiana Daily*, and exhibited his poetry-art ensemble at Indiana University Union Building for one month. The exhibit drew attentions from the students, faculty and Indiana residents. AP and UPI covered the exhibit as a unique one by a Korean student in a major American campus, too.

In the 1970s, his poems were discovered by Professor Paula De Paula of the University of Espirito Santo, Brazil, translated into Portuguese, and published in Brazil. Professor De Paula and his graduate students in his Comparative Literature class translated Choi's

works. (Paula De Paula, “nacionalidade da lingua,” A TRIBUNA-VICTORIA, Subado 22 julho de 1978).

He published “A Poet” and “The Wood” in the Wyoming (1987, n.4) and “Arizona Desert” in the Mildred and collection of his poems, Autumn Vocabularies (Calcutta: Writers’ Workshop, 1990). Pulitzer poet Gwendolyn Brooks wrote a poem, “Yearn Hong Choi,” for his first poetry book in English.

He read his poems in the US Library of Congress under the auspices of Gettrude Clark Fund in 1994 for the first time as a Korean poet. The US Poet laureate is inside the Library of congress. Poetry reading has been a tradition in the poetry room in the Library.

He published several short stories, one of which was “Bloomington, Fall 1972” that was published in Short Story International and a college textbook, International Journeys through Writing edited by Marilyn Smith Layton (New York: HarperCollins, 1991).

A poetry book in English by a group of Korean-American poets was published in 1997, Mother and Dove (New York: Institute for Korean-American culture). Julia Kyungja Im made the publication possible.

Haengja Kim, president of the Korean Poets and Writers’ Group in the Washington Area, created a poetry-art ensemble in a Georgetown Arts Gallery in 1997 that was covered by the Washington Post. Poems in English were juxtaposed by corresponding paintings.

Summing Up

The “second wave” immigrants’ literary works have been circulated among themselves. Their works have not been circulated widely. The readership of the Korean literary works is extremely limited in the US, and the Korean literary magazines in Korea do not allocate their spaces for the Korean-American poets and writers. The prestigious Korean literary magazines are already competitive among the first-class poets and writers. Language barrier is the first hurdle, and the literary quality is the second hurdle to them.

Overcome the language barrier and improving the literary quality are the tasks for them at the centennial year. Those who cannot overcome the language barrier are seeking their places inside Korea. Only a very few will find successes in that endeavor. How to improve the literary quality depends upon their creative efforts and labors. Talent should be the necessary ingredient, but writing and re-writing over and again will help. Stories should be appealing to the readers, but a certain kind of plotting suitable to a certain kind of stories should be invented or discovered. That makes a literary quality.

Some good autobiographical novels by the first-and second-generation writers have been published in the United States. Non-fictional stories can appeal to the readership, but their literary quality has been questioned. Poetry is facing more serious troubles, because rhythm is not residing in their poems, because English is not their native language. That caused a serious problem or barrier. Therefore, their poems are at best translated works from Korean into English.

The first-generation poets and writers have been ignored, forgotten, and neglected by the American literary magazines and the Korean literary magazine for very long time, and will be unless they make successes in the United States. The first-generation poets can rediscover Cathy Song's *Picture Bride* on the occasion of the centennial year, and the first-generation Korean writers can rediscover Amy Tan's *Joy Luck Club* as their writing model. This can be my best advice and suggestion to the Korean-American poets and writers.