



Generations of Hanji: Korean Papermaking from the Field to YouTube

AIMEE LEE

Jang Yong Hoon, the provincial and now national Intangible Cultural Property Holder, uses webal muljil to make traditional hanji. All photos taken by the author in 2009, in Gapyeong, Korea unless otherwise noted.

On January 6, 2009, train passengers traveling through farmland in northeastern Korea might have seen a woman in a turquoise puffy coat throwing herself onto piles of dead pepper plants. She worked alongside three elderly women and two brothers. Once the field was cleared, bundles of dried plants rose high above the top of the pickup that drove to a paper mill called Jang Ji Bang. This mill would eventually repay their neighbor for his pepper plants with hanji, Korean handmade paper.

The Jang family has operated Jang Ji Bang for four generations—its septuagenarian patriarch is an Intangible Cultural Property holder and two of his four sons work at the mill. In 2007, I e-mailed the eldest son, Jang Seong-woo, to explain that I was applying for a Fulbright grant to research Korean papermaking, and asked if he would be willing to meet with me if I received the grant. He agreed.

I arrived in Korea a year later and met with a number of scholars, businesspeople, and artists, visited mills and papermakers, attended festivals, and received an offer to study with a Buddhist nun.¹ One papermaker refused to teach me once he saw that I was a woman, saying I was not strong enough to make paper.² In late 2008 I met with Jang Seong-woo and recounted my search for a papermaker who would teach me to make traditional, laminated hanji. He said, “Find a place to stay close to the mill and I will tell my mother to add another spoon to the pot.”³

As a student, I deferred to Mr. Jang in speech and action, but he disarmed me with his own deference and gregarious personality. I had expected the stereotypical sullen silence of a Korean man, and was surprised to hear so much, from trade secrets like his custom-cut beater knives, to how Park Chung-hee’s New Village Movement ruined the hanji industry.⁴ His family and staff were also generous towards my learning. They helped with manual labor, sang songs, and insisted that I nap when tired. Once, as I tended an outdoor fire, his mother ran outside to scold me because it was dinnertime and I was on the verge of overcooking my fiber.



Jang Gap-jin (left) and Jang Seong-woo load bundles of dried pepper plants onto their truck to transport to their family paper mill, Jang Ji Bang, where the plants will be burned into an ash. A solution of water passed many times through the ash is necessary to cook fibers for Korean papermaking.



Jang Seong-woo uses a homemade device to hammer hanji made of white, green, and black bark. The paper was dried and then slightly dampened before being calendered in a method called dochim, used in Korea to compact fibers, increase sheen and strength, and prevent excessive ink bleed.

I first thought that these interactions were marginal to my research. But while I learned to harvest mulberry stalks on hill-sides, burn pepper plants for ash, and make paper with the traditional Korean method of *webal muljil*,⁵ hanji's folk history emerged. I learned that some mills were so revered that riders, when passing, dismounted their horses to show respect. Korean moulds once had deckles that were later removed because they were deemed superfluous. Men worked in pairs on opposite sides of the vat, making sheets together, and only later did they suspend the back end of the mould from a bar above the vat to make paper singly. I learned many uses for bamboo poles: agitating the vat, stirring cold water with pounded hibiscus roots to create *dak pul*,⁶ the mucilage crucial to making hanji, as well as beating unruly apprentices.

Family history also emerged. Lynn Amlie, who studied at Jang Ji Bang in the 90s, wrote: "It felt like perhaps the most important moment of my entire 6 months in Korea, when I saw [Jang Seong-woo] realize that his father was indeed more than just a father in my and other people's eyes."⁷ Mr. Jang had never intended to stay in the family business; he promised his father that he would work at the mill for five years after his military service and then leave. But when he met foreign papermakers who treasured hanji, he realized that preserving it was more important than he had previously thought.⁸ He now runs the business.

Though I deferred to Mr. Jang, I sometimes challenged his authority on papermaking matters based on my past experience. I often ended up recognizing my glaring presumptuousness and quietly set about learning what I thought I already knew. When he suggested that I use my starter batches of hanji to bind books, I finally had something to share. I made as many books as possible with the limited tools on hand. He paid me the highest compliment when he said, "the paper melts in your hands."⁹

I was touched when his father, after seeing my books, brought bundles of paper that he had made years ago and asked me to teach him to make single-sheet bindings. He was hard of hearing and

watched me sew, then took the needle to do it himself. Mr. Jang finally made his father leave so that I could retire for the day. I was disappointed, because I wanted to stay and teach in silence. When I struggled alone at the vat, his father would often appear, watch me, and then demonstrate the correct technique. When I imitated his motions well, his smile was radiant. Once, Mr. Jang's father told me about how he started making paper. His father was a papermaker, but would not teach him. During his father's lunch breaks, he would sneak into the mill and attempt to make sheets, then slip out. His sloppy sheets on top of the post always gave him away, and his father would scold him, "You made paper, didn't you?" When Mr. Jang's father turned seventeen, his father started to teach him.¹⁰ Even in his seventies, this master artisan was eager to learn.

I, too, considered what and how I was learning. Six days a week, I walked one country road for twenty minutes under railroad tracks, over a bridge, and through a mountain pass. In the morning quiet, I felt grateful for being part of something bigger than the swish of a bamboo screen across the water. Though the direct transmission from teacher to student and countless hours of solitary practice are vital to learning the craft, studying in a supportive community gave meaning to my studies. Though the women did not even know my name—they simply called me "Miss"—they made space for me.¹¹ In Korean, *teacher* and *student* each have two characters, but share one in common. The signifying character for *teacher* means "first," as the teacher has lived or come first, and the one for *student* means "to learn." But their shared character means "life" or "to be born." Every day, I found new connections to hanji among people who had already been down the path before me and welcomed me.

Throughout my research year, I felt compelled to welcome others to share my journey via the Internet through three outlets: videos, photos, and blog posts. I shot and edited five videos, starting with my first visit to a mill.¹² The video format is a useful way to introduce the *webal* technique, which is confusing when explained

in words. My subsequent videos look at the last maker of hanji screens and moulds,¹³ a third-generation *jiseung* (paper weaving) master,¹⁴ and *webal* methods by different papermakers.¹⁵

Of the thousands of images I took during my year in Korea, I organized over twenty separate albums to show details of mills, studios, lessons with my teachers, papermaking in progress, and exhibits of paper artifacts and contemporary paper artwork. I blogged almost daily, recounting stories of my research. I wanted to extend the voices of my teachers to a larger audience, to help hanji register on the radar of international consciousness. As a young researcher of an ancient craft in the early twenty-first century, I used Blogger, Flickr, Vimeo, Yahoo! Groups, YouTube, and my own website to get the word out.

Since my return to the United States, I have begun to disseminate information in more traditional ways: exhibiting, lecturing, teaching, and writing. But I also edited the hanji entry on Wikipedia and I plan on launching a website to help future hanji researchers and create an online community of people who care about hanji. I have helped three Americans train at Jang Ji Bang whose goals are akin to mine: organizing exhibits; writing about their experiences; and cultivating plants to make hanji in the United States. Mr. Jang trained me, for free, with the understanding that I would teach others to sustain hanji craft and culture. I provide my online content for free, trusting that if I can raise hanji out of obscurity, then I have been an able student.

On his first-ever trip to the United States in November 2009, Mr. Jang called me to discuss logistics for the interpreters I had recruited for him.¹⁶ During my time in Korea, Mr Jang's speech had loosened from high formal Korean to a more informal version, which I had expected from a teacher. He first called me "Ms. Aimee," and after a few months, just "Aimee." However, for the first time ever, he surprised me by using the more formal address over the phone: "Teacher Aimee." When I think of myself laying awkwardly on top of pepper plants to compress them into smaller bundles, I marvel that I may already have served my teachers well.

NOTES

1. I declined this offer from Youngdam Sunim because her temple no longer has a paper mill on site. She had trained Lynn Amlie and several other Americans in the 1990s when she had a paper mill at her temple in Wonju. The temple has since moved to southwestern Korea. Though it has no mill, it does have a museum devoted to housing Youngdam Sunim's hanji artwork. Lynn wrote about her experience in Hanji: Korea's Traditional Paper, in *Hand Papermaking*, vol. 11, no. 2 (Winter 1996).
2. Paper in Korea was traditionally formed by men and dried by women.
3. Jang Seong-woo, conversation with the author, November 28, 2008, Seoul, Korea.
4. Park was a military general and South Korean president from 1963 to 1979. His controversial New Village Movement, which started in 1970, aimed to rapidly modernize Korea after its decimation in the Korean War. Part of the movement involved replacing traditional homes with Western architecture and materials. However, the old homes had always used hanji to paper its doors, windows, walls, ceilings, and floors. Once these structures disappeared, so did the regular demand for hanji. [Jang Seong-woo and Kim Bo-kyung, conversations with the author, 2008-2009, Korea.]
5. Webal muljil translates roughly to "single-frame water action," the way of moving a single frame and screen through the water to make a sheet of paper. Now, almost



The author uses the stripped woody core of a dak branch to part a sheet of hanji from a pressed post of formed paper. She will brush the sheet on the heat dryer behind her.

all hanji is made with the method identical to Japanese nagashizuki, called ssangbal muljil, meaning "paired-frame water action." This refers not only to "paired frames" of the mould and hinged deckle, but also to the ability to make two sheets at once with a bisected screen. The speed of this technique is partly why it displaced webal muljil in Korea. Two to four times the number of sheets can be made using the ssangbal method as compared to webal.

6. Literally translated to "mulberry glue," but known to papermakers as natural formation aid and to Japanese papermakers as tororo-aoi.
7. Lynn Amlie, e-mail message to the author, January 31, 2009.
8. Mr. Jang credits both Lynn Amlie and Naoaki Sakamoto with awakening him to hanji's value. Sakamoto runs Paper Nao in Japan and wrote the book, *Paper Across Continents* (Tokyo: Tairiku-mo-Taiwa Shartel, 2000), which includes stories about his visits to Jang Ji Bang.
9. Jang Seong-woo, conversation with the author, January 28, 2009, Gapyeong, Korea.
10. Because papermaking was such a difficult, labor-intensive trade, his father tried to steer him away from learning it and dooming himself to a hard life. [Jang Yong-hoon, conversation with the author, January 22, 2009, Gapyeong, Korea.]
11. It is common in Korea to use general addresses with people. Usually, only close friends or adults speaking to children will use given names. In the social hierarchy, the younger person should never address the older person by his/her name. Two months after we met, Mr. Jang's mother finally asked what my name was, and then said, "I never knew until now! But I'm going to keep calling you 'Miss.'" It would have been rude for me to ask for hers, which is why I still don't know what it is. Mrs. Jang, conversation with the author, January 30, 2009, Gapyeong, Korea.
12. The video of my visit to Shin Hyun-seh Traditional Hanji in southern Korea can be viewed at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1_nWOO1oODk.
13. Yu Bae-gun is a Provincial Intangible Cultural Property holder in Jeonju, one of the former capitals of hanji production and a city in southwestern Korea. The video can be viewed online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aoPsSyjCigg>.
14. Na Seo-hwan is a master weaver who lives and works in Seoul, and is Mr. Jang's jiseung teacher of over 15 years. The video can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HRV3v9eAWqs>.
15. The video can be viewed online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wrPVewoaMVQ>.
16. Mr. Jang was a guest artist and presenter at the Philadelphia Museum of Art Craft Show, with 25 other Korean artisans under the umbrella of the Korean Craft Promotion Foundation.