



MULTICULTURAL FORUM

EDUCATIONAL EQUITY COMMITTEE • COLLEGE OF HUMANITIES AND THE ARTS • SAN JOSE STATE UNIVERSITY

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Special Issue

From the Editor

In Fall 2002, the editors of the Multicultural Forum learned about Professor Kichung Kim's imminent retirement as of Spring 2003, after a distinguished career of 36 years with San Jose State University. We decided to interview him for the Faculty Profile and, finding the transcript too valuable to be abbreviated, share it in this special issue of the newsletter.

Outlining his life experiences and professional career during the hour-long conversation, Kichung delineated the quest for meaning, identity, and heritage of an Asian immigrant and American academic, in the process alluding to precious moments in the institutional history of San Jose State University and exemplifying the coming-of-age of diversity and multiculturalism as integral results of the struggles for civil rights and equality. The interview is one of the most edifying conversations I have ever had with a colleague at San Jose State University. Asian American though I am already, I came away with an even surer sense of heritage and identity—and mission as an academic—thanks to Kichung's plain words of experience, wisdom, and perspective. Being modest to the point of self-effacing, Kichung declined having his picture posted; the cover of his book is pictured instead.

Balance Chow

Forthcoming in the next issue:

** Dr. B. Kumaravadivelu of the Department of Linguistics and Language Development explores the relationship between "foreign accents" and discrimination.*

** Native American student Lisa Price breathes life into her Karuk culture and tradition as she shares experiences of tribal myth and ceremony with her grandson.*

To contribute articles for consideration, please contact the Editor of the Multicultural Forum, zip 0088.

Faculty Profile: Professor Kichung Kim

Department of English and Comparative Literature/
American Studies Program

An interview by Balance Chow

The following interview was conducted in November 2002.

—Thanks a lot for agreeing to do this interview for the Multicultural Forum. Could you begin by talking about your educational background?

I went to a prestigious public high school in Seoul. I was in the first class after the liberation of Korea at the end of World War Two. It was a six-year school, but I actually spent a little more than four years there because the Korean War broke out a little after my fifth year began. So our class ended up graduating with many of us having been absent for most of the last years.

—Do you have any memories of the Japanese occupation?

I went to a grammar school in a very small town in North Korea. The principal was Japanese. I even had a Japanese home-room teacher for a year. There was one other Japanese teacher, along with other Korean teachers.

—Did you have to learn Japanese?

Oh yes. We were educated in Japanese from the second year on. The first year, we were allowed to speak Korean, and we even had some classes in Korean, but after that Korean was forbidden in school and we all had to communicate in Japanese.

—So you were not allowed to learn about Korean literature, history, and culture?

No, I really had little background in Korean literature—and history—until I began to study it on my own in this country after I finished my Ph.D. in English. I felt really deficient, and I didn't think that my educational background was enough for me just to know Western literature.

—*How about English? Did you get to learn English in Korea?*

Yes, we studied English, but my language proficiency was very poor when the Korean War erupted. I could read, but when I tried to talk to American soldiers, they didn't understand me and I didn't understand them. My conversational English improved when I started working for Americans in an American field hospital. Because I had a good background in English grammar, in a few months I was able to communicate with them.

—*Were you a volunteer in the field hospital?*

No, I was a refugee in Pusan; they didn't feed refugees that much, and I had my father and my mother with me. I had to help. I just stumbled into this place, where they needed to hire somebody in the X-ray room. So I became an apprentice; later I became a technician in the X-ray room, where I spent the next two years.

—*At that time were you still studying as a student?*

I was supposed to be enrolled in high school, but I never attended any classes—as I mentioned to you. Two years later we just went back for graduation.

—*Did your work at the hospital have anything to do with your coming to the United States?*

Yes. A doctor who worked there, when he returned to the United States, helped me get a scholarship to go to a small college in Virginia—Randolph-Macon College, a Methodist liberal arts college named after two well-known statesmen.

—*Were you required to adopt the Methodist faith?*

No, I was not required to do so, but we were required to take a class in The Bible and attend weekly chapel service. But I never became a Christian.

—*How old were you then?*

I was 18, and since that time I have been in the US. I had meant to go back to Korea in four years, but after I graduated I got another scholarship, and then I got married, and things like that...

—*What did you study in college?*

I studied English—English literature; that was my major.

—*What made you decide to study English?*

I thought about going into Chemistry, because I excelled at Chemistry and things like that when I was in college. But—I

don't know, it's hard to explain why I ended up in English of all things. Randolph-Macon College was one of those places where you could become a doctor because it had a very strong pre-med program and I could have easily gone into that program like many of my friends. There was a Chinese fellow that I swam and played tennis with; he got into the program and became a doctor.

—*For some unexplained reason you majored in English and got a degree. Did you go straight to graduate school afterwards?*

I got a fellowship from the University of Washington in Seattle, to study for an MA in English.

—*During all this time who were your favorite authors or literary works?*

Fitzgerald, I suppose. I also liked Whitman a lot. It had a lot to do with the teachers I had. There were some good teachers who introduced me to American literature. I was very much into American literature and Shakespeare.

—*What were your professors like? Did they find it strange that you were somebody from Asia and you were studying English literature?*

They did find it strange. In fact, some of them discouraged me from getting into it at the graduate level because, they said, even native-born students found it difficult. I had an interesting experience: I applied to Princeton for graduate studies; they didn't accept me, but they did write me a letter trying to discourage me from getting into English, saying that "English is very difficult for you because your first language is not English." I should have taken their advice, I guess, but when you are young, you don't know better.

—*But since you had already received an undergraduate degree in English, probably you were doing OK in terms of the subject?*

Well, yes, I was doing OK, but when I got to graduate school I found out that I really had difficulty with poetry. I didn't know that before because poetry wasn't that much emphasized in my undergraduate studies. With novels and so on I had no problems, but with poetry it took me a long time to see the point. For instance, I loved Ben Jonson's poetry, but I didn't know what to say, you know, and it took me a long time to really understand his poetry.

—*Did this have anything to do with the fact that you had a different cultural background—although you were not too familiar with Korean literature back then, somehow because your cultural background was Korean, maybe you felt more comfortable with certain genres, and certain ways of looking at things?*

Yes, I think so. I think most immigrants find poetry and jokes the most difficult to understand. Poetry, really, comes out of the cultural contexts of the language, and you have to know all of the things that surround the poetry—you know, the backgrounds, the histories, as well as all the suggestions, etc. And you have to hear the poetry—the sound. For instance, I have difficulty hearing “the beauty of Keats’s poetry” that people talk about. I don’t think I really hear it, not yet. This is just like some of my American-born friends who are studying Korean poetry. Well, they don’t hear Korean poetry either. But I don’t have any problem hearing Korean poetry, because that’s my mother tongue. When it comes to poetry, I can understand Shakespeare better, because there is more content to work with—even though I had problems with Shakespeare’s sonnets at first. Dramatic poetry I can understand better than pure lyric poetry.

—Maybe there is some kind of “depth” to the culture that really requires you to be immersed in it long enough or to be born into it—I struggle with that problem myself.

Yes, right, “immersion”... so you understand that.

—Back to your education. You went to the University of Washington for graduate studies. Do you recall any significant experiences or influences there?

I met a Korean professor there—he was teaching classical Korean. It was the first time I had ever taken classical Korean in my life. Professor Suh—Doo-su Suh was his name—became my mentor for many years. He was a professor in Korean Studies. It was he who introduced me to classical Sino-Korean texts. It was very difficult. We read some classics of the Choson Dynasty, which was written completely in classical Chinese. I was introduced to that for the first time. We also read some texts in Korean vernacular literature.

—Did you still remember your Korean when you were doing that?

Oh, yes. I had no problems with Korean. Although my spoken Korean became rusty during the four years of college when I didn’t speak it at all, I recovered from that after taking classes from Professor Suh.

—He was your major influence then?

Yes, he was himself a major influence on me, because he was a kind man, with a great deal of knowledge. And what really pained me was that he did not get what he really deserved—he was not given tenure at the University of Washington. Korean literature was an insignificant part of UW’s Korean Studies program. The other thing was that Seattle was very much a racist city back then. There were many places, for instance, where he could not buy a home even though he had the money. There were only certain parts of the city where he could buy his home.

—Were there any laws against Asians?

No, there were no laws against Asians per se, but there were laws against interracial marriages, etc. It was also understood that you could not buy lakefront properties.

—So you were studying for your master’s and you got to take some Korean Studies classes. Did you go straight to the Ph.D. program afterwards?

No. I was really lucky: just as I was finishing my M.A., a guy from the University of Hawaii—the chairman of the English Department—was on campus to recruit instructors, and I was offered the job. So I taught English at the University of Hawaii for three years.

—What kinds of students did you teach there?

All kinds of students. Lots of Asians, and lots of whites. I had some trouble with white students there at first. I think they had trouble accepting me in an English class. The interesting thing was that some of the Asian students came to my help in the class—in a freshman class! Can you imagine that? They gave me confidence.

—Were some of the students Korean too?

Not at first but later. There were many Japanese American, Chinese American, and Hawaiian students.

—What was the subject you were teaching?

English composition. I was only a temporary instructor, and that was all that I was given—English composition. In fact, I was lucky to be given three or four composition classes. One of my fellow instructors from Oregon was given five composition classes. It almost drove him crazy.

—That’s too much. So you taught there for three years, and then what made you leave? Where did you go?

Well, I had to leave. But any way one good thing that happened was that I was able to apply for permanent residency when I was in Hawaii. Because I was hired, the University of Hawaii was willing to send something to the Immigration Service on my behalf—the Immigration Service had been checking on me and had wanted me to leave. That was in 1960. My passport had expired, but the Korean government would not renew it. They had a Consul General in San Francisco who was also in charge of Seattle and other regions. Once, when I was a graduate student in Seattle, I joined the Korean Association’s demonstration against Syngman Rhee’s administration. Students in Seoul were marching against him at the time, protesting against his dictatorship and anti-democratic practices. Naturally, Korean students in Washington sympathized with them and demonstrated in concert. It so

happened that during a demonstration meeting, I foolishly or bravely, whatever you call it, spoke out against Rhee when the Consul General was there. He was the one who could decide whether to extend my passport—which he refused. So I was in Hawaii with an expired passport.

—*You couldn't get your passport renewed?*

No, I couldn't. Immigration actually asked me to leave! But the problem was that by that time I was already married, and I had a son, an American citizen, born in Seattle. My wife and I had an interesting meeting with an Immigration officer, who was a woman. I asked her, "What about my son?" She said, "He can stay." But we had to leave—my wife and me.

—*So you had only two choices: either to leave, in compliance with the law, or to find a way to stay.*

I had found a way to stay because the University of Hawaii was willing to send in some forms for me that would allow me to apply for permanent residency. They saved me.

—*When did you become a citizen?*

I became a citizen after I went to Berkeley to study for my Ph.D. in English. I had to wait five years after receiving permanent residency.

—*Could you talk a bit about your studies at Berkeley, your professors, and your influences?*

I had a good experience at Berkeley. It was a huge place with lots of graduate students—about four to six hundred, I think. One of my friends from Hawaii also came to Berkeley. The first thing we had to do was to pass the foreign language exams. I passed French and German without difficulty, but I had lots of problems with Latin. I think I passed it on my third or fourth try.

—*Which were your favorite courses, and which subject did you focus on?*

I knew I was going to write my dissertation on American literature. But two of the classes that I liked the best were Professor Charles Muscatine's Chaucer and Mark Schroder's 19th-Century British Literature. Both were famous professors. They used to pack the Wheeler Hall, which seats three to five hundred students.

—*What was the topic of your dissertation?*

Henry David Thoreau.

—*Why did you choose Thoreau?*

I liked Thoreau very much at the time. He was also very popular with students who were into the student movements,

such as the free-speech movement. They used to quote from Thoreau's essay on "Civil Disobedience."

—*Did you also find some kind of connection between Thoreau and Korean culture?*

I didn't see it at that time, but now certainly I see some connections between Thoreau as well as Emerson's transcendentalism and Asian literature. They are very much influenced by Indian sacred books, and Thoreau talks about Confucius in *Walden*.

—*Did you have a good time at Berkeley?*

I don't know about that. But my three years in Hawaii, and my studies in Washington, really prepared me for graduate work at Berkeley.

—*Were you the only Asian at Berkeley?*

There were some other Asians. There was one Japanese American student, and some Japanese students as well. One of them just got an M.A. and left. I think in American schools, there was a perception at that time, even in the English department at Berkeley among the faculty, that non-American-born students could not distinguish themselves in English. It was a presupposition among them. There was this prejudice. There was only one black student. Things like that continued for a long time.

—*Yes. I experienced that myself. Did you feel something like being out of place or did you get a sense of not belonging or being alienated during all those years as a graduate student?*

Yes, I think so, both at Washington and at Berkeley. I was really estranged from the main body of the English majors. I had very few friends, and I was not very close to the professors, except for the one who supervised my dissertation.

—*Did you ever wonder about your choice of English as your field?*

Oh yes, I have, ever since I finished. I mean I was very interested in teaching English, but I do think now that it was a wrong choice.

—*You think it was a wrong choice? What would you have chosen now?*

For one thing, I could have gone into Comparative Literature. I could have studied East and West literary relations, dealing with East Asian literatures (Chinese, Korean, and Japanese) and English. I would have loved it professionally. There was a guy in Hawaii who was a visiting professor in Comparative Literature when I was there. As a junior faculty member I got to talk to him and his advice for me was: "Don't stick to English; get into Comparative Literature." I tried to do that, but at the time in Berkeley there wasn't anybody interested in Korean. It was different when my wife went to Stanford for her Ph.D. in Art History. There was a professor there who taught Asian painting,

who immediately influenced her to write her dissertation on Korean painting. But that was twenty years later.

—Maybe things have changed. Now the Asian American student population in the UC's is very much higher.

And Asian literature has become very important there. Back then, when I asked my professors whether I could substitute Japanese for Latin, because I knew Japanese well and would have no problem passing it, they said no. There was the rule that you had to pass French and German, and Latin or Greek. That was it. They would not even let people take Italian as a substitute. Things were pretty rigid.

—After you received your Ph.D., did you have any problem finding a profession to your liking?

Again I was lucky. I was hired by San Jose State University. At first I was a TA at the University of San Francisco, and I was also teaching half-time here as a temporary in 1966. Then in 1967 I was given a tenure-track position after they got to know me and visited my classes. I was very lucky.

—Since coming here in 1966, you have seen a lot of history at San Jose State, I suppose?

It's amazing that many changes took place.

—What are some changes that you could highlight?

The most prominent is how gradually the attitude of white people toward the non-whites changed. When I first came here, for instance, some of my colleagues had difficulty understanding that "Kim" was my family name. My first name is very different, you see, but they kept calling me "Kim" as if that was my first name. Then, during the last fifteen years or so there has been another major change as younger faculty started coming. They did not have any problem getting to know my name, including the first name, and saying it right. Another thing is that, about ten years after I received my tenure, when I went into Korean Studies and started writing articles about Korean literature, my colleagues did not have any problems with that at all. In fact, most of my colleagues, including the deans — successively — accepted it and encouraged me. The attitude toward diversity has changed drastically over the last twenty years. This also parallels the attitude toward non-white people in the Bay Area. When I first came here, there were areas in San Jose where I could not get any housing, and there were many clubs that I couldn't join—country clubs, for instance—even if I could afford it, I couldn't join.

—Could you talk a bit about the kinds of courses you taught here?

When I first came here it was English composition, and then American literature [survey]. At the beginning I always had to teach those. I was very lucky that halfway into my tenure process they allowed me to teach other classes. I offered an honors class

in Hawthorne, and then in Melville. I enjoyed that. Once I was accepted as part of the English Department, I was allowed to teach the regular classes—but not without some conflict at first. For instance, I was given the course "Oriental Literature in Translation," but the person who had been teaching it really resented that. In fact, he—a senior professor—and I had a confrontation. He asked me to come to his office and said, "You stole my class." I didn't know what he was talking about. He said, "I am the one who started this course, Oriental Literature in Translation. They took it away from me and gave it to you." I felt really bad about it, so I went to the department chair and told him, "I don't want to teach the class; give it back to that person." So the course went back to him. The following term, the guy who taught it said to me, "Well, you can have it one semester." So afterwards we began to alternate. Then, because I got to know quite a few black students here, I offered to teach a course in African American literature. I made a course proposal, but it was turned down by the curriculum committee. There was a furor when they [black faculty and students] found out about it. Harry Edwards—you know Harry Edwards, who is now at UC Berkeley? He was a star athlete. At the time he was an instructor in Sociology at San Jose State. He found out that I offered to teach a class in African American literature, and that the course proposal was turned down by the English Department. He did something about it, and the English Department Curriculum Committee reversed itself.

—What did he do?

I have no idea. He was an instructor here, but he was also the head of the black movement in this area. It was probably 1969 or 1970. He was a mentor to black athletes. He was the one who had energized those two runners who protested in the 1968 Olympics in Mexico. There was a guy [Tommie Smith] who broke the world record in the 200-meter dash, and another who came in third [John Carlos]. Edwards had mentored them. Those guys, instead of holding up the American flag, raised their fists in a Black Power salute on the stand. They were flown home right away. They were not given any credit at all. This really shamed America abroad, it was thought. And then there was one who set the world record for the 400-meter dash—Lee Evans. So there were three of them.

—That was in Mexico City? So they took away their medals because of the Black Power salute? Wow, this is fascinating stuff!

In fact, the wife of the guy who won the 200-meter dash was in one of my composition classes. And so was the wife of the guy who won the 400-meter dash.

—So there was a time at San Jose State when there were quite a few black students who were pretty much activists. When you proposed that course in African American literature, was it the first time it was proposed?

Oh yes, and I was something of an activist, too. I helped to found the Asian American Studies Program. I was the first coordinator.

—*I didn't know any of this history.*

I think I was converted at Berkeley. Don't forget that the free-speech movement occurred while I was there.

—*So in a way the African American literature course started with you, and it went on to be offered for many, many years until recently...*

Is it no longer offered? Has it been given to African American Studies?

—*After Wilbert Crockett retired and Aldon Nielsen left the department, it hasn't been offered regularly. There was an exception last year when Al Young was visiting as the Lurie Professor for Creative Writing.*

Is that so? I think I was the first one to teach African American works such as Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, Jean Toomer's *Cane*, and Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man*, among others.

—*Could you talk a bit more about the Asian American Studies Program? As I understand it, it is now hosted by the Social Sciences.*

I remember, on one occasion, as I was walking back to my office after I had finished teaching, I was approached by an Asian fellow. He said he was a student, and that he needed my help. It turned out that he and some of his fellow activists—these were Asian Americans such as Japanese, Chinese, and Filipino Americans—wanted to start an Asian American Studies program on campus, but they could not find any Asian American faculty to sponsor them. They finally decided that maybe I could do it, which was why they approached me. That was how I got involved in the Asian American Studies Program. It looked like the students were inspired by similar efforts at Berkeley, where they started an Asian American Studies program and offered a B.A., and now even a Ph.D., in Asian American Studies. At the time San Jose State offered a compromise: they approved only a minor in Asian American Studies. They would not approve of a major program. It was a student-led program for many years, and I was the coordinator. By the way, Mike Honda, who is now our Congressman, was part of this founding group that pushed for the program at SJSU.

—*Were any of these activities perceived as going against the grain, causing some conflicts between you and the department?*

I think so. These things occurred either during or after the Vietnam War period, and some people thought that I was a radical. I think one guy even called me a Maoist [*heartily laugh!*] But there were also many other people who supported me, especially in the English Department, as for instance the late John Galm and others. I was an active member of the union. At one point I was the secretary of the union, which was then called the American Federation of Teachers. The English Department, in fact, had the strongest detachment of the union.... Did you know that, at one point we went on strike to protest against the Vietnam War and to fight racism?

—*I didn't know that. Did most of the department go, too?*

No, most of the department did not go. But those from the English Department who did were the strongest group that struck in the union. We struck when San Francisco State struck. We promised that three days after San Francisco State went out we would strike in sympathy. And we did it. Then we were all fired a few days afterwards...

—*Oh really?*

Yeah, it was thanks to Hayakawa.

—*Was he the guy who wrote a book on language [S. I. Hayakawa, *Language in Thought and Action*]?*

Yes. He was the president of San Francisco State at the time; later he went on to become a U.S. Senator from California.

—*Did he fire those of you who went on strike?*

It was the state that fired us, but he engineered it.

—*You were fired? Wow! So how did you get to come back?*

Well, what happened was that there were many of us, and there was widespread support for us from the university's departments. Although not everybody went on strike, many supported us in spirit. In the English Department, they even collected money to give to us because we were out of our pay. The union was also quite strong. We were able to get reinstated, with the exception of one person. He went to court, and it took him many years to be reinstated.

—*This is really fascinating history. Did you see any results coming out of all that activism?*

I think so. The civil rights movement brought about a lot of change. I think in many ways there was a sea change in the whole society. In the university, and in the English Department especially, I think there was a sea change, a change of attitude. Many of the faculty were at the forefront of protests against the Vietnam War, which was an immoral war, and they were against racism. There was this push to bring

African American literature into mainstream studies, and then there was Asian American Studies, and then Hispanic Studies, and Native American Studies. All of those things followed as a result of the activist activities of the civil rights movement.

—*We are pretty much enjoying the fruits of that movement...*

I think so. You wouldn't have any trouble finding a place to live, right? You haven't even thought about that, right? But there was a time when there was some sort of covenant among realtors working in so-called decent neighborhoods, which basically said that they would not allow black or colored people to move into the neighborhood...

—*As dramatized in the play, A Raisin in the Sun...*

By Lorraine Hansberry, right? I taught that, too.

—*The campus has now become rather diverse—in terms of both the faculty and the student population. From your perspective you have therefore seen a lot of progress here. But do you see any problems, too, with all this diversity? Do you see any difficulties and challenges?*

I think there are still major problems on campus. If there is any residual racism, it is no longer on the surface as far as I know. It has become fashionable to promote diversity, at least on this campus and in the Bay Area. Once you are out of the Bay Area, let's say if you go to the South, to Alabama, Kansas, or to Iowa, Idaho, etc., things are probably going to be a bit different.

—*Things have changed in those places too. Diversity is really a national trend. But do you think the San Jose State administration is doing enough to meet the needs of this diverse population?*

I think they are trying... But you know, I have ceased to be an activist, and I have ceased paying too much attention to what is going on.

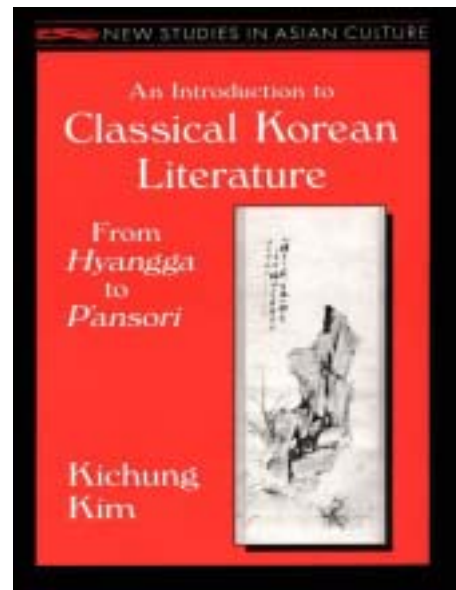
—*Why is that?*

I don't know. I guess I have become too busy studying Korean literature. And I also found out that, after the strike, my heart was not in it anymore. I guess I became rather disappointed in politics.

—*Is that why you switched to Korean culture and literature? Was it in the early or mid- or late 1970s?*

Probably in the early 1970s. It started out with my sabbatical when I began to translate Korean stories into English.

—*Over all these years, what are some of the things you have done with regard to Korean literature both as a scholar and a teacher?*



I have taught Introduction to Classical Korean Literature in Translation through the English Department twice. The English Department has been very supportive of me. The two classes have helped me to write my book, *An Introduction to Classical Korean Literature: From Hyangga to Pansori* (M.E. Sharpe, 1996).

—*How long did it take you to write this book?*

First, I had to educate myself. This was because, when I was growing up in Korea, I never heard of *Hyangga* or *Pansori*. I had to educate myself about it, and then I began to do research and write about the subject. It took me about ten years to write it.

—*That means you started writing the book in 1986. Before then, did you spend a lot of time studying Korean culture and literature?*

Right. I was at first interested in modern Korean literature. The first thing I did was translate some stories by modern Korean writers. Then I realized that I knew nothing about classical Korean literature.

—*How did you go about learning it? Did you do it on your own?*

Yes, on my own. And I started going to conferences. I did this at the right time, because Korean literature was becoming known, and there was encouragement coming my way. I received research grants and sabbaticals, so that I could travel back to Korea—many times.

—*Was it easy for you to reconnect with Korean culture and the people?*

I had no problem doing that. In fact, I felt very comfortable going back because at that time, at the end of the 1970s, I was still living in a society with racist attitudes not only towards blacks but also Asians. When I was in Korea, I was with my people; everybody accepted me and nobody saw me differently. When I was on the bus in Korea, for instance, even though it was crowded, I still felt comfortable. When I got on the bus, when young boys and girls gave up their seats for me, they would put their bags in my lap so that they could free their hands to hold onto the armrest or whatever for support—it gave me a wonderful feeling.

—In reconnecting with Korea, and in relearning about Korean culture and literature, what are some of the most important things you have discovered about Korea? Why does Korea provide such a “pull” for you?

You know, lots of African Americans started looking for their roots, and I think something like that happened with me. When I first went to grammar school, we were taught by the Japanese; in high school we had Korean teachers but we were not taught much about Korea. And then soon after the Korean War I was struck with this mania for things American and mania for everything Western, so that I was more interested in absorbing the American than the Korean or Asian type of thing. After I had actually come to America, gradually I understood that I was not fully accepted—in housing and in everything—and treated as different. American society itself makes us realize that we should never forget that we are different. Then I began to realize that I must understand something of my own Asian and Korea roots.

—A lot of immigrants and “hyphenated” Americans try to claim their American identity by acculturation and assimilation, and to fight for their right to belong, as if proclaiming, “Look, we are just as American as everybody else!” And yet you seem to be heading in the other direction...

I think for the first six years I tried to be as American as I could. Maybe studying American literature was part of it. Then I realized I couldn't, ever. I think Hawaii saved me, legally, psychologically, and culturally. When I went to Hawaii, I realized how beautiful Asians were. I realized we didn't have to assimilate completely, that we could be Asian and still be American or Western. I realized I really had to learn something about myself.

—Do you think being Asian and being American are compatible?

Yes. I actually wrote about this in an essay which deals with the Korean diaspora in literature. You remember I talked to you about this? The essay is out, by the way [“Affliction and Opportunity: Korean Literature in Diaspora, a Brief Overview,” *Korean Studies* 25:2 (2001)].

—I would love to get a copy of your article.

Certainly. What I finally realized about ethnic writers in Japan, Russia, and America, for instance, is that they had to become “amphibian.” We have to be able to navigate in not just one culture, but both. I remember having a conversation with the author of *Clay Walls*, Gloria Hahn [i.e., Kim Ronyoung; Gloria Hahn was her married name]—a very good friend of mine (and her husband, too); she died just before she and I were to offer a creative writing class in the Korean Center in San Francisco—anyway, she and I agreed that our “Koreanness” does not detract from our being American, but adds an additional dimension to being who we are.

The conversation continued for another fifteen minutes, touching on the Korean War, the American intervention, and the issue of imperialism in general. It was getting late, and as students were knocking on the door asking to see Kichung, I ended the interview reluctantly.

***College of Humanities and the Arts
Educational Equity Committee***

Carmen Sigler, Dean

One Washington Square
San José, California 95192-0088
Phone: (408) 924-4300 Fax: (408) 924-4365

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