

MFA STUDENT, FIBERS, KOREA

“Hanji: The fibers of a mulberry tree and pure water combine a mystical union to form one of Korea’s most unique forms. Han (Korea) ji(paper)

-Ven. Young Dam”

Pick up a piece of Korean handmade paper and try to tear it. It is not very easy to do because it is made from the unique naturally long fiber of the inner bark of the paper mulberry tree. It actually seems to have a luminous quality due to its special processing given the paper mulberry fiber. You will discover that it is a superior paper accepting ink readily without blotching or spreading because of its perfect “tooth” and “grain.” The development of fine paper greatly affects the progress of art and culture in the course of a nation’s history and achievements. Paper is an important part of Korean life.

-Kim, Yeong-yon”

I propose to travel to Korea to study the ancient art of papermaking. It is the intent of my project to learn both the techniques of Korean papermaking and to document my research. I will both be studying in Seoul and traveling to smaller villages where traditional papermaking takes place. I have been studying papermaking for five years, both in a university setting and on my own. For a papermaker, the quality of an individual sheet is of extreme importance. I have been taught to make Eastern paper in the United States on Western moulds and deckles. However, I believe that the opportunity to study in Korea would greatly improve my technical skills and knowledge of papermaking.

The Chinese originated paper in 105 AD, but the Koreans added a unique method of sheet forming process, resulting in paper of the highest quality. Hanji is said to touch every part of Korean life. In fact, in a traditional Korean home, both the walls and the floors are coated with Korean paper. For hundreds of years the Korean people lived through cold, bitter winters in houses with doors and windows fabricated from two layers of hanji pasted together. Perhaps this says more than anything about hanji’s indispensability and utility. Strong and durable, as well as translucent and smooth to touch, for centuries hanji has been coveted by Korea’s neighbors.

While both Japan and China make handmade paper, the Koreans have developed techniques that are unmatched in the world. For example, Korean papermakers have developed a mould, used in forming sheets, which allows them to make paper larger than the Chinese and Japanese sheets. The larger sheets are often used to make “yellow carpet paper” or Jan plan. By laminating sheets together with rice starch paste and lime and coating them with oil, the Korean floor papers are created. This is one example of how the Koreans have used paper as an architectural building material. Another technique, uniquely Korean is their paper cloth or chamkyonji. By repetitive washing and kneading of the mulberry fibers, the paper becomes so durable that it can withstand water. Paper scholar and maker, Kim Kyong, declares: “In the 1989 International paper Competition in Japan, the superiority of the Korean paper was again confirmed. Other papers fell apart almost as soon as they were immersed in water. People were astonished to see the Korean papers were unaffected.”

During the first months of my project, I will remain in Seoul, both studying the Korean language and meeting paper artists. I have established a contact at Kyungwon University in Seoul. Professor Liu of the Textile Design Department has offered to be my liaison. (Please see enclosed letter) I will study the practicum of Korean sheet forming techniques and the art of making paper cloth, chamkyonji. Furthermore, I will take frequent trips to a nearby Folk Village, where traditional papermaking takes place. This will be a time to become acclimated to Korean lifestyle and language.

I have researched the curriculum at Yonsei University and Seoul National and plan to enroll in a Korean language program during my stay in Seoul. Furthermore, I have arranged private lessons in Korean at the Lingual Institute, which I will begin in advance of my research project. In addition, I would like to note that many of my contacts in Seoul are English speaking: Professor Liu of Kyungwon University and Kim, Bong-Young; Director of Marketing Communications at the Grand Hyatt Seoul.

I will then travel to Cholla Province, an area known for traditional papermaking. During the winter months, the mulberry is processed. I will study the traditional techniques in processing mulberry and creating hanji. I will visit the different villages to learn of their own specialty papers. For example Chonju is noted for its lichen papers;

whereas Songgwang Village, only 12km from Chonju is distinguished as the birthplace of the Korean floor paper. As an artist sculpting with paper, I believe the unique properties of hanji will greatly benefit my own work and potentially the work of other artists. I am particularly interested in using paper as building material, that can be exposed to natural elements. A central theme in my work is the dichotomy between strength and delicacy. This juxtaposition is the very essence of hanji.

While studying the practice of Korean paper techniques, I will also be conducting research. It is my intent to document my research and have the results published in a professional craft publication. Papermaking has become, over the years, an increasingly popular and important part of the American and international art community. There is a strong demand for new and better techniques which, through my published research, I can share with the community, as well as knowledge and familiarity with the Hanji paper, itself. Today Korean papermaking, despite its unique results, has become overshadowed by the Japanese papers. Korean paper artists and scholars alike fear that the traditional methods may be lost. As Sunj Woo-Je explains: "The Korean papermaking tradition entered a period of decline during Japanese colonial times, and research into the field remains less active than it should be." I firmly believe that this project will increase the knowledge of Korean papermaking in the United States and abroad. I also have ambitions to curate an exhibition of contemporary Korean papermakers when I return to the United States.

In her article, "Hanji: Sturdier than Silk or Leather from Cradle to Grave, Paper was a Part of Life", Lee, Chong-sang, Professor of Fine Arts at Seoul National University expresses her concern for the future of hanji art, as well as the important role artists can play in preserving hanji.:

In spite of its long celebrated history, the current manufacture of Korean traditional mulberry paper reflects a situation far from ideal. The greatest problem stems from modern mass production system devised to cope with massive demands for quality paper. As an artist for whom quality paper is indispensable, I cannot but feel the time honored methods of our ancestors are being adulterated to satisfy the burgeoning needs of an industrial society. Coordination between papermakers and artists is one means to discover how graft traditional skills onto the advanced technology of the modern paper industry. In this way, we can both preserve and develop our valuable cultural asset.

It is my intent to spend one academic year both studying in Seoul and travelling to the paper mills in the countryside. My project will take place from September to May.