

ASIAN AMERICAN

L I T E R A T U R E

Reviews and Criticism of Works by
American Writers of Asian Descent

Lawrence J. Trudeau, Editor

with advisors

David Henry Hwang, Ravindra N. Sharma, Kenneth Yamashita



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DETROIT • LONDON

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CYNTHIA KADOHATA

1956-

INTRODUCTION

Kadohata is an award-winning novelist and short story writer. Her stories have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Grand Street*, and the *Pennsylvania Review*, and her two novels, *The Floating World* (1989) and *In the Heart of the Valley of Love* (1992) have been critically well received. Kadohata was born in Chicago and spent much of her early life moving with her family, living in Arkansas, Georgia, and Michigan before settling in Los Angeles. Kadohata's background and experiences are mirrored in her novels about young Asian American women coming of age. Her first, in some ways autobiographical, novel, *The Floating World*, tells the story of a Japanese American family travelling across the country in the 1950s. Told in the voice of twelve-year-old Olivia, the story depicts the family's searching for economic and emotional security in post-World War II America. *In the Heart of the Valley of Love* is a futuristic novel concerning survival and quality of life in Los Angeles in the year 2052. In this world Kadohata pits the haves and have-nots against one another. Both are highly armed communities without morals, law, or order. Amid this chaos, the main character, a nineteen-year-old orphan of Asian and African descent named Francie, relates her story of endurance. Some critics have hailed Kadohata as a new voice for Japanese Americans. Recalling her reaction to being characterized as a "Japanese Amy Tan" after the publication of *The Floating World*, Kadohata summarized her thoughts regarding the significance of being an Asian American writer: "For the first time in my life, I saw that there could be expectations of me not only as a writer but as an Asian American writer. On the one hand, I felt like, 'Leave me alone.' On the other hand, I thought, 'This is a way I can assert my Asianness.' I wrote the book, and I'm Asian, and I'm the only person who could have written it." Kadohata received a degree in journalism from the University of Southern California in 1977. She has been the recipient of a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities and in 1991 received the prestigious Whiting Writers' Award.

REVIEWS AND CRITICISM

Diana O'Hehir (essay date 1989)

SOURCE: "On the Road with Grandmother's Magic," in *The New York Times Book Review*, 23 July 1989, p. 15.

[In the following review of *The Floating World*, O'Hehir states: "[Kadohata's] aim and the book's seem to be one: to present the world affectionately and without embroidery. To notice what's there. To see it as clearly as you can."]

What was it like to be Japanese-American, 12 years old, traveling across the country in the 1950's? At first, the reader of Cynthia Kadohata's debut novel [*The Floating World*.] may be puzzled about how she proposes to answer this question. Ms. Kadohata's narrator, Olivia, and her rootless family put miles of motels, fruit stands, bus stations, town squares and dusty arguments behind them, all in an apparently standard American search for a better life. "With the light off," Olivia says, as their car hurtles east toward Arkansas, "the tension seemed to escape through the cracks between the windows and doors, easing out into the dark. I imagined it on the roadside now, waiting. I fell asleep, and when I woke again the Ozarks were swelling on the horizon."

Olivia's family history goes along in the battered sedan, but again it's not an ethnic history but a history that could have happened to any set of characters. The father and mother were married when the mother was five months pregnant by another man; Olivia is the child that resulted, the first child in the family. She seems proud of her special place; her stepfather, Charlie-O, is gentle and affectionate; she's fond of her three younger brothers.

The "gray, whale-shaped" car contains Olivia, her parents, those three brothers and a grandmother. And it's through this last character that the narrator and the reader find a link with a Japanese past. For Olivia, Obasan (the most formal address for Japanese grandmothers) is a strong figure, a figure of love and hate against whom she pits herself; she's a unifying force for experience, a violent maternal power, directing, tale-telling, punishing, cigar-smoking, a foil for the young girl's resentments. Dead by page 29, she is the character who has most acknowledged the superstitions that grip these travelers. ("Too much magic on the road," Obasan always said.") Her death supplies a reservoir of energizing guilt.

The Floating World is about families, coming of age, guilt, memory and, especially, this magic. Ultimately it is also about being Japanese-American in the United States of the 1950's, but this latter theme is so subtly presented that the reader tends to lose sight of it for long periods of time.

The novel occurs in a loosely strung series of delicate, perceptively rendered episodes that move through Olivia's adventures on the cross-country drive, her teen-age years in a small Arkansas town, her job in a chicken hatchery and her later life on her own, in a Los Angeles apartment building filled with starstruck neighbors. Concealed but always incipiently present is the dead grandmother's threatening, magic world: "He was tapping something," Olivia says of her Cal-

ifornia boyfriend, Andy Chin. "It reminded me of my grandmother's arthritic clicking knee. The next day Andy told me that I'd fallen asleep and shouted, 'Stop hitting me, you witch!'"

Ms. Kadohata's narrative tone is straightforward and direct, and Olivia's personality emerges in similarly economical glimpses. Her aim and the book's seem to be one: to present the world affectionately and without embroidery. To notice what's there. To see it as clearly as you can.

The indications that Olivia's family is Japanese—and is treated in a special way because of this—are very delicately handled. The father owns a garage, but most of his friends are chicken sexers, workers who separate male from female chicks—certainly an unusual job, but is it a skilled trade or a demeaning one, or both? When the father and his friends are arrested as members of a betting ring, the chief of police in the small Arkansas town says cheerfully, "One year we arrested the mayor, this year we decided to arrest a bunch of Japs." But no motels or restaurants refuse to accommodate the family or offer them slow service; their friends are Japanese, but their neighbors aren't. So it comes as something of a surprise when a grown-up Olivia, about to leave Arkansas, says: "My parents had taught me many things they hadn't meant to teach me and I hadn't meant to learn. One of these things was fear: their first big fear, during the war; and when my father was arrested; . . . concern that I would be all right in the future; and a hundred other interwoven fears. That was what I wanted to leave."

Ultimately it is the grandmother, her stories of the past, her pinching, her persistence, her identification of the American version of the transient life of old Tokyo from which the book takes its title ("We were stable, traveling through an unstable world."), her pinpointing of the magic in even the most ordinary scene, that shape the book and supply its energy.

Since she was 12 years old, Olivia has had her grandmother's journal; she has been carrying it with her and deciphering bits and pieces. "My grandmother's diaries were a revelation," she tells us. "Her first great lover was not someone she'd married. Before she ever slept with him, she wrote: 'I like the diabolical quality, the clarity of admitting I want, knowing he knows, and now waiting to see it happen, or not happen.'" Olivia ponders the meaning of "diabolical," becomes "enamored of the very word." By the book's magical, regenerative end, her grandmother's knowledge and certainty have become hers.

Stan Yogi (essay date 1990)

SOURCE: A review of *The Floating World*, in *Amerasia Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 1, 1990, pp. 261-63.

[In the following, Yogi considers *The Floating World* "an exciting addition to contemporary American literature and the growing body of work by Japanese Americans."]

"For a few hours, I was in another realm, and impossible things happened," comments a character early in Cynthia Kadohata's haunting first novel. To read *The Floating World* is to be seduced into that realm of the seemingly impossible. Kadohata creates a slightly surreal world in which people and situations seem just a tad askew, a bit off-base. This results in moments of subdued yet exhilarating insight and reminds us of the Japanese American community's diversity.

Narrated by a precocious adolescent, *The Floating World* is a picaresque novel chronicling the experiences of Olivia Osaka, her mother and stepfather, three younger brothers and irascible grandmother as they travel throughout the United States in the 1950s and 1960s. The first third of the book concentrates on the family's travels in search of work. Life on the road is one of motels, roadside diners and convenient alliances where Olivia matures into an understanding of her parents' troubled marriage and her grandmother's unconventional, disturbing life. The second part of the book follows the family to Arkansas where Olivia's stepfather, Charlie-O, operates a garage. Here Olivia and her family work and socialize with Nisei chicken sexers and gamblers, a gruff yet amiable group that bond through their mutual displacement. The final third follows Olivia as she leaves her family and continues a fragmented life in Los Angeles, finally attempting to come to terms with her past as she takes to the road once again.

Kadohata masterfully digs through to the core of complex emotions and relates them with disarming simplicity and chilling accuracy. In this brief but moving passage, for example, Kadohata conveys deep feelings within a few sentences:

At the end of one year, when I had to return an artbook to the school library, I got very depressed. I had fallen in love with the book. . . . So for a surprise my mother borrowed a typewriter and typed up my favorite chapters. She didn't know that what I loved most was not the text but the pictures. Still, I kept the manuscript she'd typed in my collection of special things. Other items I kept were some candy; the strand from my grandmother's braid; a prize I won in third grade for throwing a softball the second farthest of the girls in my class; and a silver button that was the only thing Obasan ever gave me. Sometimes as we drove I sat and looked over my special things, examining each one.

We witness the depth of the mother's love through her typing entire chapters of a book; yet at the same time we feel the mixture of appreciation, disappointment and responsibility that Olivia experiences by not informing her mother of her mistake. We also see the poignancy of Olivia's collection of special things, small items she infuses with meaning that create some consistency in her otherwise fragmented life.

Kadohata's hypnotic and spare prose style enhances the jarring sometimes surreal situations that fill the book. The junction between the leanness of the writing and the magic of the story results in a consistent feeling of slight disorien-

tation that recalls the work of Gabriel Garcia Marquez and other Latin American writers.

Because the Nikkei characters that populate the novel are unconventional, the novel raises the prickly problem of how we define Japanese American culture. Kadohata's characters, who engage in pre-marital sex, behave cruelly and crudely, and speak eloquently, defy impressions of Japanese Americans as a "model minority," an image that many Japanese Americans themselves accept. Through her convincing characterizations, Kadohata subtly explodes that image and reminds us that there is no monolithic Japanese American experience; the Nikkei community is a mosaic of differences.

The Floating World is an exciting addition to contemporary American literature and the growing body of work by Japanese Americans. Like Olivia, the narrator of *The Floating World*, Kadohata is wise beyond her years, gifted with a penetrating eye and an eloquent voice.

Cynthia Kadohata with Lisa See (interview date 1992)

SOURCE: "PW Interviews: Cynthia Kadohata," in *Publishers Weekly*, Vol. 239, No. 35, 3 August 1992, pp. 48-9.

[In the following conversation, Kadohata discusses her role as an Asian American writer.]

On the lanai of her Hollywood bungalow, Cynthia Kadohata sits with her legs curled under her body, periodically brushing her black hair away from her face. As she shyly responds to *PW*'s questions about her work, her answers are like interior monologues—exploratory, self-searching, provisional and at times uncertain. Surely she should feel little hesitation over her career—at age 36 she has produced two novels, received a prestigious Whiting Award and an NEA grant, and earned comparisons to Mark Twain, Jack Kerouac, Raymond Carver and William Faulkner.

In 1989 Kadohata received glowing reviews for *The Floating World* an apparently autobiographical novel about a Japanese American family traversing the country—a mundane yet magical world of backwater towns, gas stations and truck stops—with a cranky grandmother in tow. In her new novel, *In the Heart of the Valley of Love*, . . . Kadohata has used her sparse prose to paint a picture of Los Angeles in the year 2052. It is a world where the haves live in "rich-towns" and the have-nots contend with frequent riots, corruption and the black market. Until recently, this vision might have seemed more appropriate to the realm of science fiction, but the Rodney King riots in Los Angeles have proved—if nothing else—how open Kadohata's eyes, ears and heart are to the world around her.

Readers of *The Floating World* will already have formed a sense of Kadohata's early life, much of it spent on the road with her family. She was born in Chicago, then moved

MAJOR WORKS

The Floating World (novel) 1989

In the Heart of the Valley of Love (novel) 1992

to Arkansas, Georgia, Michigan, back to Chicago and, finally, at age 15, to Los Angeles, where she attended but dropped out of Hollywood High School. "I had gone to an alternative high school in Chicago, and Hollywood High wouldn't accept a lot of my credits," she explains, pausing to add, "But I also didn't fit in. I became intensely shy. It got to the point that going to the grocery store and talking to the cashier really made me nervous." She clerked in a department store and she served up hamburgers at a fast-food restaurant. When she was 18, she gained admission to Los Angeles City College. She later transferred to USC, where she graduated from the school of journalism.

Then, in 1977, while Kadohata was walking down a street in L.A.'s affluent Hancock Park, a car jumped the curb and smashed into her, breaking her collarbone and mangling her right arm. She didn't realize the extent of her injuries until her doctor told her that had she not had prompt attention, she'd be looking at a "sure amputation." She was 21, and the accident made her realize that anything could happen. "Life is unpredictable," she observes.

At loose ends and still recovering from her accident, Kadohata moved to Boston, where her sister was living, and discovered the city's great bookstores. "I started looking at short stories," she remembers. "I had always thought that nonfiction represented the 'truth.' Fiction seemed like something that people had done a long time ago, and [like something that] wasn't very profound. But in these short stories I saw that people were writing *now*, and that the work was very alive. I realized that you could say things with fiction that you couldn't say any other way."

Supporting herself with temp work and the money from her insurance settlement, she set herself the goal of writing a story a month, submitting her work to the *Atlantic* and the *New Yorker*. In 1986, after 25 rejections, the *New Yorker* bought a piece called "Charlie O"; later it took two more; *Grand Street* and the *Pennsylvania Review* also published her tales. All would end up as chapters in *The Floating World*. (The *Atlantic*, she notes wryly, has yet to buy her work.) After a stint in the University of Pittsburgh's graduate writing program, she decided to enter Columbia University's graduate writing course as a way of "segueing into New York."

She still feels torn between traditional education and the education of the road. "It's always a battle in my head: 'Oh, I've got to be reading. I feel so guilty.' On the other hand,

I feel if I don't go out there and do wacky things, like traveling, it will make my writing dry. Besides, you can't help admiring people who never went to school, travel around and are incredible writers. There's something romantic about that."

Despite her commitment to writing, Kadohata dropped out of Columbia, too. There were several factors this time: the tuition was expensive and life on the road continued to beckon but, most important, she sold *The Floating World*. On a plane during the winter break of '87-'88, she had read an article about super-agent Andrew Wylie. "I thought, 'Now this is a scary person,'" she says now. Coincidentally enough, when she got back to New York, she found two letters from Wylie in her mailbox: he had read her story "Jack's Girl" in the *New Yorker* and wanted to see more. "I called a friend and said, 'That scary man wrote to me.' She said, 'Cynthia, you call [him] *right now*.'" When she finally met Wylie, she found him to be "very smart, very kind."

Even after Wylie sold *The Floating World* to Dawn Seferian at Viking in the spring of 1988, Kadohata still found the prospect of being a writer intimidating. "I would go into bookstores and browse through all those how-to-write books. It still doesn't feel totally natural to say that I'm a writer. I'm still really drawn to that section in a bookstore, and it's still discouraging. It's sort of like picking at a scab." She shrugs off her good notices for *The Floating World*. "Reviews feel arbitrary."

After the release of *The Floating World*, many critics suggested that Kadohata was a new voice on the Asian American scene—a Japanese Amy Tan, as it were. "For the first time in my life, I saw that there could be expectations of me not only as a writer but as an Asian American writer," she says. "On the one hand, I felt like, 'Leave me alone.' On the other hand, I thought, 'This is a way I can assert my Asianness.' I wrote the book, and I'm Asian, and I'm the only person who could have written it."

But within the Asian American community, especially on the West Coast, the politics of writing about the Asian American experience can be demanding and internecine. To take one example, literary feuding between Maxine Hong Kingston and playwright Frank Chin has been memorably bitter. No less so was the furor among Asian Americans over Ronald Takaki's nonfiction account of Asian immigration to the U.S., *Strangers from a Distant Shore*. Some readers of *Amerasia Journal* challenged Takaki's footnotes; others complained that he had not included enough women and that he was pandering to commercial tastes (often, it seems, a sin in Asian American circles). Even in college writing classes, Asian American students have been known to dismiss Amy Tan's work, insisting, "That's not the way it happened in *my* family."

Kadohata has not been able to sidestep these artistic controversies and conundrums. They are impossible to resolve, she believes, for she could not write what was true to her

if she had to make that story "historically correct" for the entire Japanese American experience. For instance, "My grandparents were already married when they came to this country," she says. "Well, I've been told my book wasn't historically correct because most Japanese weren't married when they came here. One Japanese interviewer accused me of being socially irresponsible. He asked me if in *The Floating World* I was saying that all Japanese grandmothers are abusive and in conflict with themselves. Of course not! Obasan [the grandmother] was a character in a novel—not a person representing all Japanese grandmothers. He said that Amy Tan and Maxine Hong Kingston were catering to white people, but I think they and other Asian American writers are just writing from their hearts. Why should their work or my work stand for all Asians? That's impossible."

She describes a panel on Asian American writers sponsored by the Academy of American Poets in which she participated: "Those of us on the panel kept saying that we were writers, trying to play down the Asian part. But I must admit that it did feel safe for all of us to be up there together. The next day, someone complained that the organizers hadn't found a Filipino writer. It's all very category-oriented. But you see, there's so much variety among Asian American writers that you can't say what an Asian American writer is."

While the protagonist of *In the Heart of the Valley of Love* is a young woman of mixed Asian and American background, theme and setting are far different from those of her first novel. Arriving at them was not easy. Kadohata's Viking contract stipulated that she submit the first half of the novel upon completion. When she reached that point, the narrative was still located in the present. "I wanted to move it into the future, but I kept thinking it was too nutty, too ridiculous. Finally I said to myself, 'Oh just forget it. Just do it.' Before I made that decision, the writing had been hard work, but once it was set in the future, it made sense to me as a book. It changed the mood for me. It made everything seem more eerie. I had the freedom to do anything."

Although the book takes place in 2052, it is very much grounded in the present. Kadohata's world is not exactly "futuristic" but rather more like Los Angeles on a bad day. Speaking of which, Kadohata notes, "My boyfriend and I used to go to a bakery, and it always seemed peaceful, except that every five minutes, someone homeless or crazy walked by. When you see, day after day, that more and more communities are enclosing themselves, you realize that inevitably it can't work. It seemed to me that there was going to come a time when there would be riots [in L.A.], but I was as amazed as anyone when they came. I guess I should have set the book just three years ahead."

Although Kadohata says that she doesn't write according to a schedule, her friends call her a "pitiless writing machine." She is bewildered by the comment. "I just do it and don't complain about it," she says. She wanted the writing in *In*

In the Heart of the Valley of Love to have a dreamlike quality, which came more easily once the book was set in the future. "I've always had paranoid dreams that have cataclysmic changes in them. And they've always ended with my having to do something violent to survive or to help someone I love survive. I think the book ends on a hopeful note. Yes, this can happen and everything will be okay. Writing the book may have purged my fears."

It also became a way of dealing with her accident. Francie, the book's 19-year-old protagonist, is pinned against a wall when a car jumps a curb; her arm is crushed. "I thought this was a way for me to come out of the closet, in a sense," she says. "I have friends who have never seen my arm. Sometimes I catch people, especially women, staring at it. Sometimes I have to turn away, because I don't want them to see that I know they're looking." But for Kadohata, writing about events in her life has sometimes blurred the line between what is real and fictitious. "Sometimes I can't remember if something has happened to me or to my character. My memories become their memories, and their memories become mine."

She's begun working on her next book, which she coyly describes as "a pile of writing that's not even close to being shown to anyone yet." What she will say is that she has been interviewing people in their 70s, 80s and 90s. "I guess the book will be about the friendship between two women as they go over their lives together and separately. My first two books were written in the first person, and I'm sick of writing the word 'I.' I'd like to write from a different point of view, and right now I'm compelled to be with older people."

But always there's the lure of the road as an inspiration. "I remember once I was crossing the country by bus," Kadohata says dreamily. "I don't remember where I was going or where I was coming from, except that I was in a slightly seedy bus station at three in the morning in the middle of nowhere. I had this feeling of 'I am really happy at this moment.'" Kadohata may not always be at ease with her career, but there is no hesitation as she speaks about the sources of her art.

Barbara Quick (essay date 1992)

SOURCE: A review of *In the Heart of the Valley of Love*, in *The New York Times Book Review*, 30 August 1992, p. 14.

[In the following negative assessment, Quick contends Kadohata's novel seems haphazard and unfocused.]

In her second novel [*In the Heart of the Valley of Love*], Cynthia Kadohata has tried something extremely difficult: to take a story of the disaffected 1990's and project it 60 years ahead in time. What makes futuristic fiction work is an accretion of telling detail so convincing that the reader suspends disbelief. Unfortunately, *In the Heart of the*

Valley of Love has lots of detail but very little conviction. The setting is Los Angeles in 2052, but the author seems not to have exercised her imagination: this is the smog-filled and crime-ridden city of 1992, with just a few differences (water and gas rationing; odd, unexplained skin diseases). Apart from some specific biographical details, the book's narrator, a 19-year-old named Francie, bears a remarkable resemblance to the slightly younger Japanese-American narrator of Ms. Kadohata's first novel, *The Floating World*. Though supposedly generations apart, these two adolescents seem very much the same person: alienated, opaque and drawn to angst-filled speculation about the absurdity of existence. The plot concerns Francie's involvement with her college newspaper, the handful of other students who work there and the aunt and surrogate father who have raised her from the time she was 13. But the narrative lacks focus; it seems haphazardly constructed out of Francie's deadpan stream-of-consciousness observations, which read like a bad translation of Camus. The result is like listening to someone describe a long and pointless dream.

Lynn M. Itagaki (essay date 1997-98)

SOURCE: A review of *In the Heart of the Valley of Love*, in *Amerasia Journal*, Vol. 23, No. 3, Winter 1997-98, pp. 229-31.

[In the essay below, Itagaki emphasizes the variety of genres that are fused together in *In the Heart of the Valley of Love*, including "science fiction, cyberpunk and multiracial literature."]

The year is 2052, and in the Los Angeles metropolis and its environs, the world-famous landmarks and infrastructure are deteriorating from rampant crime, pollution and rioting in Cynthia Kadohata's second novel *In the Heart of the Valley of Love*. No apocalypse of mythic proportions, no nuclear holocaust, has ripped apart society as we know it: there is only the slow residual degeneration from our 1990s present. Francie, the Japanese-Chinese-African American narrator, struggles to find a future in the seething conditions of the multiracial underclass: she enrolls in a junior college, helps run a student newspaper and begins a relationship with a fellow student editor. Constrained by rigorously enforced boundaries which divide the contested urban space between white and colored populations, "richtown" and ghetto, Francie and her friends cling to each other, trying to resuscitate feelings of love and hope in the midst of such despair.

Francie must battle the feelings of isolation and exile that haunt all characters in the novel. Families are broken by the sudden death or disappearance of their members. In 2052, if one is not suddenly arrested by the invisible police network for some crime, one is surely suffering from cancer, "harmless" but disfiguring skin diseases and polluted air, food and water. Francie's own family was destroyed by the sudden death of her parents in the recent past. Numbled by the prevalence of death and destruction, Francie, like many other

inhabitants of Los Angeles, feels ambivalent toward violence, loss and, ultimately, the primacy of human relationships.

In the Los Angeles of 2052, human relationships are inevitably thwarted. The characters are plagued with frustrated communication. Sounds of car and property alarms, helicopters and sirens, incessantly remind characters that they are under police surveillance. Francie notes with irony that housing developments are now called "camps," separated communities surrounded by tall fences and armed security guards. In the novel, the themes of aborted communication and impenetrable physical boundaries become gripping metaphors, symbolic of the breaks between past, present and future and the disjunction of the reader's 1990s perspective with the future 2052 "present" of the novel. As Francie traverses the ruined, dystopian spaces of Los Angeles, her individual past becomes subsumed under a larger cultural and historical memory. By placing the novel in the future, Kadohata allows Francie to reference the 1990s present as a long-dead history, a retrospective myth-making.

Francie ruminates on the disintegrating state of Los Angeles, a "postmodern" space disrupted and "stabbed" with abandoned skyscrapers and aborted monuments to man's technology: For example, the Sunshine System, a highway project which ran out of money in the 1980s and left tall, half-rainbows of concrete highways puncturing the urban landscape. Kadohata's setting is primarily a wry picture of famous Los Angeles landmarks, our contemporary public works projects that characters discuss cynically from the hindsight of the future.

In this sense, Kadohata has written a novel explicitly about Los Angeles, alluding to the history of the sprawling metropolis and its surrounding desert. Kadohata's lyrical descriptions of a decaying infrastructure on the brink of devastation glow poignantly in the narrative; conversely, these intricate, ordinary details of life in 2052 concurrently appear to bog down the characters and narrative in necessary explanations and commentaries. The characters are swamped by the chaos of their futuristic existences, reduced to performing small insignificant actions that are not attached substantially to the

overarching symbolic structure of the plot.

Kadohata's novel, however, is most effectively understood through its placement in the context of Los Angeles' urban history and literature. Kadohata's prose is best appreciated for its intensity and vibrancy when we are allowed glimpses of setting in her trademark style that evokes a tangible sense of place, of location and dislocation. Francie is the passive narrator, events happen to her, around her, and she is swept along, knowing it is useless to resist. Her dry, detached voice describes the stark, crumbling settings in a way that invokes Los Angeles' cultural heritage in the filmic and literary traditions of noir; however, the narrative lacks the gritty punch characteristic of this quintessentially Southern California genre. Ultimately, *In the Heart of the Valley of Love* is about 1990s Los Angeles, a little grimmer, a little nastier in its 2052 old age, but the novel is not about the characters, nor the plot. Kadohata's true achievement lies in the intersection of the history and future of the metropolis, in this fiction that is startlingly the reality of Los Angeles today.

A work inherently about Los Angeles, *In the Heart of the Valley of Love* has been reprinted this year under the heading of "California Fiction." This novel can also be considered science fiction, cyberpunk and multiracial literature. It is rare to see in one novel such an amalgamation of genres that defies classification and shows the complexity of the "genre" of Asian American literature itself; Kadohata's clearest contribution is the novel's intrinsic resistance to stereotyped categorization. Perhaps, the field of Asian American literature should, as Francie mentions in the heart of Los Angeles at the end of the novel, take its inspiration "from right here."

Additional coverage of Kadohata's life and career is contained in the following sources published by Gale Research: *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Vol. 59; *Notable Asian Americans*.

YOUNGHILL KANG

1903-1972

INTRODUCTION

Kang is the author of the autobiographical novels *The Grass Roof* (1931) and *East Goes West* (1937), and the adaptation of *The Grass Roof* as a work for children, *The Happy Grove* (1933). Born in Korea and emigrating to the United States in 1922, he attended colleges in Korea, Europe, and the U.S., including Boston University and Harvard. During his career he taught at several universities, most notably New York University, where he became friends with the novelist Thomas Wolfe. Wolfe showed some of Kang's writing to Maxwell Perkins, his editor at Scribner's. Perkins encouraged Kang and gave the young writer a \$500 advance. Kang produced *The Grass Roof*, a fictionalized account of his life in Korea, which was published by Scribner's, as were his next two works. A critical success, *The Grass Roof* was translated into several languages and received the French Prix Halperine Kaminsky in 1937. The sequel, *East Goes West*, recounts the experiences of Chungpa Han (representing Kang) after coming to America. This work was also well received; Kang himself felt it was his most important work. Kang's other honors include two Guggenheim Awards in Creative Literature. He died in Florida, where he lived, in December 1972.

REVIEWS AND CRITICISM

Lady Hosie (essay date 1931)

SOURCE: "A Voice from Korea," in *The Saturday Review of Literature*, Vol. VII, No. 37, 4 April 1931, p. 707.

[In this early review, Hosie states that *The Grass Roof* "is a real contribution to literature and to our understanding of [Kang's] countrymen and women."]

The birth of the world is the greatest event in our generation: so says Professor de Madariaga cogently in his latest book. Steam and iron and growing international trade have forged links that are welding the earth, East and West, into such an economic entity as we have not yet realized. The West has been the insurgent force, the East the more passive agent in this tremendous vitalizing interpenetration during the last two centuries. The religious people of the West have also served towards this end, and been spiritually enriched thereby, sometimes despite themselves. In the mental realm, owing to the extraordinary fluidity and expansion of the English language, the East, especially of late, has been enjoying the benefits—or reverse—of our most intimate thinking and psychological experimentations.

Now there is a certain cautious reserve in mankind which bids most people beware of uttering their entire minds; and this instinct of self-preservation went perhaps deeper in the Orient than the Occident with its more careless speech. The Oriental was prepared to listen to us first before he gave himself away; if indeed, he bothered himself at all with our opinion of his doings, for he was the sought-after, not the seeker. Presently, however, his natural pride was stung by what he considered defamation of his charter by foreign observers who could write only of his obvious and perhaps less agreeable habits, for he showed no others to them. To be sure, yet other foreigners wrote more soothingly, as if he had no faults at all, and idealized him as the most exquisitely spiritual and sensitive soul in the world. He was puzzled and disconcerted at such indiscrimination: and nobody felt satisfied. Thus there came a school of writers trying honestly to interpret a foreign nation to their own people, and in such ways that the protagonist of the portrait could feel that here was a just criticism, there a deserved meed of credit, and through all a gripping understanding of common human problems, aspirations, and failures. The method must not be too much that of dissection or scalpel. A man may fairly "babbitize" his own fellow-countrymen but not with courtesy those of another race. There must be a certain liking, or warmth of emotion—that sweet stir of the red corpuscles which we vaguely call sympathy, and which Professor Soothill in the sutra of Buddhism, *The Lotus of the Wonderful Law*, translates as "the compassionate heart dwelling within all living beings." Professor André Siegfried has in such fashion tried to portray America and England. Edward Thompson and Yeats-Brown have given us India. Pearl Buck this year has made us feel the earth-hunger of the Chinese peasant.

Today we have before us *The Grass Roof*, by Younghill Kang, a Korean, and it is an interesting, exciting account of his youth and manhood; in his home, at school, and in the bitter struggles of an adolescence spent among the alien Japanese. The first half, true pictures of old Korea and of his family circle, will probably charm and interest more than the second with its *sturm und drang*. Koreans have the reputation of being a gentlemanly, easy-going race, and Mr. Kang's story confirms this. His delightful family pictures bear the stamp of truth. His sidelights make a lover of the East smile in tender recollection, and explain scenes only half understood before, such as the chronological groupings of the family even in play. There is the father, the oldest brother of the family, and therefore naturally and without hesitation slaving to feed and clothe and shelter not only his own offspring and his mother, but his two younger brothers and their brood—all under one patriarchal "grass roof." Of

these two younger brothers, uncles to our biographer, one was a "crazy-poet" sublimely indifferent to material facts, lovable, and venerated by the locality for the delicacy of the verse which he produced at the crucial moments of joy or sorrow. The other brother was almost as endearing: a "prodigal-son uncle" who gadded about the countryside and ran up debts and was the first to wear a modish foreign hat. Not even his "late" marriage at twenty-one, arranged by his oldest brother could check his butterfly insouciance. Still it seemed hard when the father had to go into hiding at the New Year festivities, lest he be seized by the creditors for "prodigal-uncle's debts. Kindly old grandmothers are evidently the same the world over. There is a delicious scene where Mr. Kang's grandmother waged effective war with the mother-in-law on the other side of the distaff who came to upbraid—but was routed. Her daughter was the aunt who could "manufacture babies" but was no use at anything else, so that the family leaned on the other aunt who did not possess that talent but had every other desirable in a housekeeper.

Mr. Kang has a true poet's love of the country, and his pages breathe the happiness of field and flower and garnered crop, of boyish games in the open, and the smell of wood fires. It is a tremendous achievement that he should have written this lengthy book in lucid English; and so excellently that a few unconscious jerks and jars of very modern American slang only add naivety to the candor of his tale.

The second half of the book begins with the Japanese absorption of Korea into her Empire—and is painful reading. Those of us who travelled in Korea in those years know that Mr. Kang's accusations of inhumanity have foundation. One queries how the Japanese with their centuries of chivalry arrived at such a state of mind in those years. During the Great War, they alone of all the armed nations were not called upon to face the worst realities of warfare. Does the mere possession of weapons induce their ultimate use? At any rate, Mr. Kang's narrative makes plain why the Japanese Government held the Korean Christian Church as politically suspect. Mr. Kang does not, I think, give a fair account of American missionaries. Doubtless these are blundering human beings, like the rest of us. He accuses them of lack of education, yet he longed ardently to come to their country for the kind of education they receive. He was desperately eager to receive the benefit of their escort to the America of his desiring, and had no compunction when their religious meetings were used as a political cloak. He should also gratefully remember that it was American missionaries who first made the world aware of Japan's former policy in Korea, now happily reversed.

Mr. Kang is, however, on sure ground when he gives us Korea and Koreans. His book is a real contribution to literature and to our understanding of his countrymen and women. His little girl cousin, Ok-Dong-Ya, wins our hearts. After one frenzied burst for freedom and American education, marriage and babies claimed her. She and her fellows

live and toil in Korea still. One hopes that her babies will be as enterprising and determined as that obvious hero of her heart, Mr. Kang himself.

Katherine Woods (essay date 1937)

SOURCE: "Making of an Oriental Yankee," in *The New York Times Book Review*, 17 October 1937, p. 11.

[In the following, Woods declares *East Goes West* "one of those rare books which will arouse interest, ring changes on laughter and leave its residue of thought."]

Younghill Kang—born Chungpa Han thirty-four years ago in a Korean village—is not riding any theories as he sets down the tale of his adaptation to American life. He is as wide-awake and high-spirited as he is scholarly and thoughtful, and he writes with a keen sense of character both in realization and depiction, and with the faculty of humorous detachment in his observation of the world and his own place in it. This young Korean brings the qualities of a novelist, in other words, to the chronicle of his own experience. His story attracts and holds the attention as if it were a novel. And as a matter of fact there is the stuff of three novels, literally, in this truly fascinating book.

But, of course, *East Goes West* is not a novel. It is the candid record of "the making of an Oriental Yankee," as its subtitle states; and its author has been so successfully Americanized as to become Assistant Professor of Comparative Literature in New York University and a member of the staff of the Department of Far Eastern Art at the Metropolitan Museum. This volume continues the autobiography begun with *The Grass Roof* three years ago. But although readers of this book who do not know its predecessor will surely want to go back and explore Younghill Kang's idyllic childhood and rebellious youth, it must be stated at once that *East Goes West* requires no such preface. This is a story of American experiences, entirely distinct in itself; and from several points of view it is absorbingly interesting.

Chungpa Han got to the United States "just in time," before the Oriental Exclusion Law was passed. He was 18 years old, and he reached New York at the end of a roundabout journey with \$4 in his pocket, and in his heart an ambition both dauntless and lyrical to master Western learning and civilization. Yet it was partly "Westernization" from which he was fleeing—the overwhelming of his little country by the too rapid, too greedy, too merciless Occidentalism of Japan. Between that modern oppression and his old-fashioned father's insistence that he marry by family choice and settle down to live by family custom—between the two and harassed by both—he came to America with his mind and his eyes open, his body inured to privation and even hardship, and his determination no less sure because it was also flexible.

For he was going to get an American college education: on the way to that he would do almost anything, welcome any honest work. Thus his story begins. But if you think that it is going to be an ordinary story of industry and academic devotion, of the poor boy who made good, or even primarily of racial contrast and conflict, you are happily wrong. This story is before all else keenly individualized, and it is vivid and entertaining from start to finish. It is as the story of a human being among other human beings in an amazing diversity of human experience that *East Goes West* is most immediately and memorably interesting.

The child of Korean scholars and poets, educated in a mission school, Chungpa Han came with letters of introduction which, he hoped, would find him a job at once. So he felt rich with his \$4, and expended half of it promptly for a room, the first night, in a comfortable hotel. Even though he made the mistake of talking to the bellboy about Shakespeare instead of tipping him, he enjoyed that hotel. But the influential American whom he saw next morning had no job for him. The Korean friend at whose house he called was out of town. He went to get a haircut, and by repeating in his ignorance an unvarying "Yes" in answer to the barber's solicitous queries, he ran up a bill of \$1.60, and had only 10 cents left. He passed his second New York night in a flop-house, and was directed to a breadline next day in the hope of getting some soup.

The hectic prosperity of the Twenties was off with a flourish to "normalcy" then, and we may well pause to consider that flop-house. But it is part of the charm, poise and value of this Oriental's book of American experience that he himself does not linger over such incidents and observations. He is no cynic. He never picks up a big stick. He merely tells what happened, good and bad, sad and merry, and always alive. And from the first this strange New York fascinated him.

He was turned away from the breadline because he lacked a proper ticket. But fortunately the place was near Chinatown. The Oriental newcomer went to a Chinese restaurant, introduced himself to the proprietor by writing a poem on the theme of vegetable soup and was able to arrange for a meal a day on credit until he could find a job; on the same plan he got a room near by. And so he managed to keep going until his Korean friend, George Jum, came back, took him to the Korean Institute and put him in the way of getting work as a houseboy.

Told with considerable élan and without a trace of self-pity, all this is very interesting. But with the entrance of George Jum a new factor comes into the story, and *East Goes West* becomes fascinating not merely as the presentation of one enterprising stranger's adventures but as the introduction to other people also, the play of other lives. George Jum is the first of many acutely visualized characters and one of the most delightful. And there is the beginning of what would make a real novel in the picture of generous-hearted George pressing his trousers in his little room, getting food and a

MAJOR WORKS

Translations of Oriental Poetry [translator] (poetry) 1929
The Grass Roof (novel) 1931
The Happy Grove (juvenile fiction) 1933
East Goes West (novel) 1937

bath for his somewhat disconsolate compatriot and offering to share with him everything he has, discoursing meanwhile on love and pleasure, explaining the kind of plays he wants to write, telling how much money a cook can earn.

George the happy pagan runs in and out through the whole chronicle of Chungpa Han's own acclimatization; gay and self-indulgent but practical and conscientious in his own way, utterly genuine and an unfailingly devoted friend. And over against the light sure portrait of the contented merry-maker George, with his girls and his easy Americanization, is seen the dark, disquieting presence of the older Korean, To Wan Kim, artist, scholar, perfectionist, uprooted from an old culture and unable to sink his spirit in the depths of the new civilization, finding his hope of happiness only to lose it in tragedy, and lose himself at last.

The story of To Wan Kim is a novella in itself, with its own background of color and contrast, its thought and yearning and torment and disdain. Everything about the story of Kim is dramatic. But though it is tragic, it is seen in perspective, in its relation to Chungpa Han's own experience; and these experiences in sum are far from sad. There is a vigorous and agile humor in most of this young man's personal recollections, whether of his ridiculous efforts as a book agent or the awkward beginnings of his own happy romance. He has a Puckish quality, this poetry-loving young man from the Orient, which has stood him in good stead through divers changes and which adds greatly to the enjoyableness of his book.

He got his education, of course: first in a college in Nova Scotia and then at Harvard. He was no good as a houseboy and not much better as a restaurant waiter; but he was a satisfactory clerk until the business went bankrupt, and he wasn't bad in a carpenter's shop. In Boston he was pantry-boy in a big hotel. He enjoyed his strenuous toil on a rocky farm in Massachusetts—where the life was "simple, sound, wholesome and primitive," like the typical Oriental's—but he was very unhappy in a department store, and much more at home when he began to write for the Encyclopaedia Britannica. On various travels he became expert at hitchhiking, and once a policeman held up traffic so that he could ask for a ride. But of all his varied experiences, which he records with such lively zest, the funniest was his employ-

ment as a book agent: it ended by his being kicked out by a furious householder and his realization that the householder was quite right; but it began with his innocent acceptance of a message of "service"; and its whole story of a ludicrous racket must be read!

All through this succession of odd jobs the Oriental student was making friends with other students, with scholarly Americans. He was helped everywhere, he says, because he was a student (that was almost like a racket, he sometimes felt). And though he saw and heard and lived through much which is all the more a challenge to our own self-criticism because he sets it down with so much dispassionateness, he was coming to know the best of this country, too. And he loved it. He put his own roots into it. He kept his detachment, his Oriental scholarliness, his quest for intangible perfection. He had brought something with him, in mind and spirit, which he had no wish to lose. But here he found his home.

His book offers a rich largesse of color and flavor, personality and impression and event, and as the record of individual experience it has overtones of suggestiveness and a definite value. It is one of those rare books which will arouse interest, ring changes on laughter and leave its residue of thought.

Elaine H. Kim (essay date 1982)

SOURCE: "Younghill Kang: Searching for a Door to America," in *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context*, Temple University Press, 1982, pp. 32-43.

[In the excerpt below, Kim provides an overview of Kang's career.]

Many early Asian immigrant writers, including Lin Yutang and Etsu Sugimoto, viewed themselves as guests or visitors in America. They fully intended to return to their homelands at the end of a temporary sojourn in the West, to continue, perhaps, their attempts to improve communication and increase understanding between "East" and "West." The writings of Younghill Kang and Carlos Bulosan illustrate the transition from authors who view themselves as guests or visitors to those who want to find a place for themselves in American society. What we read now is not the idealized commentary of a tour guide nor the polite account of an eloquent Asian diplomat, but a personal expression of the laboring immigrant's yearnings for a new life and the process of his education about the realities of American life. Because Kang and Bulosan took part in a personal transition from Korean to Korean American and from Filipino to Filipino American, they are representative of the genesis of Asian American literature. Moreover, the differences in interpretation of Asian American realities by Kang and Bulosan emblemize the diversity of perspectives in Asian American literature.

Elements of the "cultural ambassador" theme of Lin Yutang, Park No-Yong, and Etsu Sugimoto linger in the autobiographical works of a Korean immigrant writer, Younghill Kang (1903-1972). Like them, Kang was an educated Asian aristocrat. Like Lin and Park, he attempts to present in English the "Oriental Yankee's view of America." Like Sugimoto, he is convinced of "Eastern decay" and "Western rebirth." But Kang goes far beyond these writers, writing from the heart about his agonizing search for an entry into American life and therefore "in[to] the human affairs of his time" [*The Grass Roof*].

The Grass Roof (1931) describes Kang's life in Korea to the point of his departure for the West in 1921. *East Goes West* (1937) is a chronicle of his experiences in America. In both slightly fictionalized accounts, Kang is represented by the narrator, Chungpa Han. Kang himself considered the latter book the more important one, "more mature in style and technique" as well as more highly developed in content: "*The Grass Roof* may be said to have been written in the mood of the Everlasting Nays of Carlyle: *East Goes West* may be compared to the mood of the Everlasting Yea" [quoted in Stanley J. Kunitz, ed. *Twentieth Century Authors—First Supplement*, 1955]. But it was the earlier book that won him accolades in America and Europe. *The Grass Roof* was translated into French, German, and other languages and won Le Prix Halperine Kaminsky in 1937. Even in his [14 December] 1972 obituary in the *New York Times*, it was described as his "most important work." Part of the reason lay in the book's novelty: it told a good deal about a country about which very little was known here. Kang was a unique figure for his time, the only Korean immigrant to have written book-length fiction in English, and autobiographical fiction at that. In this and in many other ways he was completely unrepresentative of his people, yet became something of a spokesman for Koreans in America almost by default.

That critics preferred Kang's descriptions of Korea to his discussions of his American experience is made clear in a review by Lady Hosie, author of *Portrait of a Chinese Lady*, who finds *The Grass Roof* rewarding because it stirs the nostalgia of the "lover of the East" and "explains scenes only half understood before" ["A Voice from Korea," *Saturday Review of Literature*, 4 April 1931]. She is less enthusiastic about Kang's rendering of the West and of Westerners:

Mr. Kang does not, I think, give a full account of American missionaries. Doubtless these are blundering human beings, just like the rest of us. He accuses them of lack of education, yet he longed ardently to come to their country for the kind of education they receive. He was desperately eager to receive the benefit of their escort to America . . . and had no compunction when their religious meetings were used as a political cloak. . . . Mr. Kang is, however, on sure ground when he gives us Korea and Koreans. His book is a real contribution to literature and to our understanding of his countrymen and women.

Even those reviewers who praise *East Goes West* like it for what they saw as sustained optimism in the face of racism and discrimination in America. This optimism is called "instinct for self-preservation": one reviewer admires Kang's "good-natured naiveté," "curiosity," and "resourcefulness"; another comments on Kang's "humor and charm," calling *East Goes West* the description of a "successful search for the formula that was to make him an 'Oriental Yankee.'" Like the autobiographies by Pardee Lowe, Jade Snow Wong, Monica Sone, Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston, and Daniel Okimoto, . . . critics saw *East Goes West* as an example of how minorities should respond to American racism, that is, as another Asian American "success story."

In fact, *The Grass Roof* is not a description of Korea and Koreans, and *East Goes West* is not a success story. *The Grass Roof* is a justification of Kang's departure from Korea, and its "contribution to our understanding" of Korea and Koreans must be accepted within this context. Kang's attitudes were highly unrepresentative of Koreans in his time. An aristocrat by birth, he is described [in Kunitz] as "one of the last immigrants to reach America before Oriental immigration was prohibited." It is important to note that scarcely more than 13,000 Koreans had immigrated to America by 1924, the vast majority of them contract laborers for the sugar plantations of Hawaii. These laborers were brought here before Japan annexed Korea in 1909, at which time emigration from Korea was halted. Even those few Koreans who came to America as students and political refugees were generally not immigrants but sojourners on temporary visas, and they participated intensely, together with the contract laborers, in the overseas movement for Korean independence from Japan.

While in Korea, Kang's protagonist, Chungpa Han, did not join the national liberation movement that captured the imagination and hearts of thousands of others of his age who fought, wrote, and were imprisoned or killed by the Japanese militarists during the bitter years just prior to his departure for America. His brief imprisonment by the Japanese after his peripheral participation in the widespread Sam II demonstrations only reinforces his desire to flee his country: "Now I could not . . . give my services [to the independence movement]. Besides I wished to escape death and torture if possible and come to America." Han decides against "mass movements" and "narrow nationalism" in favor of individual survival. His search for "universal truths" is inspired by his readings of Shakespeare and by the philosophy of individualism and creativity prevalent in Western art since the rise of the bourgeoisie in Europe; these ideas help him justify his desire to escape from Korea:

I began to realize that those who talk about others, others, others, all the time, and about doing service are usually like the worms that live off the life of another tree. Their ideas were not created by them, they give them no new application, they speak their enthusiasm by plagiarism and live it by mechanical process. Who are the people

who really give service to humanity? Only those who can't help it, who give service as by-products of their own joy or anguish. Shakespeare worked for himself, not for others.

[*The Grass Roof*]

Han has decided that Korea is lost. Korean culture is at its "dying gasp," and the narrow, antiquated world of his ancestors is suffocating and hopeless. Having described himself as a progressive, natural leader ("I can never remember a time when I did not consider myself more highly than most of my associates"), he flees from Korea as one flees a cripple or a corpse [*East Goes West*]. Kang has little of Sugimoto's romantic nostalgia: Han cannot return to Asia to await the advent of the "progressive American way," serving comfortably in the meanwhile as a cultural bridge. Disappointed by Confucian education as well as by his hard-won Japanese "Western" education in Korea, he decides that the world and real knowledge are attainable only outside Korea.

Life in Korea is too restrictive for an "energetic searcher after life" like himself. The Japanese conquest of Korea during his youth had transformed his country from a "small, provincial, old-fashioned Confucian nation" into a "planet of death":

There life grew in manifold harmony, careless, free, simple and primitive. It had its curved lines, its brilliant colors, its haunting music, its own magic of being, but it was a "planet of lost time" where the heyday of life passed by. Gently at first. Its attraction of gravity, the grip on its creatures, maintained through its fervid bowels, its harmonious motion weakened. Then the air grew thin, cooler and cooler. At last, what had been good breathing to the old was only strangling pandemonium to the newer generations. . . . I know that as I grew up, I saw myself placed on a shivering pinnacle overlooking a wasteland that had no warmth, that was under an infernal twilight. I cried for the food for my growth, and there seemed no food. And I felt I was looking on death, the death of an ancient planet, a spiritual planet that had been my fathers' home. Until I thought to stay would be to try to live a plant on top of the Alps where the air is too cold, too stunting, and the wind too brutally cruel. In loathing of death, I hurtled forward, out into space, toward a foreign body . . . and a younger culture drew me by natural gravity.

In old Korea, mobility is limited, and social networks of kinship and acquaintanceship are crucial to every aspect of an individual's life. In the immediate past, it would have been almost unthinkable for Han to refuse marriage with the girl chosen for him by his family. But now he asks: "[I]s she trained in the way I am? Can she read English? Can she talk Japanese and Chinese? As to all other kinds of training, making beds and making babies are not my requirements. I am not interested in that kind of education" [*East Goes West*].

Unlike his forebears and most of his contemporaries, Han is possessed of an alternative. Having learned "rebellion

against nature and fatality" from the West, he can reject the decaying old order and seek the source of his new knowledge. He is, he feels, a "Faustian individual," original, rugged, imaginative, a lonely pioneer in a Brave New World:

Between my father and little Aunt and me, there already seemed the barrier of an ocean, an ocean of time, since they and I lived in different eras. My grandmother died by the hand of a foreigner. The soul of my crazy-poet uncle was completely broken. My childhood friends I had grown away from and the friends of my first manhood were exiled in body or spirit. In my short eighteen years, I have seen the disintegration of one of the first nations of the Earth.

As he sets sail for America, he is exhilarated by the feeling of his uniqueness, noting that he is almost like a man with no nationality, "exiled from all humanity": "[I]t seems to me that the poet alone has no home, no national boundary, but is like a man in a ship. His nearest kin is the muse up in the clouds, and his patriotism goes to the ethereal kingdom [*The Grass Roof*].

In America, Han would have ignored, if he could, his Korean past, his Korean identity, and perhaps his Korean compatriots. He is absorbed by the desire to find an individual place for himself in American society. The search is crucial to him because he knows that he cannot return to Korea. If he survives at all, he must survive in America.

Even in America, Han, a "rebellious individualist," cannot accept the revolutionary fervor of fellow Koreans. He describes "typical" Korean exiles with pity and condescension. Obsessed as they are by their desire to return one day to a liberated homeland, they remain exiled "in body, not in soul," like Pak, whom Han describes as "a most typical Korean":

Western civilization had rolled over him as water over rock. . . . [H]e always sat in at Korean Christian services, because they had sometimes to do with nationalism. With his hard-earned money, he supported all societies for Korean revolution against Japan. . . . For fifteen years, his single ambition had been to get back there and settle down. On Korean land, he wanted to raise 100 percent Korean children, who would be just as patriotic like himself. . . . But still he did not have enough money to travel back, get married, settle comfortably there. This made him rather suffering and gloomy, always looking on the dark side of things.

[*The Grass Roof*]

Men like Pak often gave their life's savings to the independence movement. Intense desire for Korean independence from Japan characterized every class of Korean living in Hawaii and the United States for four decades. Farmers, waiters, and domestic servants by day became independence workers by night. Korean churches in America were meeting places for independence movement activities, and a group of Korean exiles even established a military academy in

America for training fighters. Korean exiles in America were responsible for the political assassination of an American envoy to Japan.

Han is unmoved by the patriotism almost all his acquaintances feel, and the result is his "loneliness and lack of nationalistic passion, my sense of uncomfortable exile even among my fellow countrymen." Unlike them, he feels he had escaped from ruin and decay by leaving Korea, and the idea of returning there is singularly unattractive to him: "If I went back to Korea, and returned to become a villager for always, was that any fun? Why should I keep on manufacturing babies for which there would be no future?" [*The Grass Roof*].

East Goes West is the chronicle of Han's continual search for the fictional America he had constructed within his own imagination: it is an idea, a "mental utopia," a place of regeneration, a dream full of magic and mastery, a "glorious vision" of enchantment and romance, a spiritual home. The search is generally unsuccessful. Han's hopes and desires and his actual experiences are in continual conflict. Though sensitive and observant, he cannot understand why his expectations never seem to match the reality that he and his friends face year after discouraging year.

Though Han would no doubt have avoided the company of fellow Koreans, most of whom made him feel uncomfortable, he befriends two of the most acculturated of the exiles, the only two who are at all interested in Western literature. Jum, an unemployed cook who fancies himself a dapper New Yorker, is the boyfriend of a white call girl who dances in black body make-up at a Harlem night club. Having seen even Korean nobles and court officials working as waiters and houseboys in America, Jum has rejected Korean culture as useless to material and psychological survival in the modern world. In Han's eyes, Jum belongs in America. He can flirt, neck, drink, and tell dirty jokes "like an American college boy." He seems self-assured and worldly-wise. Wherever he goes, "there was a chair waiting for him and a gay audience." But Jum's bubble bursts, and when his girlfriend finally casts him aside, he is forced to face the fact that he might indeed be only a "guest in the house." He marries a Korean American and settles down in Hawaii. Han receives a letter from him: "I have not failed, I have only not succeeded."

The other Korean through whom Han searches for a door into American life is Kim, whom he meets in New York Chinatown. Kim, who has lived in the West for sixteen years, is supported by "Eastern bags of rice," money sent him by his wealthy landowning parents in Korea. He has benefited from "everything Asia had to offer": his family is wealthy; he is well schooled in classical Chinese poetry; his manner is princely; he is aristocratic and cosmopolitan:

In the Far East he had wandered through the heart of the storms, amidst guns and fires, battles and revolutions. He had lived long in Europe, he had visited the Near

East, even in Africa . . . one moment drinking the famous beer of Heidelberg, the next eating fetticini [*sic*] at Alfredo's in Rome; sauntering by the bookstalls in Paris, Shanghai, Tokyo; and now recalling everything over a glass of American gin in New York City.

Surely, Han can learn a great deal from such a man. It turns out, however, that Kim's search for acceptance—in his case by the Western intellectual elite—has been no more successful than Jum's or his own. Kim can claim to belong to the same brotherhood as his hero T. S. Eliot, but his rootlessness and alienation are compounded by the color bar, which prevents him from ever being accepted as anything more than an "adopted child" by the Western literary establishment. He is always an observer, a taster, a hanger-on, never a participant:

[S]hall I take my Korean silver cup-bowl and candlesticks to the sea? They might be rare down there, that realm knows no East or West. . . . No, I will not pack up my lofty objects. . . . I will give them to my old char woman, with my heavy German books by Spengler and Kant. . . . Has she any use for them, I wonder? Well, I have none, for I will enter the mermaid Universe. . . . One good in poetry would not be barren there, their muses have a swifter wing.

Left stranded and penniless on a student passport when the family of the New England girl he loves separates them and his own family in Korea loses its fortune, Kim commits suicide. To Han, his death is a tragic waste, born of alienation from his own country and rejection by the country to which he wanted so desperately to belong.

Despite the sorry examples of his fellow exiles, Han is sure that he can succeed where they failed, and he embarks eagerly upon the task. He had not been daunted by his struggle in Seoul to find "universal truth," nor by the difficulties of his journey to America; he will "get to know the West" even if it takes him his entire lifetime. But even while he is "dreaming the Faustian dream," congratulating himself on having escaped "futile martyrdom" in his homeland, reality intrudes, as it does continually during the course of his account. How will he eat? Where will he sleep? That there might be a connection between race discrimination and his own dire circumstances never seems to occur to him. He is ever optimistic that if he keeps his thoughts "lofty," he will not become discouraged. Shakespeare's books become a talisman to him, a symbol of the elusive ideal of Western civilization. But hunger begins early to interfere with his attempts to study Shakespeare in his lonely, unheated room: "[I]n utter solitude and with a chilling heart, I feared pavement famine with plenty all around but in the end not even grass to chew. . . . [I]t was hard to concentrate. Even in the midst of Hamlet's subtlest soliloquies, I could think of nothing but food."

Han seeks an opening into American life through scholarship and study. He attends college night school classes,

hoping to find there "the whole Western hemisphere in one block" so that he can "feel its life in an unbroken stream pass through my heart-blood." But he is unable to find "unifying principles": "I could build no bridge from one classroom to another, just as I could build no bridge from New Hotel [where he works as a kitchen helper] into the mental utopia."

Naively, he tries to involve a bellhop in a literary discussion, ignorant that the boy is waiting for a tip. At another time, his books fall out of his suitcase in front of his vexed employer, who wonders if they have been contaminated by some Asiatic disease. He even stumbles over a volume, trampling his employer's garden flowers. Ultimately, he loses his job as house servant because he oversleeps, having read Shakespeare far into the night. Finally, what Han had wanted to gain through "the Kingdom of bookworms"—his dream of America and the West—has grown so dim that he can only turn inward, searching for the lost ideal through his own imagination:

Thank God there were nights, long lonely hours to think, to become *me* again, to try to recapture the magic and mystery with which I had first dreamed of America. I could find it no longer in books, the books I have brought from college . . . , though I read them again and again.

Han has been introduced to Western civilization through Shakespeare, but his true education comes in other ways. Having been denied a job at the Harlem YMCA, which is reserved for whites, he sleeps in nickel flophouses and mingles with the bums there. He wanders among the Korean exiles in New York Chinatown, "a ghostly world to be lost in, this town that was neither America nor China." He catches glimpses of American life from various vantage points. He works as a domestic servant for a white family who treat him "like a cat or a dog." He finds a job as a busboy in a Chinese restaurant, where the waiters with Ph.D.'s and medical degrees attend to customers who are call girls and shady characters. He peddles tea in Harlem, where he and his fellow Koreans are not "kicked around" as they are by those "pale people with steely eyes and ridged noses and superior shrewdness' uptown.

Throughout all, he never ceases to hope that he will one day open the "closed book" of the true New Yorker and enter into a new and exciting world. When a missionary scholarship gives him the chance to mingle with non-Asians in a small theological college in British Canada, he seizes the opportunity, but his experiences at the college only reinforce his "essential isolation and misfit." He is made to feel "queer and alien" at the college. People speak to him as to a child. Once he is mistaken for a Chinese deaf mute. For the most part, he is treated with missionary kindness:

[W]hen I look back, it seems as if everybody in Green Grove, with the exception of my enemy and his followers, was very kind to me, almost too kind. I belonged to no clique, I had no chum. I was inexorably unfamiliar. . . .

Whenever anybody received a cake from home, no matter what others might be there, Chung-pa was always invited—then given two slices instead of one. I did not care much for cake, yet ate for politeness and gratitude. By and by I got sick. For me there was always special favor, special kindness, special protection . . . the white man's burden attitude toward dark colonies . . . kindness . . . brutal cruelty. . . I weigh them in my mind, and it seemed to me better to miss the kindness and not to have the cruelty.

But the cruelty persists. He is exploited by an American encyclopedia-peddling business, ridiculed and looked down upon by various employers, used by a religious charismatic leader to cheat believers. Finally, while employed as a clerk in the fake Oriental goods section of a department store, he sees salespeople compete ruthlessly with each other over pennies. He sees the trembling hands of an elderly widow who has wrapped dishes at the store for fourteen dollars a week her whole life. He overhears racist remarks. Little by little, he comes to view the department store as a microcosm of the world he inhabits:

This is American life, I said stubbornly. All day long the moving multitudes of humanity, with busy legs, constantly darting false smiles to cover their depressed facial expression, the worn-out machine bodies turning round in the aisles. . . . At last the dead-tired body moving from the cloakroom to breathe the [stale] street air. But where were all the enchantment and the romance, the glorious vision, which I had seen in my dreams of America as a boy?

One possibility remains. Han makes a final attempt to belong in America through his desire for Trip, the young graduate of an exclusive northeastern girls' college, whom he meets through an old Quaker woman who has done relief work in China. Influenced by Kim's romance with an American girl, Han convinces himself that he is in love with Trip after hearing about her from someone. When he finally has a chance to meet her briefly,

my love for Trip seemed sublimely natural, inevitable, born with me, carried from Asia, since the far moment when I had set out to reach the West. . . . I had asked for a sign from America and it had come. . . . Even while fascinated and committed mind and soul to the Western learning, I had been dismayed and alone. But now all nature took on an instant face . . . and the moon and the stars seen from Asia, Europe, America, Africa, Antarctica, anywhere I might turn, shone and twinkled to tell me . . . Trip.

Han is acutely aware that in Korea he would have had children by now. But he is fascinated by the idea of Western romantic love, and by the idea that if he participated in it, even unrequited, he would become that much more a part of Western civilization. The cultural barriers, however, are too obvious. As Han tries to entertain Trip with tales of his

exotic background, we see (as he does not) that she is just trying to be polite.

"When I was born, it was a famine year," I paused, dramatically. "I never had a mother. She died. And I missed her so much."

However, Trip said, "That was probably a help. They don't seem to get on well with their mothers over here." And I was a little offended.

Trip is interested in the idea of arranged marriages, not in Han, and she is thrilled at being stopped with Han in Chinatown by a plainclothesman checking to see if she is being abducted by a tong man. Later, Han considers telling her about Kim's death but decides against it because she "might shut me out" for speaking "all my thoughts."

During his sole evening at Trip's apartment, Han is "enchanted" by "the talk and the gaiety and the laughter." Tipsy with wine, he gives a recitation of Keats, Shelley, Browning, Ruskin, Shakespeare, while everyone applauds and laughs. He does not mind being funny to Trip's friends, since it gives him a sense of belonging to the group. Finally, flushed with "the joy of arriving in such a sweet world of eternal beauty and youth and delightful fellowship," he leaves among polite invitations to come back again: "The door of Paradise closed behind me." The reader knows that the American girls have no intention of befriending Han. His subsequent attempts to contact Trip fail: she never answers his carefully composed letters. When he finally returns to the apartment building, the girl and her roommates have vanished. His "love" for her is the same as his metaphysical dream of America—it is only an isolated idea in his hopeful imagination: "I did not forget her. Nor what I had come to America to find. I set out now inspired to seek the romance of America. . . . I became the man who must hunt and hunt for the spiritual home."

Han has not found a doorway into American life. He is still groping, ever less hopefully, as the book ends. Contradictions—between economic survival and spiritual life, between the "ideal" of America and the actual experience of American life by an Asian immigrant, between Kim's hopeless romanticism and Jum's unconvincing, shallow buoyancy—are never resolved in the book. On his first night in America, Han had a dream: "A synod of ancestors seemed coming to visit me, watching me disapprovingly in that high Western bed, which had renounced plain earth so literally beneath. What can you hope to find here, they said. Life, I cried. We see no life, they said." *East Goes West* ends with a confirming nightmare. Han is separated from his childhood friends and a "paradise of wild and flowery magic" by his desire to find his money, contracts, business letters, and especially the key to his American car:

And now as is the inconsequential way of dreams, I was running down the steps into a dark and cryptlike cellar, still looking for my money and my keys. The cellar seemed

to be under the pavements of a vast city. Other men were in that cellar with me—some frightened-looking Negroes, I remember. Then looking back, I saw, through an iron grating into the upper air, men with clubs and knives. The cellar was being attacked. The Negroes were about to be mobbed. I shut the door and bolted it, and called to my frightened fellows to help me hold the door.

"Fire, bring fire," called the red-faced men outside.

And through the grating I saw the flaring torches being brought. And applied. Being shoved, crackling, through the gratings. I awoke like a phoenix out of a burst of flames.

I have remembered this dream because according to Oriental interpretation, it is a dream of good omen. To be killed in a dream means success, and in particular death by fire augurs good fortune. This is supposed to be so, because death symbolizes in Buddhist philosophy growth and rebirth and a happier reincarnation.

In every possible area of his American experience Han has met only disappointment, misunderstanding, loneliness, and alienation. Kim's suicide, Jum's "non-success," and an endless series of locked doors mock him as he faces at last the irreconcilable worlds of actuality and desire. Just as he had remained hopeful during the discouraging years of life in America, without objective reason for hope, he clings now to one comforting precept of Buddhist philosophy: he will live again, happily, in another time, another world. It is not the success he had hoped for when he left for America, so many years before, but it is the only dream left, the only one that will not be betrayed.

Although he remained unable to fully analyze the significance of his American odyssey, Kang's books remain valuable documents of an almost totally lost experience. He does not speak for Asians in America or even for most Korean immigrants at his own time. But his books contain a bit of the collective experience of the thousands of Asian men who worked as domestics, waiters, and cooks and who studied at American colleges or became objects of American missionary efforts. Chiefly, they give us the affecting testimony of one Korean's journey in search of the heart of America.

Kyhan Lee (essay date 1991)

SOURCE: "Younghill Kang and the Genesis of Korean-American Literature," in *Korea Journal*, Vol. 31, No. 4, Winter 1991, pp. 63-78.

[In the following excerpt, Lee argues that "the misadventures of Chang Pa Han" in *East Goes West* "reflect much more than a simple story of one individual but rather the collective experiences of every Korean-American desperately searching for 'roots for an exile's soul,'

a quest for the imaginary America, a utopia formulated in their hearts and minds long before their arrival in the States."]

While many Asian-American scholars . . . list Kang as the only Korean American writer of his time, more accurately he was the first Korean-American to achieve recognition as a successful writer. Il-han New's autobiography [*When I was a Boy in Korea*] had preceded Kang's *The Grass Roof* by some three years, yet it had failed to spark any notable interest within literary circles, primarily because neither New, a successful businessman by that time, nor his reviewers considered it to be little more than a travel guide about Korea and its people. As exemplified by the general reception of works by New and [No-Yong] Park, when Asian-American works seemed to be composed to meet "external referentialities," be it explanation of ethnic identity to an uninformed audience or fidelity to sociological and historically-based memory, they consequently proved to be comparatively weak literary constructs. However, Kang was perhaps the first Asian-American writer whose ethnicity had not completely overshadowed his literary artifact, and Kang enjoyed a notoriety among the Anglo-American readership that only Richard E. Kim was able to surpass some forty years later. Kang received the Guggenheim Award in creative writing following in the footsteps of his mentor and friend Thomas Wolfe, and when *The Grass Roof* was translated into French, German, and several other languages, it was awarded the Le Prix Halperine Kamnistry as best book translated into French in 1937. Perhaps the most noteworthy of Kang's non-Korean admirers was Carlos Bulosan, a fellow Asian-American writer of Filipino descent, who in 1947 drafted his own version of Kang's *East Goes West* entitled *America Is in the Heart*:

Why could not I succeed as Younghill Kang had? He had come from a family of scholars and had gone to an American university—but is he not an Oriental like myself?

Kang inspired and influenced many Asian-American writers, who had previously not thought it possible to write for an Anglo-American readership with any amount of success.

Born in the northern Korean province of Hamgyongdo in 1903, Kang first set foot on America soil in 1921, barely escaping the Immigration Exclusion Act of 1924. After a nomadic academic career in various colleges in Canada and in the U.S., Kang eventually settled down at New York University to pursue his studies in English literature and composition. This proved to be a fortunate decision on his part, for it was at NYU that Kang met Thomas Wolfe, a young college instructor at the time who first discovered Kang's potential as a writer.

Kang's first novel was too riddled with idiomatic irregularities to qualify as a masterpiece. Kang's American reviewers seemed amused by the apparent awkwardness of the foreign-born author's "broken" English, exemplified in such passages as the following description of Chang Pa's first visit to a Chinese restaurant: