



American Utopias of the First-generation Korean Immigrants in *East Goes West*

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Abstract: The paper concentrates on *East Goes West* by Younghill Kang, who, as the first Korean immigrant to write novels in English in the first-generation Korean American writers, offers an alternative voice on the immigrant life in the host land against the strategies adopted by most Korean American writers. Within the nascent Korean American literature by most first-generation Korean American writers, the bulk of them display strong Nationalism of resistance in oppositional terms to Japanese occupation or Western imperial culture, epitomizing Korea and the Korean patriotic spirit in their literature instead of Korean Americans in the U.S. They expose a collective trauma, the displacement from the ancestral homeland with yet an attachment to the home in term of custom, language and folk culture that exist consciously or subconsciously in the memory. Unlike his peers who are mainly riveted by the Korean memory, Younghill Kang attempts to query and subvert the imagining of a monolithic American Dream. With his four major Korean immigrants who fail to achieve their American dreams, Kang doubts and challenges American mottos of progress, equality, assimilation and upward mobility by keeping the contradictions between the promise of freedom and the reality of race discrimination, between economic survival and dreams of intellectual accomplishment, and between the ideal of America and actual experience of life in its marginal existence. By intersecting Emersonian American dream and Franklinian American dream through the characters, Kang reveals that both a moral Utopia and a material Utopia are daydreams for the marginal Korean immigrants.

Key words: American utopias; the first-generation; Korean immigrants

1. Younghill Kang, the First Generation of Korean American Writer

Unlike his peers who mainly concentrate the Korean memory, Younghill Kang, as the only and first Korean immigrant to write novels in English in the first-generation Korean American writers by 1965, describes his immigrant experiences in the U.S. Most of Korean immigrant writers of the first generation demonstrated the Korean nationalism in their literature. However, Younghill Kang concentrates more on the new life of Korean Americans on the host land. In *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context*, Elaine H Kim comments on Kang: “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” (Kim 33). As the first Korean American to write novels, although with an autobiographical touch, Kang represents Korea and Koreans to Western readers, for whom he is an importer of both the unfamiliar, in terms of a remote Oriental nation, and reinforcer of the familiar, in terms of popular notions about backward peoples craving for the American dream.

Kim once pointed out that Kang saw himself not as a guest or visitor to the United States but sincerely tried to find a place for himself in the country and to make, at a very early point in his life, the transition from Korean to Korean American (Berner 109). Although he is the person who attempts to

find a place in the new land in a proper way and wants to be assimilated into the American society, Kang finds out that he is separated by the very U.S. as a colored people who should have the self-knowledge that these glaring American dreams are not for them because they are in a de-privileging position, and that there is a discrepancy between the west they know from literature and the west they themselves experience.

In his second autobiographical fiction of *East Goes West*, Kang creates four characters of Park, George Jum, Chuang-pa and To Wan Kim who endeavor to find their American Utopias in their various ways. Instead of taking readers on an immigrant's journey from a penniless immigrant to a successful citizen, Kang depicts his four major Korean immigrants who fail to achieve their American dreams. By intersecting Emersonian American dream and Franklinian American dream through the characters, Kang reveals that both a material Utopia and a moral Utopia are daydreams for the marginal Korean immigrants. Their process of pursuing material value and spiritual harbor gradually evolves a heartbreaking nightmare. They want to be a part of the U.S., yet they are apart by the very U.S. that advocates beliefs in the unity of the family, the healthiness of competition in society, the need for success and money on a low level, and emphasizes that the new self should be a moral self, with its duty of always becoming, always extending and newly uttering the possibilities of life on a high level.

2. The Material Utopia and the Mental Utopia

The word of utopia first occurred in More's *Utopia*, written in the form of a conversation between Thomas More, the writer, and Raphael Hythloday, a returned voyager. The name "Utopia" derives from two Greek words which mean "no place" and is compounded by More as the name of his ideal commonwealth. In the ideal commonwealth, the institutions and policies are entirely governed by reason, and inhabitants exist under seemingly perfect conditions.

The mottoes of progress, equality, assimilation and upward mobility advocated by American dream appeal to the Koreans who want to find their spiritual peace in the mental utopia and wealth in the material utopia. One American dream is represented by Benjamin Franklin, the original representative of American dream, which is actually a kind of material value that thousands of American common mass multitudes pursue at all costs. Thus, Franklin's American dream is a material utopia to these immigrants. The other American dream is embodied by Ralph Waldo Emerson, the radical representative of American dream, which is one of spiritual ideals perceived as a promise of prosperity for its people. Emerson's American dream represents the immigrants' mental utopia, to some extent. With the portrayal of the sundry male characters in *East Goes West*, Younghill Kang intertwines and shatters the Korean immigrants' Emersonian and Franklinian dreams which represent a mental utopia and a material utopia, respectively.

3. Disillusionment of American Mental Utopia

East Goes West is the miserable record of Chung-pa Han's unsuccessful search for his Emerson's American dream of his imagination— a mental utopia which is a place of regeneration, a glorious version of fascination and romance, and a secular format of a spiritual home. At the very beginning of the novel, Kang makes Han construct his Emersonian American dream by having learned about the West world through struggling to read Chaucer, Shakespeare, Romantic poetry, and Victorian prose. So, he yearns for America for he believes that "you can think anything, see anything, learn anything" in America. (*East Goes West* 165) After he notices bitterly the miserable condition of his father land which has become "a wasteland that had no warmth, that was under an infernal twilight, Han is grimly determined that he would hurtle forward to a foreign body where "a younger culture" drew him "by natural gravity. (*East Goes West* 4) He hopes that he "entered a new life like one born again" and

“wandered on soil as strange as Mars, seeking roots, roots for an exile’s soul”. (*East Goes West* 5) Determined to quest for his mental utopia, Han sets off from the old walled Korean city some thousand years old—Seoul—famous for poets and scholars to New York, where he hopes to seek an opening into American life through scholarship and study. With his American dream of becoming “educated like J.P. Ok, A.B., B.D., M.S.T., M.A., Ph.D.”, Han starts to pursue his mental utopia by attending night school college classes, hoping to find unifying principles he is looking for (*East Goes West* 57).

In the process of pursuing his mental utopia, Han is exploited, ridiculed, despised, mistreated, and utilized by various employers and whites. His American dream gradually disintegrates. Han’s failure to fulfill his dream comes from his experiences at the margins of the U.S though he constructs his spiritual utopia through the mainstream western classics. When he interacts with paternalistic missionaries, avaricious businessmen, and haughty politicians, or when he works as a house servant, kitchen helper, farm hand, peddler, and department store clerk, Han confronts the various troubles and problems that the books he read are unable to give a reply. He is desperate to find that:

...somehow I could not recite Thomas Carlyle and John Ruskin with quite the old satisfaction in my drab little room... “Work, work, work, there is a perennial nobleness, even sacredness in work...Blessed is he who has found his work let him ask no other blessedness...” How did that fit in with selling cherry-wood stands? As for Ruskin, “Magnanimous, magnanimous, magnanimous is life”... I had always liked that adjective, magnanimous, but Ruskin now sickened me...I read once more about Maude and Madelaine, then threw the book from one end of the room to the other. Even Browning was English fog in the lungs... (*East Goes West* 328-329)

The above desperate soliloquy derives from his miserable personal experience in the U.S. when he pursues his mental utopia. Having been refused a job at the Harlem, which is reserved only for whites, he sleeps in nickel flophouses and mingles with the bums there and roves with the Korean exiles in New York Chinatown. Then he has the chance to work as a domestic servant for a white family who mistreats him like a cat or dog. After that he finds a job as a busboy in a Chinese restaurant, where Asian waiters with PhDs and medical degrees serve the white prostitutes and petty criminals. He vends tea from place to place in Harlem, where he and his fellow Koreans are not abused as they are by the whites with steely eyes and superior shrewdness uptown. Even though a missionary scholarship offers him the chance to jumble with non-Asians in a small theological college in British Columbia and he seizes the opportunity, his experiences on the campus only reinforce his estrangement and alienation. Experiencing various plights of being exploited, derided, contemned and abused from various employers, he finally works as a clerk in a department store and overhears racist remarks. Bit by bit, Kang smashes his protagonist’s mental utopia, until Han comes to view the department store as a microcosm of the world and fully perceive the secret of American life:

This is American life...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...two eyes to look at the customer, two hands to count the change... then to make a sale check, to carry the goods to the packing room, then to run with legs’ tottering strength after a new customer, for fear of losing that sale to another salesman, at last the dead-tired body moving from the cloak-room to breathe the

air—the street air, the dusty, respectable, stale air of staid Philadelphia. But where were all the enchantment and romance, the glorious vision, which I had seen in my dreams of America as a boy? (*East Goes West* 318)

Keenly perceptive and highly sensitive to the apparently new and exciting world around him, Han finds out the secret core of the world in his dream—hypocrisy, covetousness and desperation without enchantment and romance he expects before. Astonished and disappointed by white ignorance and racism he encounters at every turn, he cannot understand why his hopes and desires never seem to match the reality that he confronts with year after discouraging year.

Despite the sad examples of his fellow exiles, Han is sure that he can succeed where they failed. But hunger starts early to interfere with his attempts to study the ideal of Western civilization in his lonely and cold room: “In utter solitude and with a chilling heart, I feared pavement famine with plenty all around but in the end not even grass to chew... it was hard to concentrate. Even in the midst of Hamlet’s subtlest soliloquies, I could think of nothing but food” (*East Goes West* 32-33). There remains one possibility for Han to belong to America through an American girl. Influenced by Kim’s romance with an American girl, he attempts to form an association with an American woman. He is so attracted with the idea of Western romantic love that he considers if he participates in it, even unrequited, he will become one part of western civilization. No matter efforts he makes, the American girl has no intention of befriending Han. His love for her is like his dream of America, only a hopeful fantasy.

After his failure of attempts to integrate into the United States through scholarship and study as well as an association with an American woman, Chung-pa Han realizes that his daydream of belonging in America is doomed to be shattered. Where there is progress, there is slavery, starvation, racial discrimination and no soul. Leaving Korea for America, Han is anxious to find a way to make of himself a bridge between developing East and developed West. He depicts his “purpose in coming to the West”:

More and more I intellectualized my instinctive purpose in coming to the West. On my own cultural heritage, I wanted to ingraft the already ancient tree of the Renaissance, to make from that something different, something new... my own rebirth. Thus, in approaching the West I was eager to feel its life in an unbroken stream pass though by heart-blood... Homer, Aeschylus, Christ, Augustine, Dante, Chaucer, Shakespeare... linked in continuous process of ... life with its vast onward momentum.... I wanted the whole Western hemisphere in one block. (*East Goes West* 204)

According to the exposure of Han’s instinctive purpose, readers readily know that the aim of the writer is to graft the best essence in the Western culture to the old East and advocate the integration of the East and West to create a mental utopia. However, in the end, Chuang-pa Han is unsuccessful to make himself into a bridge that could communicate barriers between the East and the West. He remains an outsider because he is not granted access to American society. Like Cervantes’s Don Quixote, Han sets forth to battle windmills throughout the American landscape, never ceasing to be deflated by the racial discrimination he encounters. He meets a chapter of disappointment, misunderstanding, loneliness and alienation which forces Han to reject his daydream of melting into the United States and accept the irreconcilable worlds of actuality and desire. Like Fitzgerald’s great Gatsby, Han’s ideal mental utopia dies through his picaresque adventures which expose the shallow materialism, hypocrisy, philistinism

and inhumanity of life in capitalist America.

The novel ends with a significant dream, in which Han is struggling toward a dangerous suspension bridge to reach his childhood friends and a “paradise of wild and flowery magic” on the other side when he suddenly drops his money and car keys. Scrambling after them, he is beset by a dark cellar only to find himself trapped in with “some frightened-looking Negroes”. Some red-faced white men are to set them all on fire. Both mental and material utopias having failed him, Han turns to Asia for the answer:

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 Buddhistic philosophy, growth and rebirth and a happier reincarnation. (*East Goes West*, 401)

Disillusionment of the American dreams ultimately forces the protagonist to retreat to a Buddhist interpretation of the dream—that he will be reincarnated to a better life. In the end, Chung-pa Han fails to find an entry into American life. Kang deconstructs Han’s spiritual Garden of Eden by keeping the contradictions between the promise of freedom and the reality of race discrimination, between dreams of intellectual accomplishment and economic survival, and between the ideal of America and actual experience of life in its marginal existence. Thus, Younghill Kang succeeds in smashing his protagonist’s Emersonian American dream. Han became disillusioned about his mental utopia at last after experiencing countless struggles and numerous intentional efforts.

4. Disillusionment of American Material Utopia

The material utopia of Franklin format is a sequence of beliefs in acquirement of material possessions, the unity of the family, the need for success and the quest for freedom and equality. Except Chuang-pa Han who is endeavoring to search for an ideal and mental utopia—a spiritual home, Kang depicts another type of Korean exiles who are attempting to pursue their material utopia of Franklin format in the host land: acquirement of material possessions, the integrity of the family, the healthiness of competition in the society and the need for success. Although they attempt to realize the material utopia, most of these Korean immigrants are doomed to fulfill it at last.

Kang deconstructs the integrity of family by showing Pak’s dilemma of being never able to accumulate enough wealth to get back and settle down in his native land. Almost all the typical Korean exiles long for the integrity of the family in their mother land although Chuang-pa Han is absorbed by his desire to find his place in American society and would have ignored, if he could have, his Korean past, his Korean identity, and his Korean compatriots. These drifting Korean exiles often give their life’s savings to support the independence movement in their native land across the Pacific Ocean. Intense desire for Korean independence from Japanese occupation has characterized every class of Korean living in Hawaii and the mainland U.S. for four decades. Farmers, waiters, and domestic servants by day become independence workers at night. Kang depicts Pak as one of these most typical Koreans who have the revolutionary fervor for the independence of Korea and plan to return one day to a liberated homeland:

He was most typical Korean, an exile only in body, not in soul. Western civilization had rolled over him as water over a rock. He was a very strong nationalist; so he always sat in at the 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. Most of his relations had moved out of Korea since the Japanese occupation—into Manchuria and Russia—but Pak still lived believing that the time must come to go back... he had bought a minute piece of land to the north of Seoul. For fifteen years his single ambition had been to get back there and settle down. On Korean land, he wanted to raise 100 per cent Korean children, who would be just as patriotic as himself, and maybe better educated in the classics. (*East Goes West* 58)

According to the above vivid description, it is readily to discern that Pak wanders in the American continent only in body, not in soul and he hopes that he could have enough money to travel back, get married, settle comfortably down and bring up pure Korean descendants who are as fiercely loyal as their father. However, in the land of material utopia, the marginal ethnic group is hard to accumulate their wealth as those white people because of racial discrimination. As a houseboy who is always unemployed, Pak could never save enough money to go home for fifteen years. Thus, Kang grinds Pak's utopia by showing the plight of being unable to scrape up enough property to return and settle down in his native land eternally.

Furthermore, Younghill Kang shatters the need for success, another aspect of material utopia in Franklin format, through the character of George Jum who gives up his Hollywood dream, withdraws from New York to Hawaii in seclusion and admits in frustration that he has not failed and he has only not succeeded. Since he wants to know and melt into the U.S., and since most fellow Koreans make him uncomfortable with their simple nationalism, Chuangpa Han befriends the only two exiles who are at all interested in Western literature and culture and seem successful figures in the circle of Korean exiles. George Jum, an unemployed cook who imagines himself a dapper New Yorker is the boyfriend of a white call girl. Having known Korean nobles and court officials working as waiters and houseboys in the U.S., Jum has declined Korean culture as useless to material and psychological survival in the modern world. When he discusses Confucius with Han, Jum shows his opinion:

Confucius, I admit, has nothing to each on the subject of love. That's where I leave him behind. For love is the beginning of a real, new and true life leading you into the Garden of Paradise, maybe Eden. It's a pity that they in English say falling in love. It is not a falling, but it is a rising. If it is a falling action, you will have no more life. But because it is a rising action, you get more done. But maybe in English they have a more ironic attitude toward love than I have... (*East Goes West* 41-42)

According to his statement about love, readers readily comprehend that George Gum has rejected Korean culture and accepted western ideology. In his friend's view, Jum belongs to America because he can flirt, neck, drink and tell dirty jokes like an American college boy. Wherever he arrives, there was a chair waiting for him and a jocund audience. Unfortunately, Jum's American dream shatters when his girlfriend finally casts him aside, which forces him to face the fact that he might be only a guest in the house of the host land. He marries a Korean American and settles down in Hawaii. Han receives a letter from him saying,

"You will want to ask me about Hollywood. Only minor parts there. I was disgusted. So I have come to Hawaii...It is a hot country, and that means there is more love. I am going to

get married and settle down. I am engaged to a Korean girl, one American-born, with a good stenographic training, and very pretty to see...So here in Hawaii I will spend all my hours in eating, loving and sleeping. Is love the be-all and the end-all, am I still romanticist? I never go back on my words. But what is the difference? ... P.S. For the rest, I have not failed. I have only not succeeded" (*East Goes West*, 399).

According to the letter from Jum to Han, readers comprehend that Jum's American dream of the need for success at last shatters although he wants so desperately to succeed. With Jum's abandoning his Hollywood dream, retreating from furious New York to remote Hawaii and admitting in frustration that he has not failed and he has only not succeeded, Younghill Kang grinds the need for success of the Korean immigrant.

With To Wan Kim who failed to assimilate into the host land as a racialized other, Kang smashes the third aspect of material utopia in Franklin format—the quest for freedom and equality, namely melting into the American society. Besides pursuing American dreams of the integrity of family and the need for success, most of Korean immigrants' quest for freedom and equality, namely melting into the American society as other Caucasians. Han's another friend is To Wan Kim, who has lived in the West for 16 years, supported by money sent him by his wealthy landowning parents in Korea. Kim has benefited from everything Asia had to offer: his family has a large amount of property; he is well educated in Chinese poetry; his manner is princely; he is aristocratic and cosmopolitan.

Undoubtedly, To Wan Kim, a cosmopolitan Korean immigrant, should readily realize his American dream and melt into the U.S., a cosmopolitan country. It turns out, however, that Kim's American dream has been no more successful than Jum's or Han's. Kim could claim to belong to the same brotherhood as his hero T.S. Eliot who was born in the U.S. and naturalized as a British subject, but his rootlessness and racial alienation restrain him from being accepted by the western literary establishment as nothing more than an adopted child. As a result, his identity is always an observer, a taster, and a wanderer, never a participant. Left marooned and impecunious on a student passport when the family of the New England girlfriend he loves divides them and his own family in Korea loses their property, Kim kills himself. Kim's death is caused by rejection from his own country and alienation from the country to which he wants so desperately to belong to. The dream of assimilation into the host land as other Caucasian immigrants from Europe is doomed to be fractured because To Wan Kim is only a Korean immigrant—the racialized Other who is prevented from questing for the freedom and equality.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, *East Goes West* presents an objective view of the American life from the perspectives of people banned by the racial discrimination and reveals moments in the lives of the invisible ethnic group to American readers—Korean exiles in the 1920s and 1930s. Younghill Kang manages to smatter the mottos of progress, equality, assimilation and upward mobility advocated by American dream by his four major Korean immigrants who fail to achieve their ideal mental and material utopias: Park, the nationalist, is marooned in the U.S., working as a domestic houseboy and failing to achieve the dream of returning to his colonized homeland; Jum, the gadfly, tries to be American in his all walks of his life, in the end, admits that he has not failed and he has only not succeeded; Kim, the aristocrat, fails to gain access to American high culture and commits suicide finally; Han, the narrator, finds no entry into his spiritual Garden of Eden by being unable to eradicate the contradictions between the promise of freedom and the reality of race discrimination, between dreams of intellectual accomplishment and

economic survival, and between the ideal of America and actual experience of life in its marginal existence. Through picaresque adventures of Pak, Chuang-pa Han, George Jum, and To Wan Kim, Kang exposes that both a material Utopia and a moral Utopia are daydreams for the marginal Korean immigrants. The process of pursuing material value and spiritual harbor gradually evolves a grievous nightmare. Different from their contemporary writers, Younghill Kang does not follow the routine way to satisfy the desire of the American mainstream readers. He delineates the first stories about the immigrant life in the host land and counterattacks the accepted thinking modes. He transcends the majority of their contemporaries and enriches our understanding of human existence, and he constitutes a portion of the essence of the Korean American literatures, never a mere decoration.

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