

Journals of the Korean American Community

The cutting edge of historical reportage, literary writing and journalism in Korean America

The quiet, thoughtful voices of our times are too often drowned out by the sheer quantity and volume of exciting, shallow "news" oriented media. To counteract this trend, we turn our attention this quarter to a small selection of journals on fascinating topics written by the historians, writers, and artists of Korean America. This is by no means a comprehensive list, just a sample. KQ welcomes recommendations of journals to review for future issues.

OCCASIONAL PAPERS, THE JOURNAL OF THE KOREAN AMERICAN HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Occasional Papers is a journal which is decidedly less nonchalant than its name. As the official publi-

cation of the Korean American Historical Society, based in Seattle, Washington, it was first published in 1985 and entitled *The Journal of the Korean American Historical Society*. Then an interval of eleven years passed when the journal was not published, while the Korean American population in the Seattle area grew and flourished. Finally, the second edition was published in 1996, with one per year promised by the Society from now on.

The issues covered in the 1996 edition were far-reaching and diverse. Many are written from a scholarly point of view, including meticulous explanations of research methodology, and many other details the aver-

age reader is not interested in, however, there are gems of information for anyone determined enough to slog through a researcher's explanation to other researchers about the way types of research were accomplished and why. These studies include one on attitudes of Korean American students at the University of Washington, which explore Korean American students' attitudes towards various social issues, such as marriage, and gender and family roles as well as opinions on the relationship of the U.S. and Korea. There are some interesting facts in this study, but a lot of reading is required to glean them from the rather weighty text.

The best part of the 1996 edition

for the average reader by far are the oral histories of one immigrant family in Hawaii, the Kang family. There is something about verbatim oral histories, particularly by voluble, funny old ladies that make the flavor of the times, including everything from slang expressions to economic concerns like the price of a bag of flour, seem to jump off the page at you.

These particular family histories are done by two generations, a Korean "picture bride," Sung-hark Kang, who married a Korean immigrant laborer in Hawaii, then two of her children, and a niece and nephew of Kang, who were raised in Hawaii and later in the state of Washington. Sung-hark

Kang left her family at age 17 because of an excessively strict family, particularly a repressive father. The family disowned her and could never answer her letters or in any other way admit she was alive after that. Sung-hark Kang related how after her father died, she received a thick packet of letters from him which he wrote to her but never mailed.

Particularly touching and tragic is the story Kang relates about how she came to be a picture bride. Kang was a runaway and knew for a fact she had to go forward with her life, even with all the regrets she was having immediately after she left home. To return was unthinkable. She met her future

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husband in a store in Yokohama where she was working as a clerk after she ran away. Her future husband courted her, but also lured her by promising a travel permit which would allow her to go abroad and study. She needed medical treatment before she could immigrate. Kang paid for it all. After she was declared cured, she related

...and the first thing out of his mouth — what do you think the first thing he said was “But do you want to get married or do you want to study?” I was already feeling so bad about all the money he spent. ...I just couldn't say that what I wanted to do was study. So I told him I'd leave it up to him, and before I even finished saying the words, he said “I want to get married.” My heart dropped. I couldn't beg him to let me study after having said what I did, and that's how I ended up getting married.

This decision, and other bad ones made later on in life reveal how her upbringing, which was a traditional one, resulted in her being unprepared in the extreme to deal with even the most basic of life's necessary decisions. Her upbringing was not completely to blame, however. Over the rather slow and circuitous pace of reading the oral history, the reader can piece together the many small reasons that made this particular life such a difficult one for Mrs. Kang. She and thousands of other immigrants were forced to face difficulties related to acclimating to a new culture and a tumultuous transition in history, all simultaneously. The result was lives characterized by hard times — near victimization of new immigrants — who, in complete bewilderment, took up back-breaking jobs that bordered on slave labor in Hawaiian plantations because there were no other jobs, and because once in Hawaii, they were too broke to return home.

It is clear from Sung-hark Kang's narrative that she deeply regretted her abandonment of her parents for all of her days. Later on, she divorced her alcoholic husband and moved to the state of Washington, attempting to establish a family farm with her children, another situation that resulted in repeated economic failures and constant back-breaking labor. Concerning her children, she said “I would always get so sad watching them sleep, stretched out in their pajamas all in a row. I used to cry and cry over them. And if my kids ever did anything wrong, or didn't listen to me, the thought that it was because I was such a bad daughter to my parents would always come to me.”

This psychological/cultural predicament in which she found herself is illuminated further in the oral history of Kang's daughter Marion Van Deel, who talked at length in her history about the sometimes bizarre behavior of her mother, who never accepted the fact that her children were growing up with Western cultural norms around them. Strong expectations from her mother and a clash of cultures led to punishment bordering on brutality for the easygoing Marion. “...she beat us! She kicked me right here and I passed out, and then later on, she got some ice and revived me. ...Mother was never happy, and she took it out on us. That's the kind of life we lived.” Korean American oral histories, like those related in *Occasional Papers* reveal a history characterized by constant struggle on all fronts, economic, cultural, social and psychological. They ground us in the present because they illuminate in a step-wise fashion, just how Korean American people were established in this country. Those who went before us suddenly get promoted a notch or two in our mental filing system. And as hard as it is for us in some of our modern economic, social, and cultural difficulties, reading histories like this put all these less traumatic problems in perspective.

Volume three of *Occasional Papers*, published in April of this year, explores multicultural relations and intergenerational relations, including biographical sketches of eleven members of an extended family, revolving around the World War II era. It also includes, among other things, an essay on Korean “Go” players in Seattle, book and movie reviews, including an interview with Chris Chan Lee, the director of *Yellow*, and an essay by Elaine H. Kim on multicultural relations and the role of Korean Americans.

A year's membership in the Korean American Historical Society, which includes an annual edition of *Occasional Papers* costs \$20 for an individual membership and \$12 for a student membership. Write to: Memberships, Korean American Historical Society, 10303 Meridian Ave. N., Ste. 301, Seattle, WA 98133

LITERARY AND VISUAL ARTS JOURNALS

For an overview of Korean culture today, several publications offer a sampling of the arts world. Two primarily focus on the Korean and Korean-American literary and visual

arts. Contributions range from gritty first person journalism to scholarly essays, from contemporary art and photography to fiction and poetry. Contributing writers, photographers, and artists are either Korean, Korean American, or individuals influenced in some way by Korean culture.

MUAE

MUAE takes its name from a Buddhist term which means without hindrance, boundless or completely interpenetrating, that all entities and events mutually reflect and are included within each other.

It's an apt description of the publication which showcases writers, scholars, and artists working in any print, visual, or performance media. MUAE contains critical studies, creative writing, translations, journalism, documentation and visual projects in a substantial perfect bound volume with textbook quality paper stock.

Its contributors represent a cross-section of Koreans, Korean-Americans, non-Koreans and scholars of Korean art, history and literature. A sampling of its contents include a scholarly essay about the politics and aesthetics of subduing colonial territories, in this case, the Philippines. The essay examines how the British colonial mindset influenced the America's imperial role in settling the Philippines and its subsequent homogenization of the culture, even to the point of physically altering the landscape:

The assumptions...revolve around this and related themes: how the arrangement of space may be seen as a reflection of the desire to leave a physical mark upon the landscape, rather than simply reflecting on or describing it; and how the colonial impulse for building—particularly for duplicating Western models of urban planning in the ‘untamed’ cities of the Orient—demonstrates the need to organize and dominate the world according to a pattern of grids facilitating expansion and domination.

In this ‘promised land,’ the colonizer, who is also its cartographer, basks in the privilege of beholding the world and himself as if for the first time. Like a new Adam, he has the power to name and rename the world and its objects.

—excerpt “Translations in the Wilderness. The Politics and Aesthetics of Subduing Colonial Spaces,” by Maria Luisa Aguilar-Carino, a assistant professor of lit-

erature at the University of the Philippines College, Baguio.

An earlier MUAE volume includes an extensive portfolio of work produced by Yi Sang, 1910-1937, described as Korea's most fiercely experimental writer, graphic designer, architect and poet. His work was influenced by the French author and film maker Jean Cocteau (1889-1963). Yi Sang's *Ogando* (Crow's Eye View) is a well known example of his contemporary poetry. Published in 1934, the series outraged Korean readers for its rejection of lyricism in favor of absurdity and linguistic experimentation.

Poem No. II (Shi che i ho), from Crow's-Eye View (Ogando)

*when my father dozes off beside me
i become my father and also i
become my father's father and even
so while my father like my father is
just my father why do i repeatedly
my father's father's father's...when i
become a father why must i loping-
ly leap over my father and why am
i that which while finally playing all
at once my and my father's and my
father's father's and my father's
father's father's roles must live?*

More accessible is the first person account of a Japanese American woman who wrote about her stay with Buddhist nuns in Korea. Entitled *Zen Laundry*, the Japanese American author, who calls herself Mushim, spent eight months in a Korean monastery in 1987-1988.

Yongch'ik sunim seemed to be in her mid- to late twenties, a former schoolteacher. She had an exquisite, heart-shaped face and an air of quiet maturity that distinguished her from many of the young nuns, who spent their free time chattering and shrieking and drinking instant coffee to boost their spirits. They made fun of Yongch'ik sunim, saying that her name sounded like “Baby Chicken” in English, or they avoided her. As the weeks went on, I noticed that she kept mainly to herself, and would periodically be allowed to go alone to the headquarter temple down the road, where the abbot and Zen master resided...Many of the other young nuns, while well-meaning, were often invasively friendly: they swarmed over me like children around a new puppy, fondling my shaved head, patting my pockets to see if I was hiding candies or letters from America, plying me with junk food, and commenting liberally on my eating style.

MUAE, is published annually by KAYA Production, 132 West 22nd

St., Fourth Floor, New York, NY 10011. Contact KAYA by Internet: www.kaya.com.

BUG

A much more irreverent survey of the contemporary Korean arts world is showcased in a 'zine' called BUG. Editor J. Scott Burgeson is a self-described California boy who divides his time between Korea and Japan. He's a graduate of the University of California at Berkeley. He was a movie, theater and book critic for *The Daily California* and *The San Francisco Bay Guardian* newspapers. He arrived in Korea in 1996 and taught English at Hanyang University in Seoul.

The first issue of BUG evolved after he interviewed a number of “cool” Koreans including artists, movie directors, fortune tellers, fashion designers and musicians. Eventually, he decided to put the interviews to print. The second issue covered the Japanese scene in a similar way.

The black and white format, printed on comic-book style paper stock, is a perfect vehicle for the zine's playful tone. Burgeson's interviews begin with a brief overview of what the interview was like and his impressions. It's a nice setup for the articles which are formatted as a Q & A. The interviews, painstakingly translated into English by Burgeson's associates, are lively and extremely conversational. Interspersed between the interviews are cartoons, black and white photos of his subjects, and whimsical illustrations.

Unlike the more formal MUAE, BUG's voice is breezy, street smart, with a lot of attitude. “I made this magazine because I was bored with my life here in Korea,” Burgeson writes in his first editorial from April 1997, “and because I couldn't find a girlfriend to save my life. Normally, I like to go to loud punk rock shows and raves and big house parties with free beer and stuff like that, but they don't really have those kind of things here, so I found myself with too much time on my hands. I always wanted to make my own magazine, so I thought I'd give it a shot while I'm here.”

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