

Korean Poets and Writers Group in Washington, D.C., helped to edit this book, along with Haeng Ja Kim, a poet and recipient of the Editor Choice Award from the National Library of Poetry in Maryland. Sponsored by George Washington University and the Smithsonian Institute, *Surfacing Sadness* may have the distinction of being the only significant anthology to focus solely on literary works written in Korean by Korean American immigrants. As Choi asserts: "[First-generation] literary voices deserve to be heard, and their art deserves to be recognized."

In fact, the majority of poets and writ-

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— Dr. Yeann Hong Choi, one of the editors of *Surfacing Sadness*

ers in this anthology have never been translated and published in English before. "Writers whose works are included in [*Surfacing Sadness*] cannot distance themselves from their mother tongue or the culture that has shaped their craft," explains Choi. Unfortunately, the use of the Korean language automatically limited their audience and their ability to find access to the mainstream. While small *munhak* or "literary" societies were formed in cities throughout the United States, sadly, these works could only be circulated within their own Korean-speaking communities. To make matters more difficult, the emergence of "resistance" literature by Korean American writers who opposed the South Korean government during the 1970s and '80s and themes of American immigrant life (embodied in poems with titles such as "L.A. Elegy," "A Dry Cleaner Ironing the Pacific Ocean" and "Black Korean") meant that these works would be overlooked not only in America, but in their homeland of Korea as well.

"Some Korean scholars think the creative writings of Korean Americans do not

belong in the framework of Korean literature because they do not have literary value," says Choi, who nevertheless feels that these works should be required reading in college classrooms in both the United States and Korea.

What is striking about the varied works in *Surfacing Sadness* is the various nuances of the Korean immigrant life that involve both Korea and America. Whether it is longing for the homeland in a country where "kimchi and soy paste/Has to be eaten in stealth" in Byong Hyon Kim's poem "Disapproving Reaction" or wondering how long it will be before the poet's sons and his descendents lose



Dr. Yeann Hong Choi (LEFT) and Heang Ja Kim compiled and edited *Surfacing Sadness*, an anthology of first-generation Korean American poetry, essays and short fiction.

their Korean names in Soon Paik's "Annapolis," the quintessential Korean emotion of *han* — an often overused Korean cultural trope that is loosely defined as "sorrow," "angst" or "unrequited anger" — suddenly takes on new meaning in the context of American immigration. As Choi describes it, these nuances are "sorrow, nostalgia, pathos, anger, frustration and, of course, hope."

In Moon Hee Kim's poem "Grafting," she writes:

*although a young branch is cut
and inserted into another stem
curiously,
it bears much better fruit
in spite of the cruel cut.*

...
*who knows a keen immigrant's life
would also bear
much better fruit
at the end of a branch
that loses its voice
longing for the root?*

Sometimes, the direct translation, with its stilted grammar and awkward phras-

ing, makes the work all the more poignant. Consider Dae Woo Chang's essay, "At a Grocery Store," where he writes of being rudely dismissed by a bank teller who taps at a notice on a bulletin board next to the window instead of looking directly at him:

"However, I already knew that information. Since I didn't quite understand, I asked her again. The response from her was the same except the tapping became stronger. It meant, 'You still don't know.'

"Listen! I am a customer too. How can you treat me like this when we are all same customers."

In these translated immigrant writings, even clichés become meaningful expressions. They are, as the introduction puts it, "jewels in the mud." And in a clever inversion of a common American saying, the editors assert: "All that does not glitter may be gold." And in a very real sense, they are right. As Choi states, "I don't care however humble [these writings] are. I want to show the reality of Korean Americans' dreams, sorrows, frustration, tears and anger," even if it means confronting the embarrassment of "imperfect English and strong accents."

Since its publication, *Surfacing Sadness* has received some of the mainstream recognition that has been sorely lacking. There has been coverage from the Voice of America and a poetry reading sponsored by the Library of Congress. Even the South Korean media has covered the book in major daily newspapers and academic journals. While the writings may not achieve the stature or quality of works by transnational writers such as Mia Yun (though Yun is one of the very few English-language writers included in this anthology), overseas Korean-language writers will continue to seek to have their voices to be heard. They may not have a choice. According to the editors, *Surfacing Sadness* "is a Korean scream in the castle." In other words, there has been too much hardship and pain that is aching to be expressed, and anyway, isn't literature often the work of those that are outcast?

"There is much sorrow in immigrant lives," says Choi. "But sorrow is a beautiful thing to immigrants, isn't it? *Surfacing Sadness* is the expression of our lives." ☐