

A FINDER OF LOST VOICES

Discovering the works of first-generation writers in the anthology, *Surfacing Sadness*

> By Charse Yun

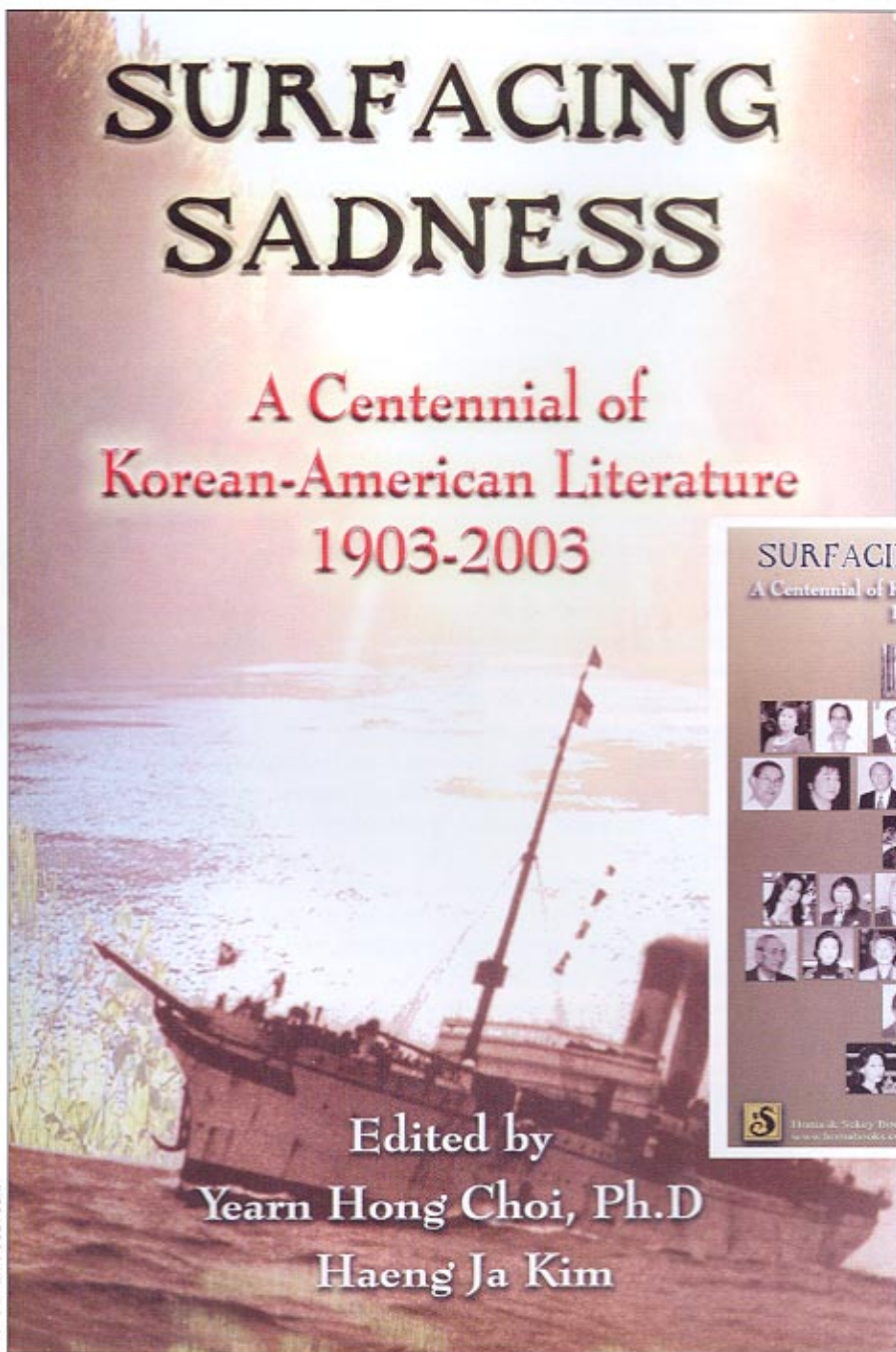


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INSET: The back cover of *Surfacing Sadness* pictures the writers who contributed to this first-of-a-kind literary anthology: works written in Korean by first-generation Korean Americans that were translated into English.

PICTURE, for a moment, the first-generation Korean immigrant. For many of us, we need only look to our own parents. Immediately, we conjure up images of Korean merchants running small mom-and-pop dry cleaners, nail salons or liquor stores, or dignified professionals quietly toiling away in their specialties. Certainly, the *ilse*, or first generation, have been nothing if not industrious and hardworking. Yet, notice how *silent* these images are. If they speak at all, it is most likely in their native Korean. If it is in English, it is the broken English caricatured in stereotypes of the foreign shopkeeper (or "Konglish" as it is somewhat pejoratively coined); for others, it is the clipped, awkward speech of the educated foreign exchange student.

Which perhaps explains why we don't expect or imagine a poetic literary voice emerging from first-generation Korean Americans. It may also explain why it is always something of a revelation when younger generations discover early Korean American writers such as Younghill Kang or Richard Kim, who

managed to master English and publish critically acclaimed novels in their adopted country. Novelist Thomas Wolfe called Kang "a born writer" with "an original and poetic mind." And none other than Pearl S. Buck lauded Kim's 1964 novel, *The Martyred*, as being worthy of the Nobel Prize for Literature.

But aside from these exceptional writers and a few others, the literary voice of the *ilse* has been virtually absent in English.

This neglect, says Dr. Yearn Hong Choi, co-editor of the aptly titled anthology, *Surfacing Sadness: A Centennial of Korean American Literature* (Homa & Sekey Books, 2003), is what inspired him to compile poetry, essays and short stories of 37 immigrant Korean American writers in celebration of last year's centennial anniversary of Korean immigration. Choi, the founding president of the

