

# The Asian Reporter

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## Anchors in America

By Polo

*Sun Gu Ja* features families and individuals who exemplify one hundred years of Korean settlement in the state of Oregon.

If, in its sincerest form, documentary film is an intense process of accumulating and reconciling a thousand-thousand recollections, not for the director's acclaim but in a search of truth — truth, in all its contingency and complexity — then Portland director Ian McCluskey has done his job.

This film has been one of those big jobs. *Sun Gu Ja: A Century of Korean Pioneers* is 56 minutes and 46 seconds of hope over reality, stubborn toil over ugly history, familial success and cultural integrity way beyond anyone's expectations. It is above all, all about persistence. Korean persistence.

Featured in the film are solid families and esteemed individuals exemplifying a hundred years of Korean settlement in the state of Oregon. Among them are Jee Hye Lee, leading the folk ensemble Osanori and epitomizing energetic youth; Holt International Adoptions V.P. Susan Soon Keum Cox representing generations of Korean adoptees; State Senator John Lim standing for Korean War sorrow and American success; Rev. Sang Jeung Kim, "the Good Shepherd," modeling moral authority and community service; and Master Tae Hong Choi, still active after disciplining three generations of Asian and American Tae Kwan Do martial art students.

Each of these stories' gravity notwithstanding, at the center of *Sun Gu Ja* and at the core of Oregon's Korean history are grand elders Mr. Harry Park and Mrs. Rak Soon Park. Mr. Park's father, Kyung Soo Park, was one of the first Korean pioneers in Oregon, settling into farm life in Mt. Hood's grand shadow exactly a century ago.

Mr. and Mrs. Park weave an emotionally complicated and historically troublesome tale. They do it through faded family photos and archival film footage, they do it with the kind of lighthearted banter off the edge of a well-worn loveseat that only ancient couples can manage. A gift of great perspective.

### **The story behind the story**

The process of settling on a common narrative for Oregon's Korean experience began when local Korean Society president H.J. Yu approached Portland film

director Ian McCluskey. Mr. McCluskey has established a national reputation as a serious and sensitive documentarian. His production company, Northwest Documentary Arts & Media, has earned a number of award-winning films for the Public Broadcasting System (PBS), including the four-part *Innocence in an Age of Infamy: Teenagers' Experiences of WW II*.

Sun Gu Ja has delivered for Mr. McCluskey and crew a sweep of Telly Awards in three categories: Best Educational, Best Cultural, and Best Historic Documentary. The film recently won Aurora Awards for "Best of Show" as well as a "Gold" for Historical Documentary.

Underlying dramatic parts of the film's narrative is the music of Osanori. Director McCluskey's use of the youth group's renditions of traditional folk arrangements seems emblematic of his success in embracing and expressing Oregon's Korean community's story. The melodies are old — sometimes aching, sometimes ecstatic, always driven hard — but the musicians are teens. They rock and they roll. Obviously having a splendid time at it. They surely make proud their elders and ancestors, on both sides of our big Deep Blue.

Further information on the production of *Sun Gu Ja* and the work of Northwest Documentary Arts & Media is available at <[www.nwdocumentary.org](http://www.nwdocumentary.org)>. To purchase a DVD copy of Sun Gu Ja, write to <[info@nwdocumentary.org](mailto:info@nwdocumentary.org)> or Northwest Documentary Arts & Media, 115 S.W. Ash Street, Suite 620, Portland, OR 97204. DVDs are available for \$20.00 plus \$4.95 shipping and handling.