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Inside:



Mary Kuang Sun Paik Lee, author of *Quiet Odyssey*, the story of her life as a Korean immigrant in the US. Yong Soon Min reviews it, p.11.

Promised land, broken promises

by Yong Soon Min

Quiet Odyssey: A Pioneer Korean Woman in America, by Mary Paik Lee, edited by Sucheng Chan. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1990, 201 pp., \$20.00 hardcover, \$10.95 paper.

PERHAPS BECAUSE I AM a visual artist, my initial engagement with this autobiography was lingering over its many photographs, including the author's portraits on the front and back covers. The snapshots of Mary Paik Lee and her families by birth and marriage constitute, in this marvelous oral history, a narrative all by themselves. A round-faced little girl with piercingly inquisitive eyes, in traditional Korean dress, appears on the front cover and again at the beginning of the book. Here, she sits on her paternal grandmother's lap, the rest of her extended family surrounding her, everyone except her brother dressed in white.

This portrait was taken in 1905. That was the year the Paik family—the author, her older brother and their parents—left Korea for Hawaii. The next 27 photographs chronicle the experiences of the Paik family and, after Mary's marriage to Hung Man Lee, of the Lees, in the new world. A final, back-cover portrait shows Mrs. Lee with her editor and collaborator, Sucheng Chan: here, Mrs. Lee's face is handsome, worn, but still younger than its 87 years.

As a fellow Korean immigrant who came to the US in 1960 at the age of seven, I felt, of course, an undeniable kinship with Mary Paik Lee and her families. Yet we have in common only a few particulars of immigrant experiences (our incredulous delight when we first encountered a flush toilet, for instance). Although we both grew up in California, I was overwhelmed and sobered by the contrasts in our lives and the severity of the hardships that befell her generation of immigrants.

In the nearly 60 years separating her family's immigration from mine, historic events transformed both Korea and the US. The Paik family fled from the oppressive early stages of Japan's occupation of Korea (which soon became outright colonial annexation). My family left to escape the ravages of the Korean War and the destabilization that followed in April 1960, with the student-led uprising that deposed the Republic of Korea's first president, Syngman Rhee. (Coincidentally, Mary Paik Lee knew and supported Syngman Rhee: he was one of several Korean expatriate leaders who sojourned in the US during Korea's colonization.)

Of Mary Paik Lee, Professor Elaine Kim of the University of California at Berkeley writes that she is one of "those we Korean Americans call our 'pioneers'—a comparatively small group of 'early' Korean Americans, a very few of whom were women," and who, even more singularly, has produced a book-length autobiography. But the book's historic value lies not only in the fact that

Mrs. Lee is, in Sucheng Chan's words, "a rare specimen." It also lies in Chan's treatment—an introduction and appendices nearly as long as the oral history itself, which adroitly articulate the social and political developments that shape collective and individual Korean American identity. Chan explains that "[b]y discussing the major social and political forces that affected the lives of Korean immigrants in the early decades of this century, I hope to place Mary Paik Lee's life history in its global context." In the Appendix, "The Historiographer's Role," Chan describes the oral history process: "The final product can be likened to a necklace, for which Mrs. Lee provided the original beads, which I sometimes polished or reshaped before stringing them together into a finished product."

SINCE MY FAMILY'S religious background was partially Buddhist but de facto secular, I was particularly fascinated to learn about the dominant role of Christianity—especially the Protestant sects—in early twentieth-century Korea and in the early Korean immigrant experience in the US. In a detailed introductory discussion of the history of Christianity among Koreans, Chan is particularly perceptive about the early Protestant missionaries' impact on Korean life. She notes, for instance, that the unparalleled success of the Protestant missions in Korea resulted from the fact that "since one of Korea's Asian neighbors, Japan, rather than a European power, became its colonizer, Koreans did not equate Christianity with Western imperialism—a connection that hindered missionary efforts in other lands." By the start of the twentieth century, moreover, the spread of Christianity in Korea coincided with the emergence of modern nationalism. Missionary schools introduced the idea of democracy while also spreading literacy through the teaching of scriptures beyond the *Yangban* (noble) class to the common people. Christianity's impact on women was particularly strong, for it challenged Confucianism's strictly defined female roles.

Converts made up a large percentage of the early Korean immigrants and the Protestant churches became their social centers. "Even nonChristians," explains Chan, "went to the functions held at the churches. Furthermore, since a number of the Korean pastors were vocal leaders in the nationalist struggle, some immigrant churches served as institutional bases for political activities."

Mary Paik Lee's actively religious paternal family was part of a growing Presbyterian community in Pyongyang, now the capital city of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. In the US, the Lees' peripa-



The Paik and Lee families in Tremonton, Utah, in 1926. Mary Paik Lee is holding her son Henry. From *Quiet Odyssey*.

tetic, mostly rural existence in California—they had to move up and down the state looking for subsistence-level work—limited their participation in organized religion. Mary's father practiced his ministry whenever possible. Paik Lee remembered that

[a]ll during our farming years, we donated what we could to help build and maintain our Korean Presbyterian Church . . . [but] since Sunday was the busiest day on the farm, we could not attend services. Nevertheless we supported the church for many years. (p. 101)

The autobiography is full of Mrs. Lee's recollections of times when she instinctively questioned her father's counsel to meet deprivation, abuse and discrimination with Christian charity.

During the time we lived in Colusa, we had no rice, meat, or anything besides biscuits to eat. Nonetheless, when we sat down to eat, Father would pray, thanking God for all our blessings. This used to irritate me. At the age of eleven years, I couldn't think of anything to be thankful for. (p. 23)

Stories like this lead Chan to speculate that Mrs. Lee's "desire to write and publish her autobiography is a retrospective attempt to come to terms with the tensions of being a Christian and an Asian immigrant in America."

During much of Mrs. Lee's life, being an Asian in the States meant being treated as subhuman. (A later chapter, "Discrimination," seems redundantly inconsequential, given the fact that racism is a persistent

theme of Mrs. Lee's account of her US odyssey from the moment she set foot in the port of San Francisco and was greeted with jeers and spit.) In addition to enduring individual expressions of racial prejudice, she, like other Asian immigrants, was severely restricted by various institutionalized and systematic forms of racism. Not only were Asian immigrants denied the vote, but legislation like California's 1913 Alien Land Law limited their ability to buy or lease land. In the litany of degradations, the following seems especially poignant: "When we quit farming in 1950, I went to Whittier, the 'City of Brotherly Love,' to try to rent a house. When I knocked on doors, every person took one look at me and shut the door without a word; so we were forced to move to Los Angeles."

I'm thankful that Mary Paik Lee has lived long enough to have witnessed many positive changes. The most brutal expressions of racism are no longer a part of her everyday reality. Yet the fact remains that we still have many rivers to cross. "To confront the current problems of racism," writes Ronald Takaki in *Strangers from a Different Shore*, "Asian Americans know they must remember the past and break its silence." We Asian Americans are indebted to Mary Paik Lee for recovering our deep roots in this land and to Sucheng Chan for helping in that effort.

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Mary Paik Lee with her sons and two of her granddaughters in 1987. From *Quiet Odyssey*.