

# Buddhist Illumination of Korean Papermaking's Past and Present

By Aimee Lee

Buddhism and Korean handmade paper, called *hanji*, have traveled a similar road in Korea. Transmitted from China, they started humbly and then grew to become a major part of Korean culture. Their survival was subsequently threatened by persecution, occupation, war, and modernization, but they both still exist today. During my research year in Korea on a U.S. Fulbright grant, I was lucky to meet a Buddhist nun who epitomized the best of spirituality and paper.

## The Search for a Papermaking Nun

Ven. Youngdam learned how to make paper in her youth. Her grandfather practiced Oriental medicine and had treated an elderly papermaker. The old man had no money, so he paid his debt by making paper for the clinic, as *hanji* is an excellent way to store herbs. She grew up with a close connection to paper and its production, and later researched historical connections between Buddhism and *hanji*. When she became a nun, she opened a paper mill at her temple in Wonju and trained a few Americans. But she stopped making paper when her temple moved south and lost its mill. However, she built a museum called Youngdam Hanji Art Museum in Bogapsa Temple, North Gyeongsang Province to house and display her impressive inventory of *hanji* and artwork.

In 2007, I wrote her a letter that explained that I was an artist applying for a U.S. Fulbright grant to research Korean papermaking and asked if she would be willing to meet me. She agreed in the form of a letter on



Naturally-dyed *hanji* by Ven. Youngdam

*hanji* and also enclosed a calligraphed koan on another delicate sheet of *hanji*. When I arrived in Korea in June 2008, I called her right away but waited until the summer heat passed to visit her. Traditionally, farmers made *hanji* during the winter off-season for extra income, so papermaking was a seasonal activity.

In October 2008, I traveled from Seoul to Cheongdo-gun to a persimmon festival in search of Ven. Youngdam. When I arrived at her booth, I was greeted by a rainbow of dyed and petal-filled *hanji*. I spent the entire day at two large tubs, one for white *hanji* and the other for yellow *hanji*, helping children make squares of fluffy paper. Another nun and three temple-goers helped dry paper and sell *hanji*. We were exhausted by the end of the day and piled into two vehicles to drive through the mountains to the temple. It wasn't until we finished eating dinner that evening that I finally met Ven. Youngdam.

A stocky, jovial woman, she said, "Let me take a good look at you," and we sat face to face as I introduced myself. I had studied papermaking in graduate school, and showed her images of my artwork: books of knitted paper, and a floor-to-ceiling tower of 2,000 paper bricks. I had come to Korea to research *hanji* because there was scant information available in English or the US. She shared stories about *hanji* and its history while reminiscing about Americans that we knew in common. Eventually, we moved from the dining and kitchen area to her museum, where she pulled out seemingly endless piles of her paper and artwork. I was amazed at the quantity and quality of her work, and was sad to see it hidden in this mountain hermitage, far from most people's reach.



Children learning to make *hanji* at the persimmon festival



This sign at Bogapsa Temple says “Youngdam Museum of Hand-made Paper.”



Ven. Youngdam has dedicated her life to the development of *hanji* with the belief that paper can contain human sensibility and aesthetic soul.

## History of Korean Papermaking

*Hanji* has been made in Korea for well over a thousand years. After papermaking’s recorded invention in China in 105 CE, it spread to Korea and developed between the third and sixth centuries. Like the Chinese, the first Korean paper was made from hemp and ramie scraps and rags, a crude paper called *maji*. But eventually the inner bark of *dak*, or the mulberry tree, was discovered as an excellent papermaking material.

During the Three Kingdoms period (57 BCE-668 CE), each kingdom used paper to record their official histories. In 610, the Buddhist monk Damjing introduced papermaking to Japan along with ink sticks, which indicated a high level of development in paper techniques. Somewhere between 704 and 751, the *Pure Light Dharani Sutra* was printed onto *hanji*. It is the world’s oldest surviving woodblock print and still bears the papermaker’s name.

*Hanji*’s golden age peaked in the Goryeo period (918-1392), which saw the rise in quality and use of *hanji*. Paper was used for money, Buddhist texts, and medical and history books. The government encouraged paper production and *dak* was planted countrywide in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Often called Goryeoji, *hanji* became famous in Asia for its strength and luster, and became a heavy tribute item to China. Illuminated manuscripts, or hand-copied Buddhist sutras, also became a tribute item to China and were greatly treasured in Japan. The act of writing these opulent sutras was a highly meritorious deed, and commissioned by royalty and aristocracy. Monks wrote them on paper that was dyed deep indigo and embellished lavishly with gold and silver. In 1290, 35 Korean monks were sent to China to copy sutras, and in 1305, a Mongol envoy took 100 monks for the same task.

The Goryeo period is famous for two landmarks in printmaking history,

both impossible without an advanced paper culture and Buddhist faith. One was the carving of the Tripitaka Koreana onto over 80,000 wooden blocks, which reside in their original home at Haeinsa, a Buddhist temple in South Gyeongsang Province. It was carved twice, due to destruction by Mongol invasions in 1232, and the final version was completed in 1251. The second accomplishment, in 1377, was the printing of *Jikji*, a guide for students of Buddhism, and the world's oldest extant book printed with metal moveable type.

Paper permeated the daily lives of Koreans in the beginning of the Joseon period (1392-1910). Since paper was so precious, scraps were saved from calligraphy practice, wallpaper, book trimmings, and pages of old books to create new objects. Paper was used to make umbrellas, rain hats, tobacco pouches, bags for medicinal herbs, shoes, masks, and even furniture. *Hanji* was also used to make fans for Dano Festival, kites for Chuseok (harvest moon festival), hat streamers and flowers for the Farmer's Dance, and lanterns for Buddha's Birthday. The government created an agency devoted to paper production, and supplied troops with waterproof paper armor, which insulated well and resisted arrows and swords. Greenhouses (c. 1450) used oiled *hanji* as it effectively controlled temperature, humidity, and light.

However, the Japanese invasion of 1592 was a huge blow to the *hanji* industry. Papermakers were abducted and books were either burned or stolen. Paper tribute demands by China increased, and the *dak* supply was struggling to keep up with demand. The Joseon government pressured Buddhist monks to increase their production of *hanji*, which caused temples to close down because they could not produce such enormous quantities of paper. *Hanji* production suffered further as Western methods of mass-producing paper were introduced in 1884.



Paper mulberry trees (called *dak* in Korean) growing near the temple. These trees are used to make *hanji*.



The Japanese colonial period (1910-1945) undermined *hanji* as Korean culture was brutally suppressed. After the devastation of the Korean War, the New Village Movement of the 1970s further decimated the *hanji* industry as it eradicated traditional straw-thatched homes whose floors, walls, ceilings, windows, and doors were covered with *hanji*. The most recent threat to the Korean paper industry is the rise of inexpensive paper made in China. Once a mecca of papermaking in Asia, Korea has seen a dramatic loss in *hanji* production, going from 8,000 mills in 1910 to only 26 *hanji* mills in 2009.

### Farewell to the Nun

What is the destination of 'paper'?

It is forever the same.

The destination is 'people'.

What is the destination of people?

That is what we are asking the paper.

— Naoaki Sakamoto, *Paper Across Continents*

I read these words a few months after I met Ven. Youngdam, and they reminded me of her. Though I met many contemporary artists using *hanji* in Korea, the simplicity and directness of her artwork remains in my memory as the purest interaction between a person and her paper. After meeting her at her temple, I saw her pieces in two Seoul exhibits. She had started using paint rather than natural dye, but her art still retained the subtlety and richness of her previous work. In our final meeting, we climbed up the stairs from a hearty lunch in Insa-dong, and she patted my back as she said, “As long as you follow the *hanji* path, both God and Buddha will look after you.” ■



Aimee Lee | BA in Visual Arts, Oberlin College | MFA in Interdisciplinary Book and Paper Arts, Columbia College Chicago | Lee was a United States Fulbright fellow in Korea (2008-2009), where she researched the traditions and contemporary applications of *hanji*, which is Korean handmade paper. She trained at the family-run paper mill of Jang Ji-bang, an Intangible Cultural Property Holder, and also studied paper weaving, natural dyeing, paper felting, and calligraphy. She is an active international resident artist and is writing a book called *Native Intelligence* about her *hanji* research. More information on her art and research can be found on her website at [aimeelee.net](http://aimeelee.net).