

F O R E W O R D

When *Quiet Odyssey* was published in 1990, I was a graduate student hungry for texts in Asian American history. Nestled between two iconic works that offered sweeping historical overviews, Ronald Takaki's *Strangers from a Different Shore* (1989) and Sucheng Chan's *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History* (1991), Mary Paik Lee's autobiography provided an entry to the past through an individual story. All three texts buoyed my spirits because they documented the multidimensional lived experiences of Asian American communities that had largely been erased from narratives of US history. Moreover, these books made significant contributions to the developing areas of Asian American and ethnic studies.

What set and continues to set *Quiet Odyssey* apart is that it chronicles Korean American history from its very beginnings in the early 1900s. Mary Paik Lee's remarkable journey moves across almost the entire twentieth century, offering a rare first-hand account of Korean American lives. Her stories are especially rich in bringing to life the expansive period before the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, which opened the way for large numbers of Koreans to enter the United States in the 1970s and 1980s. Adding to the autobiography's historical significance, it is told from a female point of view and, furthermore, across a full life-span, including Lee's memories and observations as a child and young person.

Born in Korea in 1900, Mary Paik Lee (then Paik Kuang Sun) traveled with her parents and siblings to Hawaii in 1905 as part of the first small wave of immigrants who ventured to the United States. These early Koreans, predominantly male, were recruited to labor in the sugarcane plantation fields. After a short stint in Hawaii, the Paik family moved again, in a secondary migration to work in the citrus fields of southern California. Frequently on the go, Mary and her family crisscrossed the

state in search of seasonal farm work, against the backdrop of the rise of California as an agricultural power. The daily grind of survival was indeed the lot of the vast majority of early Asian immigrants, and Lee's account provides a granular view of the ups and downs of those struggles, first through the Paik family and later as Lee marries and establishes a family of her own.

Like all autobiographies, *Quiet Odyssey* is a personal and subjective rendering of the past, and Lee makes no claims to the contrary. Hers is a story simply told, but textured and vibrant in its observations and insights. I have assigned the book many times in my history classes on Asian Americans, the US West, and American autobiography. Students across these courses have consistently rated the book as one of their favorites. In class discussions and brief writing assignments, students comment on how they have never encountered Korean American history or realized that Korean immigrants helped build the agriculture industry in California. What stands out most for students, however, is the genuineness and humanity of Lee's story in the face of such difficulties, including her repeated experiences of racism and discrimination. One student shared in class that he cried while reading the book, moved not only by Lee's story but by how it gave him a way of understanding his own family's hardships in migrating and making a life in the United States.

The movement between the particulars of an individual and her family and a larger immigrant saga speaks to the enduring relevance of *Quiet Odyssey*. The book introduces a little-known racial-ethnic community during the decades of California's ascendancy as arguably the most important state in the nation in terms of its sociopolitical, economic, technological, and cultural developments. Lee's experiences intersect with these major forces in unexpected ways, such as the years she and her husband sold produce in Orange County. The Lees run across the Knott family and their well-known berry farm as well as the Nixon family and their (in)famous son who would become president. The Lees' years in the produce business in a sleepy town called Anaheim take place amid citrus groves that eventually give way to an amusement park deemed the happiest place on earth.

While Lee's story is understandably at the heart of the book, it is difficult to imagine that *Quiet Odyssey* would have gained such a wide readership without the guiding hand of Professor Emerita Sucheng Chan of the University of California, Santa Barbara. Chan's reputation as a leading scholar of Asian American studies likely played a key role in publication of the autobiography. Her introduction has been immensely helpful in providing background and context for my students, and it represented the best, most concise overview of Korean American history available at the time of publication, especially when coupled with her exhaustive bibliographic essay of materials available on Korean Americans in English before 1990. In an appendix, she further gives a meticulous accounting of her role as editor of the autobiography and the choices she made in helping Lee. Two additional appendixes discuss the role of Korean Americans in farming and rice cultivation. In all, the autobiography is bolstered by Chan's editorial skill, and all these supplementary elements have stood the test of time.

As a historian of Asian America and the United States, I have only grown in my appreciation of Lee's story since I first encountered it as a graduate student. It also has been a privilege to introduce the autobiography to students over the years. And yet, on more personal level, *Quiet Odyssey* has spoken to me as a second-generation Korean American. I have seen glimpses of my parents' experiences as immigrants arriving in the United States in the post-Korean War period as well as linkages to the old-timers with whom I grew up in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s. I wish I had had the opportunity to meet Mary Paik Lee in person to thank her for her story, but in a way I have met her many times, over an extended period, as I have read and reread and taught this book. It is gratifying to know that new readers will enjoy and learn from a remarkable life well-lived.

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