

★ STAR TALK

HER NEXT GREAT LEAP

Yunjin Kim,
the game-changing actress,
will be back as Karen
in "Mistresses" on ABC TV Show



Yunjin Kim

Photo by Kim Hanjun

The Sun is rising again. Ms. Yunjin Kim, 40, will be back in your living room this summer as Karen in "Mistresses" for a second season on ABC. After her groundbreaking role as Sun in "Lost," also on ABC, which fascinated viewers around the world for 6 seasons (2004 - 2010), Ms. Kim plays psychiatrist Karen Kim in "Mistresses," who is romantically involved with one of her patients. Her character dangerously crosses personal and professional lines.

Now Yunjin Kim is also playing an active role as an executive producer for the US remake of "Nine: Nine Time Travels," a Korean TV drama. We have seen normal Korean couple speaking Korean with English subtitles on small-screen in "Lost." Will "Nine" be her next Great Leap?

Yunjin Kim was 10 when her family relocated from Seoul to Staten Island, New York. After graduating from the New York High School of Performing Arts (the "Fame" school), she studied acting at the British American Drama Academy in London and Boston University. Her debut role on TV was "Splendid Holiday," a Korean language drama shot in New York in 1997. Since then she settled in Korea, appearing in films and TV dramas.

In the Hollywood style action thriller "Shiri" in 1999, directed by Kang Je-gyu, Ms. Kim played a North Korean spy who falls in love with her enemy. The movie broke box office records, beating "Titanic" in Korea. Ms. Kim won the Grand Bell Award (*Korean Academy Award) for New Actress for the role and numerous other awards. She received Golden Bell Best Actress Award for her role in "Seven Days" in 2008.

In March 2010, Ms. Kim tied the knot with Jeong Hyeok Park, her manager and film producer, after the final shooting of "Lost" in Hawaii. She wrote a memoir "The World is Your Drama" in 2007.

Q: Let's talk about "Lost," which lasted 6 seasons. Sun-Hwa Paik was your breakthrough role. But you auditioned for Kate, played by Evangeline Lilly. How did you get the role?

A: Wow! You still want to talk about "Lost"?! In order to answer your question, I need to take you back in time to the year of 2004... ten years ago! I read for the role of Kate, but the producers didn't feel I was right for the part, so instead of just calling up my agents to say the usual, "We really liked Yunjin but she's just not right for the role," they did something quite magical. The producers wanted to create a new role for me to play on the show. That's how the character "Sun" was born, and a week after, they decided to add another character, Jin, to be Sun's husband. It was one of the best compliments to receive for an actor, especially coming from J.J. Abrams and Damon Lindelof.



Yunjin Kim as Karen Kim (from left to right), Alyssa Milano as Savannah "Savi" Davis, Jes Macallan as Josslyn Carver and Rochelle Aytes as April Malloy in "Mistresses".
Photo: ABC

Q: What was involved in making Sun so authentic? Did you develop any aspect of the character with the writers?

A: I'd like to take some credit in developing an amazing character like "Sun," but I can't. It was all the terrific writers of "Lost" at the Disney Studio. I did pitch in, however, in tiny details of the show to make things "authentic" when we were shooting all the Korean scenes. I helped with the Korean lines, to

speaking Korean on an American TV show can change or even affect Asian-American stereotypes, but I can tell you "Lost" was the first American TV show to cast two Asian American actors as series regulars on the show. It was only ten years ago, but it was a big deal back then.

Q: And your Korean was perfect. How were you able to become bilingual? And

"Korean is my first language and when my family immigrated when I was 10, my parents wanted to make sure their three girls didn't forget their Korean language and culture. I tried to keep it up and always spoke at home"

make them more conversational, and setting up the table, Korean style, and helped with the signs, making sure all the characters were written correctly, etc.

Q: With Daniel Dae Kim, watching two Korean-American actors speaking Korean with English subtitles on national TV was pretty exciting! Has "Lost" changed Asian-American stereotypes on TV?

A: Thank you. It was really gutsy for the producers to have actors speak another language and put English subtitles on an American TV show. I can't imagine seeing this on TV anytime soon. I'm not sure if

how does it affect your career?

A: Well, Korean is my first language and when my family immigrated when I was ten, my parents wanted to make sure their three girls didn't forget their Korean language and culture. I tried to keep it up and always spoke at home but my Korean language skills stayed at 10. Back in 1997, I was cast in a Korean mini-series out of NY and that led me to work in Korea. I had to actually relearn the language when I started working in Korea. Having said that, if I wasn't already fluent in Korean, it would've been impossible to build a career as an actress in Korea.

Q: How did "Lost" change your life?

A: Greatly! I was working and living in Korea before "Lost." "Lost" was my first TV show in America and this show opened new doors and different opportunities!

Q: You are now basically settled in Seoul and work in LA as well. Are you lost in jet lag?

A: My life isn't as glamorous or as busy as it may sound. I split my time between LA and Seoul. I shot "Mistresses" last year for six months in LA, and came to Seoul to shoot a Korean film called "International Market" for about 3 months. I've been unemployed for about 3 months. Hahahaha!

Q: ABC's "Mistresses," based on U.K. drama series, will return this summer. When you did auditions, were the producers looking for a Korean-American actress or did they change the character for you?

A: Yes, I'm thrilled that "Mistresses" will back for season two!! The producers weren't looking for any specific ethnic type for the role. They were opened to seeing all kinds of actresses for the role. I just happened to be cast in the role, so they changed the last name from Katie Rhodes to Karen Kim. That's usually the case in casting nowadays, unless the role calls for a specific ethnic

We have so much fun on set, and getting into some of the sexy outfits doesn't hurt either.

Q: You are one of the executive producers of the US version of a Korean cable channel drama, "Nine: Nine Time Travels," which is in development with ABC. How did you become interested in this project?

A: I've always been interested in producing. Seeing amazing U.S. remake dramas like "The Killing," "Homeland" and "Mistresses" gave me an idea to bring Korean dramas to the US. I was actively seeking some Korean dramas to remake in the US, and "Nine: Nine Time Travels" happened first. It's not definite that ABC will make this drama. We're still at the early, developing stage of writing the pilot and I won't know if this is going to be picked up for a while. I'm hoping it will. If it does, it'll be the first Korean drama to be made into a US remake.

Q: Your debut film "Shiri (1999)," was a blockbuster. While appearing on American TV, you have made quite a few films in Korea as well. How do you select films?

A: I'm inclined to be in films with good storytelling and interesting characters. The story is the key for me. It's not about what the story is saying but how it's saying it that's important to me.

Q: When you were growing up in Staten Island, it probably was not very racially diverse. How did that affect you?

A: I did go through an identity crisis because I immigrated when I was 10 years old. I was taken out of my safety net, away from my friends and familiar environment, and had to start all over again. It wasn't about Staten Island at all. I had a great time growing up in Staten Island, I miss it sometimes!

Q: When did you decide to become an actor? And did your parents support your decision?

A: Going through my identity crisis drew me to the stage. Not being fluent in English, there were days when I wouldn't even utter a sound in school. I had nightmares about losing my voice! I joined a drama class in 7th grade and started to find myself again. Oddly enough, I felt freer on stage, and I didn't care what I sounded like on stage. I fell in love with acting and, of course, my parents thought I was crazy.

Q: Who was your role model?

A: Meryl Streep. She still is!

Q: What is your New Year's resolution?

A: To be grateful. Not just say "I'm grateful," but really mean it!!!