

Jiseung: *One Journey into the Korean Art of Weaving Paper*

In 2008, I traveled to Korea on a Fulbright research grant, to study the ancient Korean sheet formation technique to make *hanji*, which is Korean handmade paper. Over the course of my research, I was attracted to many aspects of *hanji*: its role in textile and fiber arts, how it became an inextricable part of Korean history and daily life, and ways to manipulate and transform it.

In January 2009, I stood outside, cooking *dak* (paper mulberry) with my *hanji* teacher, Jang Seong-woo. In addition to papermaking, he had taught me how to cord strips of *hanji* and weave a gourd-like pendant, the basic steps of *jiseung* (paper weaving). I asked him if he had a *jiseung* teacher, and he told me the story of a master weaver who lost his two children and sister-in-law — and nearly lost his wife — in a car accident. The story was eerily familiar, as six months prior, I had gone to a market in Seoul in search of a man who made *hanji* dolls, only to be told that he had shut down his shop after an accident killed his children. When I matched the stories, we realized that this was the same man. My *hanji* teacher insisted on introducing me to this weaving master, Na Seo-hwan.

I had expected an elderly man, since I knew via Jang that Na had undergone heart surgery, but when I met him in February 2009, I was greeted by a jovial man in his forties with long, grey, curly hair, dressed in a stylish black sweater and dark slacks. His home was neat, clean, and full of his woven paper pieces. The walls were lined with tall glass jars full of plants, insects, mushrooms, herbs, and bark, all steeped in brown liquid. Later, I learned that when his wife was struggling for her life after the accident, he started to hike into Korea's famed mountains, seeking natural remedies to help her recover. He became obsessed, and brought back all sorts of treasures to preserve in alcohol. For a time, he stopped weaving.

Na is a third-generation *jiseung* master, and remembers playing with *hanji* ever since he was a child. In time, he gained recognition for his work. He exhibited, taught classes, gave private lessons, was aired on television, and was invited to teach in Japan. Soon after he declined the invitation, a truck rear-ended his car and instantly killed the three back seat passengers. He escaped the car but his wife was trapped. She has had

over twenty surgeries, but never missed my weekly lessons with Na at their home; she prepared refreshments and delicious meals to sustain us through my lengthy lessons — never less than four or five hours.

Na has had many students, but is reluctant to take on new ones because they inevitably balk at the amount and tedium of work necessary to learn *jiseung*. Like any master of a traditional craft, he is frustrated by students who do not want to learn *jiseung* “straight” (other translations of the Korean adverb *ddokbaro* — often used when referring to learning and living properly — include correct, upright, and clear). *Jiseung* has a steep learning curve and is hard on the fingers, hands, wrists, neck, back, and legs. Beginners modify the technique to make it easier whenever possible, but these modifications often interfere with the integrity of the final piece. When I brought my slowly growing pieces to him each week, Na could always point out to me exactly where I had loosened my tension or taken a short cut. But despite his insistence on quality, he was a father at



Right: The author, with her teacher, Na Seo-hwan, in his home.

Following page, from l to r: A washbasin in progress by Na; colored patterns in a large flat basket; chamber pots by Na (the white ones are finished in sticky rice paste and the black one is lacquered); a chamber pot in progress by the author; the interior of a completed washbasin by Na.

heart, and reminded me to take breaks to avoid fatigue. His wife would create a work-rest rhythm by bringing us trays of tea and snacks.

the desire to sit down and work, and when you do, your work will look as untidy as your piles.” Taking a pair of paper strips, he deftly spun them in his hands such that

His fingers started to bleed during our first lesson, which alarmed me, but I was lucky and only developed blisters and calluses. For months, I was confused as to how I



Na developed a unique method of cording *hanji* by anchoring not one but two strips of paper between his crossed legs to twist and wind between his hands. Traditionally, single strips had been twisted between the index finger and thumb, and later wound in pairs to make cords. These cords were weak, since the first set of strips had no anchor. But Na’s method sped up the process and created tighter, stronger cords since they were anchored, and twisted between a broader space of the palms of his hands, rather than the pads of his fingers.

For my first few lessons, Na emphasized the importance of making good cords, which is the first step in *jiseung* — after identifying a good *hanji* supplier. He declared that one-third of *jiseung* mastery was rooted in proficiency in making tight, even cords that could stand upright when held at their base. He showed me how to cut *hanji* by hand to prepare strips of paper that were piled neatly on the floor. He was fastidious about neatness, saying, “If you throw pieces in random heaps, you will never have

each strip twisted counterclockwise, but one strip wound clockwise around the other. He repeated this action until one half of the strips was corded, and then turned the cord around to complete the remaining length. The motion was so fast that I saw only a flurry of twisting paper and heard only a crisp rattle.

To start my first piece, Na instructed me to go home and make two hundred cords, then unwind one hundred of them, all in time for my next lesson — in a week. When I returned with my bundles, he scolded me for making such inadequate cords but sighed and said we would begin, even though the quality of the cord defines the strength of the final object. We started with a knot of four cords folded in half, and then used the unwound cords, which looked like long wavy noodles, and twined them around the spokes that created the base.

Na maintained high tension while twining, to the point that I could hear the cords squeaking between his fingers.

could ever weave so tightly, until one day he pushed down on my thumb with so much force that I felt like it had been smashed by a door. Only then did I understand how much pressure my thumb was supposed to give to the cord, whereupon my weaving tightened.

Na taught me how to increase and decrease spokes to control the shape of an object, expose them to create open patterns, work with colored cords, change direction to create a double-walled vessel, and complete a project with several versions of final rim finishes. I kept thinking that each step would be somewhat easier than the previous one, but inevitably, the end of a project was usually the hardest. This gave me even more appreciation for the craft.

Koreans have made objects with *jiseung* techniques for hundreds of years. Because *hanji* was so precious and Koreans so frugal, Na told me that the edges that were trimmed from books at the end of the printing and



Above: The author weaves a traditional Korean lantern, and at far right: the completed lantern drying after being coated in fermented persimmon juice (in Korean, gam mul – also known as kakishibu in Japanese). The final piece would have a weighted candle hanging inside the body.

binding process were always saved. Someone started playing with these long, narrow strips, and applied Korean basketry techniques. Though many pieces have been lost to theft, war, colonization, and modernization, extant woven *hanji* artifacts include shoes, quivers, brush holders, baskets, vessels, bags, purses, and lanterns.

Another traditional *jiseung* object is the chamber pot, specifically for women who were getting married. In the past, when a woman married, she made the often day-long physical journey from her natal family to her husband's family, being carried along with her belongings in a covered palanquin by four men. Confucian culture forbade these men from seeing the bride, so she had to stay inside the palanquin for the entire trip. It would have

also been indiscreet if they heard her bodily functions. Therefore, a paper chamber pot made the most sense: it was light, did not make noise like a ceramic or metal container, and was beautiful — this last detail making it appropriate for a woman's use. For waterproofing, chamber pots were finished in lacquer; other traditional finishes for *jiseung* objects include fermented persimmon juice and perilla (asian plant of the mint family) oil.

Na joked about testing the chamber pot I was weaving because he had never used one, as it was only for women. Even after unthinkable tragedy, he retained a remarkable sense of humor. I once brought a picture of myself when I was about four years old, and he took one look at the pieces of yarn tied onto my pigtails and said, "Your mother knew that you would grow up to do *jiseung*! Look at the cords that she tied to your hair!" As he got to know me, he would insist that I weave gifts for my family in the U.S., and helped me make a set of teacups for my parents and sister. When an American friend visited me in Seoul, I brought her to a lesson and he gifted her with a beautiful bracelet that he designed. When I complained of heat rash, he poured liquor from one of his tall glass jars into a water bottle that belonged to his late daughter, and insisted I take it home and apply to my skin. I knew that I was more than just a student, though he and his wife were not quite old enough to be my parents.

I encouraged Na to exhibit his work so that a wider audience could see the treasures that lived in his home. Soon after I left Korea, he held a solo exhibit in a Seoul gallery, and not long after, won a top prize for his work in a second show. He recently told me that he is meeting with publishers to write a book about *jiseung*.

Recently, while teaching a *hanji* workshop at the Morgan Conservatory in Cleveland, I found myself advising a

student using a phrase Na had spoken to me. In one of my lessons, I asked him when I would know to add cords to increase the diameter of a lantern I was weaving. He responded, "when the children are hungry, feed them rice." Surely that is the approach he took while teaching me, giving me as much as I could stomach each lesson, hoping I would grow "straight" and honor not only his legacy, but that of *jiseung* as well.

~ Aimee Lee

*All photos are by and courtesy of the author. Readers are encouraged to be sure to watch the very informative [YouTube video](#) pertaining to *jiseung* which the author has produced, and to see more of her great photographs of the process on her [flickr account](#).*

