

**“Mountains of Encounter” 2007**  
**HAEGUE YANG**

“Mountains of Encounter”, but whose story?

Haegue Yang tells the story of Kim San, a Korean communist who was mainly active in China (1905-1938), and of the American journalist Nym Wales – Helen Foster Snow, who met each other on July 7, 1937, in Yen-an, China. Nym Wales wrote a biography of Kim San which was published in New York in 1941 under the title “Song of Airan. A Korean Communist in the Chinese Revolution.”

Nym Wales, later the wife of Edgar Snow – the important American journalist and author of the book “Red Star” – came to Shanghai in 1931 to write a series of biographies of communists in China. After conducting research in the library of Yen-an, she repeatedly came upon the same name on the reader’s tickets of the books she was interested in. This made her curious. Although it was difficult to find him, she didn’t give up and finally left a letter in the library, which Kim San did receive, but did not answer due to the great danger. Only after writing a second letter and suggesting a secure meeting place, did they meet on July 7, 1937. Nym Wales’ original plan to do just a short interview with him, resulted in 22 meetings within the course of two months and the decision to write a complete biography. When she asked him what name she should choose, he answered: Kim San – which he had invented, like so many others before.

This fateful encounter thus led to a book that spared Kim San’s story from being forgotten. Both were foreigners in China, both belonged to a minority: he as a Korean communist, she as an emancipated, American journalist and writer.

During the Japanese occupation of Korea from 1919 to 1945, most freedom-fighters were politically active more in Japan and China than in their homeland. Since the Korean peninsula was so perfectly controlled that no underground activism was possible, the Korean communists joined the Chinese movement. One of them was Kim San, who later became the icon representing many nameless freedom-fighters, since he was the only one known to the Koreans due to the encounter with Nym Wales.

Kim San – the name is reminiscent of the region Kim Gang San, in which Kim San was active. The installation “Mountains of Encounter” directly refers to the encounter of the two persons, in which a part of Korean history is narrated. The signifier and the motivation of the work is above all the indirect way in which the existence and the extraordinary life of the outsider Kim San is conveyed from the perspective of another outsider. In a certain respect, his various political identities – he was a nationalist, anarchist, communist – and the nationality of Nym Wales reflect the political and social development of Korea. Without her interest, Kim San would not have been able to pass on his story, and even though he was probably killed by the Chinese, she saved him in a certain way. Whose story is told here? That of Kim San and Nym Wales? That of Korea in a politically explosive period? That of an American’s interest in communism? That of a romantic encounter that served historical enlightenment? Or maybe even that of a person living today but attempting to read a personal story in the mirror of history?

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