

# From cataloger to curator

## The Korean exhibits of an accidental ethnic librarian

by Jina Choi Wakimoto

**F**our years ago, I attended the opening reception of an excellent exhibit at California State University, Northridge (CSUN), of Chinese snuff bottles curated by a Chinese-American librarian. I was lost in my enjoyment of the wide array of specimens and happy to view the results of someone else's work. I was surprised when more than one colleague said, "You should do a Korean exhibit." "Me?," I asked. This is the story of where those comments led.

I started as a full-time cataloging librarian at CSUN four years ago. I was returning to the profession after a decade of hiatus and had much to catch up on in learning the new technology and relearning the rules. I immersed myself in every detail of AACR2, the CONSER manual, and MARC formats—busy and quite content with my life as a cataloger. Not too long after I settled into this routine, I attended the fateful snuff bottle exhibition.

I came to the States from Korea as a teenager with a head full of nothing but the

thoughts of a teenager. As an adult, if ever I gave it a moment's thought, Korean culture to me was something in the ancient past with no relevance to a life revolving around my work and a house in suburbia with two children, two cats, and a minivan. I owned few, if any, Korean things and nothing of any consequence. My last name, Wakimoto, which I have borne for more than 20 years, is Japanese.

I could have forgotten all about my colleagues' suggestion, but I am sufficiently Korean to have a sense of duty that would not let me. As I thought about this challenge/predicament, I was overtaken by many emotions. I was struck by my almost total ignorance of my

own heritage—the result of years of assimilation in this country.

First overwhelmed by the complexity of the task before me, I then became resentful. What made them think that I could or should do a Korean exhibit? What made them think that I would know more about



Hyungbae (square insignia) 19th-century embroidered on silk, from the collection of Robert Moore.

### About the author

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Korean culture or history than any other American?

About this time I read a book by Eric Liu, *The Accidental Asian*.<sup>1</sup> The author's story of how he came to accept his Asian-American identity resolved some of my doubts and emboldened me to begin.

### Drawing up a plan

First, I pondered the purpose of a Korean exhibit. I decided it would be successful if it were to:

- educate the campus community by raising its awareness and appreciation of the traditions and culture of Korea,
- bring together the large Korean community of the San Fernando Valley and other parts of Los Angeles, encouraging them to work together on promoting Korean studies, and
- build a potential donor base by identifying individuals and groups who would be willing to support such endeavors.

I was keenly aware that such exhibits and events should not be a one-time entertainment for mainstream society, supported by the generous donation of the ethnic community. Education and outreach are continuing commitments. Once you embark, however tentatively, you must keep going for there is no backing out.

At this point, I was mentally prepared and ready to get busy. I drew up a plan consisting of the following steps:

- decide on the theme and focus of the exhibit,
- write up a plan of action, including a detailed timeline,
- be flexible and prepared for unexpected circumstances, and
- meet all the people in the library and the university who might share an interest in such an exhibit (the CSUN Library's development director, the exhibit committee, and faculty members in other departments).

This list in hand, I set out to build a support group for the exhibition. The success of an exhibition is largely dependent on the sup-

port of those with the same goals. I formed the "Task Force for Korean Culture at CSUN" with a faculty member in the Theater Department and another who was preparing to teach a Korean art history class. Our idea was to create the exhibition but also to be a continuing resource for Korean studies at CSUN.

### Taking the plan to the community

Now it was time to go out to the community. Immediately I was presented with a seemingly small but significant problem—my name card. It read: Jina Wakimoto, cataloging librarian. Those who know the painful history of Korea under Japanese rule in the not-too-distant past will understand my difficulty in approaching the Korean community for support and donations. With the support of Sue Curzon, CSUN's library dean, I was able to print a new bilingual name card, which included my Korean maiden name.

I started with the Korean Cultural Center (KCC), whose chief purpose is to promote the understanding of Korean culture and aid any organization in such an effort. I discussed my tentative plan for the exhibit and the opening reception with KCC's director and cultural consultant. I reviewed the resources available on site and secured a few

items for loan for the exhibit.

I had learned that it is very important to share a meal with Koreans, so I took the cultural consultant to lunch. To paraphrase a popular proverb, "When in Koreatown, do as Koreans do."

I made frequent visits to Los Angeles's Koreatown in the next several months. A call to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) connected me with Robert Moore, a private collector of Asian *objets d'art*, including many priceless Korean treasures, and he generously agreed to lend many items to us.

I visited a *hanbok* shop with dozens of colorful traditional costumes of different styles and learned more about the significance of the traditional designs and symbols. I visited



Glazed porcelain 18th-century bottle with underglaze decoration, from the collection of Dae Sung Choi.

a Korean Dance Academy to invite their dancers to perform at the exhibit and discussed the dance performances we would feature in the opening program.

During this period, I borrowed many books and read nightly as part of my crash course in Korean art, culture, and history. This was an intense time because all of my evenings and weekends were occupied with this singular challenge, and I was still carrying out my day job as a cataloger. My husband and teenagers cheerfully put up with my absences and the house filled with books and Korean objects.

My first exhibit was called "Mi: Beauty in Korean Art & Culture" and opened on April 23, 1999.<sup>2</sup> "Mi" was an introduction to Korean culture. As such, it featured more popular items and showy aspects: calligraphy and printing blocks, embroidery, personal ornaments, various types of pottery, and paintings. In addition to descriptive labels for the items, some notes giving the historical background, a map, and a brief chronology of Korea were displayed.

Then came the day of reckoning—opening day. There were five sets of tall and colorful drums on the portico outside the library,

and dancers in full Korean costume in brilliant colors awaited their time to perform. A corner of the lobby was decorated as a scholar's room with traditional Korean furniture, folding screen, and bamboo mat, ready for the planned calligrapher's demonstration. Korean food and drink were in the opposite corner. Guests began to arrive early.

Everything was ordered and serene. Then there was a loud thunderclap, a lightning storm, and hail pelting down in full force! This does not happen in Los Angeles in April. I hid in an office going over my speech and thinking back over all the preparations until it was time to face the standing room only crowd. As I went outside, a rainbow appeared in the sky! All was well.

### **The next exhibit**

I did not long to create another exhibit, despite the success of my first attempt. However, I had made a commitment to promote Korean culture, and I knew I would have to continue. In addition, because of the publicity in local papers, community members sought me out. Thus I came to know Peter Maeng, who collects rare books on Korea

## **Tips for successful exhibits**

### **Overall planning**

- Begin planning six months prior to opening.
- Make a to-do list and establish a timeline.
- Put your exhibit on the campus calendar as soon as possible.
- Involve faculty members interested in the exhibit subject.
- Contact cultural center/consulate general.
- Contact local museums.
- Identify potential sponsors and donors.
- Establish budget and write grant proposal.
- Secure funding and sponsorship.
- Prepare press releases.

### **Exhibit**

- Identify categories of culture to highlight.
- Select and acquire items to exhibit.
- Prepare labels for items and historical background.

- Allow a minimum of three days for installation.

### **Opening reception**

- Plan the program—keep it simple and appropriate for the audience.
- Bring in authentic food and drink, which are always popular.
- Design invitation and send to printer six weeks in advance.
- Prepare guest list for invitation: Friends of the Library, university administrators and deans, officials from a cultural center/consulate general, prominent members of the cultural community
- Design flyers (bilingual, if necessary) for general distribution.
- Send out invitations three weeks in advance.
- Send press releases twice—one month prior to and one week after the opening.

written by westerners or Koreans with a western education. I proposed that we should provide a venue to showcase his collection, and he readily agreed. This was the origin of a second, more scholarly, exhibit called “Land of the Morning Calm: the Western View of Korea, 1741–1960,” featuring books from the Peter Maeng Collection.<sup>3</sup>

The earliest book in the collection is Jean-Baptiste du Halde’s four-volume *General History of China Containing a Geographical, Historical, Chronological, Political and Physical Description of the Empire of China, Chineses-Tartary, Corea and Thibet*, the third edition of which was published in 1741. Halde’s work is a collection of published and unpublished accounts by Jesuit missionaries, who were the first Europeans to visit Korea.

The other books include accounts by American Protestant missionaries who arrived in the 1880s, such as Homer B. Hulbert’s *History of Korea*, published in 1905; by early travelers, such as *Korea and the Sacred White Mountain, Being a Brief Account of a Journey in Korea in 1891*, by A. E. J. Cavendish; and by diplomats, such as *Life in Corea*, by W. R. Carles, published in 1888. The collection includes several nationalist books in English by early Korean immigrants, such as Younghill Kang’s *The Grass Roof*, published in 1932, and includes many books on the Korean War (1950–1953).

The “Land of the Morning Calm” exhibit was accompanied by a lecture series. The year 2000 was significant as it marked the 50th anniversary of the beginning of the Korean War; the historic meeting between the two Presidents Kim of North and South Korea occurred; and the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to South Korean President Kim Dae Jung. With these events in mind, I planned four weekly lectures, each with its own theme, and identified and contacted Korean Studies scholars in the Los Angeles area. All of them gladly agreed to speak to our faculty and students and to share their expertise.

The exhibit opened on October 3, 2000. During the opening reception, a history professor from University of Southern California presented a lecture, “The Turn of the 20th Century: Korea’s Discovery of the West.” The audiences listened with interest and amusement to this twist on the exhibit theme of the western view of Korea. In the following week, the lecture “Early Printing in Korea” was given by a CSUN art history professor. Another faculty member brought his class to the lecture, and a lively question and answer session ensued. The following week, we viewed a clip of a Korean War documentary—made from the newsreels of the time—followed by a lecture, “The Korea Summit and Beyond,” by a professor of Sociology and Korean Studies at UCLA. His lecture on a very timely



Tools used for calligraphy (bamboo brushes, ink stick and stone, water dropper).

topic delineated realistic expectations for the two Koreas in the near-term and the long-term. To end on a more cheery note, a travelogue, *A Mormon Missionary’s Encounter with Korea (1988–1990)*, was presented by the cultural consultant for the Korean Cultural Center. This slide presentation showed the Korean people in the countryside and their interaction with a modern missionary. The success of the lecture series was due, in great part, to the generosity of the presenters who appeared without promise of material reward.

So, here I am, forging ahead with my resolve to promote the art, history, and culture of Korea. Every year or so, many weeks of organization, coordination, and hard work are required. Is it a burden to be an accidental Korean-American librarian? Yes. However, it is a burden I now gladly bear, because it forced me to learn so much about my own heritage, and to reach out to those who yearn for knowledge of other cultures. It also allowed me the privilege of straddling two cultures, understanding both and appreciating the unique aspects of each. For this, I am infinitely grateful to my colleagues who nudged and encouraged this then ignorant and reluctant ethnic librarian four years ago.<sup>4</sup>

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## **A comprehensive collection of books**

and other publications by the poet and novelist James Dickey (1923–97) has been acquired by the University of South Carolina (USC). Dickey taught at USC for three decades as poet-in-residence and First Carolina professor of English. The collection comprises 436 first editions, limited editions, proofs, other books, and periodical issues containing Dickey items, many with personal inscriptions, covering the range of his career.

## **The Barbara Harbach Collection has**

been acquired by Wilmington College. Harbach is a noted composer, performer, recording artist, and professor of music. She is also the founder, publisher, and editor-in-chief of Vivace Press, which promotes underrepresented composers (mainly women) by publishing music scores, producing CDs on the Hester Park label, and issuing the *Women of Note Quarterly* journal. The Harbach Collection consists of Harbach's complete published compositions and recorded works and performances, as well as a substantial portion of the catalog of Vivace Press and a complete run of *Women of Note Quarterly*.

## **A major collection of the works of author**

W. Somerset Maugham has been acquired by Boston University. The Loren and Frances Rothschild-W. Somerset Maugham Collection contains hundreds of letters chronicling Maugham's personal and intellectual life, ev-

ery significant first edition of the author's novels, short stories, and the original manuscripts of *The Gentleman in the Parlour* and *The Painted Veil*. Also included are personal documents and ephemera; audiovisual material; photographs and art of the author; thousands of additional manuscripts and typescripts, page proofs, and galleys dating from 1906 to 1953; and more than 200 periodicals containing the first publication of many of Maugham's works.

## **The papers of the late Dr. William**

Kaufman, a leader in the field of vitamin therapy research, and the papers of his wife, Charlotte Schnee Kaufman, have been acquired by the University of Michigan (UM). Kaufman, who earned both his Ph.D. and M.D. at UM in the 1930s, is best known for his research in the 1940s and 1950s on the use of Niacinamide (a form of vitamin B3) to treat osteoarthritis. Kaufman published more than 60 papers in scientific and medical journals mainly dealing with arthritis, nutrition, food allergy, and psychosomatic medicine. He also published 25 articles for a general audience in such magazines as *Coronet* and *McCall's*. Charlotte Kaufman, a 1938 graduate of UM, acted as his research assistant for many years and later served as founder and executive director of the Family Life Film Center of Connecticut, where she pioneered techniques for using films followed by discussion. The archive consists of 30 feet of material. ■

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(*"From Cataloger . . ." continued from page 434*)

### **Notes**

1. Eric Liu, *The Accidental Asian: Notes of a Native Speaker* (New York: Random House, 1998).
2. "Mi: Beauty in Korean Art and Culture" is available at <http://library.csun.edu/jwakimoto/koreaexhibit.html> (10/1/01).
3. "Land of the Morning Calm: the Western

View of Korea, 1741–1960" is available at <http://library.csun.edu/jwakimoto/maengexhibit.html> (10/1/01).

4. A version of this paper was first given at the First National Conference on Asian Pacific American Librarians in San Francisco on June 14, 2001. ■

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(*"Washington Hotline" continued from page 441*)

then the full House, to pass this important legislation, which has been held up to leverage passage of other legislation. Let's get this bill out of committee and passed by Congress.

Other hot issues in Congress include privacy bills, and database and digital

rights management proposals. Watch for further reports or subscribe to the electronic newslines, ALAWON. To subscribe, send the message: `subscribe ala-wo [your_firstname] [your_lastname]` to `listproc@ala.org`. ■