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SPECIAL SECTION: KOREAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

## THE ROLE OF THE KOREAN ACADEMY

For a long time, Korean American writers like Younghill Kang and Richard Kim were not recognized as Korean writers in Korea because they wrote in English. The Korean Academy (of Literature, in Korea) was sometimes even hostile to them. But recently, Korean American writers are finally welcome under a new and more inclusive vision of Korean literature.

Dafna Zur of the University of British Columbia characterizes this new attitude in her essay, *Covert Language Ideologies in Korean American Literature*. Zur points out that in recent years, Korean scholars have begun to "graciously embrace Korean American writers as an obvi-

ous and natural part of Korean literature." They now feel that "Korean American literature is a branch of Korean literature written in English but nonetheless Korean in the issues discussed." That is to say, to the Korean Academy, Korean American literature is now Korean Anglophone literature, a classification that doesn't quite make sense to some American scholars.

Zur summarizes the three main points of this new attitude in the Korean academy:

(1) that Korean American literature has an educational, didactic value to it, in that it informs non-Korean readers about Korea (by employing, for example, Korean words and phrases in the English text);

It is true that many Korean American authors employ such language devices. But in light of some of the works I have discussed above, the next two points seem somewhat limiting:

(2) that Korean American literature attests to and performs 'Koreaness', thus preserving Korean culture for future generations to come; and that

(3) Korean American literature is a part of Korean literature because it discusses issues relevant to Korean culture, namely the process of immigration and the negotiation of identities of Koreans abroad.

The tacit definition applied to Korean American literature by American scholars is that it is writing, in English, by Americans of Korean origin. It is typically assumed that this writing is somehow connected to issues of ethnicity or at least includes a character or narrator who is Korean or Korean American. Whether this literature serves the interests of Koreans is not generally an issue.

In light of the above, the work that best characterizes the three considerations of the Korean Academy is probably not what the Korean or American academics had in mind.

If you follow the Korean rhetoric back to America, it brings us to the anthology *Surfacing Sadness: A Centennial of Korean-American Literature 1903-2003*, whose contents were translated from the Korean into English (perhaps its most remarkable feature). This type of writing is a category likely to become more prevalent in the near future.

In the afterword to *Surfacing Sadness*, Yeom Hong Choi, one

of the co-editors, implicitly defines Korean American literature as works by Korean Americans written in Korean, which goes contrary to the general view that Korean American literature is written in English.

Choi also reveals a nationalist rhetoric quite familiar to those in Korean literary studies. He says, "In the intellectual void of the 1970s and 1980s, Korean poets and writers in the United States published their works in Korean-language newspapers, attended Korean churches utilizing their native language, and organized Korean literary societies in metropolitan areas such as Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., New York, Atlanta, Chicago, and San Francisco." He goes on to talk about some of these literary movements and their products, such as *Jipyongsun*, *Miju Munhak*, *Woollim*, *Munhak Saega*, and *Oaegi*, but it is the last two titles that have a distinctly odd and exciting sound to them: Washington *Munhak* and New York *Munhak*. These are all venues through which Korean Americans writing in Korean can get published, but the titles of the last two finally represent, and draw long-overdue attention to, the increasing international culture of Koreans and Korean Americans.

Choi has a set of complaints, partially directed at the American academy. For example, he says, "I was greatly disappointed by Marshall Pihl's total ignorance of Korean literature in the United States, even though he was one of America's most prominent Korean scholars." Choi also complains about Cornell University's East Asia Series, which publishes Korean novels and poetry collections, "but [has] yet to publish Korean American literature." He talks about Korean Studies programs and literature courses in which classic works like the *Ch'unhyangjon* and *Hong'gilongjon* are studied but contemporary Korean American works are not. He says that "the students' parents are paying their sons' and daughters' tuition yet they are not introduced to their parental works at all. This is a sad state."

Choi's concerns exemplify how the rhetoric and the definitions can be surprisingly disjunctive even when they appear to refer to things that fall into the same category. But his concerns also draw much needed attention to the complex layers of politics concerning Korean American literature.