

## Show sheds light on strangers who work among us

By Iris Moon

Throughout her work, Korean-American artist Min Yong-soon has explored the issue of foreign identity in America. Yet, working on a project on foreign laborers in Korea was both a familiar and strange experience for her.

"I gravitated toward this project because it has personal resonance, as an immigrant in a specific context. My position as an 'other' in the United States context made me curious. What is the experience of the other in the Korean context that makes it so different than the U.S.?" said Min in an interview with The Korea Herald.

Min, 51, is an art professor at the University of California Irvine and is well known for creating works that stir dialogue about race, memory and the politics of representation in the U.S. She was also a curator of the exhibition, "There: Sites of Korean Diaspora" at the 2002 Gwangju Biennale.

For her project "Xen: Migration, Labor and Identity," she spent two months in Korea last summer interviewing and meeting with Korea's migrant labor population. She traveled to factories, workers' dormitories and migrant centers near Seoul, meeting with workers and activists. The results of her research are on display at Ssamzie Space.

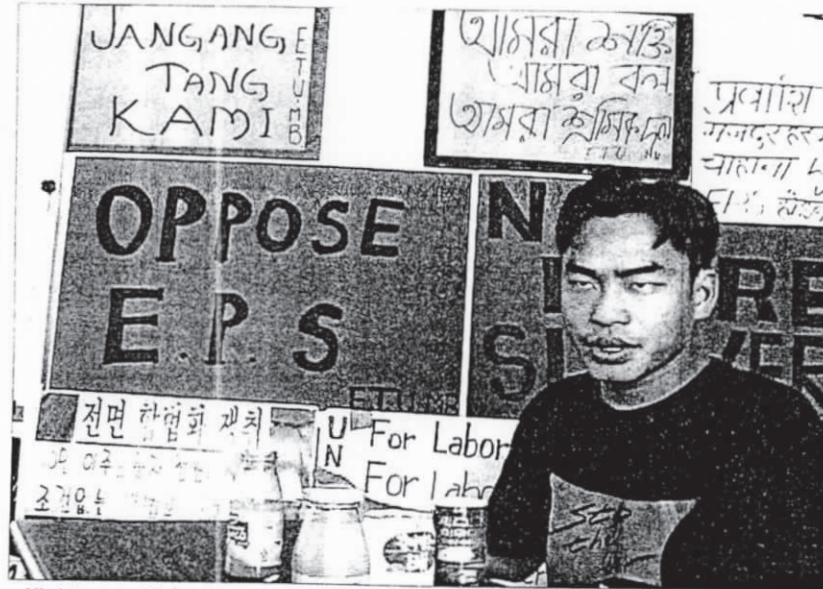
While her central focus was examining Korea's foreign work population, she said that the project



Korean-American artist Min Yong-soon. At right is her artwork, "3D Exit: Desperate, Disposable, Deported." Samar Thapa was a Nepali laborer and activist in Korea whom the artist interviewed.

also dealt with exploring the changing Korean identity.

"The whole issue of identity is not something that Koreans care about that much because in their point of view, they know who they are. But I would say, well, maybe not. With all the fast, accelerated pace of change and all of the influences, to me, even for Koreans themselves it's a pertinent question. What is Korean anymore?" Min asked, in a clear, articulate voice.



Min interviewed Samar Thapa, a Nepali migrant labor activist for her project on the foreign work population in Korea. As part of a government roundup of illegal laborers, Thapa was deported this February.

Judging from her work, Korean society is no longer a completely homogenous entity. Laborers from Bangladesh, Myanmar, the Philippines and other countries who are displayed on camcorders scattered throughout the first floor gallery form a collage of personalities and individual experiences.

Min conducted individual as well as group interviews, visiting factories during late night shifts, when Korean managers were out of sight.

A chief concern of her interviewees was the issue of the revised employment permit system, which went into effect Aug. 17. In theory,

the rewritten system would decrease the number of undocumented laborers and guarantee migrant laborers rights and protection for three years. When Min arrived last summer, however, the Equality Trade Union Migrant's Branch (ETU-MB), the country's only union for foreign workers, was or-

ganizing rallies to protest the government's decision to activate the new permit system.

After a massive roundup and deportation of illegal migrant workers beginning last year, the government invited 25,000 workers from six countries to reenter the country with the new permits.

More than the revised system itself, Min found the continued existence of the industrial trainee program problematic. The program gives year-long permits to foreign employees but does not provide proper workers' rights and protection. Small and medium-sized companies lobbied heavily in favor of maintaining the trainee system.

"I'm very skeptical that this is going to work because the industrial trainee system is always going to produce undocumented workers who flee the system. Because in that system, you import all of these workers but you don't call them workers, you call them 'trainees.' And in the guise of offering them 'training,' it's really exploitation, giving them substandard wages and no rights," Min said.

Yet despite the problems faced by Korean society, Min was amazed by Korea's rapid political and social change. Present-day Korea, she said, is a far cry from the country she visited in the past. In 1979, on her first visit back to Korea since moving to the United States in 1960 as a child, she was suspected of being a North

Korean spy and was arrested. After an investigation, she was soon released.

"There are a lot of positive things about Korea. I don't want the show to suggest that I'm critical about everything in Korea," Min said.

"I'm curious about whether I'll get the kind of criticism from Koreans about what right I have as an outsider to be critical. But I think anybody has the right to be critical."

Min hopes that her work will be both educational and informative to viewers. Her project also manages to highlight the paradoxical nature of xenophobia in Korea, a country with a long history of its own of citizens immigrating.

Min wonders whether Koreans' view of immigrants is affected by the fact that so many Koreans who immigrated have experience as outsiders themselves.

"Would that help Koreans in gaining a better perspective on those foreigners who come here for similar purposes, for gaining a better future for their families? You would think it might," she says. Nonetheless, "It's just my cursory sense that it doesn't."

"XEN: Migration, Labor and Identity" is on display until Sept. 18 at the Ssamzie Space gallery (Near Sinchon Station, Subway Line No. 2, exit 8, across from the Sanulim Theater). For more information, call (02) 3142-1693.

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