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KOREAN PAPERMAKING:

PAPER, PLACE AND PEOPLE

Words Aimee Lee Photography Ricky Rhodes

One woman's journey to discover and revive the ancient art of hanji.

One: The Paper

With a history of well over 1,500 years, Korean handmade paper, known as *hanji*, is familiar to Koreans but a mystery outside of its home country. This lustrous paper – made in a wide array of thickness, colour, dimension, and translucency – was once a coveted item both inside and beyond Korean borders. Made by farmers and artisans during bitter cold winters, *hanji* was a noble marker of the literati who demanded high-quality paper for books, documents, calligraphy, and painting. It played a sacred role in manuscripts of religious texts and as ‘spirit paper’ that was burned in funereal rituals where the ashes symbolically disappeared into the heavens. The oldest extant woodblock print in the world is on *hanji*, found in a Buddhist stupa (burial mound) and dated 751CE – its silk wrapper had disintegrated but the paper was intact when discovered over 1,200 years after it was made. Fashioned into objects that ranged from kites to armour; from greenhouses to shrouds; from shoes to chamber pots, there was seemingly no end to the possibilities of paper through the transformation of natural fibres via human ingenuity. But then the forces of history and industrialization collided and left this once-celebrated substrate, and its related craft practices, near extinction.

Hanji (*han* = Korean, *ji* = paper) was based on Chinese influences and evolved from crude paper made of hemp rags into the fine paper we know today – made from the inner bark of the paper mulberry tree. One Korean name for *hanji* is *baekji* (*baek* = 100). This refers to the idea that there are 99 steps required to make *hanji*, and the 100th step occurs when the buyer touches the paper. 99 steps may be an exaggeration – 72 is more accurate – but it communicates the labour involved in making this strong and fine paper. Two key plants are required to make *hanji*. *Hibiscus manihot* (*Abelmoschus manihot*) seeds are planted in early spring and dug up in the autumn for mucilage found in their roots, which resembles egg whites, and is essential for Korean papermaking. *Broussonetia papyrifera* and *Broussonetia kazinoki*, collectively called *dak* or paper mulberry, are the trees used to make the paper itself. *Dak* is felled annually after food crop harvests, which encourages growth for the next season – countering the misconception that all papermaking kills trees.

After *dak* leaves have fallen and the sap has drained for winter rest, year-old shoots are cut and bundled for steaming. Steaming allows the outer bark to be pulled away cleanly from the inner woody core; in Korea, the neighbours of paper

mills would strip the bark and save the core for firewood as payment for labour. The stripped bark consists of black, green, and white layers, which are scraped by hand to isolate the strongest white bark, which is bleached in sunlight before cooking in a natural caustic solution. This solution is made from plant ashes (requiring a separate harvest and strategic burning of dry plants), and neutralizes acidic and non-cellulosic elements in the bark. After cooking, the bark is rinsed and picked over by hand to remove remaining impurities. Now the bark is ready to be beat by hand with wooden bats to reduce the wide strips to a pulp.

The pulp enters a vat of clean water and the slurry is agitated vigorously with bamboo rods before adding mucilage. The goo distributes the fibres evenly and slows the draining time of water to help the papermaker manipulate the slurry on a bamboo screen that is supported by a wooden frame. The screen is dipped into the slurry with a rhythmic action using back-to-front and side-to-side dips to pick up fibres suspended by the mucilage in water. Then, the papermaker tilts the frame to let the slurry rush across the surface of the screen before washing back into the vat. Repeating this action creates laminated layers of fibres within one thin sheet, giving it remarkable wet



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strength. After building up the thickness of the sheet, the screen is laid onto a growing pile of wet paper and the sheet is detached from the bamboo screen. To distinguish one sheet from another a thread is placed between sheets.

At the end of the day, the pile of wet paper is covered with felt and capped with a wooden board before being placed into a screw or hydraulic press to gradually remove excess water. Once adequately pressed, the threads assist in parting each sheet. The damp sheets are pulled away from the rest of the pack and brushed onto flat surfaces to dry. As soon as a sheet is dry, it is peeled away and the whole batch is curated for quality control. Following tradition, hanji was only made in the winter to create crisp sheets as the fibres contracted in the cold, to keep the mucilage gooey, and to retard bacteria growth. Siberian winds blowing down into Korea created ideal conditions for strong trees with shiny fibres, and for the golden window of winter hanji making.

Two: The Papermaker

After I returned from a year of field research in Korea, I had lunch with my college drawing professor, and showed him hanji objects I had made. One was a dark brown pot with a lid, woven with two layers of paper like a basket, watertight because of the undercoating of rice paste and the outer coats of lacquer. It was the first piece I made with my *jiseung* (paper weaving) teacher in Korea, a copy of something used by women upon marriage who were carried by men on sedan chairs across mountain passes to their new husbands' homes in distant villages. In Confucian culture, men were never to see

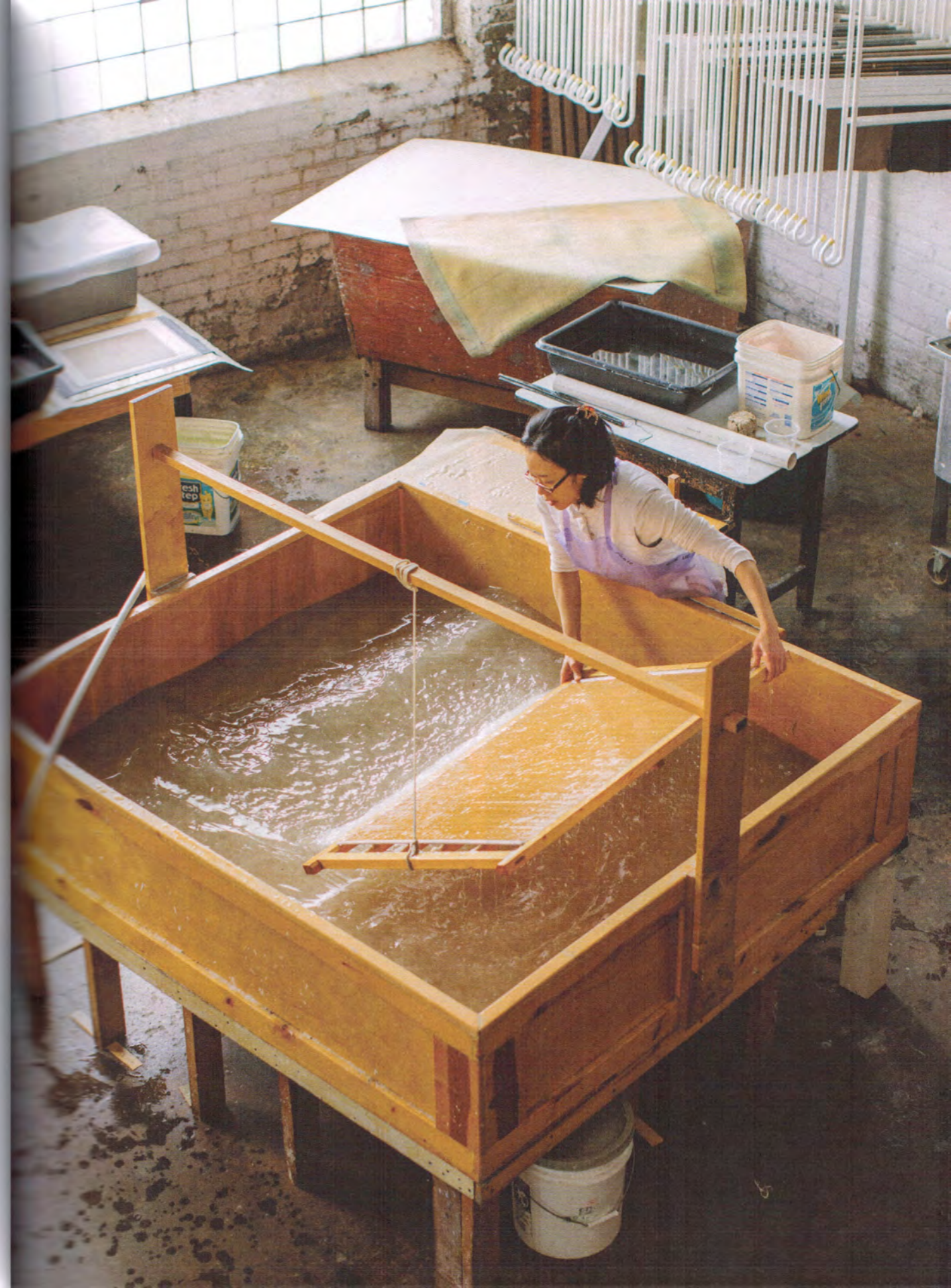
or hear women, so the bride could not exit the chair. To accommodate bodily needs on a day's journey, a paper chamber pot served as a lighter version of a ceramic one, a quieter version of a metal one, and a beautiful but functional object considered most appropriate for women. My professor handled this pot as well as other pieces I had brought for a workshop, and said, “your body is a library.” I was startled by the accuracy and poetry of his observation and rewrite these words often, especially before I teach, to remind myself of the heritage of hanji that has become a part of me.

My history began in New York City, where I was born to Korean immigrants. Korean was my first language until I entered preschool at age four and learned English. My third language was music, and I chose Oberlin College for its academic strengths and world-class conservatory. However, I quickly realised that I did not want to practice the violin eight hours a day and instead I explored writing, art, dance, performance and philosophy. I declared an art major and, as part of its requirements, took an Art History course in Chinese landscape painting. One day, we visited the Allen Memorial Art Museum to view painted scrolls, and the curator noted that one used Korean paper – gold-flecked and creamy – because Chinese painters often preferred Korean paper. My head lit up and I realised that if I wanted to learn about Korean art, I could only do so by reviving my first language. Subsequently, at age 20, I asked my incredulous parents to send me to Korea for language training.

Years later, I entered graduate school with a deep interest in making books, but in my

first papermaking class I was immediately hooked. The water, repetitive processes, and need for peace and quiet inside the mind and body to make a decent sheet of paper spoke to me more than any artistic medium I had ever encountered. Though I took it for granted while growing up, I lived beside a river for 14 years, which embedded an unconscious affinity to moving water. My personality has always included obsessive tendencies, so endless repetition felt familiar, and my work in body awareness and movement therapy gave me deep respect for physical labour. I spent nearly three happy years making paper, mostly focused on Western traditions, before I started to connect this technique to my heritage. I became curious about the role of Korean papermaking but could only find a few articles in English on the topic – clearly, I had to go to the source if I wanted to truly know hanji.

At 30, I was granted funding to return to Korea to discover as much as I could about hanji through a government agency that promoted cross-cultural understanding. I wanted to absorb and process my research mindfully enough to accurately articulate and share this remarkable paper culture, history, and techniques. Before I left for Korea, a work supervisor gave me helpful and important advice: “Be present because you are about to have a once in a lifetime experience.” It sounded so clichéd that it would have been easy to discount it. However, even when I was on the floor of my studio apartment in Seoul in a cold sweat during a terrible bout of food poisoning, I lay there miserably and experienced it fully. I retraced my steps while waiting for a friend to bring me saltines and “cider.”





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a Korean soft drink similar to ginger ale: I had travelled to the city of Jeonju in the southwestern region of Korea to visit the only remaining family that makes the bamboo screens and wooden frames necessary for hanji making. Here, a kind anthropology professor found university accommodations for me, and the following morning, unsure of when I would eat next, I indulged in a full spread of food for breakfast. After our visit to the screen maker, we went to lunch to enjoy the local delicacy, a bowl full of rice, meat, vegetables, and all sorts of other ingredients mashed together. I couldn't insult my host by not eating even though I was still full from my morning feast. Whether it was overeating, the raw egg on top, or aggravated motion sickness on the long-distance bus back home I'll never know. But I will certainly never forget that trip, and now I own two of those precious screens which without I could never make Korean-style paper.

Many of my hanji stories involve food, which acts as social currency in Korea, a way of exhibiting hospitality, generosity, and concern for each other. A common first question after greeting any given host was, "have you eaten?" Even when people were cranky to take the time to meet me, I never left without tea at the least, and massive spreads of food at the most (the latter being the norm). The upside was that I had plenty of fuel to crisscross urban landscapes on foot, buses, subways, and taxis, as well as field research in the countryside. Of course, the most important reason for all this eating was to gain the energy for papermaking labour. When I finally met the man who would become my hanji teacher, he said, "you must find a place to live close to the mill but we will put another spoon in the pot

for you," indicating that his family would take care of board. Being late to meals was a huge faux pas and there was no excuse for it, not even work. Once, while tending to a fire to steam a batch of *dak* shoots, I was shooed inside to eat. I was reluctant to leave the fire and was right to be concerned; when I returned after dinner, the entire bundle of *dak* had fallen over. My teacher's brother ran out to help strip the shoots before it was too late; they were slightly underdone but it was better to strip into the darkness than to set up another steam the following day.

No other days of my stay were as vital, simple, and deeply satisfying as my apprenticeship at the paper mill. I was never so happy to live in a "love motel" down the road from the mill, to wear at least four layers of clothing daily, apply strong moisturiser to keep my face from falling off in the cold, and get chased by dogs on the walk to work. I was well cared for by the mothers, grandmothers, aunts, fathers, and brothers who may not have comprehended my desire to wrap my mind and body around hanji but nonetheless, did not want a single woman to go hungry, cold, or be unsafe. I eventually met other teachers who shared secrets of weaving paper, texturing and fusing paper, natural dyeing, and calligraphy. All of this generosity and open heartedness that came from a mutual love of the craft, materials, and techniques spurred my spirit, and reinforced my desire to share as selflessly as my teachers had.

As soon as I returned from my Korean adventure, I found an institutional home in Cleveland at the Morgan Conservatory. Its founder, Tom Balbo, had already planted paper mulberry trees in their

urban garden and was open to my mission of spreading the word about hanji. Together, with a team of volunteers, interns, and staff, we built the first hanji studio in North America in 2010, where I returned to teach each year. In 2012, my book about hanji was published, and in 2013 I finally made the leap and moved from New York to Ohio to be fully present in Cleveland. I helped the Morgan Conservatory receive the largest grants of its history to establish an Eastern Paper Studio that builds upon the Anne F. Eiben Hanji Studio, which will become the only non-academic site in the U.S. where the public can learn about the processes and passion behind Asian papermaking traditions.

Every day, I head to the studio to train apprentices and make paper for new production lines of Eastern-style papers that we will market to artists, calligraphers, bookbinders, origami folders, and eventually conservators. The labour remains difficult, tedious, and constant, but sharing the process helps legitimise it and keep it alive in the most vibrant way possible. I fuss over how cold the water is for my apprentices and offer them wrist cuffs used by lobstermen, exhort them to take body breaks, and insist that we buy enough protein for their lunches. Only now do I feel the weight of responsibility that my own teachers in Korea must have felt having me underfoot – but this weight is an honour too, and it keeps me present as we create a seat for hanji at the papermaking table. •

