



Quiet Odyssey

Mary Paik Lee , Sucheng Chan (Editor)

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Mary Paik Lee, born Paik Kuang Sun in 1900, left her native country in 1905, traveling with her parents as a political refugee after Japan imposed control over Korea at the close of the Russo-Japanese War. Her father labored in the sugar plantations of Hawaii for a year and a half before taking his family to California, where Mrs. Lee has lived ever since. Though her father knew the comforts enjoyed by the educated traditional elite in Korea, after emigration he and his family shared the poverty stricken existence endured by thousands of Asian immigrants in early twentieth century America. Mrs. Lee's parents earned their living as farm laborers, tenant farmers, cooks, and janitors, and the family always took in laundry. Her father tried mercury mining until his health gave out. In their turn, Mrs. Lee and her husband farmed, sold produce, and managed apartment buildings.

The author is engagingly outspoken and is extremely observant of her social and natural surroundings. Recounted incidents take on memorable life, as do the sharply etched settings of California's agricultural and mining country. She tells of singular hardship surmounted with resilience and characteristic grace. During much of her life Asian Americans were not treated as full human beings, yet she kept a powerful vision of what the United States could be.

Quiet Odyssey Details

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Laura says

a good biography that really showcases the plight of a Korean immigrant and how immigration to such a foreign country shaped her personality, family, and life experiences. the theme of American dream is very pronounced in the book, and its unattainability is also prominent within the pages. made me very sympathetic to immigrants, because moving from your mother country with little to nothing is so hard; nevertheless, the new country has a language that they don't speak... the challenges (mental and physical) are indescribable.

Esther says

I am so grateful that this published account and primary text even exists. Ms. Mary Paik Lee's autobiography illuminates the ways in which her family struggled--through poverty, the racially-charged climate of the U.S., and harsh working conditions--and how they pioneered the way for future waves of Korean Americans.

Joey'S Jenny says

Immigrants suffer.

Liz says

As an outsider looking in on the Asian-American experience, I found myself engrossed in this autobiography. Mary Paik Lee is part of a very small group of Koreans who immigrated at the onset of Japanese invasion around 1900, before immigration out of Korea was essentially shut down. Reading her story in her own words helped me understand and empathize more with the immigrant journey and struggle to stay sheltered and fed in a foreign, racist climate. I cannot begin to understand what life was (and is) like for Korean immigrants, and the book gave me a new appreciation for the tenacity and character of those trying to forge a new life in the U.S.

The introduction packs in Korean history to give context for her story. This I found useful, since most U.S. education about non-white people groups is woefully inadequate. East Asian immigration played a huge role in California's history; as a California native, it's disheartening that I'm just now learning about immigrant history post-college.

Carrie says

Fascinating piece of American history!

Rosa says

Any recent Asian Immigrant can relate to what the main character of the story goes through. I find it very heart breaking to see the Mary, and all of her sisters and brothers went through such financial hardship through out their entire life. I find it very touching to read the story of what Mary's youngest son had to go through...he did not have the opportunity to further his schooling by graduating from college like all of his brothers did...I find it touching to read that neither did Mary nor her husband had the opportunities to graduate from college. I think that since they grew up so poor, Mary's parents didn't have the opportunities to send any of their children to get a college education. (I think that situation is very sad to read indeed.)

Shirley says

This is the autobiography of a Korean woman, Mary Paik Lee (née Paik Kuang Sun), who as a child immigrated to the United States in the early 1900s - one of the few Koreans who were able to do so before immigration from Asia was shut off. Her story is a firsthand account of the discrimination and obstacles that came along with being poor, Asian, and female in that era. She lived at a time when alien land laws in California restricted real-property rights for Asians (although her family was able to make oral agreements to farm land) and a time when she was constantly told, "Japs aren't wanted here." The purpose of her narrative, though, is not to complain about what happened (her voice is surprisingly not bitter, given all that happened).

I first read this account in high school; almost 20 years later, I'm struck by the paucity of narratives about Asian-American (let alone Korean-American) women at the time this book was published (1990) - this was apparently, as the preface claims, the "first full statement we have" of an Asian-American woman's life from childhood through old age. Wow.

Cherry says

same w emma, essential read for understanding migrant/immigrant/people's history

William says

A phenomenal, truly affecting memoir/autobiography that managed to inspire and fill me with hope while utterly demolishing me with so many feels.

Maggie says

firsthand narrative from a female pioneer from Korea. fascinating life this woman lived! very readable.

Karyn says

When I started to read this book I expected it to be good in an informative sort of way, but wasn't expecting a whole lot of enjoyment from the reading process. I loved it. Mary Lee's story is an amazing one and her manner of telling it quite engaging!

This story is one that shows how amazing the human spirit really is. Through incredibly hard work, Mary & her family were able to make their way in the U.S. It took a long time and a LOT of work, but they succeeded. It left me inspired to work harder and complain less.

What I found disturbing was (a) how little I knew about Korean history (why did I learn nothing about that in school??) and (b) how little I knew about the mistreatment of Koreans and other Asians in the U.S. at the beginning of the 20th century. For some reason I knew a lot about discrimination against other races, but very little about the discrimination felt by Asians only one generation ago.

I would definitely recommend this book to anyone!
