

## **American history, Korean style**

*Quiet Odyssey*

by Mary Paik-Lee

University of Washington Press

1990

*Review by Joanne Lee (Winter 1997 issue)*

Mary Paik Lee writes her powerful life story in *Quiet Odyssey: A Pioneer Korean Woman in America* (edited and with an introduction by Sucheng Chan). While most Korean Americans immigrated to the U.S. after 1965, Lee and her family arrived much earlier, in 1905. We don't often hear about this first group of Korean immigrants, often assuming that the Chinese were the only group of Asians in the U.S. at that time. Thus, Lee's is an important and unique story in Korean American history.

*Quiet Odyssey* is an excellent example of historical biography. It should be required reading for any student of Korean American history, as well as for anyone interested in seeing how things have changed, yet still remained the same for Koreans in the U.S. *Quiet Odyssey* contains many examples of sacrifice by the older generation for the younger generation. This seems to be part of the endless cycle for Korean Americans. Korean nationalistic pride is also highlighted in many places in Lee's story. Most disturbing is Lee's portrayal of the racism that her family faced and eventually overcame during their 90-year history in America.

Lee was born in Korea in 1900 and traveled to Hawaii in 1905, where her father worked in the sugar plantations. Life was difficult there, and the family soon moved on to California, working as farmers, cooks, janitors, and miners. As a child, Lee, her parents, and later her husband were very resourceful, living off other peoples' throwaways and finding food and clothing from unlikely sources. As children, she and her brother picked out discarded lemons, scrubbed them clean, and sold them like new. Her father, trained as a tailor in Korea, made many of the family's clothes, and Lee later learned this art of sewing and tailoring from him.

Lee makes her story even more interesting by adding historical contexts in many places. She discusses the Korean independence movement, which culminated on March 1, 1919, when Korean patriots rose up in defiance of the Japanese government, and writes that Koreans in America felt strongly about supporting their home country in the struggle against the Japanese colonists. She even writes of meeting President Syngman Rhee in California and supporting his efforts financially. Other famous public figures Lee mentions in her story are Ahn Chang-ho, another early Korean patriot in the struggle for independence, and Richard Nixon's family, whom the Lees met while farming in California.

Throughout her early life in the U.S., Lee suffered discrimination as a Korean American. This discrimination intensified during World War II, when her neighbors were taken to internment camps throughout the U.S. Several times she and her family members were mistaken for Japanese, and she describes it as a difficult time for all Asian Americans.

Even to those of us familiar with these themes from first hand experience, it is truly humbling to read about how Lee's husband, H.M., returned to Korea several times in his seventies, very frail and sick himself, in order to help his half-brother and other family members who were greatly in need of financial help. Furthermore, it is amazing, knowing all of the discrimination that Lee faced (being spat upon, excluded from educational opportunities, refused service at public places) that Lee has such an appreciation for her adopted country.

While Lee's main purpose in writing her story seems to be to describe the hardships her family suffered, she does not complain. Rather, she speaks like a proud parent who has watched her family (in this case, the U.S.) grow and mature through many struggles. Ninety years old when *Quiet Odyssey* was published in 1990, Lee beams with pride over what her children and grandchildren have accomplished. She seems both grateful and proud to be an American.

While Lee's story is certainly inspiring, it is a bit frustrating that she leaves a few nagging questions unanswered. For example, while she writes that the reason she left Korea was because of the brutal Japanese occupation, she has no comment for the fact that she was often mistaken for being Japanese in California during World War II. Did this particularly irk her, or did she see her Japanese American neighbors in the same light as her Caucasian or Chinese neighbors?

In addition, while Lee writes extensively about her son Henry and his marriage, career, and children, she makes no mention of her son Allan's interracial marriage to a Caucasian woman, only relating that he was divorced, and including a picture of her two granddaughters from this marriage.

In the Korean culture there is a tendency to conveniently "leave out" anything negative and to glorify the accomplishments of one's family, particularly children. Lee's story is both heartbreaking and inspiring, and it has a happy ending. However, perhaps we as Americans need to know both sides to this success story, so that we can learn further from Lee's hardships and perseverance.

Although Lee's conservative writing leaves a great deal unsaid, and a lot of questions about that historical period unasked and unanswered, *Quiet Odyssey* is a window into an important era for Korean Americans, a time when there was no comfort in numbers for immigrants struggling to survive in a new land.