

Children's Folklife

The Traditions of Oklahoma

by Jean Alexander

This year children visiting the Children's Area of the Festival of American Folklife will be able to experience what it was like to grow up in Oklahoma Territory and to discover the values and traditions that Korean-Americans have handed down to their children. In order for any culture to survive, its traditions and values need to be passed from parents to their children. This may be achieved through instruction, but also through observation of ceremonies and games.

In Oklahoma, children's games are based on preparation for adulthood and adult activities. Because much of Oklahoma's industry is agricultural, children necessarily learn farm and ranch skills at an early age. For example, the game of "roping dummies," that is roping metal calf heads placed in bales of hay, prepares them for roping real cattle when they are older. "Bucking barrels," a game in which children ride on large barrels bucked back and forth by adults, teaches them to balance and ride horses later when they must spend many hours in the saddle.

To make work in the field more enjoyable, ranchers will often devise games which teenagers can participate in with the adults as they work. For example, while the job of moving and stacking huge bales of hay in the hot sun is not the most pleasant of chores, ranchers learned to make a game of it. They organize the workers into two teams which compete against one another to stack the hay the most quickly. There are tricks and secrets to be learned, and special skills to be developed in stacking the hay neatly into large piles of more than 50 bales. With teamwork, hay can get stacked and fun can be had at the same time.

Other games and crafts are also important in preparing for adulthood. For instance, young girls are taught by their mothers and grandmothers to make various types of dolls. In this year's Festival, there will be Osage Indian cloth dollmaking and Cherokee Indian buffalo-grass dollmaking. As the girls play with their dolls, they begin to prepare for parenthood as they imitate their mothers and care for the dolls. They begin to pick up sewing skills as they learn to sew small garments for the dolls. Then, in later years, they are able to sew clothes for their own families.

While any culture is more than just its games or the making of a doll, it is hoped that the visiting children will come away from the Festival wiser about the traditions of Oklahoma children.

Jean Alexander is a school librarian and a collector of children's games and folklife.

Douglas S. Kim received his B.A. in Asian studies in 1978 from the University of Michigan and his M.B.A. from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1981. He has worked extensively in Korea, Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and China and for two years has been director of the Saejong School Korean Youth Camp in Detroit, Michigan.

The Traditions of Korea

by Douglas C. Kim

When I was first asked to assist in the planning of this year's Folklife Festival I was excited because the festival is a unique opportunity to illustrate some of the best aspects of Korean culture and tradition, but also challenged because it is very difficult for a Korean-American to decide what things best represent Korean folklife.

Born and raised in the United States by parents from Korea, I am less familiar with Korean culture than a native Korean. Yet there are age-old Korean traditions and values that have been passed down to me and are as much a part of me as my fondness for Big Macs. These things are the "Old Ways in the New World" that the Festival is all about.

There was lengthy discussion among the Korean-American participants in the Festival before we decided on the themes that we feel best represent our heritage, as we know it. We rejected the idea of constructing a small Korean farm village or wearing traditional clothing because we realized that *we* don't

live in small Korean farm villages, and that we wear *ban-bok* (traditional clothing) only on special occasions. There are, however, things Korean within us that are much deeper than the clothes we wear or the kind of houses we live in. These form the basis of the four themes we are presenting.

The first theme, *Traditions, Customs and Values in the Home*, concerns Korean practices that we maintain in our western homes. For example, we don't wear our shoes inside the house. We do this both to prevent tracking in dirt from outside, and because in traditional Korean houses most activities are conducted while sitting on the floor. Also, it is common to have our grandparents live with us. Until very recently in Korea, there were no "old-folks homes." The responsibility and privilege of caring for an elderly parent was that of the children, just as caring for the child was the duty of the parent. To do otherwise was unthinkable in traditional Korea. This practice is still carried on in many of our homes. Another custom is our use of two hands in giving or receiving something; this is done to express that we do so with our whole heart and person, not just "half-heartedly," as using only one hand suggests. We bow to one another as a means of greeting and respect and, in so doing, we show respect for ourselves as well. When guests depart we will often wait outside until their car is out-of-sight. This is a modern concession to the days when a guest would be escorted all the way home after a visit. Such practices, and the reasons behind them, reflect some of the Korean values that have been instilled in us.

The second theme is *Holidays and the Zodiac*. Knowing what special events are celebrated and in what fashion as well as the purposes behind them offers some insight into a view of life from another culture. To a lesser extent, and primarily for fun, comparing the Korean Zodiac to the western Zodiac provides an interesting alternative view of one's astrological sign.

Like most people, Koreans celebrate the changing of the seasons, birthdays, and the beginning of the New Year, but in different ways. For example, on the morning of the first day of the New Year, children will perform a formal bow to their parents wishing them much happiness and good fortune in the coming year. A child's first birthday is an important cause for celebration because, according to tradition, after one year of life most infant diseases have been safely avoided. A person's sixtieth birthday is also a special occasion. Reaching the age of sixty, though not as rare an achievement as it used to be, still signifies attaining great and honorable accomplishment, worthy of celebration. Here in the United States we continue to celebrate sixtieth birthdays as very special occasions, principally because we have been taught to respect and honor age, rather than to see it as an opponent to be contested with.

While the Korean and western Zodiacs have many similarities, they have many differences too. Both have twelve signs, but the Korean includes monkeys and dragons. Another difference is that we take our signs from the year we are born in, rather than the month. The purpose of both Zodiacs are, however, the same – to let you know what kind of person you really are. We hope that you'll enjoy finding this out for yourself from the Korean Zodiac.

Han-gul, the Korean alphabet, and *han-kuk-mal*, the Korean language, make up the third theme. Unlike Chinese, *han-gul* is a completely phonetical alphabet consisting of fourteen consonants and ten vowels. More importantly, the Korean alphabet was created over three hundred years ago for the express purpose of allowing the King to be a better ruler. King Saejong, creator and promulgator of *han-gul*, realized that to be the best monarch possible he would have to be able to communicate freely with his people. However, at the time, the only writing available was Chinese, which is very complicated and difficult to learn. Therefore King Saejong summoned his best scholars and commissioned them to develop an alphabet that his people could learn quickly and use effectively. The result was *han-gul*, an alphabet so simple it can be learned in an hour and so phonetic in nature that, it is said, any sound the human mouth can make can be written in it. To prove this point, you will have an opportunity at the Festival to have your name written phonetically in *han-gul*.

Han-kuk-mal, the Korean language, is an essential part of being a Korean-American; no matter how little of it one may speak, the few words we do know

reflect much of the philosophical basis of our heritage. For example, the word for teacher, *sun-saeng*, means literally "earlier life." The idea behind this is that, by virtue of earlier life and thus greater experience, someone is a teacher. Our parents may refer to each other as "our-baby's mother," or "our-baby's father" instead of using first names. This is because one's position, role, and responsibility are traditionally seen as more important than personal identity. Although this is changing slowly, the importance of the family and the group-centered mentality of Koreans is seen time and again in the Korean language. Even the way in which we refer to the Korean language itself reflects this: it is called *oori-mal*, literally "our language" instead of "my language." Likewise, in Korean we seldom refer to things possessively; rather it is our house, our family, our country. These are just a few examples of how pervasive and different the values inherent in the Korean language can be.

The fourth and final theme is "Did You Know?" We chose this in hopes of letting you know some interesting facts about Korea. Did you know, for example, that iron-clad warships were used in Korea by Admiral Yi Sun Shin over 200 years before the Monitor and the Merrimack were in action? Or that Korea is over 70% mountainous, and that it has four seasons, just like Minnesota? And that astrological observatories, the mariner's compass, and moveable-type printing were in use in Korea centuries before they were invented in the West? And most of all, that despite numerous invasions through the Korean peninsula and its proximity to China and Japan, Koreans retain a distinct cultural identity?

Unfortunately, little is known about Korea here in the United States. Most of what we do know comes from watching the television series MASH, having some vague recollection that a war was fought there, and seeing some resemblance of Koreans to Chinese and Japanese. We hope that this final theme will allow you to see that, although there are similarities, Koreans are different from their Chinese and Japanese neighbors; moreover, that the country has a rich tradition of over 4000 years that provides us with a heritage as viable and proud as any.

It is of course impossible to provide a total picture of the Korean tradition as we Korean-Americans know it with only four themes. However, we hope that this information and our presentations will give you at least some insight into the customs, values, and "Old Ways" we keep in this "New World." We invite you to explore and learn about our heritage and ask any questions you may have.