
Dandelion Seeds



Seodaemun Prison Museum, Seoul—Beneath a weeping sky, I enter a room papered with the ID cards of thousands upon thousands of patriots jailed here by Japanese colonizers, then South Korean tyrants. Prisoners' gaunt faces stare into the eyes of the jail photographer—and now mine. They range in age from grizzled halaboji and halmoni to fourteen-year olds. Their eyes show they know that torture, solitary confinement in dog-sized cages and possibly death awaits them. Like Yu Kwan Sun, the Ewha student activist horribly tortured and executed here, whose final words were:

Japan shall fall...my fingernails may be pulled out, my nose and ears cut off, my hands and legs broken. I can bear the pain. But I cannot bear the pain of losing our country. That I only have one life to give for our country is my only sadness.



I run my fingers along the edges of the patriots' pictures so I can remember. Let the sorrow and defiance nesting in this bloodied place wash through me, here with descendents of Korean independence fighters from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, China and the US. We are guests of the Ministry of Patriots & Veterans Affairs (MPVA) on a program initiated in 1995 that has brought over five hundred

kyopo, overseas Koreans, from fifteen countries to celebrate roots. Families of fighters often live precariously, still suffering from the effects of collective punishment leveled against our ancestors. MPVA seeks to redress that hurt.



Thanks to my Uncle Frank and Aunt Susan Yoon’s research, I know of organizations my grandparents Rev. Yoon Peong Koo and Agnes Oh Yoon helped spearhead in Hawaii, California, New York/ Jersey, Washington, Oregon and beyond. Groups like Shinmin Hwe, Chinmok Hwe, Korean National Association and the Korean Methodist Church. This visit teaches me about political and military initiatives of their peers in China and the former Soviet Union.

Take Lee Eun Ja of the Jirin Korean Autonomous Region. Her haunting *Arirang* soprano makes me feel like flying. Her halaboji Lee Keon Su fought Japan from Chinese soil, where he raised war funds with the Model Youth Party. He later helped blow up key Japanese facilities in Pyongyang, was arrested and died in prison.



Choi Wui Min also comes from Jirin. He speaks flawless Korean and represents our delegation during ceremonies at the National Cemetery (where Halaboji is also buried.) His father, Choi Bong Won, fought in the Joseon Volunteer Army in North China. Mr. Choi grows animated at Dorasan Observatory near the DMZ re opening the railroad connecting North and South Korea and the rest of Asia. That way he can hop the train to visit his ancestral land instead of having to trek the long way around.



To meet Koreans from Central Asia is to find sisters and brothers twice betrayed, first by Japanese occupiers, then by Stalin’s ethnic cleansing program. Accused of being a fifth column for Japan, by 1937 over 180,000 “Koryo Saram” were deported from Russia’s

Far East, especially the Vladivostok region, where many had migrated during colonizer wars and occupation. Thousands died from starvation and exposure. Kazakh and Uzbek neighbors helped survivors make a life in those arid lands.



“Our halaboji wrote *Joseon Grammar* and *Joseon History* to keep us from losing our culture,” says Alex Kye who hails from Almaty, Kazakhstan. He feels like my big bro, always refreshing my beer mug. Like my grandparents, Alex’s halaboji, Kye Bong Woo, worked for Shinmin Hwe before he was sent into exile. He also served on the Korean Provisional Government in Shanghai and wrote for *Independence Newspaper*. Later he was arrested and jailed by the Irkutsk leadership of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union on trumped up charges and deported to Kazakhstan, where this tireless man kept writing. Alex speaks and writes Korean, a living testament to his halaboji’s faith.

Larissa Kim is a beauty from Tashkent, Uzbekistan. “This is our Whang Un Jeong Halaboji. He couldn’t get Korea out of his mind.” She shows me this proud man’s

pictures, one shot straight ahead, one sidewise, perhaps from travel or prison documents. Larissa and I are roommates and soul sisters. Electrified by the March 1, 1919 Uprising, my grandfather helped organize the First Korean Congress in Philadelphia and was elected president of the North American Region of the Kukminhoe. Larissa’s Halaboji also cast his lot with the March 1st Movement, in Hamkyongbuk-do, for which he was promptly exiled to Wang Cheong-hyun, Jirin, China. There he led combatants as an executive member of the Chupoon Solbatkwan Korean Communist Army against Japan.



Working for the same cause but shaped by place and circumstance, our ancestors walked different paths. Some excelled in education and mobilization, others in persuasion and diplomacy, still others in assassination and armed struggle. After being separated so many years by wars hot and cold, now their descendants can embrace in jong, affection and unity. Whatever our dandelion diaspora tongues cannot say, our eyes know to dance and hearts to sing—in the restless land haunting our ancestors’ dreams.

--By Miriam Ching Yoon Louie, August 2011

Got questions? Check out:

- *Koryo Saram - The Unreliable People* DVD by Y. David Chung & Matt Dibble at www.koryosaram.net/
- Ministry of Patriots & Veterans Affairs—<http://english.mpva.go.kr/>
- K.W. Lee & Dr. Luke & Grace Kim’s “Like Father, Like Son,” *KoreAm*, May 2003 for Uncle Frank Yoon’s story, also in Lee & Kims’ forthcoming, *Lonesome Journey: The Korean American Century*.
- Roberta Chang’s *The Koreans in Hawai’i: A Pictorial History, 1903-2003*
- Prof. Marn Cha’s *Koreans in Central California (1903-1957): A Study of Settlement and Transnational Politics*



All power to Korea’s youth, including history guide Lee Shin Woo—the future is yours.

Special thanks to Lee Han Ju and Mun Hanul for photos, to Sunny Kim and Lina Min, the fabulous Wonder Women of TourNetKorea for skill and solicitude, to the MPVA for generosity and vision and Minnie Yoon Ching Omma for faith.

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