

OLD ART LEARNED THE  
OLD WAY

*Hanji Unfurled: One Journey  
into Korean Papermaking*

By Aimee Lee

Legacy Press

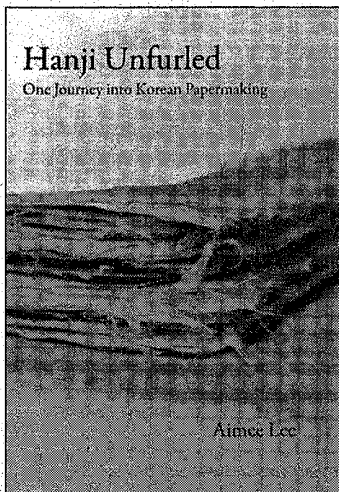
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Review by Libby Pomroy

I love this book. I knew I would even before I cracked it open. In 2010, The Hanji Crew contributed to a Kickstarter campaign for author Aimee Lee's project to build North America's first *hanji* studio — in Cleveland. The Hanji Crew is a group dedicated to learning and teaching Korean *hanji*, or traditional papercraft, and using the proceeds from the sale of our products to benefit Korean arts and cultural efforts, mainly in the Twin Cities.

In return for our support of Aimee Lee's project, we were rewarded with fascinating updates on her blog, and a few months later, some sheets of the glorious *hanji* paper she created. Her recently-published book chronicles the path she followed from her Korean American roots in New York City to her journey as a Fulbright scholar traveling



through Korea learning about the history and soul of *hanji*, Korea's strong, beautiful handmade paper.

The book is part cultural travelogue, part character study (each of the author's Korean teachers is more interesting than the last), and part technical guide. The initial chapter is a *hanji* history and overview, starting in its glory days in the Goryeo period (918-1392) when the government encouraged papermaking for use in Buddhist texts and medical and history books. As paper quality improved, *dak* (a term referring to the trees used for making paper, the paper

mulberry) were planted across Korea. Today, the production of *hanji* has decreased as younger generations are drawn to the cities, away from the agricultural and more labor-intensive way of life.

While Lee's description of *hanji*-making goes into some detail, the text is easily understood and a delight to read. Tidbits of information jumped off the page as I read, such as Lee's papermaking teacher saying it is possible to discern when a sheet of paper is ready, based on the shapes of the fibers of the finished sheets.

Lee arrived in Korea in August 2008 to begin her Fulbright year. She didn't expect to meet papermakers until winter; cold weather contracts paper fibers and slows bacterial growth. She did, however, have the chance to meet a *hanji* master, Hyun Sea Shin at his paper mill in South Gyeongsang

Province. Many step-by-step photos document the complex procedure used to create some of the finest *hanji* in Korea.

For Lee to find a teacher who would apprentice her was a huge challenge. The status of a Fulbright scholarship meant nothing to the Korean papermakers. The fact that Lee is female, not particularly strong, American, and in Korea for only a year made her a poor candidate. Papermakers didn't see any advantage to their business in taking her on. After a number of rejections, Lee was able to join Ji Bang Jang as an apprentice. On her first day at the mill, the patriarch of the papermaking family asked her, "Why do you want to do this? It's terribly difficult."

Working side-by-side with the Jang family and three female employees in their '70s who she respectfully addressed as *ajuma* (auntie), Lee began her physically-demanding

apprenticeship in the dead of winter, dressed in multiple layers topped off with ski pants. The *ajumas* finished more work in a day than Lee could ever imagine, and they took good care of their American *agashi* (miss).

Lee's narrative of her early apprenticeship often sounds as if she was time-traveling deep into the past. She harvested the *dak* (mulberry wood) with a sickle that she sharpened on a grindstone. Once cut, she carried the heavy bundles on her shoulder. When she needed to stop to shift the burden, her teacher, Mr. Jang, once asked, "You've never done really hard work before, have you?" By week two, she was making paper.

Traditional papermaking in freezing weather, involves plunging one's hands into icy water repeatedly. At first, Lee kept a pot of hot water nearby to warm her hands, but as she got accustomed to the process, she used the hot water less and less. The freezing water numbed her chafed and blistered hands.

Lee's words make papermaking sound as graceful as a ballet. This is how she describes the patriarch's style: "His method was calmer and more even than his son's, with a slow rocking motion. He did *yup-muljil* [a side-to-side motion that lets water run off of the screen that holds the pulp] in an even and light motion, as if tracing the lower arc of a circle back and forth. He never took up too much water at once, nor did he dip at sharp angles. His technique always involved dipping the full length of the screen... and pausing for that magical moment when all of the pulp sat on top of the screen before the excess tipped off the other side."

The author also had an apprenticeship in *jiseung*, a method of twisting paper into cords and weaving them into objects. Her teacher, Mr. Na, was a third-generation *jiseung* master. The photos of Mr. Na's work are astounding. Her lessons were tedious, but photos of

Working with Ms. Yang, who had studied fashion design in New York, Lee learned how to dye fabric using the unripened fruit. Like magic, the characteristic orangy-red color only appears when the dye is exposed to sunlight.

Ms. Kim, an octogenarian and *hanji* collector, was next in line as Lee's teacher. From her, Lee learned *joomchi*, a process where fibers of *hanji* paper are broken down, scratching the paper into lint. Using a moistened sheet of *hanji* as a base, the colorful lint is added to the paper, and the base sheet is crumpled and distressed, merging the paper fibers, much like the process of felting wool.

While Lee had dismissed the possibility of studying calligraphy early in her trip, she reconsidered when an acquaintance told her she could never really know *hanji* until she studied calligraphy, as calligraphy was the reason the paper was created. So study she did, with yet another expert.

Lee wraps up her story with chapters on *hanji* today, including sources for purchasing *hanji* in the U.S.; and the culmination of her journey, the establishment of her *hanji* studio in Cleveland. Rounding out the book is a helpful glossary.

For a glimpse at this uniquely Korean art form — and one artist's journey to discover its versatility — *Hanji Unfurled* is a gem.

#### DOESN'T ADD UP

*All Woman and Springtime*  
By Brandon W. Jones  
Algonquin Books  
NYC, 2012  
ISBN #978-1-616-20077-0

Review by Joanne Rhim Lee

The premise of Brandon W. Jones' *All Woman and Springtime* is by all accounts both intriguing and promising. The book jacket describes it

Without blood  
there is no forgiveness

SHAME'S  
EVIDENCE



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Next on the agenda was learning about natural dyes. Lee studied first in Seoul with Myung-sun Lee, a scholarly expert on coaxing stunning colors from plants and other natural materials. The brilliant hues shown in the photos of silk and paper are warm and inviting. On Jeju, the large island south of the mainland, Lee learned about dyeing with persimmon, a tree fruit that grows well in that climate.