

Getting to know you

East to America: Korean American Life Stories

by Elaine H. Kim and Eui-Young Yu

The New Press

1996

Review by Joanne Lee (Winter 1997 issue)

Reading *East to America: Korean American Life Stories* is both fascinating and unnerving. Any previous ideas about what constitutes the “Korean-American community” are shattered with each short biography. There are 38 Korean Americans profiled in this collection, ranging in age from 19 to 90. Elaine Kim and Eui-Young Yu compiled the stories after the 1992 Los Angeles riots, and the majority of stories come out of L.A., but this is not a homogenous group of people. Rather, there is a wide range of opinions and experiences presented. Editor Elaine Kim writes, “There is not just one way to be Korean, American, or Korean American.” This is clear by the third or fourth story.

Readers will find biographies of people whose ideas they sympathize with, and some about which they will cringe in disagreement. Some of the themes that are revisited in several stories are the riots and the relationship between Korean Americans and African Americans, family and the generation gap, relationships between men and women, the work ethic, class consciousness, religion, and community work. Some of the stereotypes of Korean Americans that are mentioned are that Korean Americans hate or are afraid of African Americans, that all Korean Americans are shopkeepers, devout Christians, not concerned about social justice, and that they all want their children to go to Ivy League colleges. With each story, these stereotypes are broken down.

Paul Kim, a Korean-American police officer in L.A. writes, “Many people think that all Koreans go to Harvard and get A-pluses, that all Koreans are rich. This is not so. This community has a lot of tragedies, a lot of stereotyping in reverse. We have a lot of poor and uneducated people. Their living conditions are terrible.” Kim has the unique experience of being one of the few Korean-American police officers in Koreatown. He handles it well, with humor. “There are some Koreans who think I should help them just because they are Korean. It’s very hard. I say to them, ‘Listen, if I use your logic, and we were in Korea, how could I arrest anybody? Everybody would be Korean.’ But they still say, ‘We’re Korean. Why are you arresting a fellow Korean?’ Get real.”

East to America is powerful because it gives a strong background of both Korean and Korean-American history. Through the various stories, we can piece together Korea under Japanese colonization during the early part of this century and the ensuing immigration patterns to America. In addition to this struggle, we learn about the Korean War and the effects it had on families. Young Kim tells a story about meeting a Korean leader during the war and asking him what side of the war he was on. He answered, “Let

me put it this way. We are the grass, and one of you is a cow and one of you is a horse. What difference does it make which one eats us?" Finally, we learn about the last group of Korean immigrants, those who came during the last thirty years looking for a better life, and for many, not finding it.

There are stories which seem not to fit the "mold" of the Korean American: Dredge Kang, a young gay AIDS activist and educator; Kyu Min Lee, who is into rap and a member of a gang in L.A.; Doh-an Kim, a Buddhist abbot, and Kook Kim Dean, a mixed race Korean and African American mechanical engineer. These stories broaden the narrow definition of Korean American, and educate those who have a limited experience with Korean Americans. Janine Bishop, an adopted Korean American from Seattle, explains that after she visited Korea as an adult, she realized that Korea was undeniably a part of her life. "If you think about it, I'm a first generation immigrant..." She categorizes herself this way now because she was never considered "Korean" before, by her teachers, peers, or even herself.

The 1992 riots may have seemed incomprehensible to those safely tucked away in the Midwest, but they were a life-changing event for many Korean Americans in Los Angeles. Several stories attempt to explain the conditions and tension which contributed to the riots. Dong Hwan Ku and his wife worked a combined 23 hours a day at their store in Koreatown under horrible conditions. The store was looted and burned during the riots, and he is clearly angry. "This is war," he says. "Who would want a life like this?" Ku writes that he is planning to return to Korea as soon as possible. Many of the people profiled attempt to analyze why the riots happened, and though they cannot completely explain them, they speak with wisdom gained from experience.

K.W. Lee writes that there is too much disrespect among Korean shopkeepers, and they need to learn American etiquette. "Most people in the poor communities are law-abiding citizens, but they have to play the game of the street to survive. Koreans, lacking in language and street manners, behave just as if they were in Myongdong (a very crowded shopping district in downtown Seoul where people push and shove each other on the sidewalks)." They have struck the most sensitive chord in central city black culture, which has to do with respect. "Koreans don't know any of these terms at the outset, but they aren't dumb. They can learn quickly."

Stella Koh writes that she wishes Du Soon Ja (a Korean shopowner who shot and killed an African-American teenager in the back for stealing orange juice in 1991) would have gone to jail for her crime. "I hate these people who say they looted or stole and had a right to do it. But to kill someone who is turning around and leaving is something I can never comprehend. Why did Du Soon Ja pull out the gun and shoot her? It shows that she hated not only that teenager but all black people."

It's interesting to read about all the Korean-American "issues" (Korean War, racism, L.A. riots), but it's even more interesting to read about these people's lives. They are not merely subjects of a study of Korean Americans, but also mothers, fathers, wives, husbands, sons, daughters,

sisters and brothers with real life problems. Kathy Kim is a community organizer in L.A. and has done a lot of work for Koreans. But her comments about her young child with Down's Syndrome are what make her real, what make her just like one of us. She speaks with pain and sadness, but she is not bitter. Rather, it is inspiring to read what she had gained from her experience.

Similarly, Brenda Paik Sunoo speaks with steely strength about how she lost her youngest son to a rare medical condition. Sean Suh, a young gang member in L.A., writes honestly about his childhood and his bitterness toward his mother. Kyung Ae Price writes of the difficulties she faced in her interracial marriage, and how she beat the odds against it. Serena Choi writes how she is 27 and single, though she would like very much to find that special someone. She faces pressure from her family and her community to get married, but she is head of the household right now, and has other things on her mind too. Everyone has pain and problems, she writes. To her, that is just regular life.

Elaine Kim writes, "Every Korean American family I know has a huge cache of skeletons in its closet. Isn't it likely that most immigrants to a new land do?" I would add that all people, not just immigrants, have these skeletons in their closets. Reading *East to America* is like going through these private skeletons in someone else's closet. In this case, 38 Korean Americans have divulged their secrets - their weaknesses, their stereotypes, their successes, and their little bits of wisdom gained over many years. For those interested in Korean American history or literature, or just the plain old American story of struggle and perseverance, *East to America* is a must read.