



Father Jang performs yupmuljil, Korean sheet-forming.

Hanji Unfurled: One Journey into Korean Papermaking

REVIEWED BY MINAH SONG



HANJI UNFURLED: ONE JOURNEY INTO KOREAN PAPERMAKING

Aimee Lee. Ann Arbor, MI: The Legacy Press, 2012. 208 pages. 10¼ x 7¼ x 1 inches (hardcover, jacketed cloth, sewn). Includes 320 color photographs, maps and diagrams drawn by the author, glossary of Korean and American-English terms, bibliography, and index. \$35.00.

In Korea, papermaking is a craft that have only been grasped by people who learn directly from their masters, who also learned it from their grandmasters. The craft, transferred in the old, remote paper mills from one generation to another, it is not necessarily a mystical secret, but it is somehow shielded from the eyes of the general audience. There are only a few books in Korean that document the production of old-style Korean paper, hanji, and other traditional crafts of the country. It is natural to presume that the subtleties of the papermaker's craft can never be learned from a book, but—not only among artists, conservators, papermakers, and paper hobbyists—there is a strong need for information regarding various technical and cultural aspects of Korean traditional hand papermaking. Today gigantic factories in Korea use an automated production process to make billions of sheets of paper. There are less and less people who carry out the difficult task of learning how to make hanji. Korean-American Aimee Lee is one such person and she has written *Hanji Unfurled: One Journey into Korean Papermaking*, the first book exploring practical and artistic aspects of hanji that has been published in English.

Aimee Lee's book, written in straightforward narrative and not evading personal reflection, describes experiences of the author who had a unique chance to study Korean papermaking and other traditional crafts at the source. In 2008, Lee travelled on a Fulbright grant to Korea and became an apprentice at Jangjibang, the paper mill of the Jang family that has been making hanji for three generations in the mountainous region of Gapyeong, northeast of Seoul. Explaining her reasons for undertaking her task, Lee observes, "Although my original intent during my visit to Korea was to learn one particular way of making paper, my journey led me far beyond the surface of hanji. I started to appreciate the social and cultural importance of paper on various scales: prosaic, elite, functional, decorative, structural, and symbolic."



Aimee Lee and Na Seo-hwan at a weekly jiseung lesson to learn paper cording and paper weaving.

ABOVE: Jiseung paper lanterns. *At left, Aimee Lee's; the one on the right was made by her teacher Na Seo-hwan.*

In the beginning of the book, the readers will find a theoretical description of hanji, explanation of the history of the craft, characterization of raw materials used by Korean papermakers, details of the process, and a comparison with other Asian papers. Lee connects the theory to practice by outlining a chain of empirical examples from her own experience—the difficulty of finding a hanji master, the struggle of early apprenticeship days, and the slow way of learning how to make hanji. Numerous photographs and the author's hand-drawn diagrams of tools and process provide unusual and a truly stunning number of useful details. By sharing her point of view, not as a master, but as a student, she, in essence, allowed us to have a look at her student notes. Instead of explaining techniques of papermaking and traditional crafts in a detached, academic way, Lee's

personal narrative enables readers to follow her own steps in learning the complicated and meticulous process of papermaking. Vivid descriptions let the readers almost smell the cooking bark, feel the sliminess of natural formation aid and the weight of slurry on the screen, and hear the sounds of water moving in the vat.

Lee's was not easy task since traditional hanji makers are not keen on accepting foreign apprentices even though they often complain that young people do not want to undertake hard work and no one wants to learn hand papermaking. In this traditionally male-dominated craft, and in a male-dominated society, when a woman from another country wants to come and learn paper-



Aimee Lee demonstrates webal tteugi during a hanji workshop at the studio she built for the Morgan Art of Papermaking Conservatory and Educational Foundation in Cleveland, Ohio. All photos by Aimee Lee and courtesy of The Legacy Press, Ann Arbor, Michigan.



Aimee Lee brushes newly formed and pressed paper onto the heat dryer.

making, the craftsmen's attitude can be described as anything but enthusiastic. The author describes in chapter three how difficult it was for her to get in touch with masters and even more, to convince them to open their minds and to finally accept and teach her. Her hardship comes alive in the account of perseverance and hard work that was necessary for her to build a professional relationship with the craftsmen.

From chapter six through nine, Lee presents other traditional Korean crafts directly related to hanji: *jiseung* (twisting paper into cords and weaving them into objects), natural dyeing, *joomchi* (paper felting), and calligraphy. As Lee mentions, even though *joomchi* is known to some Western artists, sadly for contemporary Koreans both *jiseung* and *joomchi* are becoming obscure and forgotten.

For many years it has been customary to call mulberry paper by its popular, Western designation—"Japanese paper" or "Japanese tissue," a fact related to the quality and popularity of Japanese paper. Washi, Japanese handmade paper, has already become a familiar name, while its Korean equivalent, hanji, is still new and largely unknown. Aimee Lee's book will undoubtedly contribute to hanji's recognition amongst artists, papermakers, bookbinders, and conservators. But this is only the beginning of the process to widely promote and ensure the continuation of hanji. As emphasized in chapter ten, "Hanji Today," not much can be done without Korean papermakers' effort to consistently maintain the highest quality of their products. Given the specific demands of the highly skilled professionals who buy handmade paper, a point made by Lee is well taken: "Korean paper mills need to learn how to become accountable and competitive in the international market, recording and maintaining samples of their product lines for quality control."

For Aimee Lee, the end of her apprenticeship and her studies in Korea did not mean the end of her journey. After returning to the United States, she built a Korean-style hanji papermaking facility in the Morgan Art of Papermaking Conservatory in Cleveland, Ohio, and continues to teach hanji workshops and experiment with hanji in her artwork. "My impetus was to find a way to connect my heritage with my identity as an artist and a person," reflects Lee in the final chapter of the book. "But I believe that the study of hand papermaking can be as rewarding to someone approaching it for entirely different reasons." No matter what the reasons and paths are, Lee remarks, "I am heartened by all the ways that we can connect" through the study of the remarkable tradition of hanji.