

## **KYOPO**

### **Foreword by Marie Myung-Ok Lee**

There is a Korean saying, “The country that you live in is your native country.”

When I first saw the photos from CYJO’s astonishing KYOPO Project, I was struck first at how by posing all the subjects with neutral expressions in a frontal X-shaped pose, that the results, taken in all at once, uncannily resembled a genetic map, the kind with which one is introduced to Mendelian genetics in high school, except here, each somewhat generic X-shape was a person, not gene.

This is the genius in these series of pictures of KYOPOS accompanied by text written in their own words, for it captures basically an essence of a group of people yet allows for a closer examination of the individual within. Genes do not define a person’s identity, but they do act as an unalterable starting-off point. Similarly to be a KYOPO, one must start with the inheritance of being phenotypically Korean, flesh-and-blood origins that trace an unerring biological line back to that peninsula that juts out into the East Sea. What one does with this inheritance, and how life and culture in a different country then shapes story of the individual person, is the subject of this work.

Being a KYOPO is being part of a tribe, for we are tied together by our experience, race, culture and ethnicity in a specific way. Indeed, the individuals who appear in this book represent the complex and random inter-weavings of this tribe; taken as a whole, this group is *not* meant to suggest a representative group, but something much more interesting: it is a visual and textual expression of an organic web of relational connections. Put in another way, the project began with a single person being photographed. That person went on to recommend others, who went on to recommend others, and so forth, until the one bloomed into more than two hundred subjects, and the intricately overlapping and interconnecting relationships of a *certain* KYOPO community is what the work has produced.

The photographer purposely did not research her subjects before they were recommended (for instance, she and I connected at a reading I did for my novel, an event organized by a previous subject), and yet the collection displays its own startling diversity.

It includes KYOPOs who have lived in countries besides America, including Argentina, Canada, China, Denmark, France, India, Japan, the UK, the Philippines, Cuba, and Brazil. There are KYOPOs adopted into white families, mixed-race KYOPOS, and a range of ages from teen to septuagenarian. Professions include bankers, a chef, a hat designer, taekwon do instructors, a human rights lawyer who represents the Muslim community, writers, a well-known actor. Some can speak Korean, some cannot, and some speak only a child’s version of Korean even though they are adults. Some have Korean first names, some have both American and Korean names, one person, Cabin Gold Kim, has a name his parents charmingly made up for him.

But while the ticket to admission to KYOPO culture begins with Korea, it is a changeable entity, not a limiting term, but an expansive one suggesting hybridity, fusion, and multiculturalism in the literal sense of the word. KYOPO culture gains and borrows from other cultures, and evolves; thus, KYOPOs have been bar mitzvahed, speak Portuguese and Danish as primary languages. People have achieved KYOPO status even living in Korea by attending English-only international schools. KYOPO culture is, in a sense, one facet of an increasingly globalized world culture, swimming in a planetary phenomenon of drastically shrinking psychic distances between countries and cultures thanks to new technologies in communication and travel. Earlier KYOPOs like my parents had a simple binary choice between “old” country and “new,” the distance between them a three-week journey by steamer ship. But now, a KYOPO in this book at only thirty years of age has already called Korea, Mexico, Japan, Switzerland, France, Singapore, Russia and the U.S. home. “I never felt a need to identify myself as an existing word,” she says. “Because I don’t think there necessarily is one. I’m creating my own, unique identity.”

KYOPO life, you will see, continually changes as the individual and also the world changes. What at first glance appears to be a book on “Koreans” and “Korean culture” will prove to be instead one encompassing the world.

I hope you will join in the visual and textual exploration of this fascinating journey.