

Wearing clothes decorated with Hangeul, a Korean to the core; 'Hangeul is like the rice we eat every day'

First office building established, commemorative event on Dec. 14; goals are to establish AP Korean and expand Korean language classes



Monica Ryu, president of the Foundation For Korean Language and Culture, pictured here, is Hangeul to the core, to the point that she wears a suit with Korean letters for official events.

A former doctor who has worked in the medical field all her life is gaining attention for leading the movement to promote Hangeul in the United States. The main character is Monica Ryu (77, Korean name: Jeon Wol-hwa), the president of the Foundation For Korean Language and Culture in USA. Just looking at the name of the foundation, it is easy to mistake it for a public institution. It is a nonprofit, purely civilian organization headquartered in Los Angeles that has been promoting Hangeul around the world for 30 years. We had a written exchange with Ryu, who has been serving as a director of the foundation since 2011 and is in her eighth year of service as the president.

Congratulations on the 30th anniversary of the foundation. Please introduce the Foundation For Korean Language and Culture.

"The Foundation For Korean Language and Culture is a nonprofit organization established under state of California law in LA, USA, that works to open and expand Korean language classes in regular elementary, middle and high schools in the United States. There are many foreign languages taught in elementary, middle and high schools in the United States, such as Spanish, French, Japanese, Chinese, Russian and Latin. Korean is one of them."

What are the foundation's goals and future plans?

"The ultimate goal is to establish AP Korean. It is an educational system called Advanced Placement (AP). The system provides high school students with an opportunity to study college subjects in advance. If they complete this course and get good grades, the course will be recognized as credits after entering college, so they can fill that time with other subjects and even graduate early. It has been 15 years since Chinese and Japanese were recognized as AP courses, and we are in our third year of petitioning for Korean. Currently, 28,547 people have participated in the petition. Following the opening of AP Korean, another goal is to increase the number of Korean classes in elementary, middle and high schools. Currently, 217 regular schools have Korean classes. This number needs to be doubled."

Proceeds from the sale of self-compiled Korean language textbooks were used to secure a building

You recently secured a building for the first time since the foundation was created. How do you plan to utilize it?

"The foundation operates in nine areas. Teacher training, prospective teacher

training, administrator training, student training, etc. Large-scale teacher training with many teachers will be held in the large auditorium of the LA Education Center, where the foundation is located, and training for small groups will be held in this foundation headquarters building. In addition, there is a project that the foundation has proudly prepared. It is to teach Korean for free to low-income and non-Korean children in the surrounding area. Many of them want to learn Korean, but they cannot go to weekend school because they are not of Korean descent, and there are many cases where the schools they attend do not have Korean classes.”

I understand that the foundation did this without any outside help.

“We compiled a Korean language textbook that differentiates it from textbooks for Korean as a native language. We were able to purchase a building with the income from textbook sales. Foreign language textbooks in the United States must follow the proficiency guidelines of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) and the California Department of Education. The guidelines are the 5C’s (Communication, Culture, Connection, Comparison, Communities). The high-quality textbook ‘Epic Korean,’ created according to these guidelines, has been adopted and is causing a sensation in many places. It has been adopted and used in the western, eastern, central, northern and southern United States, as well as in Canada, schools affiliated with the Osan U.S. military base in Korea and in Ireland.”

I am curious about the reason or background for starting the Hangeul promotion movement.

“Hangeul is like the rice to me that I eat every day. As a doctor, I work with people who are having a hard time, but I was far from an organized social service. I realized that systematic public service is important. Someone has to plan, inform and collect. The place I arrived at along the chain of service and volunteering was the Foundation For Korean Language and Culture. Through the foundation, I was able to reaffirm my Korean identity, and I have accompanied its journey to promote the excellence of Hangeul and Korean as a second foreign language essential for the globalization of the next generation.”

In recognition of her efforts to spread the Korean language, she was selected as a Proud Gyeonggi Person last October.

“The spread of the Korean language was possible thanks to the tireless dedication of the previous directors who started it 30 years ago. I joined the cause late. Rather than receiving the Proud Gyeonggi Person award as a prize given to me, I took it as support for all diaspora Gyeonggi women and women who have worked



The photo shows the first building built by the Foundation For Korean Language and Culture without external assistance to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the foundation's establishment.

hard outside of Gyeonggi too.”

What are some of the difficulties you face as an overseas Korean?

“I first came to the U.S. half a century ago. At that time, I was unfamiliar with the culture, the language was awkward, and the U.S. was a bit closed off. But I don't remember anything that was particularly heartbreaking. Rather, as a foreigner, I was able to do more things by understanding the culture and history of both countries, and I was able to live as a global citizen. I think life is all about how you approach it.”

If you have any wishes for the Overseas Koreans Agency or your home country, please tell us.

“Korea needs to break away from male chauvinism, and to do that, mothers need to blossom, and this must be put into practice. Only then can the next generation's education run smoothly. I think that only by boldly breaking the repetitive chain of connections can mothers' sons and fathers' daughters be able to open their hearts and live well. The other side of an inferiority complex can be seen as superiority. If someone feels superior to something, you can see that there is an inferiority complex hidden behind it. I hope that the OKA and my home country can serve as a foundation for escaping from this authoritarian environment and becoming productive global citizens, doing what you want and living happily.”

Ryu is a writer who debuted through the Overseas Koreans Literary Awards hosted by the Overseas Korean Foundation, the predecessor of the OKA. She is a member of the American Catholic Writers Association and the American Essayists Association, and in 2007, she participated as a regular contributor to the JoongAng Ilbo health column. 장