

P R E F A C E

I met Mary Paik Lee by sheer good fortune. In November 1986, the Santa Cruz *Sentinel* ran a story about my decision to resign from my administrative position at the University of California, Santa Cruz, noting that I desired more time for research. Because many of the early Asian immigrants were getting old and dying by the day, I felt that I and others should record their stories while we could. My words struck a resonant chord in Allan Lee, a local businessman. He asked if I would like to meet his (then) eighty-six-year-old mother, who had come from Korea at the age of five and had recently written an autobiography—a 65-page, copyrighted typescript (Library of Congress Catalog Card Number TXU-169-794, 1984).

Since I was extremely busy at the time, months passed before I could leaf through Mrs. Lee's account. As soon as I read it, I realized that hers is exactly the sort of story I have wished were available for my courses in Asian American history. While students learn a great deal from history written in the third person (in the case of Asian immigrants, usually a faceless, nameless "they"), they become far more engaged in what they read when the information is presented through individual voices. Unfortunately, few Asian Americans have written autobiographies.

Mrs. Lee's autobiography is compelling—a story of hardships told with grace. When I interviewed Mrs. Lee for the first time in her San Francisco apartment, where she was living alone, I told her I was amazed by her crystal-clear memory. She said, "Oh, I am so old now that I often forget what I did last week. But these things I've written down, what I'm telling you now, I remember them because they made me *suffer so*." Suffering, however, is not her only theme. Side by side with her recollection of hard times are memories of kind gestures: she is ever mindful of people's ability

to rise above meanness and hate. She has also been extraordinarily observant of her surroundings. Her obvious love of nature — which she now expresses through oil painting, a hobby she took up at age seventy-six — suffuses her narrative with a visual, almost tactile, quality that enables her readers to feel, hear, and see the world through her eyes. But this book is more than the life story of an old woman. For several reasons, it is a unique contribution to the study of immigrants, ethnic minorities, women, and poor working people.

Most important, Mrs. Lee is a rare specimen. The Population Research Bureau, a private research organization specializing in demographic projections, has estimated that, of the 700,000 persons of Korean ancestry in the United States today (in mid-1988), the vast majority have arrived only in the last twenty years. Korean immigration history, however, began at the turn of the century. Mrs. Lee is one of the last survivors of the seven thousand or so pioneers who traveled to Hawaii between December 1902 and May 1905, when emigration ended suddenly, for reasons that will be discussed in the Introduction. Compared with the Hawaii-bound contingent, the number of Koreans who journeyed to the continental United States directly from their homeland before 1905 was very small — fewer than a hundred students and ginseng merchants. Eventually, about a thousand of the workers in Hawaii returned to Korea, while another thousand remigrated to the Pacific Coast. Between 1905 and 1910, slightly more than two hundred additional Koreans arrived in Hawaii and California combined. After 1910, the only Koreans who could come were women and political exiles — the two groups together numbered about one thousand six hundred. Thus, fewer than nine thousand Koreans landed on United States territory before the passage of the 1924 Immigration Law, which reduced immigration from central, eastern, and southern Europe and virtually ended all Asian immigration. (Most Chinese, Japanese, and Asian Indians had already been barred by legislation and executive agreements.)

Among the Koreans who entered before mid-1905 were some six hundred women. Between 1905 and 1910, another forty females came. Then from 1910 to 1924, more than a thousand “picture

brides" arrived—women who had gone through marriage ceremonies in Korea (with the grooms absent) before sailing to join their husbands in Hawaii and on the Pacific Coast. Arranged marriages were the norm in most traditional Asian societies; what gave these transoceanic arrangements their nomenclature was that the matchmakers showed photographs of the prospective partners to their interested families. Nine-tenths of the picture brides went to Hawaii and one-tenth to the continental United States. Though few in number, these women made possible a continuing Korean presence in Hawaii and the American West.

Approximately six hundred Korean children, two-thirds of them boys, accompanied their parents to Hawaii, and almost all of them remained in the islands. Fewer than thirty remigrated with their families to California. Of the Koreans who went directly to the mainland, only a handful took their children with them. Ahn Chang-ho, an important expatriate leader, was one who did; his son Philip was one of Mrs. Lee's playmates in Riverside. Altogether, no more than three dozen Korean-born children resided along the Pacific Coast during the first decade of this century. Mary Paik Lee, born Paik Kuang Sun, was one of the girls; she is the only one who has written her life story.

Mrs. Lee's autobiography is also significant because very few book-length autobiographies of Asian immigrant women and American-born women of Asian ancestry have been published in English. The earliest account, *A Daughter of the Samurai* (1926), by Etsu Inagaki Sugimoto portrays the author's life in Japan and the United States, spiced with her observations of differences between the two cultures. *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1945) by Jade Snow Wong and *Nisei Daughter* (1953) by Monica Sone, two well-known classics, focus on their American-born authors' childhood and youth, and end as the protagonists reach adulthood. *Life Is for a Long Time* (1979) by Li Ling Ai is the chronicle of a Chinese immigrant family in Hawaii. *Through Harsh Winters: The Life of a Japanese Immigrant Woman* (1981), the biography of Michiko Tanaka [pseudonym], recorded by her daughter, anthropologist Akemi Kikumura, covers mainly the years after Mrs. Tanaka immigrated to the United States as an adult. The much-acclaimed *The Woman*

Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts (1975), by Maxine Hong Kingston, is not an autobiography per se, mixing as it does biography with legend and history. Ruthanne Lum McCunn has produced *Thousand Pieces of Gold: A Biographical Novel* (1981), a novelistic embellishment of snippets of information about a Chinese woman who came to be known as Polly Bemis. *Clay Walls* (1986; paperback edition, 1990), by Kim Ronyoung, is the first novel about a Korean immigrant family in America, but we do not yet have any autobiographies, biographies, or even fictionalized biographies of Filipino or Asian Indian women in early twentieth-century America. Given the minuscule number of life histories of Asian American women available, Mrs. Lee's would have been a valuable addition, even if it had had no literary merit.

Fortunately, it is a well-told tale. This is the first full statement we have of the experiences of an Asian American woman from childhood through old age. Mrs. Lee's life has covered a lot of ground—geographically, culturally, and socially. Born into a secluded traditional society being pried open by foreigners in the late nineteenth century, she traveled with her family first to Hawaii and then to California—the site of countless social experiments—where she grew up and spent her entire adult life. Her natal family partook of the comforts enjoyed by relatively well-to-do Koreans, but her parents, after emigration, shared the poverty-stricken existence endured by thousands and thousands of Asian immigrants in early twentieth-century America.

Her narrative is at once singular and representative: though there were few Korean girls and women in the United States—a fact that makes her account unique—there were thousands of immigrant females from other Asian countries who lived in circumstances similar to hers, whose stories, because they were unrecorded, have been lost to history. Her autobiography is more representative than those of Jade Snow Wong (whose father was a merchant in San Francisco) and Monica Sone (whose father ran a boardinghouse in Seattle), because, though merchants controlled their communities, they comprised a far smaller percentage of the Asian immigrant population than did farmers, produce sellers, cooks, launderers, and common laborers. Mrs. Lee's par-

ents, her father Paik Sin Koo and her mother Song Kuang Do, were educated people, but they had to support their family in America by cooking, farming, and washing clothes; subsequently, Mrs. Lee and her husband farmed, sold produce, and managed apartment buildings. Such occupations were the main ones open to Asian Americans—immigrants and American-born alike—in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America.

To set Mrs. Lee's life in its global context, I explore in my introduction the complex circumstances that impelled not only her parents but also thousands of other Koreans to come to the United States and to remain here against overwhelming odds. In Appendix A, I discuss the values I hold as a scholar, because these influenced the way I edited Mrs. Lee's text, and I detail the kinds of research needed to turn the story of an unknown woman into a historical document. Appendixes B and C record the history of Korean American farming in California. The Bibliographic Essay lists available English-language sources on selected aspects of Korean history and on the Korean American experience.

During our last interview, I invited Mrs. Lee to suggest a special message for her readers. She has written her book, she says, because she wants young people to know the hardships that Asian immigrants have faced, so that they can appreciate their blessings today. She urges them all to acquire a good education because she believes, as her father told her so long ago, that what one has learned—unlike material possessions—can never be taken away by others. She is not pleased that some of the books she has read depict Asian men as uncaring husbands and authoritarian fathers. She wants people to know her marriage was a happy one, and that both her own father and her husband were loving parents.

"Anything else?" I asked.

"Certainly there are other things I remember, but I'd rather not tell about them," she replied.

"Why not?" I persisted.

"Because," she smiled, "they might hurt others, and I don't want to do that."

Her desire not to hurt others is clear: she does not name the individuals about whom she has negative recollections, whereas

those whom she remembers fondly are clearly identified. I feel privileged to make Mary Paik Lee's memoir available to a wider audience, and I envy her for the peace she has made with herself and with the world.

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