KOREAN AMERICAN MATTERS AND IDENTITY
IN KOREAN AMERICAN NOVELS

by

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ABSTRACT

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My dissertation focuses on the intersection between the maturation of young Korean American protagonists in fiction and the writers’ own growing-up of ethnic identity as Korean descendants. I analyze nine Korean American novels written by Sook Nyul Choi, An Na, and Linda Sue Park. I approach my selected texts in two different ways. First, I explore the different exigencies of their writing projects by investigating their biographical backgrounds. Second, I examine how these authors differently represent Korean American matters such as history, community, and culture in order to create stories of Korean or Korean American protagonists’ coming-of-age through their writing projects by comparing their literary oeuvres.
In Chapter 1, I provide a historical overview of Asian American matters in Asian American novels in order to define the term Asian American matters, contextualize the study, and present the theoretical framework. In Chapter 2, I discuss how Sook Nyul Choi, as a first generation Korean American writer represents various historical matters in order to demonstrate a story of Korean American protagonist’s coming-of-age in her autobiographical novels based on her pre-American childhood experiences and writing Korean history: *Year of Impossible Goodbyes, Echoes of the White Giraffe, and Gathering of Pearls*.

In Chapter 3, I argue how 1.5 generation Korean American writer An Na represents Korean American community in order to demonstrate a coming-of-age story of Korean American young adult protagonist in her contemporary young adult novels based on her own young adulthood in Koreatown in Southern California: *A Step from Heaven, Wait for Me, and The Fold*. In Chapter 4, I propose how a second generation Korean American writer Linda Sue Park demonstrates Korean American culture in her historical novels in order to illustrate a story of Korean protagonist’s coming-of-age set in different Korean historical periods and places based on her own research and imagination: *The Kite Fighters, A Single Shard, and When My Name was Keoko*.

This study gives scholars a new opportunity to explore Korean American novels in both fields of Asian American studies and children’s literature by dually examining nine Korean American childhood accounts. As an Asian Americanist,
cautiously regard this study as an important academic accomplishment because it would be a burgeoning area of research regarding Korean American novels, accomplished by examining the complicated relationship between the authors’ consciousness and the texts created out of the authors’ intentions.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION


Asian American literature has been differentiated with mainstream literature in America, because most Asian descent writers have used various Asian American facts such as history, culture, and community in order to represent major themes of Asian American such as “family,” “home,” “village,” “the origin,” “loss,” “migration,” “racial differences,” “cultural differences,” “assimilation,”
and “identity conflicts.” However, representing these Asian American matters has made most Asian descent writers’ works be devaluated as not literature but social documents. In the second half of the twentieth-century, literary scholars began to fully discuss new values and meanings of Asian American literature based on Asian American contexts.

Elaine H. Kim observes that Asian descent writers take on the role of a magician because they create new values and meanings by imaginatively transforming various Asian American facts into fictionalized materials in their literary works, novels in order to solidify themes, set specific backgrounds, embody various characters, and develop plots (Kim “preface” xiii-xvi). Ui-rak Kim also presents the new objectives of studying Asian American literature suggesting that literary scholars not devalue Asian descent writers’ literary works as social documents, simply representing Asian American matters to introduce them to the American reading public, but rather should pay attention to their creativity which transforms facts into essential elements in their fictional works (7-31). These two scholars’ observations inspire me to find the possibility of examining Korean American novels, especially the various representations of Korean American matters found within their different perspectives of Korean American identity.

In the history of Asian American literature, the numbers of Korean American writers are relatively fewer than the numbers of other Asian American
writers such as those of Chinese or Japanese descent. Richard S. Hahn claims the criteria of the true genre of Korean American literature that “author must be of Korean racial origin, but born and raised and educated in America, and be exposed to a Korean environment by living in a Korean enclave such as Koreatown in Los Angeles, and finally the text is originally written in English and growing up Korean in America” (Yoo, “An Interview”). However, Hahn’s claim of the true genre of Korean American literature became the classical definition which simply explained the early Korean American literature because in the new millennium, the numbers of Korean American writers have not only rapidly increased but also created various Korean American narratives reflecting different and complicated Korean American experiences.

Son-mo Yoo modifies Hahn’s criteria of a true Korean American literature to extend the boundaries of Korean American writers no matter where they are born through synthesizing various claims of Korean American scholars. First, Korean American literature should be written by the American citizens or permanent residents. Second, it should deal with Korean American matters such as history, life, or culture. Third, it should be written in English (Han’gukke 18). Yoo’s modified definition results in more works being classified as Korean American literature. These writers have created various Korean American narratives in terms of using various literary forms, but they generally have something in common concerning themes and motifs, which differentiate them
from other minority literature, especially other Asian descent writers’ works.

Like other Asian descent writers’ works, the majority of Korean American literary works represent the identity conflicts in America based on the authors’ own experiences of immigration or diaspora. Thematically, the first-generation writers demonstrate a time of trial in Korean history—the period of Japanese imperialism occupation or the Korean War, which urged them to decide to immigrate into America—in terms of creating autobiographical narratives. Due to national characteristics of the Korean, which emphasizes the national unity as a single race in Korean peninsula, these writers simultaneously pursue both their personal identity as an immigrant and national identity as Korean Americans through demonstrating Korean American themes such as “nostalgia for homeland,” “brotherly love,” “patriotism,” and “joys and sorrows of immigrants’ life in America.” As a result, these writers’ works spontaneously become the collective stories of the early Korean immigrants in America beyond narrating a story of the personal diaspora.

The 1.5 (trans-generation) or Korean adopted writers who were born in Korea and educated in America generally pursue slightly different Korean American identity than the first-generation writers’ in terms of demonstrating the struggles of acculturation to the American culture based on their parents’ or their own experiences. Thematically, they demonstrate the protagonists’ struggles toward racial discriminations or prejudice based on their own experiences by
Americans because these writers are also not free from them like their parents in America. Finally, they realize the limitations of entry into the mainstream in spite of being eager to fully assimilate to the American culture. As a result, they began to write various themes in order to pursue their own Korean American identity in terms of creating a story set in Korea or representing their own experiences. Due to the relatively short immigrant history, quite a few third-generation writers are active in America, but their literary works show slightly different characteristics than other generation writers. They generally depend on not representing their own experiences in America but fictionalizing their grandparents’ lives, oral fables, traditions, or old history in Korea. Through recreating these various Korean matters as a part of finding their national roots, they pursue their own identity as a Korean American. Irrespective of different generations and genres, these Korean American writers pursue their own Korean American identity in terms of fictionalizing various Korean or Korean American matters in order to realistically represent struggles of the identity formation and assimilation in America.

While closely examining nine Korean American novels for young readers, I found that they differently represent three types of Korean American matters such as history, community, and culture, which they succeed in Asian American literary trend, representing various Asian American matters. First, they represent personal or collective history in order to demonstrate the Korean American
presence, which has been descended by their ancestors who had undergone various hardships in order to be American. They generally represent these historical facts through creating autobiographical narratives which show similar characteristics of the early Asian American literary works. Second, they use communal facts in order to help the American reading publics more easily understand the presence of Korean American society, Koreatown, which became representative of Asian American communities in America. Third, they represent cultural facts in order to introduce various Korean American culture to mainstream readers who are not familiar with Korea and her unique culture. More interestingly, these Korean American writers represent these Korean American matters with different purposes, perspectives, and strategies reflecting their own visions toward Korean American history, community, and culture in order to enhance themes, set backgrounds, embody characters, develop the plots, and more effectively appeal to their specific readers. As a result, my observation of Korean descent writers’ different ways of representing Korean American matters would offer new possibilities to literary scholars who want to find the critical approaches to find new meanings and values of Korean American literature.

1.1 Asian American Matters in Asian American Novels

Most Asian American writers of children’s literature have generally used various Asian American matters in order to convey Asian American history,
community, and culture, but they have strategically used them in order to attract more attentions from the mainstream readers and publishing companies. However, their unique readership makes them pursue different aesthetics than Asian American writers for adults. Peter Hunt claims that the children’s literature can be defined in terms of its unique readership, children, because it has been written for children, written about children’s stories, and written by adults on behalf of children (64). This specific readership makes children’s books show thematically and stylistically different characteristics than books for adult readers.

Maria Nikolajeva argues that the specific feature of communication between an adult author and the child reader is “asymmetrical” because a child reader’s cognitive capacity, life experience, and linguistic skills are normally different from those of an adult (21). In the case of children’s literature, this asymmetry between an adult writer and a child reader certainly affects the way children’s novels are written, in terms of style, theme, plot, narrative perspective, and many other textual aspects. For example, in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, C. S. Lewis intentionally used explicit biblical allusions. As we know that Lewis not only was a devoted Christian, but quite intentionally put the Christian message into his children’s books.

Asian American writers of children also have continuously represented various Asian American matters such as personal or collective history, the aspect of Asian American community, and culture in terms of creating various literary
forms dealing with Asian American childhood. For instance, Chinese American writers primarily fictionalize their personal childhood experiences in the Chinese immigrant communities or recreate the early Chinese immigrant history. Japanese American writers mainly feature their traumatic experiences, especially the internment camp, related to World War II. The numbers of Korean American writers are relatively fewer than those of Chinese descent or Japanese descent, but they more complicatedly demonstrates various Korean American matters in terms of recollecting childhood experiences, rewriting specific historical events, and featuring various aspects of Korean American community and culture.

In *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1945), Jade Snow Wong portrays Chinese Americans with realistic descriptions and creates an autobiographical narrative with a third person point of view: “My writing is nonfiction based on personal experiences. So few Chinese Americans have published that I think it is my responsibility to try to create understanding between Chinese and Americans” (Hedblad 199). This realization leads Wong to create a story of a Chinese American girl’s coming-of-age through intersecting a young female protagonist’s desire to become an artist and her struggle to balance between two different cultural influences—Chinese and American.

Lawrence Yep has been evaluated as the representative Asian American writer of children who made it visible through a vivid revival of the early immigrant history of Chinese Americans in the mid-1970s, whereas Jade Snow
Wong has been regarded as the earliest writer first creating Asian American childhood narratives in the 1940s. Lawrence Yep as the second-generation of Chinese American was raised in a predominantly African-American and Hispanic area of San Francisco because his family owned a grocery store in that area, and he attended a predominantly white high school. From his childhood, Yep had been confused by his culturally hybrid environments and experienced feelings of “alienation” and “isolation.” He played the role of “all-purpose Asian” who could play the part of a Japanese or Korean soldier while playing war games with his African American neighbors (Marino 335). Simultaneously, he was an outsider in his Chinese American community due to his limited proficiency in Chinese.

Yep has mostly written books for child readers, and he primarily deals with Chinese American cultural heritage in order to “[provide] the reader with a new way of viewing Chinese-Americans, not as ordinary as well as extraordinary” (Stines 393). “Gold Mountain Chronicles” as Yep’s representative literary works consist of eight novels—*Dragonwings* (1975), *Child of Owl* (1977), *Sea Glass* (1979), *The Serpent's Children* (1984), *Mountain Light* (1985), *Dragon's Gate* (1993), *Thief of Hearts* (1995), and *The Traitor* (2003)—and are a loose-knit novel series following seven generations of the Yep family across one-and-a-half centuries of history. *Dragonwings* as the first novel of Yep’s chronicles illustrates the story of Moon Shadow who moves from China to San Francisco’s Chinatown in order to join his father who dreams of building a flying machine at the
beginning of the twentieth century. In this novel, Yep explores the life of Chinese immigrants in America at the turn of the century through “drawing a realistic portrait of their bachelor’s society” (Marino 336).

Bette Bao Lord’s *The Year of the Boar and Jackie Robinson* (1984) is slightly different than other Asian American writers’ childhood narratives because she emphasizes providing a story of successful acculturation to child readers found within the notion of “Model minority.” In her book, Lord tells about her first experience in the United States in terms of a fictionalized autobiographical novel. In this childhood narrative, Lord humorously illustrates a Chinese immigrant girl’s successful acculturation to the new environment such as “overcoming language barriers,” “keeping Chinese heritage,” “making friends,” and “becoming a fanatic fan of baseball”—as well as vividly describing the nostalgic optimism of the 1940s. In her childhood narrative, Lord skillfully juxtaposed two different motifs—Chinese heritage and the iconic American sport, “baseball”—and it was Lord’s vision for “Model minority” who has to absorb new culture as well as keep their own cultural heritage, simultaneously.¹

In the field of children’s literature, most writers adopt more innovative

¹ For more information, see Danico and Ng’s *Asian American Issues*, p23. “Model minority” as a political tool refers to a minority ethnic, racial, or religious group whose members achieve a higher degree of success than the population average. It is generally used to label one ethnic minority higher achieving than another ethnic minority. This term is often characterized as a myth which amounts to racial stereotyping, and it has usually been associated with Asian descent Americans in the United States through measuring in income, education, and other related factors such as low crime rate and high family stability.
forms such as poetry and picture books to deliver their messages to young readers more effectively. Asian American writers also adopt these unique and artistic narrative forms to illustrate Asian American cultural heritage and childhood. Ed Young, as a first generation of Chinese American, started illustrating pictures in children’s books in 1962. Young mostly creates children’s books which characteristically reflect his Chinese heritage in subject and style. His various artistic achievements made him “a brilliant illustrator whose impressionistic watercolor paintings and pencil drawings incorporating Oriental motifs and other cultural elements are acknowledged for their originality, stunning beauty and evocative quality” (Senick 213). Thus, he is also well known for his “interpretation of Oriental folktales with universal flavor” that he writes in succinct style (Senick 213). Among various works which were written, retold, or illustrated by Young, *Lon Po Po: A Red-Riding Hood Story from China* (1989) is the most famous and widely circulated in the United States because Young amazingly recreates unique Chinese fairy tale through putting the very popular western fairy tale, a story of “Little Red Riding Hood” into artistic techniques of Oriental paintings.

Like Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans have a relatively longer immigration history than other Asian Americans, but the literary works of Japanese descents are even harder to find among Asian American children’s books. However, there are significant books on the difficulty of the Americans adapting
to Japanese living in America. They vividly demonstrate the cultural conflict, traumatic experiences of Japanese internment at concentration camps, or war experiences that erupted during World War II.

Monica Sone’s *Nisei Daughter* (1953) is based on her own childhood experiences about World War II, and it was originally dedicated to her parents, which “began as a series of letters Sone wrote to her friend Betty McDonald” (Beebe 270). In this autobiographical childhood narrative as a story of a second generation Japanese American woman who struggles through internal, familial, and racial conflicts to find her identity, Sone portrays the internment traumas of Japanese Americans after the outbreak of World War II and her development from childhood in her family to her assimilation into the mainstream of white America. Sone intersects issues of race and gender thorough her experimental prose writing such as mixing genres, crossing the boundaries of prose and poetry, combining the work of memory and history, fact, dream, and fiction and the discourse of bureaucracy and law.

In the first half, Sone is mainly concerned with describing details of every day family life and the nature of the pre-war Nikkei community in 1930s Seattle including some accounts of the discrimination they faced. Sone’s childhood account is framed by her conflicted feelings about her identity through humorous descriptions of her home, school, and community. In the later sections, she focused on the evacuation and internment of Japanese Americans during
World War II, tensions in the Itoi family, her re-assimilation after her release to the Midwest in 1943, and return to visit her still-incarcerated parent. Sone’s *Nisei Daughter* became a groundbreaking work in a series of autobiographies written by second-generation Japanese American woman writers such as Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston and Yoshiko Uchida.

In *Farewell to Manzanar* (1973), Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston and James D. Houston present first-hand accounts of the experience of Japanese American internment at one particular concentration camp during World War II. Jeanne Wakatsuki was born in Inglewood, California in 1935, to a Japanese American family, and she grew up in Ocean Park where her family made a living by fishing. When she was seven years old, her family was relocated to the Manzanar internment camp in Eastern California, and she had to endure further complicated family problems such as “her father’s inability to support his family because he was inhibited from returning to the fishing industry after the war” (Huang 64). She studied sociology and journalism at San Jose State College, and she married her colleague, James D. Houston in 1957.

In the late 1960s, Jeanne and James started collaboratively writing about Jeanne’s own experiences of internment camp, Manzanar. *Farewell to Manzanar*, the first account of Japanese Americans’ war traumas in the internment camps, is largely autobiographical and focuses on the stories of Wakatsuki family. In this childhood narrative, Jeanne and James Houston vividly reconstruct the
Yoshiko Uchida’s childhood narratives also share the same themes of Houston’s childhood narrative because Uchida also creates a couple of childhood narratives drawn from her personal experiences at the internment camp. Uchida as a Nisei Japanese American daughter was born in Alameda, California in 1921, and her family moved to Berkeley when she was a child. From her childhood, Uchida was interested in writing and reading, and she attended the University of California. In 1942, Uchida and her family were forced to move to internment camps after the breakout of World War II. Uchida’s family lived in a horse stall at the Tanforan Racetrack in California for five months, and then they moved to a larger camp, Topaz in the Utah desert. In 1943, Uchida and her sister left Topaz to pursue graduate studies in the East Coast. In 1944, she received a master’s degree in education from Smith College.

Uchida worked as a teacher in Philadelphia and also wrote several books simultaneously. Among her various books, Uchida’s five childhood narratives—Journey to Topaz (1971), Journey Home (1978), A Jar of Dreams (1981), The Best Bad Things (1983), and The Happiest Ending (1985)—became her best-known literary works. As a school teacher, Uchida drew from her own
experiences in both the United States and Japan to “write brilliant stories that delight children of all nationalities” (Morad 182). As a result, she primarily wrote historical fiction about Japanese Americans to “give children of Japanese descent pride in their ancestry and to educate children of all nationalities about the past,” especially Japanese American’s tragic experiences (Morad 183). Both *Journey to Topaz* and its sequel, *Journey Home* are more strictly autobiographical works, because she not only represents the war traumas of eleven-year-old Yuki Sakane and her family in the relocation camps during World War II but also demonstrates how their lives were changed after the war. As a result, Uchida’s works became the representative Asian American childhood narratives as well as Japanese American literary works.

Ken Mochizuki’s first childhood narrative, *Baseball Saved Us* (1993), also shares similar themes with other fictional autobiographies related to the internment camp experiences. However, he adopts a different form of expression through combining text and illustration. In his childhood narrative, *Baseball Saved Us*, Mochizuki vicariously recreates a story of a Japanese-American boy living in an internment camp and its aftermath, and it has been highly acclaimed. Although Mochizuki did not directly experience internment camp life, he successfully juxtaposes representing the neglected history in the past and illustrating children’s difficulties by living with racism through “[capturing] the confusion, wonder, and terror of a small child in such stunning circumstances
with understandings” in terms of recollecting his parents’ experiences in Idaho’s Minidoka camp (Berkow 26).

Mochizuki begins the story with narration from a young Japanese-American narrator, Shorty, about his memories of “how he was ostracized, how other children called him ‘Jap,’ and how voices on the radio talked on and on about Pearl Harbor before his family was sent to live in the crowded, dusty camp” (Mynatt 206). And then, he beautifully expresses the narrator’s complicated feelings such as isolation from the society, the confusion of racial prejudice, and importance of baseball in his life.

In the last decade of the twentieth-century, Asian American novels for children show different characteristics from earlier writers’ works. They began writing neither “traditional tales set in Asia” nor “stories about coming” to the U.S. (Smith “Fusion Stories”). They also stopped recreating stories of “their ancestral war trauma” during World War II. On the contrary, they not only began to illustrate new types of Asian American childhoods through the removal of the ethnic qualifier representing Asian American ethnic and cultural heritage but also to deal with universal themes and motifs which focus on more contemporary child protagonists’ “coming-of-age” as well as appeal to more wide readerships in the United States.

A Newbery Award Winning Book in 2005, Cynthia Kadohata’s _Kira-Kira_ (2004) is a good example of this new trend of Asian American childhood
narratives because she illustrates contemporary Japanese American protagonist’s “coming-of-age” story excluding representation of Asian American contexts and themes such as revealing war trauma, illustrating racism, describing early immigrant life, and demonstrating a search for cultural heritage. *Kira-Kira* is the story of the Japanese American Takeshima family during the 1950s based on Kadohata’s childhood experiences as they moved from their hometown in Iowa to rural Georgia: “The world I left behind, I am usually referring to those years in the South” (Kadohata “Newbery”). Katie Takeshima as the protagonist lives with her old sister, Lyn, younger brother, Sammy, and her parent working in the non-unionized poultry plant. Kadohata demonstrates Katie’s recollected memory of her early life such as “her parent’s struggles to earn a living and her older sister’s battle with lymphoma” (Faust 39). Particularly, using a symbolic word, “Kira-Kira” which loosely “means ‘glittering’ in Japanese, an idea that translates to finding beauty and glory even in the most mundane of surroundings,” Kadohata beautifully demonstrates her older sister Lyn’s influence on her world view (Burns 45). Thematically, Kadohata juxtaposes representing the struggling to live of Asian American family and illustrating the protagonist, Katie’s coming-of-age through a little girl’s perspective. To demonstrate the little girl Katie’s way of seeing the world, Kadohata creates Katie’s narrative almost as “stream-of-consciousness.” And then, as Katie grew up through facing various hardships with her family, Kadohata demonstrates her protagonist’s emotional
changes in quietly lyrical prose style.

In the new millennium, Korean Americans have formed a large body of the immigrant population in the United States, but both Korean American authors and their literary works still have been invisible in the Asian American studies.² First, their immigrant history is relatively shorter than other Asian American immigrants such as Chinese, Japanese, and the Filipinos. Second, few authors started articulating their voices in terms of various literary forms such as fiction, poetry, and children’s books before the late twentieth-century. As a result, from the burgeoning period of Asian American studies pioneer scholars tried to create the terrain of Asian American literature, but Korean American writers had been excluded from the first of a list of Asian American authors such as Frank Chin, et al’s Aiiiiieee! An Anthology of Asian American Writers, the first anthology of Asian American writers.³ While Elaine H. Kim, one of the pioneer scholars of Asian American studies, makes an effort to compile Korean Americans’ various literary works in order to make them legitimate texts, Korean American literature still has been invisible in the history of both Asian American and American

² Ever since the origin of Asian American studies, many scholars have tried to compile diverse Asian American literary texts into book-length anthologies, but there is no solid illustration of the literary history of Korean American Literature.

³ In “Preface,” Chin and other editors argue that Asian American are not “one people” and reveal their research focus on Asian American writers such as Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino.
Elaine H. Kim argues that historically Korean Americans like other ethnic minority immigrant groups were “materially and discursively excluded from the mainstream” in the United States, “denied subjectively,” and “defined according to the degree of threat they were thought to pose to the dominant culture at particular points in time” (“Korean” 157). Generally, Korean American literary works would fit Amy Ling’s observation of characteristics of Asian American literature:

Each Asian group in the United States has had a distinctive history and yet, despite the diversity of race, language, religion and cultural background, all share the experience of exclusion as a nonwhite, foreign element, regardless of the length of time the group or individual has been in the United States. (35)

They also show the characteristics of Asian American literature, “hybridity,” “heterogeneity,” and “multiplicity,” defined by Lisa Lowe (258). However, Kim claims that Korean Americans are as unique as other groups because “their experiences are all rooted in specific historical and sociopolitical circumstances” such as crucial experiences of the Japanese Occupation, the Korean War, or early

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Due to their relatively short immigrant history, the numbers of Korean American literary works have been comparatively fewer than others such as Chinese and Japanese Americans. However, as the number of Korean immigrants has increased, many Korean descent writers also started to articulate their voices in the United States, and they formed three distinctly identifiable groups: “foreign students” or “political exiles” from the early twentieth century till the mid-1960s; “Women Writers” in the 1980s; and “1.5” or “second generation” of the post-1968 immigrants.⁵ Among these three different groups, 1.5 or second generation of the post-1968 immigrants began to express various Korean American stories, and they became full time writers in the 1990s. Thus, Kim argues that Korean American cultural expressions “grow quickly and become increasingly heterogeneous, just like the population itself, especially as the children of post-1965 Korean immigrants to the United States” (“Korean” 157).

These new generation writers, such as Chang-rae Lee, Heinz Insu Fenkl, Nora Okja Keller, and Susan Choi rapidly expanded the terrain of Korean American literature in terms of not only utilizing various literary genres but also representing various Korean American contexts. Son-mo Yoo claims an analogy between the rise of the new generation of Korean descent writers in 1990s and the

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⁵ Elain Kim explains that the term 1.5 generation was coined in the late 1970s and early 1980s to denote how those who were born in Korea and speak Korean but were educated primarily in the United States. In the Korea town, 1.5 generation is also called as il-chom-o-se.
rise of African American writers in the 1920s and names it as the “Korean-American Literary Renaissance” because the numbers of their literary works have remarkably increased. And then, these writers share similar thematic representations like other Asian American writers’. Furthermore, their literary qualities are also amazingly increased, which can be critically noticed by both mainstream readers and scholars (Yoo Han’gukke 150).

With these new generation writers, Korean American writers of children’s literature rapidly appeal to both mainstream readers and publishing market because they began to actively publish various genres of children’s books—realistic novel, folktale, autobiographical novel, historical novel, and fantasy—representing various Korean American matters. Min Baek became the first Korean American writer about children after publishing Aekyung’s Dream (1988), which illustrates the story of a Korean American child protagonist’s acculturation, but many Korean American children’s books actively came out to the mainstream publishing market in the 1990s—Sook Nyul Choi’s Year of Impossible Goodbyes (1991), Marie G. Lee’s Finding My Voice (1992), Haemi Balgassi’s Tae’s Sonata (1997), Linda Sue Park’s Seesaw Girl (1999), and An Na’s A Step from Heaven (2001).

These writers began to write children’s books with different purposes and backgrounds, but they commonly illustrate stories of Korean or Korean American child protagonists’ coming-of-age through representing Korean American matters
such as autobiographical experience, collective history, the aspect of Korean American society, and culture. For example, first-generation writer, Sook Nyul Choi creates autobiographical novels based on her own childhood experiences and historical facts in Korea. As the second or 1.5 generation writers, Marie G. Lee and An Na create contemporary YA novels based on their own bicultural experiences of the Korean family in America. Exceptionally, Linda Sue Park as the second generation creates historical novels based on her parental childhood, traditional culture, and conventions in Korea.

A first-generation Korean American writer, Sook Nyul Choi was born in Pyongyang, Korea and grew up in war-ravaged Korea during the aftermath of World War II. She gradually published a sequel of autobiographical novels based on her own experiences—*Year of Impossible Goodbyes* (1991), *Echoes of the White Giraffe* (1993), and *Gathering of Pearls* (1994). She also wrote three books for younger children—*Halmoni and the Picnic* (1993), *The Best Older Sister* (1997), and *Yunmmi and Halmoni’s Trip* (1997)—which demonstrate the cultural tensions and richness of the Korean American experiences. Among Choi’s complete works, a sequel of autobiographical novels should be the best. Even though it has not received any critical attention by literary scholars because Choi has been classified as a writer of children, it has appealed to the broader American reading public through receiving various awards and honors. In this sequel, she continuously fictionalized various Korean American historical facts such as World
War II, the Korean War, and immigration in order to address the issue of how a young protagonist not only struggles to preserve her own cultural identity but also finds her own place from extraordinary circumstances.

A second generation writer, Marie G. Lee wrote various novels for both middle-grade and young adult readers. Her young adult novels—Finding My Voice (1992), Saying Goodbye (1994), and Necessary Roughness (1997)—feature protagonists who are facing the consequences of being different in small-town America. Lee addresses the issue of how young Korean Americans struggle to find a place for themselves in a society that is ignorant of their cultural roots. Each of Lee’s works demonstrate different kinds of Korean American experiences, but all of them address “the ways in which Korean Americans struggle against their entrapment in false dualisms—between ‘white’ and ‘nonwhite,’ between Korea and America, between ‘foreign’ and ‘native’” (Kim, “Korean” 177). In her first novel, Finding My Voice (1992), Lee demonstrates how the Korean American young adult protagonist, Ellen Sung, quests for her identity and place as well as overcoming racial discrimination and the generational gap in the American Midwest.

An Na was born in Korea and immigrated to the United States, when she was four years old. As a 1.5 generation Korean American, she was biculturally raised in terms of attending schools that were predominantly white and attending a Korean church, where all of her friends were of Korean descent in Southern
California. In her first young adult novel, *A Step from Heaven* (2001), Na addresses the issue of how the young protagonist struggles to find her place in Koreatown, where two different cultures coexist. Thus, Na continuously fictionalized various Korean American matters, especially various aspects of Korean American society, Koreatown in order to not only enhance her themes but also offer an understanding of the problems immigrants face.

In spite of being a second-generation writer, Linda Sue Park’s novels show different characteristics than other 1.5 or second generation Korean American writers such as Marie G. Lee and An Na because she focuses on featuring various traditional cultures in her parental homeland, Korea. In 1999, Park published her first historical novel, *Seesaw Girl*, set in the seventeenth-century Korea. In addition, she published three historical books—*The Kite Fighters* (2000), *A Single Shard* (2001), and *When My Name was Keoko* (2002), which represent various traditions, customs, arts, and history in Korea. In these four consecutive historical novels, Park creates various Korean child protagonists such as a little girl in the seventeenth century, two brothers in the fourteenth century, an orphan boy in the twelfth century, and a brother and sister during World War II. In addition, she uses various factual materials in Korea in order to enhance themes, develops plots, and embodies backgrounds.
1.2 Methodology

While exploring a number of scholarly works, I perceive that various literary theories can be widely applied to study children’s books. For example, Bruno Bettelheim observes various fairy tales through psychoanalytical criticism. Rebecca Lukens explores the textual elements through new criticism. Lisa Paul emphasizes differences between girls and boys based on the feminist criticism. With the notion of post-colonialism, Perry Nodelman observes that children are often “colonized” by adults because adults speak on behalf of children instead of letting children express themselves. Both Jacqueline Rose and Karin Lesnik-Oberstein argue the “social construction of childhood” that identities are created with no “inheritance,” and in the case of an identity such as “childhood,” it is created by an “adult” in the light of their own perceptions of themselves. Stephen McCallum examines the intertextuality of various books for children. These scholars’ works well prove that children’s literature is a legitimate literary genre in the academia which possesses its own values and aesthetics found within various concerns such as history, culture, literary conventions, communication, and power relationships. However, due to the different readership, children, I also know there are limitations to apply whole contemporary literary theories to study children’s books.

Maria Nikolajeva helps me find my own way to approach children’s books which overcome various prejudices and limitations while studying
children’s books as not the educational tools but literary texts as study objects in academia. In *Aesthetics Approaches to Children’s Literature*, Nikolajeva introduces practical applications of contemporary literary theories, which make both scholars and students in academia start studying various children’s books as literary texts in terms of using general heuristics of literature such as genres, plots, characters, tones, styles, and narrative perspectives. And then, she gradually explores various aesthetics of children’s books such as the author, the work, the genre, the content, composition, the scene, character, narration, language, the medium, and the reader in each chapter.

Among various aesthetic approaches, “Aesthetics of the Author” offers me a clue of exploring nine Korean American novels because like other Asian American writers who possess different ethnical, religious, social, and political backgrounds, they as Korean American writers try to deliver specific messages to American young readers in terms of various literary forms such as autobiographical novels, contemporary YA novels, and historical novels reflecting their own vision of Korean American identity based on their own experiences and social environments in America.

As an Asian Americanist, I agree with Dolores de Manuel and Rocío G. Davis that Korean American novels “must be read as a multilayered and nuanced attempt to establish the place of [Korean] American writers for children in American culture,” and creatively engage their marginal position. It is also
working in its own way to replace the stereotypical depictions of the Korean American history, community, and culture that children know best, as in what used to pass for Asian American literature (vi). This belief makes me combine nine Korean American novels though they were written in different expressive forms such as autobiographical novels, contemporary YA novels, and historical novels, and it also leads me to examine how these three Korean American writers creatively represents Korean American matters in order to satisfy their specific readership; children in America.

My exploration of nine Korean American novels is initiated from the awareness of this problematic situation of Asian American children’s books. From the origin of Asian American literary criticism, many Asian Americanists have examined child protagonists, their ideal childhood, and their maturation in the various Asian American narrative forms such as autobiography, memoir, women’s writings, and contemporary experimental novels. However, the parameters of their research were too limited because their primary research would focus on literary works not for children but about Asian American childhood for adult readers.6 The main reason for the exclusion of Asian American children’s books from Asian Americanists’ researches originates from stereotypical prejudices against children and their literature that also occur in mainstream literature. First, the children’s book is not a good form of art for successfully demonstrating

6 See the selected texts in various surveys by Jennifer Ann Ho, Alicia Otano, and Rocío G. Davis.
complicated and diverse Asian American thematic representations. Second, Asian American children’s books are circulated only for child education as special texts in the multicultural classrooms.

However, in exploring various Asian American children’s books, I perceive that authors within this genre have adopted various narrative strategies and forms to create their literary works as well as have continuously shared the same thematic representations with Asian American literature for adult readers. Simultaneously, I find the necessity of my writing project to discuss how Korean American writers creatively represent Korean American matters in order to effectively deliver Korean American history, community, and culture to their specific readers; children. I am also aware that the terrain of Asian American scholarship would be expanded by the study of the Korean American novel for children and that the construction of Asian American literary canons requires more inclusion of and expansion to Asian American children’s books, just as contemporary mainstream literary scholars lively examine children’s books through various critical approaches in the United States.

My exploration of nine Korean American novels initiated from the awareness of following questions: (1) What kind of personal experiences do these writers create in these Korean American novels for children? (2) What kind of messages do authors convey to the readers? (3) How do these writers represent various factual materials into their Korean American novels for children? (4)
What kinds of outcomes do these writers pursue in terms of creating a series of Korean American children’s books?

Thus, in my dissertation, I mainly discuss how three Korean American writers—Sook Nyul Choi, An Na, and Linda Sue Park—creatively represent various Korean American matters such as personal or collective history, community, and culture in terms of recollecting their own childhood experiences, conducting researches, and reflecting their perspective toward Korean American. Here, I would like to consult two general scholarships to construct my theoretical framework: Asian American studies and children’s literature studies. I am especially indebted to two literary scholars’ critical approaches in my dissertation: Elaine H. Kim’s term of “ambassadors of goodwill” in early Asian American writers’ works and Maria Nikolajeva’s unique addressing aesthetics of children’s literature, especially, “aesthetics of the authors.”

According to Elaine H. Kim, most early Asian American writers spontaneously became “ambassador[s] of goodwill” because they made their efforts to “bridge the gap between East and West and plead for tolerance by making usually highly euphemistic observations about the West on the one hand while explaining Asia in idealized terms on the other” (Asian American 24). This notion of the “ambassador of goodwill” initiated my exploration of various representations of Korean American matters such as history, community, and culture in terms of creating Korean American novels in order to convey specific
messages to the American reading public, especially children. Maria Nikolajeva’s “aesthetics of the author” also inspires me to explore the interrelationships between these Korean American writers of children and their personal backgrounds because they create these nine Korean American novels through recollecting their personal childhood experiences, conducting research, and reflecting their own vision of Korean American.

1.3 Structure of Dissertation

In my dissertation, I mainly discuss the interrelationships between the authors and their personal and social contexts which make them imaginatively represent various Korean American matters in terms of creating different literary forms such as autobiographical novels, contemporary young adult novels, and historical novels set in Korea or the Korean community in America. In Chapter Two, “Korean American History,” Sook Nyul Choi’s autobiographical trilogy, *Year of Impossible Goodbyes, Echoes of the White Giraffe,* and *Gathering of Pearls,* will be discussed. In these autobiographical novels set in Korea and America Choi employs many historical facts such as the Japanese military’s occupation during World War II, the Korean War, and early Korean immigrant history in order to introduce Korean American history to American readers who do not know it.

In Chapter Three, “Korean American Community,” An Na’s a series of
young adult novels, *A Step from Heaven, Wait for Me*, and *The Fold*, will be
discussed. In these YA novels set in Koreatown, Na employs many communal
facts while describing a Korean American community, Koreatown, through the
main purposes of including the facts in these works to introduce Korean American
culture and community to American readers.

In Chapter Four, “Korean American Culture,” Linda Sue Park’s a series of
historical novels, *The Kite Fighters, A Single Shard, and When My Name was
Keoko*, will be discussed. In these historical novels set in traditional Korea, Park
employs many cultural facts while illustrating traditional manners, conventions,
and art in Korea in order to introduce Korean culture to American readers.
CHAPTER 2
KOREAN AMERICAN HISTORY
IN SOOK NYUL CHOI’S AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOVELS

Ninety one-year-old retired Japanese plantation laborer said,
“Our stories should be listened to by many young people.
It’s for their sake. We really had a hard time, you know.”

Ronald Takaki, “From a Different Shore”

Sook Nyul Choi’s autobiographical trilogy—Year of Impossible Goodbyes (1991), Echoes of the White Giraffe (1993), and Gathering of Pearls (1994)—are the novels of childhood based on the author’s own experiences in both Korea and America. From the burgeoning period to present, the autobiographical writings have been the very popular literary genre in Asian American literature, especially the early writers’ works. Like other Asian American writers, many Korean American writers also have followed this literary tradition, the autobiographical writings, such as Il-han New’s When I was a boy in Korea (1928), Younghill Kang’s The Grass Roof (1931), Ronyoung Kim’s Clay Walls (1986), Peter Hyun’s Man Sei!: The Making of a Korean American (1986), and Helie Lee’s Still Life with Rice (1996). This Asian American literary tradition was originated from the earliest Asian American writers’ strong desire to introduce various Asian American history, culture, and society to American readers in order to help them better understand both Asians and Asian Americans.
These early Asian American writers were commonly the highest social classes of their homelands. Their autobiographical writings are characterized by efforts to bridge the gap between East and West because they consciously attempt to correct the stereotypes and distortions about their homeland, Asia and her culture in America. Thus, they spontaneously became the “ambassadors of goodwill to the West” (Kim Asian American 24). The early Korean American writers also began to publish their autobiographical novels with the same purpose of other Asian American writers because they pursued the collective identity of Korean American through demonstrating common themes such as joys and sorrows of immigrants, nostalgia for their homeland, patriotism, tradition, and Koreanness in their literary works.

In *When I was a Boy in Korea* (1928), Il-han New consciously takes a role of the cultural ambassador because he tries to rectify various stereotypes and distortion about his homeland, Korea through accurate presentations of Korean tradition, culture, and manners such as his boyhood education, Chinese sports, games, food, clothing, folk tales, and ceremonies. However, excessive emphasis on introducing accurate information about Korean manners and customs makes New’s autobiographical writing be placed on not a literary work but rather on an anthropological account.

Younghill Kang published his first autobiographical novel, *The Grass Roof* (1931), three years later than New’s *When I was a boy in Korea*, but his
work has been evaluated as the first genuine novel written by a Korean American
because he did not simply describe Korean traditional conventions and manners
but creatively represent them in the fictionalized narrative.

Younghill Kang (1903-72) immigrated into the United States in 1921, and
he was “one of a very small number of Korean intellectuals” before the revised
immigrant quotas of 1965 (Kim “Korean” 158). After publishing two novels, The
Grass Roof (1931) and East Goes West (1937), Kang represented Korea and
Koreans to Western readers in the first half of the twentieth century. In his two
novels, Kang creates the same protagonist, “Chung-Pa Han” and illustrates Han’s
life in two different places. Interestingly, Kang juxtaposes the protagonist’s life
and historical events in Korea before his immigration to the United States.

Like this, the early Korean American writers represented by Il-han New
and Younghill Kang followed the early Asian American literary tradition, the
autobiographical writing, in order to not only pursue collective identity as Korean
American but also introduce Korean history, culture, tradition, and society to the
American reading public. However, like other early Asian American writers’
literary works, both New’s and Kang’s autobiographical novels had been also
placed on the borderline between fiction and nonfiction because their literary
works seemed to be social documents which were full of realistic representations
closely related to their homeland, Korea. Irrespective of the point at issue, we
should take notice that these writers intended to create not personal
autobiographies based on realistically conveying personal history or national culture but autobiographical novels fully reflected on the authors’ creativity, even though their works were full of realistic descriptions of personal experiences, historical events, traditions, and social manners in Korea.

Even though Sook Nyul Choi published her novels in the 1990s, she succeeded to the early Korean American writers’ literary convention because she also intended to introduce various historical events, culture, and social manners to Americans through representing Korean American historical events, but her autobiographical novels show slightly different characteristics than other early Korean American writers’ autobiographical novels due to her different readership, American young readers. Thus, first, she splits her entire life into three different periods such as childhood, young adulthood, and early adulthood. And then, she narrates her own experiences in terms of creating a sequel of autobiographical novels with different perspectives—child protagonist, young adult protagonist, and early adult protagonist. Second, she focuses on not simply narrating her own experiences but representing historical events which had fully influenced her entire life in both Korea and America. Finally, she uses these historical facts as the major motifs of her childhood novels, especially for American young readers.

As a result, Choi strategically interweaves facts with fiction in her autobiographical trilogy, and she conveys her messages to specific readers in terms of unfolding protagonist Sookan Bak’s coming-of-age stories from
childhood to early adulthood. By means of creating a sequel of autobiographical novels, Choi intends to deliver two specific messages to American young readers. First, she as a history teacher tries to engage American young readers in Korean American history, which they still don’t know well. Thus, she objectively describes various historical facts—World War II, the Korean War, and early immigration in the late 1950s,—which were closely related to the presence of Korean American. Second, she as an adult writer offers a role model of socialization through representing young protagonist Sookan Bak in a series of coming-of-age stories. Thus, Choi creatively transforms various factual materials, especially historical events into fictional materials in order to clearly reveal a central theme, concretely set backgrounds, and deepening the protagonist’s conflicts in her autobiographical novels.

2.1. World War II: *Year of Impossible Goodbyes*

Choi’s first novel, *Year of Impossible Goodbyes*, is the ten-year-old Korean girl’s coming-of-age story, in which she has to face up to various difficulties originated from extraordinary environments during the Japanese colonial period in World War II. In this novel, Sook Nyul Choi conveys both unknown Korean history and her vision of growing up to American children in terms of illustrating the process of the protagonist’s conquering all difficulties in her home, school, and society originated from a sad Korean history.
In the beginning of this novel, Choi first conveys how Koreans had suffered from the cruel ruling of the Japanese military as the colonizer represented by two policies—cultural genocide and economic exploitation—during the last thirty-six years in terms of condensed descriptions of Sookan’s family life. The Father as a member of the resistance for Korean independence fled to Manchuria, China. Three older brothers forcibly left for the labor camps. The Mother unwillingly had to operate in a sweatshop sock factory for Japanese soldiers. The Grandfather as a scholar silently resisted in terms of teaching the Korean language, history, and culture to his grandchildren—Sookan and Inchun—in order to maintain Korean identity and heritage. However, he was laid up by watching Captain Narita’s forced cutting off the pine tree in his front yard representing both family and national pride. Thus, he wanted to tell his painful stories of life under the ruling of the Japanese military to his grandchildren before the moment of death. Here, Choi represents it in terms of the Mother’s storytelling in order to more effectively convey her message:

Your Grandfather was a very important scholar. He passed all the government examinations. The bird was a present from one of his friends from China who had come to visit him. […] Under that special hat, your grandfather’s hair was drawn into a small bun, called a topknot, on the top of his head. But when the Japanese occupied Korea, they gathered all the scholars in the town square
and cut their topknots off. It was only hair, [ . . .], but to your grandfather and the other proud scholars, it was a symbol of their culture and identity. The Japanese wanted all Koreans to dress like them and speak only their language. Everything Korean was forbidden. (37)

Through this recollection of Mother, Choi conveys how Koreans represented by Grandfather had to endure unbearable sufferings originated from loss of the national pride under the Japanese military’s cultural genocide policy during those thirty-six years. Continuously, Choi represents the unknown historical event—massacre of innocent people by Japanese military—in Manchuria, China in terms of Mother’s storytelling:

It was a hard life in Manchuria, [ . . .], but we were happy working for the independence movement. But not for long. The Japanese soon found us, and once again, in the middle of the night, they set fire to our homes. The soldiers, ready with their guns and swords, waited outside people’s homes and shot them as they came running out of their burning houses. There were massacres in all the small Korean settlements. (39-40)

The Mother’s recollections about Grandfather’s life and the massacre in Manchuria made Sookan face up to the reality under the ruling of the Japanese
military. Simultaneously, they also help American young readers more concretely understand the sad history of Korea during World War II.

Finally, Grandfather was dead, and it made Sookan’s entire family members weep for pain of loss and anger for the Japanese military’s cruelty. At this moment, Sookan realized Grandfather’s strong belief, which made him as the prop and strength of the family continuously encouraging entire family members to endure the harsh reality under the ruling of the Japanese military. Here, Choi explains the Korean traditional thought, “Yin and Yang” to American readers in terms of Sookan’s voice:

Slowly, a feeling of calmness came over me. I dried my tears and looked up at the evening sky. A small, faint star was shining in the distance. I felt as though I had been immersed in a cool sea, and the red flames of pain and bitterness had been extinguished. I thought the Buddha’s spirit was inside of me. Suddenly, I understood what Grandfather meant when he said, “One’s life is short, but the life of the spirit is long.” The Buddha brought me a little bit of Grandfather’s spirit and Grandfather’s peace. I thought of his lessons on Um and Yang—darkness and light, pain and joy, evil and good. Grandfather told me that all these tensions and conflicts were necessary in the struggle for perfect harmony. Harmony. That was the word he used. “Harmony will
prevail,” he used to say. “After darkness, there will be light. The light cannot come without the darkness. Better days are bound to come now.” (46)

Sookan’s realization of the Grandfather’s life principle facilitated her to accept her present situation which she also had to endure the harsh reality under the ruling of the Japanese military like other family members, especially adults. As a result, she began to see her current life with a realistic perspective.

Now, the story unfolds to illustrating Sookan’s Japanese school life, and Choi more concretely describes how the ruling of the Japanese military had an influence on children’s life, also. In the first day of attending school, Sookan had to face up to the more harsh reality by herself. She had to line up like soldiers, to sing the Japanese national anthem, the “Kimigayo,” and to worship at the Shinto temple. Furthermore, she forcedly had to be renamed with the Japanese name, “Aoki Shizue.” Actually, Sookan already knew these matters in the first day of attending school because she heard them from her older brothers. However, the Japanese teacher’s military attitude and manner toward students made it harder for her to accept this harsh reality:

After a long while, Narita Sensei looked up at the class and said with a big smile, “You Koreans are so good at following orders. You are lucky that the Japanese soldiers are here to protect you from the White Devils, aren’t you?” “Hai, Sensei!” the children
shouted in unison. “Remember your happiness depends on the victory of the Imperial soldiers,” she said as the bell rang. Our hands were dirty and caked with wax, but we sat and ate our lunches in silence. I take out the splinter in my finger. Then like the others, I started eating my lunch. (76)

Through this scene, Choi conveys how the Japanese military represented by Sensei Narita had justified their governing Korea as a colony through the cramming system of education. Continuously, Choi represents that Korean children also could not be free from the harsh reality which made them take unwanted military training and forcibly prepare war supplies to Japanese soldiers:

After lunch, the whole school gathered in the yard. The June sun was hot, but I was glad to be out of that classroom. We were given big burlap bags and told to fill them with sand and pile them against the wall. After about an hour of this, a voice over the loud speaker said, “That’s enough. Now get those stones and pile them up near the sand bags. When the White Devils come, we need those stones to throw at them.” I looked at the boys on the other side of the yard, and saw that they were doing something with the bamboo poles. “Line those bamboo spears neatly against the wall,” said the voice over the loudspeaker.
“Remember, when the White Devils come you each must grab one, and stab them.” (77)

Coercive brainwashing and military training made Sookan be gradually disillusioned about her Japanese school life. Furthermore, she suffered from the loss of her Korean pride and identity. Finally, Sookan got into a rage for her life as a child in a colonized country:

I wished that man would disappear and let us rest. I was tired of all these instructions. I was sick of this school. I was mad that I was born a Korean. I was angry at everyone . . . my mother, Grandfather, Aunt Tiger, my sister hiding in convent, my father away in Manchuria, and my brothers who were off at labor camps. I was mad at the whole world. I didn’t even like Mother’s God. (80)

Sookan’s frustration and rage against Japanese colonial education made her unexpectedly fall in line with the senior’s revolting against the Japanese teachers who continuously forced Korean students to follow their military policies. As a result, Sookan was not only mercilessly inflicted corporal punishment by a Japanese teacher but was also expelled from school. At this moment, she sympathizes the sorrowful life of other family members who had to quietly endure the harsh reality under Japanese colonialism.
In the beginning, Choi conveys the sufferings of Koreans who lived in a colonized country with Sookan’s perspective through illustrating Grandfather’s death in order to set the backgrounds of the entire story. Through illustrating Sookan’s school life, Choi emphasizes that children also should be innocent victims in this colonized country, Korea because they also had to separately face up to the harsh reality like other family members through experiencing trials.

From the beginning, Choi initiates this story through illustrating Sookan’s family members’ painful experiences under the cruel rulings of the Japanese military, and she develops the story through describing Sookan’s Japanese school life. Both are closely related to the painful history of Korea during World War II. Here, Choi introduces the other historical event, Russian Communist’s occupying the northern part of Korea, during the aftermath of World War II in order to deepen the conflict of Sookan’s story.

Koreans were liberated from the cruel ruling of the Japanese military after the end of World War II, but their life in the free country was short-lived because they were unwantedly ruled by Russian Communists under the notion of trusteeship. Thus, as trusteeship began, Koreans unexpectedly had to suffer the other harsh realities which made them fear for safety because Russian Communists secretly made Korea a communist bloc. Thus, after stationing in the northern part of Korea, they forced Korean not only to speak Russian in public but also follow Russian traditions. Furthermore, they began to brainwash Korean
to follow their communist’s doctrines. Here, Choi represents how Koreans had to suffer from the unwanted ruling by a foreign power, Russian Communists through Sookan’s perspective, again.

Sookan’s first impression about Russian soldiers was fear and anxiety because she already heard the rumor about their violence and cruelty toward Koreans:

One day [Kisa] came running home and said, “We’d better lock the door. The Russians are in the next town over. For the past few days, they’ve been picking up all the young men who are reasonably healthy and are taking them to Siberia. Many Russian soldiers have been looting house and attacking the village people, especially the women. They have special guns that can fire many shots in quick succession and can kill many people all at once.”

(96-97)

This rumor makes Sookan not only be seized with fear about Russian soldiers but also vaguely think that she will be faced with different level of trials which are harder than her former sufferings under the ruling of the Japanese military. Here, Choi demonstrates how Koreans suffered from the dark shadow of war in terms of Sookan’s life under the Russian trusteeship in the northern part of Korea.

While staying in the northern part of Korea, Russian Communists concentrated their effort to brainwash Koreans into becoming communists
because they wanted to make the northern part of Korea be communized. Thus, through Sookan’s thoughts and feelings, Choi illustrates how Russian Communists gradually pursue brainwashing Koreans:

Every day was more or less the same. We worked, sang variations of the same old songs, heard the same praises of Communism and Mother Russia, and saw the same happy faces of the Russian proletariat in the movie they showed over and over again. Incessantly, the loud speaker blared the praises of the great Russian leaders. The town was so noisy I could hardly think. There was no need to think. Our every activity from dawn to dusk was programmed for us. We wore identical black pants, white shirts, and red scarves, and each morning when we were picked up for work, we were told what to do and how to do it. I had not learned anything new since that first Party meeting. I had begun to realize that Mother and Aunt were right. (110)

This monotonous and repeated life under the ruling of Russian Communists makes Sookan gradually understand why adults in the village worried about Russians and their trusteeship because she was also very tired of Russian Communists’ oppressions through the everyday brainwashing. Simultaneously, she realized that she was facing more harsh reality than her former experiences during the reign of Japanese military. Here, through Sookan’s school life, Choi
continuously describes the cruelty of Russian Communists which considered children as the major target of their brainwashing:

At the Little Proletariat School, it grew increasingly difficult for me to listen to the awful propaganda and the constant harsh criticisms of the Capitalists. Anyone who was interested in anything other than the Marxist Red books was labeled a traitor and a Capitalist. We only talked about Mother Russia and the Wonderful Communist leaders. I had to make the smaller children repeat after me: “We, the young proletarian comrades, are important. We can save our grown-up comrades from being Capitalists and Imperialists. If we see any comrades, whether father or mother, not understanding Mother Russia, we must report them to our comrade leader. This is our duty to Mother Russia. The capitalists are our enemy. The Imperialists are our enemy. Mother Russia is for people like us. One for all and all for one. We are all equal and it is our duty to secure this social paradise.” (120)

Russian Communists’ thorough brainwash from house to school makes Sookan feel that her current life was very far from her expectations which offered independent and free life to Koreans. Furthermore, Russian Communist’s political propaganda and compulsory forced labors gradually make her be exhausted in her current life. Finally, Sookan and her family members were deeply frustrated by
the realization of the current life which they felt more harsh oppressions from Russian Communists in spite of living in the free country. Simultaneously, they were eager to live in the southern part of Korea under the American control, where they could receive a guarantee of freedom and safety. As a result, they should have desperately decided to escape from the North to pursue their freedom and safety in the South.

Now, Sookan’s story comes to the climax and the end because Sookan and her family members unwillingly had to make a difficult decision, fleeing to the South. Here, Choi dramatizes the sad historical events about innocent civilians in the northern part of Korea who desperately cross the border between the North and the South.

While arriving at a small village near the border, Sookan has to be unexpectedly separated from Mother because the guide as the double agent betrayed her and other family members. At this moment, Sookan feels tremendous fear and anxiety:

No mother, no money, no passport, I thought to myself. How are we supposed to go anywhere? So many thoughts went reeling through my head. I sat up and tears filled my eyes. I felt lost and abandoned. I didn’t know what to do. My head ached and the tears streamed down my face like a heavy rain. (137)
In addition, these desperate situations urge Sookan to make a tough decision of whether she returns to the hometown or crosses the border by herself. At this moment, Sookan sees her present situation with a more mature vision because it calls for Sookan to advance to the next stage of life. With the absence of Mother, the tremendous burden of protecting her brother and herself is placed on her shoulders:

   It was hard to be *nuna*. I wished someone older than I were around. I didn’t like being the older one, though I loved Inchun and I wanted to take care of him. I was tired and I cried as I caressed his dirty hair, stiff from the mud and rain. We had not been able to wash or bathe since we left Pyongyang, and we were both dirty and smelly and covered with bruises and scabs from the mosquito bites. (153-4)

Finally, she makes the decision to flee to the South and desperately crosses the 38th parallel, the border between the two Koreas and completes her desperate journey for pursuing safe and peaceful life in the South, the American zone in Korea. Simultaneously, she has an unwanted farewell to her childhood because she already passed through a matter of life and death while crossing crosses the 38th parallel toward the South.

   Sookan’s desperate escape from the North means that she possesses a more mature vision of life than other children about her age because she
unwantedly had to face up to various bitter trials originating from sad Korean history in the aftermath of World War II. Even though she dramatically meets other family members who were separated from the entire family, she does not delight in her regaining freedom and happiness in Seoul anymore because of the tragic Korean historical events that compelled Sookan to make her farewell of too many things such as home, townspeople, family members, friends, and childhood. Through illustrating Sookan’s tragic stories, Choi tells readers how Koreans unwantedly become the innocent victims in the aftermath of World War II in terms of representing a tragic Korean history which American readers still have not known well.

2.2 The Korean War: *Echoes of the White Giraffe*

Choi’s second novel, *Echoes of the White Giraffe*, is a story of Sookan Bak’s coming-of-age which illustrates internalizing procedures of the protagonist’s social environments through overcoming both war trauma and insecurity of young adulthood. In this novel, Choi describes how Sookan as a young adult gradually shapes her course in life through independently facing up to various difficulties such as war trauma, extraordinary circumstances, and Korean traditional conventions. Interestingly, Choi does not focus on objectively describing factual materials closely related to Korean history such as the Korean War but subjectively recreates young adult protagonist’s war
experiences through her own perspective. Through this autobiographical narrating, Choi tries to help American young readers more easily understand the unfamiliar tragic Korean historical event, the Korean War.

In the beginning, Choi explains the protagonist and settings in terms of Sookan’s recollection of her own experiences:

I couldn’t help feeling a strange sadness deep within me. Our country was still at war, and we were still refugees here in Pusan. I felt sad at how content we were with these two simple wood-frame buildings. I wondered what had become of our beautiful brick Ewha School in Seoul, with its sparkling classrooms and its beautiful tiered garden. Maybe we could make a small garden in front of these humbler classrooms, I thought. […] I thought of the happy days before the war when I used to run out my front door each morning dressed in my school uniform: a navy blue skirt and a white blouse, proudly adorned with a silver school pin embossed with a pear blossom, the *ewha*. The war broke out in Seoul and we couldn’t help it. We had no choice but to flee south to Pusan, away from the bombing and fighting. (3)

Through this recollection, Choi conveys both the settings of entire novels and the protagonist’s current situation to readers. Actually, Sookan does not mention detailed information about the war and her traumatic experiences. However, she
clearly reveals that her life is totally changed after the breaking out of the war. She suddenly had to leave from her hometown, Seoul, in order to escape from the North Korean military’s air raids without any preparations or belongings. She unfortunately had to be separated from other family members such as Father and three brothers while heading to Pusan, the second largest city in Korea located in the southeast region. Finally, she unwantedly becomes a refugee who has to live in the refugee camp located on the top of the hill. Continuously, Choi reveals how the protagonist Sookan suffers from the war trauma such as the pain of loss of family, house, school, hometown, and normal life in the prewar period. Here, Choi illustrates Sookan’s mental status through observation of her temporary house in the refugee camp:

From the front door of our hut, we could see all the way down the mountain. Our home consisted of one room made of four thin plywood walls with a sliding door separating a small kitchen area from the main part of the room. Behind the shack, there was a steep drop-off, and it seemed as if a strong wind could blow our house off the mountain into the jagged crags below. Across the way was another mountain, also studded with rows and rows of refugee huts. The sun had already gone down, and as I looked down the mountain, I saw dark shadows moving about. Feeling afraid that the dark valley might swallow me, I quickly sat on the
little wooden ledge by the sliding rice-paper paneled door, and looked down at the city of Pusan. (10)

Through Sookan’s recollection and observation, Choi intends to make readers not only understand the basic settings but also expect the major plot of this novel, which the young adult protagonist’s life is portrayed in extraordinary circumstances originating from the Korean War. Now, Choi unfolds this story by illustrating a series of Sookan’s experiences in two different places—the refugee camp representing her domestic life and the church choir representing her social life. In these places, Sookan unexpectedly meets two people as well as develops the special friendships without any prejudices which make her spontaneously overcome feeling of the pain of loss, feeling of futility, and insecurity originating from the outbreak of war. The first person who inspires Sookan to actively accept her current situation is Baik Rin who has been known as a Shouting Poet in the refugee camp.

In the early morning, Sookan hears an unfamiliar voice from the refugee camp located on the other hill, and she gradually knows that it is the Shouting Poet’s morning greetings to all the refugees in the camp. At this moment, she feels unknown energy and delight from him: “Hello, all you refugees on these mountains. Rise and shine. Remember it is a new day, a brand new day. Hello, hello” (13). Most people in the refugee camp complain about strange noises in the early morning, but it gradually increases Sookan’s curiosity. Finally, she
impulsively responds to this strange greeting. However, Mother admonishes her not to do such a thing because it disobeys social conventions in Korea. Here, Choi introduces the Korean traditional conventions, especially manners of a young lady, to American readers through Mother’s explanation:

Sookan, my dear, sit down next to me. Listen very carefully. It is a disgrace for a well-brought-up girl to shout like that with such abandon. You are a young lady now. You cannot afford to be so impulsive anymore. People are going to say you are growing up wild and without manners because you have no father and no older brothers. I expect you have to behave like a proper young lady at all times. Do you understand? (16)

Actually, Mother does not directly reproach her daughter for impulsive actions, but she advises that Sookan should be cautious of her manners in her father’s and brothers’ absence because other people should fix their eyes on prejudice under the Korean traditional conventions. At this moment, Sookan fully understands Mother’s intentions and advice, but she does not want to seize her actions, because she has unconsciously sought for someone who can soothe her war trauma such as loneliness, sorrow, and fear. In addition, she believes that Shouting Poet’s every morning greetings bring her much consolation. Thus, she hopes to communicate with him, directly:

The hut we lived in always felt empty somehow, and I liked
hearing the sound of a man’s voice, even if it were that of a crazy shouting poet, a total stranger. His hearty morning greeting made me feel safe and happy somehow. Despite Mother’s reprimand, I hoped that someday I would meet that brave and unusual man.

There were many questions I wanted to ask him. (16)

These Korean traditional conventions for the young lady represented by Mother’s advice urge Sookan to not only learn proper manners and attitudes expected by the society but also observe them properly. However, extraordinary circumstances make Sookan have many unsolved questions about her own experiences. Simultaneously, she is convinced that this crazy man can answer for her unsolved many questions because she realizes that her war trauma has been gradually soothed by his energetic and hopeful morning greetings. However, the unexpected death of Shouting Poet brings Sookan the other hopelessness and the feeling of a loss because she cannot get the answers for her life under these extraordinary circumstances, yet. Finally, she visits the grave in order to cherish the memory of the late Shouting Poet and knows his personal history:

A smooth, gray stone slab stood in front of the mound of earth and read, “Baik Rin, 1899-1952. May he rest in peace in God’s love. May he shout his morning greeting to us each day in our dreams from his fellow mountain refugees.” Each letter was deeply and clearly chiseled into the cold gray stone. I traced each
letter with my index finger, one by one. (50)

After knowing the real name of Shouting Poet as Baik Rin, Sookan is deeply moved by his real courage which he has made efforts to deliver hopeful messages through every morning greetings in spite of the refugees’ complaint. At the same time, she realizes that she should not suffer from the pain of loss and emptiness but adapt herself to these extraordinary circumstances. This realization restores Sookan as a normal high school student who is concerned with not only finding the right path of life but also making true friendships, even though she still has to live in the refugee camp and to attend the temporary school building near the sandy beach in Pusan. Thus, she begins to worry about her dream of life. Here, Choi introduces readers to the church choir in Pusan where Sookan makes a special friendship with Junho, and she actively unfolds the story about young adult matters such as searching for the right path of life through sharing their agonies of instability with other friends about the same age.

As Sookan adapts herself to a new environment, her life is gradually backed to normalcy. Thus, she gradually meets other high school students in the church choir, but she is withered by their prejudice against the refugees in Pusan. Simultaneously, she is reminded of the evacuation due to an air raid. Here, Choi fully explains the itinerary of evacuation from Seoul through Sookan’s recollection:

We had escaped the bombing in Seoul just three days before and
had spent an entire day walking in the bitter cold all the way to Inchon harbor. From there, a small rowboat carried us out to a large ship. In the ship’s bowels, we rode for hours until we reached Pusan. Famished, frostbitten, and dirty, we made our way to the base of the refugee mountain. In our tattered, filthy clothes, we stared up at the steep, jagged, red-brown mountain looming above us. Exhausted and overwhelmed, we did not know what to do. (21-22)

This traumatic experience makes Sookan feel endless frustration, emptiness, and alienation. In addition, it also made it difficult for Sookan to reveal her feelings to other members in the church choir. However, she coincidently meets Junho as a partner of a duet and gradually feels comfortable about his attitude and manner without prejudice against refugees. Thus, she begins to tell her traumatic experiences to him. Here, Choi more vividly conveys the war situations to readers through Sookan’s recollections.

First, Choi describes the air raid in Seoul after breaking out of the war in terms of Sookan’s perspective:

Suddenly the acrid smell of bombs and sweeping fires filled my lungs, and the sound of sirens and planes flying low overhead buzzed in my ears. My mind raced back to that horrible day in late June when the dark airplanes roared through the skies and
dropped a shower of dark, egg-shaped bombs from their bellies. The bombs had exploded violently, erupting into a mass of red flames that rose into clouds of heavy black smoke. (60)

Through Sookan’s recollection, Choi makes readers more concretely understand the outbreak of the Korean War which is just simply stated in history books. Continuously, Choi represents Sookan’s family members’ experiences in order to explain why Koreans represented by Sookan’s family were seized by fear against the war:

Oh, Junho, I was just remembering the first bombing of Seoul. It was horrible. The city was transformed into a burning Hell before my eyes. All I could do was stand by the window and watch the bombs explode. Hyunchun, my third brother, came rushing into my room, shouting, “There you are! Come on. Those planes will be right on top of us next. Let’s go.” [. . .] We put thick blankets over our heads and joined the throngs of people headed up Namsan Mountain. We stayed up on the mountain all night and watched the bombs erupt into the city below. We heard buildings crumble, trees crack, and then screams of death. As we were sitting there, I realized my brother Jaechun was holding a large bundle in his arms, which he rocked back and forth like a baby. [. . .] The bombing finally stopped at dawn, and we began
making our way back home. We found our house half bombed and smoldering. We were hungry, and exhausted, and didn’t know what we would do next. (61-62)

Through this vivid description of the air raid in Seoul, Choi intends to help readers clearly understand the origin of Sookan’s war trauma, first. It also helps readers broaden the width of their understandings about the outbreak of the Korean War and Koreans as innocent victims. Here, through Sookan’s perspective, Choi represents the other historical events related to the Korean War, “The January-Fourth Retreat,” in order to explain the decisive cause of Sookan family’s evacuation to Pusan:

> When the North Korean Communists and Communist Chinese came in January, they were shooting everyone in sight. There were more bombs, and we had to run and follow the retreating South Korean and U.N. soldiers going south. It was chaos, and Mother, Inchun and I were separated from my father and my three older brothers. The three of us, along with thousands of other refugees, walked the whole day in the bitter cold snow to Inchon harbor. I was terribly cold and scared. My feet were frozen, but I didn’t even realize it until we were aboard a big gray ship headed for Pusan.” (62-63)

Through Sookan’s recollection, Choi intends to tell readers how Koreans become
innocent victims of the Korean War, who had to be separated from family members, leave their hometowns, be seized with fear of death, and unwantedly live in the refugee camps. These detailed explanations about the wartime stories induce readers represented by Junho to sympathize with Sookan’s life. Furthermore, they also help readers see the refugee represented by Sookan as the innocent victim who inevitably had to leave their hometowns. Thus, Choi unfolds the story through dealing with Sookan’s developing pure friendship with Junho who can freely share matters of young adults.

As Junho gradually knows Sookan’s traumatic experiences, he clearly understands her current life without any prejudice. Thus, he is curious to know Sookan’s dream in the future after graduating high school which is one of the young adults’ major concerns. At this time, Sookan confidently reveals her dream of studying abroad in American to study history. And then, she explains the reason of her decision to Junho:

I often wonder what Americans think about a small country like Korea. Our peninsular is so tiny and yet it is constantly being occupied or fought over. My family and I ran away from the Russians in Pyongyang; then once we settled in Seoul and were living a normal, happy life, we were driven away by the North Koreans and Communist Chinese. I don’t understand how history and politics work, and maybe if I study in America, I will
Sookan’s confident revelation about her future dream well shows that she not only possesses a mature vision than other high school students in Pusan but also dreams of a different life in the future. In terms of this revelation, Choi also tells readers her main reason of representing various historical events during the Korean War.

From the beginning of this novel, Choi has represented the various wartime situations—an outbreak of war, an air bombing raid in Seoul, evacuation, retreat, and refugee camp—to set up the background, illustrate the protagonist’s unstable psychological state, and unfold the stories. Here, Choi represents the last historical events during the Korean War, an armistice agreement.

In wartime, Sookan and Junho gradually help each other out of simple friendship through sharing various matters of young adults. Thus, while preparing to return to Seoul, Sookan accepts Junho’s proposal to take souvenir photography before returning to Seoul. Even though Korean traditional conventions do not permit Sookan to take Junho’s proposal because Korean society strictly restricts young lady’s social activities with young men in public, Sookan lightheartedly accepts it with pure heart. However, Sookan’s decision brings unexpected difficulties to both Mother and Junho because she knows that residents in Pusan accuse Mother of her daughter’s manners and attitudes. Thus, she decides to strive for studying before returning to her hometown, Seoul. Here, Choi’s details explain
the armistice agreement and life of Koreans during the aftermath of the Korean War through Sookan’s perspective in order to help readers understand the last events during the Korean War:

Then, in July 1953, the armistice agreement was signed and everything seemed to revert to the way it had been before the war broke out. The area north of the 38th Parallel was to be again under Communist rule and the southern portion under democratic rule. Korea would remain divided, but at least there would be peace. (90)

Through representing the armistice agreement, Choi intends to explain to readers how the Korean peninsula was officially divided into two countries—North and South Korea. At the same time, she indirectly reveals that Sookan’s more unstable young adulthood from war trauma comes to an end. Thus, Choi tries to conclude this novel with illustrating Sookan’s self-propulsion to pursue her own dream of the future, studying history in America.

While traveling on a train leaving for Seoul, Sookan recollects her refugee life in Pusan during the last three years. And then, she is disappointed by her life under the extraordinary situations which continuously urge her to move into the new places. However, at this moment, she is reminded of the figure of the White Giraffe which had transmitted the hopeful messages to people in the refugee camps in every morning:
This life of constant change and uncertainty filled me with frustration. But then, I remembered the cheery, resounding voice of my shouting poet. He wouldn’t like me to leave the mountain with such sadness and bitterness. To please him, I quickly imagined a lush, green mountain resounding with the echoes of the White Giraffe. (93)

This recollection of the White Giraffe brings Sookan an optimistic mind and positive attitude which makes her bravely face up to her current life, again. Simultaneously, she recollects pure friendship with Junho through reading his own poem, “My White Lilly.” And then, she suddenly realizes the meaning of life in Pusan:

How strange life was! Everything that had happened during the last two and a half years had seemed like a distant dream, but with this letter, it all suddenly welled up before me; the shouting poet, Junho, the long climbs up and down the mountain, the Ewha School by the seashore. The lily and the poem made it all real for me; now I knew my memories would stay with me forever. I held the lily and the poem to my heart, and concluded that my life was not a series of sand castles. There were meaning to life, and precious memories even amidst the sadness. (97)

This realization makes Sookan find more meanings from her refugee life in Pusan,
even though she has regarded it as the tragedy which she has suffered from insecurity and instability. Furthermore, this realization makes Sookan be a more self-propelled young lady who does not worry about her unknown life in the future but bravely challenges various hardships in order to make new meanings.

As a result, she independently prepares to study abroad in America such as passing the prequalifying test, applying to the American universities, and receiving the admission from Finch College located in New York in spite of detaining by her other family members and relatives under the Korean traditional conventions. While boarding on the airplane bound for America, she strongly makes her mind, again, which she is willing to challenge the unknown environments through reminding of the echoes of the White Giraffe: “I thought I saw the shouting poet standing there with his hands cupped around his mouth. ‘Good morning, little girl. Good morning!’ his strong energetic voice rang out” (137). Through this resolution, Choi tells readers that Sookan advances to early adulthood which she independently and dauntlessly faces up to various hardships in her future life. At the same time, here, she finishes the representations of sad Korean historical events, the Korean War, which had weighted Sookan down with more mental pressures while passing through young adulthood in wartime.
2.3 The Early Immigration: *Gathering of Pearls*

The last novel of Choi’s autobiographical trilogy, *Gathering of Pearls*, is an acculturation story of Sookan Bak in America. While attending Finch College in New York, she as a foreign student has to face up to various difficulties such as a language barrier, cultural differences, lack of funds for school expenses, and new school works. Even though she has to spend a hard time to adjust herself into the new environments, she not only amazingly accomplishes various demanding tasks of the first year college life but also successfully adjusts her into the American culture. Simultaneously, she advances to early adulthood through independently establishing both her vision and ways of living in America. Interestingly, while Choi represents sad Korean histories in the previous two novels, *Year of Impossible Goodbyes* and *Echoes of the White Giraffe*, she represents the history of early Korean immigrants in her last book of autobiographical trilogy, *Gathering of Pearls*. In addition, while Choi focuses on illustrating how Sookan indispensably experiences various trials originated from historical events in Korea in the previous two novels, she focuses on demonstrating how Sookan independently handles various difficulties originating from her immigration into America. Through representing Sookan’s first year college life, Choi intends to widen readers’ understanding about the early Korean immigrants’ life, especially the intelligent group members, who struggled to construct their own identity through overcoming various difficulties in the 1950s,
In the first few chapters, Choi describes American life and conventions in the 1950s, especially college life through Sookan’s perspective, and Choi continuously illustrates how Sookan absorbs new manners, conventions, and ways of living from other colleagues in the college. Choi begins the story through illustrating Sookan’s first impression to Americans in the Idle Airport. Sookan’s first impression about Americans is one of wonder because they freely express their feelings and thoughts in public:

As I walked through the swinging doors, I saw a crowd eagerly awaiting the arrival of our flight. People began waving and shouting, then rushing each other with kisses and open arms. How wonderfully warm these people were. I had never seen anyone embrace and kiss in public like this. In Korea, we bowed deeply to greet each other. I wondered if the students meeting me would hug me. Would I know the right way to hug them back? (3)

Even though she left from Korea with strong determination, she is bewildered by the first impression of Americans and their culture which they freely express their feelings in the crowded airport. In addition, the sociable and individual figures of American make Sookan be surprised because they are impossible under the Korean traditional manners and conventions. Furthermore, skyscrapers of New York also make Sookan realize that she has finally arrived at America, a totally
different and unknown country, by herself: “We sped by rows and rows of New York city skyscrapers, but I felt too overwhelmed to appreciate anything so new and different” (5). Here, Choi begins to unfold the story of Sookan’s immigrant life in America through illustrating her first encountering other colleagues on campus.

While attending the orientation session, Sookan finds it difficult to communicate with her American classmate, Ellen, due to the language barrier and cultural differences: “It was just too hard to express myself in English. English grammar was almost the complete opposite of the Korean. I wondered how long it would be before I could voice my thoughts and feelings accurately and freely.” (10) At this moment, Sookan suddenly loses her self-confidence because of her deficiency in English makes her feel inferior. And then, first, Sookan is very embarrassed by Ellen’s marriage plan for the near future:

This is Kyle, my boyfriend. I met him a year ago, through my cousin, and we took this picture last spring, when I was visiting him at Princeton. I can’t wait till we’re married. I already know that I want us to live in a yellow house with green shutters. And I want us to have four children, two boys and two girls. (11)

This Ellen’s straight revelation makes Sookan be surprised because Korean traditional conventions do not allow the young lady to do this, especially freely expressing their feelings, thoughts, and dreams in public. Here, Choi explains to
readers the reason of Sookan’s surprise in terms of representing marriage conventions in Korea: “I was at once stunned and impressed by all her plans. I had never heard anyone speak this way about marriage. In Korea, girls don’t talk about such things. There, marriage is an event that is left to the elders to arrange and decide upon” (12). Actually, for Sookan it is difficult to fully accept Ellen’s marriage plan and manners of speech, but they win her favor because she had thought that Korean traditional conventions did not allow young ladies to freely pursue their own personal life, especially marriage. Thus, Sookan gradually absorbs American culture, customs, and ways of living represented by Ellen’s thoughts and attitudes.

During the first few weeks, Sookan is continuously surprised by American culture and thoughts. At the same time, she repeatedly compares the differences between American and Korean conventions and culture. While comparing Korean culture and social manners with American’s, Sookan knows that she has spontaneously absorbed American culture and lifestyles because she feels more comfortable in this new environment which everybody can not only individually pursue their personal happiness but also freely express their feelings, thoughts, and dreams. Here, Choi unfolds the story through Sookan’s conflicts between keeping Korean traditional manners and adapting American ways of living.

In the middle of the semester, Sookan receives two letters which are written by Mother and Theresa in terms of totally different perspectives for
Sookan’s first few months of college life in America. Although Sookan has been fully influenced by her older sister, Theresa’s nurturing, her strong and firm commandment toward her younger sister gradually makes Sookan confused between her current life and future dream. Just before reading Theresa’s letter, Sookan listens to Marci’s worries which she has conflicted with her parents who one-sidedly expect their daughter’s future based on their minds. In addition, Sookan also knows that Marci has not only suffered from taking too much responsibility originating from the family pressures but also intentionally made her an outsider or a wayward daughter in her home:

My father actually wants me to take over his chemical company someday! I can’t think of anything I would like less. It’s a waste of time for me to pretend to like things just to please them; I refuse to do that anymore. I know what I want for my life. I want to be a classics professor. (49)

Marci’s strong and clear-minded belief for her future life makes Sookan be amazed because Korean young adults never think of disobeying their parents’ decision or expectation for their future. Thus, she begins to introspectively review the social conventions in Korea, first. And then, she also begins to confuse her perspectives of life and future found within Korean conventions, but she unconsciously begins absorbing American ways:

In Korea, you must do what is expected of you and live up to your
responsibilities. It is so important not let your elders down. I was shocked to hear Marci say these things, but strongly invigorated. I didn’t know what to say to her, so I just stared silently at the letter in my hand. It was the first piece of mail from my sister. My heart started to pound. I was afraid to open it. I knew I had disobeyed her by not waiting, and I feared her letter would be an angry one.

(49-50)

While reading her older sister’s letter, Sookan quietly recollects her high school days and how she shared her struggles and future dreams with her older sister. Then, Sookan reviews her older sister’s faithful vision of working for the public service in Korea: “[Theresa] spoke about how we would work side by side helping many people, confronting those in despair, and teaching young children” (52). However, Theresa’s letter leads Sookan to rethink a relationship with her older sister because Theresa continuously instructs Sookan one-sidedly and has no concern for her young sister’s hardship in the new environment: “[I]t all sounded fine then. But now, as I read her letter, she sounded very different to me. It was as if I had never known her” (52). Furthermore, Theresa judged firmly and heartlessly Sookan’s Americanization without deep consideration and thought: “I wondered if my sister still loved me. She didn’t seem to understand the difficulties of facing a new culture and language. Didn’t she realize that I might be struggling to settle into college life and to keep pace in my classes?” (52). At
this moment, Sookan is frustrated because it reminds her of reality and requests that Sookan choose a better way of life in America. As a college student in America, she wants to carry on her personal desire and freely think about her future. However, her reality and family pressures do not allow her to do this. Furthermore, it makes Sookan feel another type of oppression because she is confused by the choice of the right way between two different cultures—Korean and American. It also leads Sookan to rethink her older sister, Theresa and her attitudes. Here, Choi unfolds the story through Sookan’s finding her own ways of living which she individually and independently pursues her own college life in America in order to be a real American college student.

As Sookan is more exposed to American culture and mind in college, she unconsciously feels more comfortable to live in America: “In many ways I feel so comfortable here—sometimes even more comfortable than I felt at home” (57). Additionally, Ellen’s recurring revelation, her desire for independent life through marriage, makes Sookan continuously recollect the life of a young female in Korea: “This would be unthinkable in Korea, where the happiness of both families was more important than the happiness of the couple themselves. Young girls’ lives were tied to the family. Love was not the determining factor” (58). Simultaneously, she doubts the validity of her dream of becoming a nun in the future in order to help and teach Koreans.

As Sookan successfully completes her first semester in Finch College,
she receives two letters from Korea, again. First, Mother’s letter allows Sookan to retrospectively review her mother’s life in the past. In her letter, Mother informs her of the recent conditions of the other family members and applauds her daughter’s amazing accomplishment in America. Theresa’s letter makes Sookan establish a firmer pledge for her life. In her letter, Theresa never mentions about how her younger sister had to struggle to complete her first semester in America. She consistently tries to instruct Sookan in terms of her narrow religious beliefs. She also counsels Sookan to keep away from Americanization:

   Remember, my dear Sookan, that you must not be swept away by the new culture you are in. You are Korean, and your home is here. If you embrace your new culture too fervently, you will later feel lost. You will be neither American nor Korean anymore. I do not want to see this happen to you. I am disappointed. I thought you were stronger and more mature. (86)

After reading Theresa’s letter, Sookan is deeply frustrated because she feels that her sister could not understand how her younger sister struggles to survive in America. As a result, Sookan vaguely perceives that her perspective is heading to a different direction than Theresa’s mind. At the same time, she reassures her strong desire for success in America: “All I knew was that I was trying as best I could to make everyone proud of me” (87).

   While living in America, Sookan is confused due to cultural conflicts
and makes an effort to combine conflicting perspectives of life—American and Korean ways. As she is becoming more Americanized, her family expectation, especially Theresa’s, brings Sookan more confusion to find the proper way of living in America. As a result, this revelation of her struggle causes Sookan to compare her own experiences in America with social conventions in Korea. Finally, she painfully articulates her destiny as a Korean young female:

I hear you and Ellen saying that you’re eighteen years old and have to lead your own lives, but in Korea, it wouldn’t matter if I were fifty years old. I would still have to obey and respect my elders. It is my duty and obligation. If I fail, I bring shame on myself and on my family. I don’t want to disappoint Theresa or the rest of my family, but more and more, I’m not sure that I want to be the type of person my sister wants me to be. I’m not sure anymore that she always knows what is best for me. (104)

This painful articulation of her destiny as a Korean young female in America triggers Sookan to realize her ownership over life. It also leads Sookan to be a more independent young female in America just like Ellen and Marci as well as free from Theresa’s pressure. As a result, Sookan begins to work for her living on campus, to enjoy an ordinary campus life, and to dream of her own future. Finally, she becomes a real American college student who not only individually pursues her own dream of the future but also independently manages her current life. Here,
Choi unfolds the story through Sookan’s reestablishing her dream of life in the future.

During winter break, Father Lee unexpectedly visits Finch College in order to let Sookan know the news of Mother’s death. Then, he brings a “blue silk scarf” as Mother’s relic left to Sookan. With a deep grief, Sookan recalls Mother’s painful life and figure. First, Sookan reproaches herself for rushing to leave her family and questions the reason of her present: “Why had I left? Mother hadn’t wanted me to leave. No one had. Why had I been in such a hurry to come to America, just when Mother needed me most?” (151). Then, she suffers from a tremendous frustration. However, Sookan recalls Mother’s last wish, again: “If you ever feel hurt or tired or empty, I hope that you will remember what I have always told that you about taking that suffering, and creating a pearl around the pain” (145).

Although Sookan does not know what her future will bring, Mother’s last wish leads Sookan to reestablish her strong will to continuously propel towards success in America. Finally, it allows Sookan to fully advance to an adulthood which possesses self-confidence of the present life and the future. Here, Choi winds up the story of the early Korean immigrant in 1950s which the protagonist successfully finds her own way of living in America by herself.

In *The stories we live by*, Dan P. McAdams argues that each of human beings comes to know who are they by creating a heroic story of the self. He calls
it a “personal myth” as a “special kind of story that each of us naturally constructs to bring together the different parts of ourselves and our lives into a purposeful and convincing whole” (12). Sook Nyul Choi’s autobiographical novels well fit the notion of McAdams’, a “personal myth,” because she as both an adult and the first generation Korean American writer could thoroughly review her own life experiences from childhood to early adulthood which has constructed her present life, even though she originally intended to write “fictional history” based on Korean or Korean American history for the American young reader who does not well know these historical events in her homeland, Korea.

Writing a series of autobiographical novels was painful for the author Sook Nyul Choi because she had to “delve [her] traumatic memories of the grim days in Northern Korea under the brutal Japanese occupation and the subsequent Russian occupation, and finally, [her] perilous crossings of the 38th parallel to freedom in South Korea” (Choi “Memoirist and Novelist” 48). Additionally, while creating her first Korean childhood narrative, Choi struggled to overcome new adversities which originated from the sudden death of her husband. She unexpectedly became the head of her family and had to assume all the responsibilities of the household. Furthermore, she had to take over her husband’s company without any prior preparation. However, this writing project not only provided her a chance to recollect her childhood experiences objectively but also gave her a renewed self-confidence to overcome her new adversities. Thus, when
she finished writing the first autobiographical novel, Choi finally moved onto the next page of her new life just as her protagonist Sookan did.

When Choi started writing the sequel of autobiographical novels she was in less pain than the first recollection because she possessed a more visible purpose. The success of her first book ensured Choi as a writer, and it also made her reconnect with a psychological distance between her present and the past. In addition, the unexpected reception of her own childhood narratives encouraged Choi to write the sequel of a Korean young adult protagonist’s self-development story in terms of recollection of her adolescent life which she was twice marginalized in her society. As Choi continuously demonstrated the thematic representations of this young adult protagonist’s unyielding efforts to establish her dream, she gradually reestablished her own vision as a full time writer who can objectively write Korean historical events as a first generation Korean American. Thus, she not only focused on simply representing Korean contexts and her own experiences but centered on more universal matters in the world of the young adult. This new realization of her authorial vision motivated Choi to revitalize her early immigrant life in America.

The purpose of Choi’s writing her last autobiographical novel was slightly different than her previous two novels because it was not a painful memory of trauma but a testimony of the amazing story of successful acculturation in the new country. Thus, Choi wants to revitalize her story of
success in America in order to recreate the Korean American’s collective memory. In addition, Choi’s recollection of her early adulthood in America helps the author, Sook Nyul Choi, restore her self-esteem of her authorial vision, a “cultural ambassador” or “Ambassador of goodwill” for the American reading public who deals with bridging the differences between her native country, Korea and her adapted country, America. Thus, Sook Nyul Choi’s own self-development also ends with the protagonist’s realization of new life in her personal myth.
CHAPTER 3
KOREAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY
IN AN NA’S CONTEMPORARY YOUNG ADULT NOVELS

Fusion Stories serve as a helpful resource for parents, educators, and young readers.
An Na, “Talk about the Fusion Stories”

According to the Korean American immigrant history, Korean immigration to the United States began at the early twentieth century, and they have gradually constructed the Korean American community that is delineated along generation and language lines. Families have taken root, children have been born, and new immigrants continue to arrive. The Korean American community primarily consists of “the il-se, or immigrant first generation; their U.S.-born children, the i-se, or second generation Korean Americans and those who came before completing high school, often referred to as the il-chom-o-se, or the 1.5 generation” (Kim and Yu xix). The majority of Korean Americans are foreign-born, and they think that fluency in English and a higher education will guarantee their children’s success and acceptance as Americans because it was difficult for them to find employment commensurate with their education, experience, and language. Thus, they had to be engaged in small business enterprises such as dry cleaning, small grocery, liquor stores, fast food shops, clothing stores, and photo
processing business. They also had to depend on long hours and unpaid family labor to pursue success of their small business in Koreatown.

The language of the most first generation is Korean. They usually read Korean-language newspapers, attend Korean-language church services, and tune in to Korean television and radio stations. Thus, they relish the century-old traditions of homeland, Korea. Although most parents see no prospects in their own professional careers, they take joy in their children’s academic success. Thus, many of Korean immigrant’s children are acutely conscious of their parents’ sacrifices and hardships. They want to demonstrate their gratitude, even though they also suffer from cultural conflicts between embracing the freedom of the land of their birth and observing their parents’ old-fashioned values.

However, these self-sacrificing efforts of Korean immigrant parents made fruition because recently many il-chom-o-se and i-se have graduated from U.S. high schools and colleges, and they have been “leaving their mark not only in various occupations but also on a widening range of American cultural institutions, including journalism, visual art, literature, music, and theatre” (Kim and Yu xx). In literature, some of the works of these generations is informed by “the kinds of national consciousness forged under colonial rule and civil war in the parents’ and grandparents’ generations, but most writers begin to represent their experiences of America, which involves the interplay of racial, ethnic, female, and colonial subjectivities” (Kim “Korean” 174).
As the *il-chom-o-se*, An Na also uses her own experiences of America in her three contemporary YA novels—*A Step from Heaven* (2001), *Wait for Me* (2006), and *The Fold* (2008)—in order to illustrate contemporary Korean Americans’ life in America. However, her three novels show different characteristics from other Korean descent writers’ because they are originally written for specific readers, Asian American young adults. Thus, she uses different aesthetics to create her contemporary YA novels.

Most scholars had difficulty in defining YA literature and its unique characteristic, but they generally see YA as “readers between the approximate ages of 12 and 18 choose to read (as opposed to what they may be coerced to read for class assignments)” (Donelson and Nilsen 1). This specific age group, YA also makes writers develop different aesthetics than the aesthetics of general adult books:

The center of most YA fiction is becoming an adult, finding the answer to the question, “Who am I and what am I going to do about it? No matter what events are going on in the book, accomplishing that task is really what the book is about, and in the climactic moment the resolution of the external conflict is linked to a realization for the protagonist that helps shape an adult identity. (Campbell 486)

Na’s three contemporary novels primarily illustrate the story of Korean American
young adult protagonists’ self-development, but she makes them universal YA stories beyond ethnic limitation as Korean American narratives through demonstrating these unique characteristics of YA literature.

First, Na creates contemporary Korean American YA protagonists. Second, she primarily demonstrates the procedures of YA protagonists’ self-development. Third, she realistically features everyday YA life in Koreatown in Southern California. Fourth, she does not centralize on demonstrating Asian American sociopolitical matters but focuses on representing more problematic matters that would affect contemporary young adult's world—family dynamics, domestic violence, parental pressure, interracial romance, run away from home, alienation, consumerism, homosexuality, and plastic surgery. Fifth, she creates Korean American YA narratives in order to convey specific messages to her target audiences, contemporary Asian American YA readers, who need to find the answer to the pressing question of the day. Finally, Na creates her Korean American YA narratives as a bicultural Korean American writer.

Na started writing her novel as “a way to capture memory” that was her own coming-of-age story as the children of Korean immigrant family in America. (Smith “An Na”). In addition, she wanted to share various colleagues’ stories in her Korean community to contemporary Asian American YA readers. However, her writing projects provide her new possibility, establishing her own authorial vision of a full-time writer for contemporary YA readers. Thus, in this chapter, I
examine how Na insightfully features a Korean immigrant YA protagonists’ growing up through realistically representing contemporary Koreatown in Southern California.

3.1 Korean American Dream: A Step from Heaven

In *A Step from Heaven*, the first book of her YA novel series set in Koreatown, Southern California, Na portrays a stirring immigration story of young protagonist Young Ju Park’s coming-of-age from the time she leaves Korea as a small child until she graduates from high school in America. Stylistically, Na, as a writer of Korean descent, juxtaposes featuring the Korean immigrant protagonist’s coming-of-age set in Koreatown in Southern California and demonstrating subject matters of contemporary young adult literature such as family dynamics, identity crisis, generation conflicts, insecure environments, cultural conflicts, and acculturation.

In this young adult account, Na primarily deals with the story of a Korean immigrant family’s pursuit of the American dream in Southern California. However, interestingly, her portrayal of both a Korean immigrant’s life and Koreatown is not optimistic or idealistic as normally represented by the myth of “Model minority.” She tries to debunk the other side of the American dream and immigrant life by narrating Young Ju’s painful experiences of frustration, yearning, and longing as a young Korean immigrant child.
In the first few chapters, Na describes Young Ju and her family’s pre-American life and demonstrates how they initiate their own dreams of America from a four-year-old girl’s perspective. Young Ju’s father, Apa’s American dream is to attain financial success because he is an uneducated fisherman who has suffered financial pressures to take care of his family: “Apa says that in Mi Gook everyone can make lots of money even if they did not go to an important school in the city” (11). Young Ju’s mother, Uhmma’s dream is to live in a comfortable environment because she believes that “all the humans in Mi Gook are pretty like dolls. And they live in big houses. Much bigger than the rich fish factory man’s house in the village” (11).

As a little girl, Young Ju’s American dream is slightly different than her parents’. She wants to live in a heaven that brings the family back to their happy life because the financial pressures make her parents have quarrels with each other frequently: “God is in the sky. Mi Gook must be in heaven and I have always wanted to go to heaven. It is just like the Good Book says” (13). This vague yearning for a rosy future leads Young Ju’s parents to possess an illusion about America. It also leads Uhmma to force Young Ju to curl her hair in an attempt to look more American. Here, An Na begins to illustrate how Young Ju first loses a sense of self.

Young Ju doesn’t like curling her hair and naively denies becoming a “Mi Gook” girl because she thinks that she is too old to change. Indeed, Young Ju
completes the preparation of becoming a Mi Gook girl regardless of how she feels about the matter. Young Ju’s first realization of Mi Gook begins in Gomo’s house. Many different things in Gomo’s house—rooms, pink furs, and drink—cause Young Ju to feel a strong curiosity. It also makes her think that Gomo is very rich and happy. Especially different figure and language of Samchun, Uhing Kel Thim, give the impression to Young Ju that a Mi Gook person is an angel. As a consequence of her naïve imagination, Young Ju starts to become very excited. However, Ko-Ka Ko-la, the drink Mi Gook people love, brings a bad feeling to Young Ju although she has to drink it in order to be a Mi Gook girl according to Uhmma and Apa:

Ahya! It hurts. This drink bites the inside of my mouth and throat like swallowing tiny fish bones. This is what Mi Gook people love? I want to push the drink away, but I cannot show bad manners. […] They do not see my wet eyes and hurting mouth. (26-7)

Young Ju first encounters real Americans, besides her Samchun, when the new school year begins. Initially, the teacher’s figure scares Young Ju: “My teacher looks like the old witch who ate bad children for dinner” (29). In addition, when the teacher calls her “Young,” she is frustrated because she unwillingly has to accept her new identity. Then, she gradually becomes angry at her teacher and Mi Gook. While observing her classmates’ appearances, especially their hairstyles, Young Ju knows that Uhmma has the wrong idea about Americans because they
do not have curly hair like Gomo and herself. In addition, the lack of competence of communication in English facilitates in breaking Young Ju’s naïve perspective of Mi Gook. As a result, Young Ju realizes that her life in Mi Gook will not be happy and easy with her hastily constructed American identity.

Young Ju’s transformation into a Mi Gook girl is completed by her parent’s eagerness of becoming American. However, Young Ju subconsciously sees that her parent’s dream of Mi Gook is an illusion in terms of her own experiences during the first few months. Superficially, she seems like a Mi Gook girl because she has hurriedly completed all the missions to transform into a Mi Gook girl, such as “moving to Mi Gook,” “curling hair,” “drinking Ko-ka Ko-la,” and “attending a Mi Gook school.” At this point, the story of Young Ju’s coming-of-age is unfolded in terms of demonstrating her family members’ lives in Mi Gook.

Just as Young Ju realized that Mi Gook is not a heaven through her experiences, her parents also gradually realize that their dreams of America were originated from an idealistic optimism that Mi Gook would bring happiness and riches to their family. Furthermore, a combination of menial jobs, shame, failure, and lack of financial success frustrate Young Ju’s parents and bring other conflicts to Young Ju’s family. After leaving Gomo’s house, Apa manages to rent a basement of an old house, but both Apa and Umma seem to be very frustrated with their living conditions.
Uhmma blames Apa’s financial incompetence as the reason why she has to live in an old ugly house with Young Ju. Then, she reveals that she will look for two jobs so that they can save for their own house. However, Uhmma’s plan makes Apa angry. Finally, Young Ju accidentally observes Apa’s using violence on Uhmma. This terrible incident makes Young Ju seize with panic because she has never seen Apa’s violence to Uhmma in Korea, even though she knows that they have quarreled with each other before moving to Mi Gook. Thus, Young Ju unconsciously feels that Mi Gook is far from heaven.

As Young Ju advances to the third grade, she seems to be fully accustomed to school life in Mi Gook. However, she still has communication problems with her American schoolmates because of language barriers. She cannot easily differentiate between small nuances of American expressions, and she cannot learn it from her parents. Thus, she makes an effort to decrease the language barrier by searching for the dictionary definition herself, but to master English is not easy for her as an ESL student. At this time, Apa orders Young Ju to help him wash the car in Korean. While helping Apa in the parking lot, Young Ju suddenly wonders the reason of using Korean in the home even though her family is living in America:

I don’t understand why I have to speak Korean at home so I will not forget where I come from. Why did we move to America if I am to speak English only at school? But I move him off to the side
and give him a sponge to hold. (53)

Young Ju’s conflicts between these two worlds bring her to wonder about Apa’s old fashioned mind and attitudes based on Korean conventions. Young Ju feels uncertain oppression from Apa as well as cannot understand his old fashioned Korean discipline. Thus, she attempts to find the answer to Apa’s thought by using the dictionary, but it does not give her a clear answer. As a result, she initiates a dream of flying away from her oppressed reality: “So fast that I begin to fly. Away. From here. From me” (56).

Now Young Ju is a thirteen-year-old and becomes more Americanized. In addition, she can see her parent’s life more objectively. At the same time, she also begins a struggle to overcome her anxiety as an adolescent from a Korean immigrant family. Here, Na begins to illustrate how Young Ju independently establishes her own voice, thought, ways of living, and subjectivity as an adolescent in America. She becomes the best student in her class, negotiates her own way around the Department of Immigrations, learns the culture of American girls, and makes a best friend. At the same time, Na demonstrates not only how Young Ju’s self-development is threatening to her old fashioned immigrant parents, especially Apa, but also how it gives rise to serious generation conflicts in her family.

At this time, the death of Halmoni brings a tremendous impact on Young Ju’s family, especially Apa, because the conflicts between Apa and Uhmma are
getting worse. While preparing for a history exam late at night, Young Ju suddenly hears some noise in the kitchen. She knows that her parents are beginning to argue seriously. This quarrel between Apa and Uhmma makes Young Ju feel an unknown insecurity. At this time, Young Ju hears a loud crashing sound and Apa’s loud yelling from the kitchen: “Who do you think you are? Questioning me. *Slap.* Stop it, I say to myself. Go out there and stop it. But I do nothing. Say nothing. Only listen to the walls like a shameful mouse” (96).

Actually, Young Ju is eager to stop her parents’ endless arguing, but she can do nothing because she well knows that it would be useless for Apa who always has ignored his daughter’s voice and thoughts. Suddenly, she hears Apa’s crying out with deep frustration:

You think I am worthless. I see it in your eyes. A son who does not even go to his own uhmma’s funeral. A husband who does not provide you with enough. You always want more. But there is nothing. Look, we have nothing. My best is always not enough. Get away from me. You are strangling me to death with your hopes. (96)

At this moment, Young Ju sees Uhmma who is sitting on the floor and crying softly in the dark living room. Simultaneously, she looks around the living room and figures what had happened between Apa and Uhmma: “The coffee table is overturned, Korean newspaper strewn all over the carpet. The smell of Apa’s
alcohol breath soaks the air. I pick up a broken frame, the photo of our family at
the airport in Korea slightly skewed, and set it on the couch” (96-7).

As Apa executes his violence frequently, he not only gradually loses his
position as the head of the family but also becomes out of favor with the family
members. Uhmma begins to attend a Sunday worship service in a Korean church,
and she tries to solve her conflicts with Apa by engaging in a close relationship
with the Korean community. As Young Ju becomes more grown up, she also
suffers from conflicts with Apa because she cannot understand Apa’s old
fashioned Korean disciplines. Simultaneously, Young Ju feels a shame for her
parents’ low wages jobs and poor living conditions: “Amanda and her parents do
not know where I live. We have always hung out at Amanda’s house because I
lied and said Uhmma and Apa owned a restaurant that kept them working long
hours so there was usually no one home” (106).

After a long attempt at persuading Uhmma, Young Ju receives a
permission to spend time Amanda’s parents. Their warm and careful
entertainment is impressive to Young Ju and triggers her to wonder about her
parents’ flatness of life. This wondering leads Young Ju to be eager to be free
from Apa’s severe oppression and tyranny toward the family. At the dinner table,
Young Ju’s eagerness is even more ignited because of Apa’s violence and old
fashioned discipline:

Apa grips his beer. His eyes narrow and a smooth, tight voice
snakes out, it is always why with you. Stand up, Apa orders. [. . .] You, Apa shouts and hits side of my head with his knuckles, will never question me. Arrows of pain shoot through my head, making me squint. [. . .] Apa yells, Asking for an explanation! Always getting your own way! You have been running around with that American girl for too long. You are not allowed to see her anymore. She is a bad influence. (109)

Apa is convinced that Young Ju has already become an Americanized girl and has been spoiled by her American friend, Amanda. However, she cannot accept Apa’s old fashioned discipline because she is convinced that she is not a bad girl influenced by an American mind. Thus, Apa’s execution of violence and tyrannical orders bring a mixed feeling of anger and frustration. However, it also facilitates Young Ju to be more independent as a young adult.

While Apa’s unreasonable violence towards the family becomes more severe and frequent, Uhmma continues to tolerate it because it is her way of accepting the situation as her destiny. However, Young Ju still cannot understand Uhmma’s attitude. Furthermore, Uhmma’s answer makes her more confused: “There are some things you do not know about your Apa. He is a very prideful man [. . .]. He was so different when we first met [. . .]. He is still very upset over the death of your Halmoni” (128). Young Ju still cannot understand Uhmma’s impossible patience and response toward Apa’s violence because she already
possesses her own perspectives of life: “There is no excuse, I say” (128). At this moment, Young Ju hears Uhmma’s wish for her daughter’s life: “Your life can be different, Young Ju. Study and be strong. In America, women have choices” (129). Uhmma’s revelation of her remorseful wish helps Young Ju understand her mother’s painful life as well as facilitate her to move into the next stage of life, early adulthood, in which she makes her own decisions. As a result, she confronts Apa’s severe violence to both Uhmma and herself. Finally, she betrays the family by revealing Apa’s brutal violence to 911 in order to protect both Uhmma and herself from Apa’s habitual violence. Uhmma is unhappy with Young Ju’s decision to reveal the family to the policeman, but Young Ju does not feel guilty. Furthermore, as an early adult, Young Ju does not see herself as an adolescent anymore who needs her parents’ support and care.

Apa’s absence makes Young Ju feel a strong responsibility for her family. She begins to work in Uncle Tim’s small ice cream shop on the beach with her younger brother Joon. By working, Young Ju and Joon save money for the family’s weekly groceries. Furthermore, she begins to prepare the family’s meal by herself in order to help with Uhmma’s housework. Thus, Young Ju shows that she is fully ready to live her own life as an independent adult. Indeed, when Young Ju hears the news of Apa’s return to Han Gook, she reveals that she is strong enough to take care of her family in Mi Gook. As a result, Uhmma, Joon and Young Ju begin to dream of a new life with hope.
Finally, they possess their own house as a fruit of their hard work. The whole family’s endless efforts allow them to live a normal life. Soon, Young Ju plans to study in college. While preparing to leave home, Young Ju suddenly begins to worry about her uncertain future in college: “What if I don’t like it at college? What if I stand out like an alien? What if I am disappointed?” (146). Amidst her anxieties, she finds Uhmma’s old storage boxes which are full of old photos and listens to Uhmma’s stories of her family history in Korea. While listening to her family history and past life in Korea, Young Ju realizes that a whole part of her history has been missing because she lives as an American girl. Suddenly, Young Ju vaguely remembers one of her childhood memories, “jumping in the waves”: “The waves. Uhmma! I exclaim, a memory forming on the edge of my tongue. You taught me how to jump in the waves that day” (149). Then, she hears Uhmma’s warm encouragement: “Take [this picture] to college so you can remember how to be brave. […] And remember, Young Ju. You come from a family of dreamers” (150). From this point on, she becomes strongly determined to bravely attempt at a future of uncertainty in college. Here, Na tells readers that Young Ju advances to early adulthood which she independently and dauntlessly faces up to various hardships in her future life. At the same time, she finishes representing both sides of American dream in Koreatown.
3.2 Generation Conflicts: *Wait for Me*

In *Wait for Me*, the second book of her YA novel series set in Koreatown, Southern California, Na primarily features the young Korean American protagonist Mina’s experiencing the process of establishing subjectivity during summer vacation. In this novel, Mina suffers from insecurities about her present life which originates from family pressure. Due to her mother’s illusion about her daughter’s successful life in the future, Mina not only constructed a false identity but also pretended to be a perfect child in the Korean immigrant community. As a consequence, she cannot possess her own voice, thought, and vision of the future; she passively follows her mother’s plan and direction. Coincidently, Mina encounters Ysrael, a young Mexican worker, at her parents’ laundromat, develops a secret interracial romance with him, and finally establishes subjectivity for her life in the future.

As a writer for young adults, An Na primarily shares contemporary problems young adults routinely face to readers. In addition, as a writer of Korean descent, Na examines more specific issues encountered by contemporary young adults in Koreatown such as “interracial romance,” “family conflicts,” and “identity crisis.” More interestingly, Na’s childhood account deals with the growing-up story of a Korean American young adult protagonist set in Koreatown in Southern California, but she challenges “conventional definitions of what it means to grow up a Korean American in contemporary America” by revealing the
protagonist’s dark and painful experiences (Powell 208).

Na begins the story of Mina’s coming-of-age by introducing her current living situations to readers. In this coming fall semester, Mina becomes a senior in high school. Her family has suffered from financial instability. Thus, her parents spend most of their time working at their dry cleaning business. As a result, Mina takes care of her impaired younger sister, Suna. Furthermore, due to their slow business during the last year, Mina also helps her parents in their self-employed business.

As the first daughter, Mina has been overloaded with too many tasks. Now, she feels tremendous pressure to conduct many duties for her family members. These family situations give rise to her eagerness to escape from her real world. As a result, she intentionally isolates herself from the outside world, the only possible way she believes that can inspire the free spirit in her:

It always amazed me how music could take me to another place. It didn’t matter if I was at church singing in the chorus about God or jamming to the radio or listening to my CDs. Even the most insipid song had something. A beat, a melody, that lone bass holding everything together. But when a song was right, when everything fell together, each note, each rise and dip of the voice filled me with a sense of yearning. A vastness. The sensation of flight seeping into my skin until I was skimming through the air,
the music holding me aloft. (6)

However, Mina’s feeling of freedom is suddenly cut short and transformed into annoyance after she arrives at her parents’ dry cleaners because of her feeling of sacrificing too much in order to help her parents: “Even in this heat, walking into the store was like stepping from the clouds straight into hell” (7). From here, Na begins to fully unfold the story of Mina’s inner conflicts with her mother, Uhmma.

As Mina becomes a senior high school student, she feels tremendous pressure from Uhmma because she has compelled Mina to be a perfect daughter who should not only be an academically excellent student but also be an excellent helper of her parents’ business. As a result, Uhmma always reminds Mina of the need to perfect her preparation for the SAT so that she can receive admission into a highly competitive university, Harvard:

Remember, Mina, Uhmma started lecturing, you do not have another chance. Your senior year is very important. Mrs. Kim says that Jonathon only got into Stanford after he got a perfect score on his SAT. Which reminds me, Mrs. Kim has more books for you. From that expensive preparation class Jonathon took last summer. (11)

Mina knows all too well of Uhmma’s belief based on the illusionary dream of success in Koreatown. Children’s admissions into highly competitive universities would represent their success in the immigrant community. This convention in
Koreatown brings Mina a feeling of heavy oppression. She has no free time to enjoy her personal life because Uhmma is constantly meddling in her life. Thus, Mina cannot stand Uhmma’s burdensome antics in which she always compares her daughter with the idealized good child in the Korean community, Jonathon Kim, who is a freshman in Stanford. Mina gradually recollects Jonathon’s life and his family, and eventually compares his life with her life:

Jonathon, unlike me, had time to himself. He managed the restaurant’s finance and helped on busy weekend nights, but he never had the daily grind because he could afford to hire people. I barely had enough time to make a few after school meetings for chorus and clubs, and that was only because Uhmma knew it looked good on college applications. (12)

Finally, when she thinks about her family situation and her life, she feels deep desperation because her current living environment does not allow her to just concentrate on studying.

As Uhmma becomes more attached to Mina and her success in the future, she begins to seriously interfere with all aspects of Mina’s life such as studying, working, making friends, speech, and dress. In addition, she always tries to get information from Jonathon’s mother, Mrs. Kim. Furthermore, she compels Mina to keep a close relationship with Jonathon. One late afternoon, Mina unwillingly accompanies Uhmma to visit Mrs. Kim’s house in order to receive Jonathon’s
books he used to prepare for the SAT. When they arrive at Mrs. Kim’s house, Mina becomes angry at Uhmma because of her servile attitude toward Mrs. Kim. In addition, Uhmma’s bragging to Mrs. Kim makes her more uncomfortable:

Uhmma nodded at me and added. Mina has been looking forward to her senior years. Now that she is president of the honor society, she’ll be very busy this year. [...] It is a wonder she keeps up all her straight A’s while doing all that extra work at school and still finding time to help her parents. Sometimes I have to tell her to stop studying so hard and go to sleep. (26)

Mina knows well that she cannot go to Harvard which is a validation for her being a perfect daughter in Koreatown. At this moment, Mina finds herself in an awkward situation because she has told a lie to Uhmma. Then, she begins to worry about the disclosure of her false life: “How long could I keep this up? How much longer before all my lies about my grades, about going to Harvard, crumbled around me?”(30). Simultaneously, she feels hatred for herself for continuously lying to Uhmma: “Anything to keep from feeling the disgust at myself” (31).

Indeed, Mina’s inner conflicts make her feel severe anxiety and insecurity. Although Mina makes an effort to find the solution to her falling grades, Uhmmas’s one-sided decision brings deep frustration to Mina and also causes Mina to break off communication with her mother. Her mother’s dream of
Harvard as the way to her daughter’s future is also brainwashed into Mina. As a consequence, Mina tries to live according to Uhmma’s Harvard myth, and Mina has made endless effort to bring Uhmma’s dream to life.

In the first few chapters, Na introduces to readers how Mina as a young adult in Koreatown suffers under her mother’s illusionary world which is distant from reality. She also reveals that both financial deficiency and her parents’ old fashioned discipline makes Mina seriously detach herself from her family and community, Koreatown. From here, Na begins to unfold the story of Mina’s quest for subjectivity by revealing her problems, developing an interracial romance, and traveling beyond Koreatown with a young Mexican male musician, Ysrael.

One day, Uhmma hires a new worker. Mina curiously observes this young man’s figure in her parents’ dry cleaners. His name is Ysrael. He seems to be special because he performs his job perfectly and amazingly possesses “the faintest sound of his music” (51). Thus, Mina is gradually attracted to Ysrael’s exotic mood that makes her feel freedom from the harsh reality.

To take free SAT prep sessions, Mina goes to the library, and she coincidently meets Ysrael. At this time, they begin to communicate with each other. After listening to Ysrael’s life story, Mina becomes a bit excited because he seems to have a strong will and plan for his future: “Nah, I just went up there to visit my sis. I’m moving up there at the end of summer. As soon as I get my money together to find myself a place” (60). Simultaneously, she dreams of
Ysrael’s exotic journey using his description of Napa and San Francisco as settings for where she can breathe freely without any oppression. Furthermore, when she hears the news that Ysrael is a musician and has been to the beach to practice his guitar, she feels that he is also eager to pursue a free spirit just like her. Thus, she goes to the beach with him and unconsciously feels freedom which enables her to wash out the anxiety and frustration of the real world: “The sound of the waves breaking along the beach turned our attention to the sea. I breathed in deeply, letting the cool ocean air wash me clean” (68).

At this moment, she subconsciously forgets her identity because the exotic mood of the beach helps Mina feel comfortable. Then, she begins to review her false life found within Uhmma’s illusionary dream:

He played with his heart. And where was mine? I started out at the sea. I had buried it so long ago. Buried it under all of Uhmma’s dreams for me. Buried it under all the lies I told to live up to those expectations. When had what Uhmma wanted become more important than what I wanted? Did I even know what that was anymore? (72)

Indeed, Mina feels a huge distance between her reality and Uhmma’s dream, and she is frustrated again. However, Ysrael’s revelation of his childhood experiences in Mexico leads Mina to possess a close relationship with him, and it also facilitates Mina to see her life with a different perspective.
Finally, Mina immerses herself in a secret romance with Ysrael, the exotic young Mexican man. In addition, she gradually opens her mind to him and initiates traveling outside Koreatown with him. Ysrael’s advice facilitates Mina to think of her own dream. Thus, she gradually realizes that she does not want to pursue her current dream because it was not established by her own will. Finally, she painfully reveals the truth of her dream: “No one had ever asked me that before” (98). Mina’s painful articulation brings calmness in her mind because she feels a certain sympathy from Ysrael. Then, she gradually falls into the exotic mood of sunset, silently watching numerous stars floating in the blue-black night sky. Finally, she kisses him.

The kiss with Ysrael leads Mina to awaken romantic feelings within her which make her forget all the burdens of life as well as become a young female. However, it also brings other problems to Mina because she cannot disobey Uhmma’s old fashioned belief which causes her to pretend to be a perfect daughter in the false world. Thus, she suffers from conflict between two different minds. As a result, she hesitates to advance forward in her true feelings for Ysrael.

Ysrael’s encouragement helps Mina search for her own path in life: “You’re not a child. You do have a mind of your own” (114). However, Mina still does not have enough courage to stand up to her mother in terms of revealing her lies because she has no ownership of her life yet. While listening to Ysrael’s unknown Mexican song, Mina feels different moods and becomes gradually
immersed in Ysrael’s voice and feeling. As Ysrael’s songs continue, Mina’s feeling of freedom rapidly turns into frustration as Ysrael’s singing comes to an end because she realizes that she has misinterpreted Ysrael’s life with a distorted perspective:

How stupid I felt. All this time I only saw him as someone whose life bordered with mine. His life at the dry cleaners, his life at the library. But that was my life, not his. He had far more than that. I wiped away the tears with the heel of my palm. And I was not a part of this. His life. (123)

This realization leads Mina to doubt her relationship with Ysrael. Subsequently, it leads her to review her insecure situation which continuously makes her an outsider. At this moment, she lifts her eyes up to the stars and begins to reveal the truth of her current life to Ysrael:

“Sometimes I feel so lost,” I told Ysrael. “I don’t know what I’m doing. I’ve been living with all these lies for so long. I can’t tell what’s real anymore.” [ . . . ] “I don’t have the grades for Harvard,” I said. “All lies to keep my mother happy.” I paused. “And I stole money so I could disappear next fall. Just go somewhere and pretend that I was at Harvard.” [ . . . ] “Only . . . now there’s you. And I don’t want you to be a lie. I don’t want you to be something I just made up. I want us to be real.” (127)
This painful articulation helps him fully understand Mina and her suffering. It also causes them to attach to each other more closely. Finally, Mina kisses Ysrael and awakens the ownership of her life within her.

After listening to Ysrael’s advice, Mina is still insecure about living on her own even though she decides to accompany him. Indeed, she returns to home with Suna and observes Ysrael’s CD which he gave her just before his farewell. Simultaneously, she doubts her rosy future:

I closed my eyes. A wild beating like the first flutter of wings before flight took over my heart. I wanted to be with him. To live my own life. To be happy. Could we really do this? Could we really have a life together? Was this what he really wanted? As though reading my thoughts, Ysrael said softly, “Come with me.” (152)

While imagining her future, Mina is a bit anxious with uncertainty, but after Ysrael’s proposal, she is determined to reveal the truth to Uhmma bravely. The next morning, Mina still hesitates to tell the truth of her life and relationship with Ysrael. She suddenly hears Uhmma’s yelling at Suna, and her continuous complaints about her life make Mina be angrier. Finally, she runs from home.

At this moment, Mina perceives that Suna truly worries about her older sister’s unexplained disappearance. Simultaneously, she realizes how her younger sister suffers from the unexpected absence of her older sister: “For Suna. I thought
of her crying, begging me not to go. Oh, Suna. I wiped the rain from my face. Why? Were you afraid I would leave you?” (164). Finally, she determines that she should face the truth because she cannot lie to Uhmma anymore. She is convinced of “[her] own voice rising up inside, deep and light, free yet weighted with honesty that could only come from taking on the obstacles, the responsibilities of living a life that was true” (169).

Indeed, she begins to dream of her own future in which she will go through various obstacles and overcome them with her own will and as a more independent young female. This burgeoning new dream leads Mina to advance into early adulthood who goes through various obstacles with her own will and a new matured vision for life. Here, Na winds up the coming-of-age story of young adult protagonist Mina who begins to establish her own subjectivity through overcoming generation conflicts in Koreatown.

3.3 Identity Conflicts: The Fold

In The Fold, the third book of her YA novel series set in Koreatown, Southern California, Na features Joyce Kim’s coming-of-age story during the summer vacation just before her senior year of high school. As the second daughter of Korean immigrant family, Joyce does not like her appearance, especially eyebrow without the fold, which is originated from her ethnic heritage, Korean. Thus, her blind faith of westernized value of beauty makes her dream of
taking plastic surgery because she is convinced that it will help her be a winner of a competition for the most gorgeous guy in school.

As a writer for YA readers, Na primarily focuses on featuring the contemporary YA protagonist’s self-development who has to make a right decision with a proper vision of life. In addition, as a Korean descent writer, especially 1.5 generation, Na realistically represents Korean immigrant family’s life in Koreatown, Southern California. In *The Fold*, Na not only shares thematic representations of YA novels such as family dynamics, sibling rivalry, identity crisis, subjectivity, and growing-up but also uses Koreatown as the main setting just like two previous novels. However, *The Fold* shows different characteristics because Na tries to illustrate a story of one hundred percent American young protagonist who struggles to go through more universal matters which contemporary young adults confront such as plastic surgery, homosexuality, sibling rivalry, college education, friendship, and romance.

Interestingly, Na reveals that *The Fold* is one of “Fusion Stories” which are “the brainchild of bunch of APA (Asian Pacific American) writers like Paula Yoo, Grace Lee, Mitali Perkins, Joyce Lee Wong,” and they are not “traditional tales set in Asia nor stories about coming to America for the first time” (Staino). Thus, Na removes the ethnic qualifier “Korean” from her Korean descent young protagonists as well as more focuses on satisfying contemporary young readers’ needs, “books as a sort of guide on how to navigate the particular trials and
tribulations unique to being Asian Pacific American” (Shin). Thus, in The Fold, Na well reflects many cultures and challenges of growing up Korean American today through questioning the myth of westernized beauty in Koreatown.

In the first few chapters, the author Na introduces the young protagonist, Joyce, and her life to readers through featuring Joyce’s school life. Just before heading to school, Joyce cannot step away from the mirror, and she is oversensitive to her external features because she should look special in order to grab her classmate, John Ford Kang. In spite of her older sister, Helen’s compelling to ride on the car; Joyce spends more time to get rid of zit on her temple. Finally, she rushes out of bathroom and into living room, but she cannot see Helen and younger brother, Andy. Simultaneously, she just finds a note on the coffee table which is written by Helen. At this time, Joyce becomes angry at Helen’s selfishness:

This was just like Helen. Everything had to revolve around her schedule. Helen was going to be late and she had to drop off Andy, their younger brother, at school. Helen had a meeting, so Joyce could ride her bike. Joyce flung a stack of paper to floor and found the key. She snatched it up and ran out of the apartment, slamming the door behind her. (4-5)

Here, Na reveals that Joyce as a becoming senior high school student possesses the archetypal characteristics of contemporary young adult. She excessively
concerns about herself for her looks, dreams of a romance with gorgeous classmate, and complains unequal treatments with her older sister. She does not have her own room in the house because she has to share it with her older sister. In addition, she does not have her own car even though she got a drive license. Thus, she is always dissatisfied not only with her current situations but also with her older sister, Helen’s selfishness. Thus, readers simply assume that sibling rivalry is one of central motifs in this young Korean American account.

As a young adult, Joyce is frequently ups and downs on feelings. Now, she is quickly excited about the freedom of summer vacation. At this time, Gina suggests Joyce to transform their appearances that would bring them both self-confidence and popularity. As Joyce listens to Gina’s ambitious plan of transformation, she thinks that it is too naïve and idealistic plan such as “summer Cinderella dream in middle school” (42). Thus, she begins to think over more extraordinary ways of their transformation.

At this time, Joyce becomes excited at Gomo’s announcement because she is planning to give the whole family members very special gifts. Joyce also thinks about taking a plastic surgery because Gomo is poisoned by taking eight plastic surgeries. It brings new hope to Joyce because she always has a complex of inferior appearance to Helen:

Helen was the deluxe to Joyce’s standard model. The upgraded version. Helen’s features were more symmetrical—her eyes larger,
the rose petal pout of her lips fuller, her skin clearer. Their bodies were similarly lean and strong, except that Helen had received the slightly larger breasts, the longer legs and the knees without the fat. (54)

On Monday night, Joyce finally knows what Gomo’s present is. And then, she hears Gomo’s simple explanation: “Those days, they do not even cut the skin with a knife. They use a laser and only sew a little here and there” (77). First, Joyce is very surprised by Gomo’s present, but she is getting to furious about operation itself. Thus, she begins to research the plastic surgery in her own ways because she actually does not know anyone who had gone through with it except for Gomo. In addition, she begins to review her acquaintances’ eyelids such as Gina and Mother. She also remembers her older sister: “Helen didn’t have to worry about getting a fold like [me]. Her eyes were so large, even without the creases, that people sometimes thought that she was Hapa or half Asian and half Caucasian just like John Ford Kang” (84). Finally, she looks over her eyelids through a mirror and begins to compare her face and the faces of countless models in the cosmetic posters, and she concludes that her face would look like a stereotypical Asians such as Lynn Song at her high school.

This comparison brings Joyce to possess more eagerness to take the plastic surgery, but she still does not decide in her mind whether she will take it or not. In addition, she wants to know whether people can differentiate between
natural and artificial eyelids. Here, Na demonstrates how Joyce as a typical YA gradually gets information in terms of her own ways.

On Sunday morning, while attending the worship service in Korean church, Joyce knows the news of Lisa Yim who has the eyelid surgery. Thus, she begins to talk with her to get firsthand information about the plastic surgery. Lisa’s explanation helps Joyce clearly conceptualize the eyelid surgery. First, Lisa explains that the surgery takes a couple of weeks to fully heal, and there is a lot of pain at first. In addition, she emphasizes that the end results are fabulous because the surgery brought overflowing self-confidence to her:

Honestly, it’s not so much the way you look but the way you feel. [. . .] When I was in New York, I went to this really exclusive prep school. I wasn’t exactly teased, but I wasn’t getting a ton of offers for dates, either. There were plenty of Asians at my school, and the ones who were getting noticed definitely looked a certain way.

(167-8)

After listening to the firsthand information of Lisa, Joyce is very excited because she feels that the surgery will bring stronger confidence to her. This excitement leads her to stand in front of the mirror in the restroom as well as to imagine herself in gorgeous silk dress and high heels. Indeed, she decides in her mind to take it: “I want to be a part of the fold” (170).

On early Tuesday morning, while heading to Dr. Reiner’s office, Joyce
listens to Gomo’s life story in both Korea and America. She also listens how Gomo becomes a plastic surgery fanatic. Finally, Joyce understands how Gomo has suffered from her Asian appearance and how it has led Gomo to take several surgeries in order to look more American: “In America, everyone is always chasing their dream. I only wanted what I had lost when I moved to this country. I only wanted to be beautiful again” (180). Finally, she listens to the detailed explanation of a plastic surgery from Dr. Reiner:

Many teenagers come to my office with requests for breast augmentation and liposuction and blepharoplasty. And when I see these young adults, I wonder if nothing but a good dose of self-confidence, exercise and a lesson at the makeup counter might not be all they really need. (185-6)

Dr. Reiner’s explanation helps Joyce reconsider taking a plastic surgery because he well demonstrates how young clients hastily decide to take it. Thus, Joyce accepts Dr. Reiner’s recommendation, using the stitches, which she will have enough time to make her own decision by herself. Dr. Reiner also reminds that Joyce is only one person to decide her plastic surgery: “So the next time I see you, I’m going to make this permanent? Only if you decide that is the right decision for you” (193).

After returning home, Joyce is eager to show off her amazing transformation to Helen, but she feels angry about her sister’s response again
because she scolds Joyce’s thoughtlessness and folly: “There’s nothing wrong with being happy, but if it’s built on false pretenses, then the only person you’re fooling is yourself. I can’t believe you would be superficial in your values” (198). Helen’s blame for Joyce’s impetuous decision stimulates Joyce’s subconscious discomfort in her older sister, and it also lets her rebut Helen’s meddling. Finally, Joyce’s anger reaches to an uncontrolled level, and she begins to tell her older sister’s painful memory about Su Yon who suddenly disappeared. The disclosure of Su Yon’s story is an effective way of winning the battle against Helen because it makes her older sister’s face freeze with a shock. While heading to the beach, Joyce fully enjoys the victory of the battle with Helen.

In addition, her crease on the eyes makes her feel a stronger confidence in her look. Furthermore, this overflowing satisfaction leads Joyce to dream of fantastic romance with John. At this moment, Joyce finds John who surfs at the ocean and is fascinated by his figure because he looks like a surfing god. Coincidently, Joyce gets a chance to talk with him.

First, Joyce introduces herself to John with a smile and lets him awaken her existence at high school: “We had AP Chem Together. [. . .] Yeah, you even signed my yearbook” (213). Joyce’s self-introduction makes John be surprised because she seems like a totally different person to John. Thus, John gradually shows his good feeling about Joyce’s appearance, and this John’s attitude makes Joyce possess stronger self-confidence. Finally, she realizes that a little plastic
surgery brings a magical thing to her, and she fully agrees with Lisa Yim’s belief of the surgery: “The fold was not about how [you] looked so much as how it made you feel and act” (215). Now, Joyce gains her experience at first-hand the same as Lisa’s because she can confidently hang out with others in volleyball practice at the beach.

As Joyce arrived at the apartment parking lot, she finds Helen who sits on all alone at the stairs leading up to the apartment. Simultaneously, she perceives that Helen looks like a different person who is full of mood and sadness that echoes the deep sense of isolation that Joyce feels. Thus, Joyce sits down next to her older sister and begins to talk to her. At this moment, Joyce knows how her older sister struggles to propel herself to fit in with parent’s expectation through Helen’s revelation:

Thanks, but it doesn’t matter how I say things, it’s about whether I have the passion to really dedicate myself to the profession, and I don’t know if my heart is in it anymore. I’m realizing more and more that being a doctor might not be for me. (222-23)

After listening to Helen’s painful revelation, Joyce begins to worry about her parents’ disappointment because they have been anxious to make Helen a doctor. Then, she apologizes to Helen about lying a story of Su Yon. At this moment, Helen’s face suddenly becomes dark, and Joyce knows that she is full of desperation. Simultaneously, Helen reveals the relationship with Su Yon: “Su Yon
and I were really close, Joyce. [. . .] I was in love with her. [. . .] I loved her” (224).

First, Joyce is very shocked by Helen’s revelation because it is a too serious matter for her: “[My] sister was gay? This was crazy. Gay?” (225). Then, she is gradually angry at Helen who hasn’t told her before? However, Helen’s explanation leads Joyce to feel guilty for her older sister because she not only missed Helen’s struggle but also did nothing for her: “How did [I] miss this? What had [I] been doing all this time? Mooning over John. Running around Gina. Ignoring Helen [. . .]” (225). Helen’s revelation is continued, and she lets Joyce know that Apa and Uhmma have made their efforts to help her, but it was to no avail.

While listening to Helen’s painful revelation, Joyce gradually understands Helen’s current life. In addition, she feels sympathy toward her older sister’s sacrifice to help family instead of doing what she wanted. Finally, it leads Joyce not only to restore the strong sisterhood but also to understand others’ hearts and minds naturally. Now, Joyce gradually sees the plastic surgery through her own vision, but she cannot easily decide whether she will take it or not. On Sunday morning, Gomo lets Joyce know the appointment of surgery with Dr. Reiner: “I did not have time to tell you earlier, but the surgery is next week” (264). She is gradually anxious about Gomo’s one-sided notice of her surgery because she is not decided yet.
Actually, Joyce understands Gomo’s way of family care, but she feels a lot of pressure from Gomo. Indeed, she unwillingly accepts Gomo’s command because she cannot make Gomo disappointed by her disobedience. At this moment, she coincidently hears shushed conversation about her older sister: “Helen Kim, Gay!” (266). It completely makes Joyce frozen, first, but she gradually thinks about the origin of this malicious gossip. Then, she is angry at Lisa because she knows “Lisa was kind of superficial, but to be so vicious and cruel—that over inflated weasel of a gossip” (266).

Simultaneously, she is getting anxious because she should protect Helen from this fatal gossip. Thus, she detaches the eyelid from the other eyes in order to protect her sister from severe derision by people in the church. Finally, Joyce finds Helen in the kitchen and lets her know that she is in trouble due to the gossip. In addition, Joyce lets Uhmma know this. Finally, this accident makes Joyce’s family’s mutual trust be stronger which enables them to protect Helen from the bad rumor in the church.

Two days later, Joyce sits in Dr. Reiner’s outpatient operating room and waits for the final moment of amazing transformation from a “cocoon” to a “new butterfly” (226). At this moment, Joyce feels that various ideas let her be more confused, but she does not know how to find correct answers. Thus, she begins to question the plastic surgery to herself.

First, Joyce wants to know how she thinks about the plastic surgery, itself.
She can make a clear answer because she has strong belief of the folds: “[T]he folds would make [me] more attractive and confident, but it was feeling more and more like an obstacle to all things that [I] really wanted to be doing” (278). Then, Joyce doubts her identity and the ownership of life after taking surgery: “Who was this girl, woman, young adult sitting here waiting to change? Did this define her? And if she didn’t really know herself, know what was true, then how could she begin to permanently change her face? Would she regret it later?” (278)

At this moment, she clearly reveals her mind about taking the plastic surgery:

I don’t want my eyes to look any different. I don’t care about getting a san-gah-pu-rhee. I thought it was what I wanted to help me look better and feel good about myself, but I’m tired of being obsessed with how I look. I’m okay with being just me. And I have a lot of other things I want to do this summer. (279)

Joyce is convinced that she is no more an indiscreet person who just pursues meaningless goal such as the external features. As a result, Joyce politely requests Gomo to give different gift for her, because she not only learns how to respect and understand others from her family members but also possess more mature ideas about the beauty. Here, Na winds up a coming-of-age story of young adult protagonist through revising her own vision of identity and beauty in Koreatown.

According to An Na’s biographical information, she also conflicted with
her hybrid identity, Korean American, when she was a teenager just like other children of Korean immigrant family. Na was born in 1972 in Korea. When she was four years old, she immigrated to the United States with her parents. Na was growing up in San Diego, California. Na’s parents well adapted to the new environment, America, and Na’s family prospered. Due to the geographical location, Southern California, Na easily accessed to Korean community and culture: attending a Korean church, eating Korean food, observing Korean customs and traditions, and speaking Korean. However, she attended schools that were predominantly white. In her personal interview, Na recollected her childhood that she possessed two distinct personalities from two different places: Korean community and American school. First, Na reveals that she was “gregarious, liked to laugh and have fun, who showed up at [her] Korean church” (Kumar “An Na” 148). Second, Na explains that she was the “shy one who was always in the minority at school, quiet, soft spoken, hardly raised her hand” (Kumar “An Na” 148).

Na also reveals that she suffered from cultural conflicts between home and school like other Asian immigrant children because she was torn between “learning to be independent and speak [her] mind at school, and the coming home to be a Korean daughter, demure, soft-spoken, obedient” (Rochman “Interview). At the predominantly white school, she learned to be independent and out-spoken. However, she had to be a Korean daughter who was demure, soft-spoken, and
obedient. Thus, she fought hard against her parents. Like other Korean immigrant parents, her parents’ language barrier and old-fashioned Korean discipline made Na twice marginalized as a young adult in America. Furthermore, she had nobody to explain American culture or things like problematic matters of YA because she could not only speak about those things to her conservative parents at home but also ask friends and teachers because she was scared that she would sound dumb: “Why are people ‘going out’ with each other. What’s all this about breasts?” (Rochman “Interview”). Thus, she uses many children’s book authors as her “cultural teachers” in order to learn about American tradition and culture.

She further explained to the interviewer that “books were often times the resources for [her] to discover how Americans lived. My parents couldn’t explain things like Thanksgiving, and I was too embarrassed to ask my peers, so books, often times, were my teachers” (Smith “An Na”). As a result, she became a big reader in order to find proper answers for her curiosity, suffering, and trials when she was growing up in America. Finally, she fully depended on many author’s books as the cultural teachers that provided various resources to Korean American young adult An Na.

During her childhood, she liked reading books, but she did not originally aspire to be a writer because she never thought about becoming a writer: “Writing was never in my realm of career choices when I was growing up simply because my parents, being immigrants, wanted me to have a safe and secure job. Writing
or any type of artistic career just wasn’t an option” (Staino). As a result, when Na started writing the first book, *A Step from Heaven*, she primarily focused on one of problematic matters of Korean American YA between an Americanized daughter and a patriarchal Korean father through portrayal of Korean immigrant child’s heartache story of coming-of-age in Koreatown. Na’s first book won an unexpected acclaim because it was enough to “grab teens and make them think over their own conflicts between home and outside” (Rochman “Review” 1881). Furthermore, it made an English teacher, An Na, not only a winner of the Michael L. Printz Award but also a full time writer with realization of her authorial vision as a “cultural teacher” for contemporary Asian American young adult readers.

This realization led Na to explore the other problematic matters of contemporary Korean American young adult’s world such as interracial romance, sibling rivalry, religion, and family in her second YA novel, *Wait for Me*. In this novel, Na challenged the conventional definitions of young adulthood in Koreatown in terms of realistically capturing the painful growing up of more problematic Korean descent young adult protagonist who was extremely marginalized from both society and home. More interestingly, Na beautifully juxtaposes between illustrating Korean descent protagonist’s coming-of-age and representing problematic matters of contemporary young adult’s world, and it helped her dauntlessly depart from the other Korean American YA novels because she realized the exigencies of creating new type of YA novels, “Fusion Stories.”
In *The Fold*, Na tried to remove the ethnic qualifier “Asian” from Asian American YA Novel through creating a new type of Korean American young adult protagonists who are convinced that they are one hundred percent American and realistically featuring everyday life of contemporary Asian Americans. Finally, her “Fusion Stories,” *The Fold* helped Na perfectly transform from an Asian American writer to a mainstream writer for contemporary young adult readers who amazingly fill the growing appetite for books featuring young adult protagonists of every race in culturally and ethnically diverse contemporary America.
CHAPTER 4
KOREAN AMERICAN CULTURE
IN LINDA SUE PARK’S HISTORICAL NOVELS

I do believe that good children’s writers share two characteristics with their readers: “curiosity” and “enthusiasm.”

Linda Sue Park, “Newbery Medal Acceptance Speech”

Asian Americans possess different cultural, historical, and ethnographical backgrounds, but most Asian descent writers have shared similar thematic representation. They vicariously portray various lives of Asian Americans, vividly illustrate Asian Americans’ collective memories, or demonstrate their diaspora experiences. To recreate Asian American immigrant history, many writers of Asian descent interweave various historical matters with fiction. They also use their own childhood experiences or parental experiences in order to create Asian American childhood narratives. For example, Monica Sone and Yoshiko Uchida represent their painful experiences in Japanese internment camps during World War II. Jade Snow Wong and Maxine Hong Kingston recollect their own growing-up experiences in Chinatown. Sook Nyul Choi and Bette Bao Lord recall their first year immigrant experiences in America during the middle of twentieth century. Lawrence Yep revitalizes the early Chinese American immigrant history of the early twentieth century.

A second generation Korean American writer, Linda Sue Park uses various
historical and cultural matters in her three historical novels—*The Kite Fighters* (2000), *A Single Shard* (2001), and *When my name was Keoko* (2002)—and she demonstrates one of the representative Asian American themes, Diasporas.\(^7\)

However, her childhood narratives show different characteristics from other Asian American childhood narratives. First, she creates Korean child protagonists set in traditional Korea. Second, she does not centralize on demonstrating Asian American socio-political matters but creates more universal matters in the children’s world. Finally, she creates Korean childhood narratives as an American writer.

Park reveals her authorial intentions and vision for her historical novels in an article of *Booklist*:

> My writing has in many ways paralleled my cooking. I did not set out to make a political statement with that dish of quails and rice; I was simply trying to make something that would taste good. And when I began writing my first book, I was just trying to write a good story. [. . .] My [historical] novels are all set in traditional Korea. In each, I examine aspects of Korean life that were unfamiliar to me at the outset. I wanted to learn more about how Korea was not China or Japan, and to share what I learned. I

\(^7\) During the early period, Park, as a full time children’s book author, wrote four historical novels—*Seesaw Girl, The Kite Fighters, A Single Shard, and When my Name was Keoko*—which were stories of Korean childhood set in traditional Korea.
also wanted to explore what it means to be human, to discover people have in common across oceans and centuries. (“Staying on” 832)

This authorial vision allows Park to get over the limitation faced by writers of Korean descent. Although she creates her childhood narratives based on Korean historical contexts, she tactfully juxtaposes demonstrating the child protagonists’ maturation and conveying various Korean cultural matters. In *The Kite Fighters*, Park interweaves introducing Korean traditional sport, kite flying, representing the fourteenth-century Korean lifestyle and culture with demonstrating a story of two boys’ growing up. In *A Single Shard*, Park interweaves explaining Korean art with representing the twelfth-century Korean culture and lifestyle with illustrating a story of the orphan boy’s coming-of-age. Finally, in *When my name was Keoko*, Park utilizes her mother’s childhood experience during World War II in order to represent a little girl’s maturation in Korea.

Park initiates her writing projects from her personal curiosity of traditional culture in her parental homeland, Korea. Her enthusiasm for creating more interesting stories for children leads her to write Korean American childhood narratives as an American writer. From the surface, writing these historical novels based on Korean traditional culture allows Park to fill up a gap of cultural displacement from her parental homeland, Korea, within herself because she knew very little about it even though “[her] family ate Korean food
and kept other aspects of Korean culture alive in her home” (Park “Newbery” 379). In addition, Park’s historical novels bring her an enviable reputation for writing stories that draw upon the unknown culture of Korea to the American reading public. Furthermore, these writing projects also facilitate Park to reconfirm her authorial vision, “making connection between two worlds” with cultural pride and Korean American identity. Thus, in this chapter, I examine how Park negotiates illustrating a Korean child protagonist’s maturation and representing various Korean cultural matters in her three historical novels set in traditional Korea.

4.1 Korean Traditional Manners: The Kite Fighters

*The Kite Fighters,* Linda Sue Park’s second book of her historical novel series is a coming-of-age story in which two brothers, Kee-Sup Lee and Young-Sup Lee, grow up as courageous young Korean boys who come to discover brotherly love and reach a clear understanding of their roles in the family. Park uses Korean traditions and manners to not only construct settings but also develop plots in her historical novel. Thus, generally, the American reading public would see Park’s Korean childhood narratives as an exotic story of Korean children who lived in the land of “morning calm” or “forbidden kingdom” in the Far East. Furthermore, both fourteenth-century historical settings and unfamiliar manners lead them to feel more distance from the story before reading Park’s historical
Thus, they simply assume that Park’s historical novel is a fantasy or a folk fairy tale dealing with exotic Korean children protagonists’ adventure stories set in traditional Korea. In addition, they see Park as a Korean American writer who just features hyphenated protagonists and their lives in Asia or America. In her article, Park reveals the limitation faced by children’s book writers of Asian descent:

> The hyphen appears to be a connector: Korean-American, I am both. But in the eyes of some people, the hyphen actually subtracts. The appendage makes me somehow less American, my background alien, my loyalties, perhaps, divided. (“Staying on” 832)

However, Park’s representing traditions and manners of her parental homeland, Korea, challenges this narrow prejudice or simple assumption because she intends to make a connection between these two different worlds in her historical novel. As a result, Park interweaves representing various Korean traditions and manners—kite flying, kite making, capping ceremony, Confucius virtues, and the New Year kite competition—with demonstrating a story of protagonist’s growing up.

Park begins to explore the fourteenth-century Korea through the illustration of two brothers’ flying a kite on the hill:

> The Kite bumped and skittered along the ground, but if Kee-Sup
got up enough speed, it sometimes caught a low puff of wind and rose into the air.

Sometimes.

Not very often.

Every tenth try or so.

In the air the kite would hold steady for several moments, then dive without warning. Kee-sup ran in different directions, pulling desperately on the line, but to no avail. The kite always ended up on the ground with its twin “feet”: crumpled beneath it, looking, Young-sup thought, both angry and ashamed. (3)

Through this opening scene, Park conveys detailed information about her historical novel to readers. First, she introduces the two Korean protagonists and their names, “Young-sup” and “Kee-sup.” Second, she shows that they enjoy flying kites, a Korean traditional sport during the winter season. Third, she describes in detail the proper way to fly a kite. Finally, she foreshadows the brotherly conflicts because Young-sup is not satisfied with his older brother, Kee-sup’s kite flying.

This opening description also well represents the direction of Park’s historical novel because there is no explanation of the historical and geographical background of Korea. Her protagonists have the same figures and minds of contemporary children because they are not generic characters. Furthermore, the
two brothers do not live in a fantasy or folk fairy land because Park does not use
the cliché of a fairy tale opening—“Once upon a time” or “A long time ago.” With
this setting, Park develops her historical novel, a story of overcoming sibling
rivalry driven by a father’s favoritism.

Young-sup subconsciously thinks that he has received a discriminatory
treatment from his family. He has been eager to possess a kite because he has an
excellent talent of kite flying, but the father gives it to Kee-sup as a birthday
present instead. In addition, he just received a “yut” set, the popular board game
with its “little carved men” (6). Furthermore, Kee-sup’s kite seems to be the
greatest kite in the village because it was made by Kite Seller Chung “who made
the finest kites in the market place” (4). As he observes that Kee-sup does not
possess good enough skills for kite flying, he is eager to demonstrate his skills in
his older brother’s face. Finally, during his turn, Young-sup flies the kite and
begins to naively show off his expert skills to Kee-sup. However, Kee-sup cannot
understand his younger brother’s instruction because he cannot see his younger
brother’s innate talent for kite flying. Thus, he calls Young-sup a “pig-brain” who
possesses unrealistic and child-like ideas (8). In addition, when he hears Young-
sup’s revelation that he can communicate with the kite, Kee-sup mocks the kite as
a “tok-gabi” and finally concludes that his brother is still too young (8).

In this first episode, Park reveals that both brothers see each other
differently. Kee-sup does not carefully listen to Young-sup’s instruction of kite
flying which is originated from his innate talent because Kee-sup is convinced that he is much more superior to his younger brother biologically and psychologically. From Young-sup’s perspective, he believes that Kee-sup is too arrogant because he has always ignored his younger brother’s innate talent without any reason. In addition, he is also convinced that Kee-sup has been treated as a special person by the entire family members based on the one of Confucian thoughts, “the elder first.” Here, Park introduces the way of making kite to readers, and it also helps readers understand the differences between two brothers, one of major motif of this historical childhood narrative.

At the end of summer, Kee-sup decides to make a new kite because he thinks that his kite became well-worn during last winter. While observing his older brother’s kite making process, Young-sup is eager to produce his own kite. Therefore, he plans to make his own kite which originates from his naïve and simple mind. Finally, he begins to imitate Kee-sup’s kite-making procedure. However, Young-sup cannot understand the older brother’s intention for which he spends so much time and effort to simply make a kite because he can make it in a hurry. However, Young-sup’s excitement of possessing his own kite quickly fades away when his kite crashes to the ground, despite his confident efforts to launch it several times. Initially, Young-sup is frustrated, but then he remembers his older brother’s excellent craftsmanship: “Clever with his hands, Kee-sup had made many toys in the past: bamboo dolls for their two little sisters, boats on the Han
River, a whole collection of carved animals” (10-11). Thus, he reluctantly requests Kee-sup to make a kite for his younger brother: “Brother, I was—I was truly a failure at making a kite. You made yours so well. Would you make one for me?” (15). It was his first realization of the differences between him and his older brother because Young-sup not only admits his mistake, impatiently making a kite, but also recognizes his older brother’s clever skills and knowledge to make a good kite.

Finally, Young-sup remakes his own kite under Kee-sup’s direction. However, he does not want to change his attitude toward his older brother because he simply regards Kee-sup as a playmate who lacks kite flying skills. Furthermore, Young-sup’s distaste of the discriminative treatments by his family members gives rise to a second conflict with his father. Here, in order to deepen the conflicts between two brothers, Park introduces readers to one of the representative Korean traditions, capping ceremony.

Before developing conflicts between Young-sup and Kee-sup, Park introduces the capping ceremony to readers in detail in order to convey various cultural and conventional practices to readers. First, Park introduces the place of the capping ceremony. And then, she guides readers to see inside of the room in the traditional Korean house through detailed description:

On the day chosen by the soothsayer, the family dressed in their finest clothes and assembled in the largest room of the house—the
Hall of Ancestors. The room sparkled with cleanliness. Porcelain vases of fresh flowers brought bright spots of color to each corner. The finest scrolls had been hung. And the tempting smell of the food for the celebration feast drifted through the whole house. (18)

These detailed descriptions help readers easily conceptualize the capping ceremony as the one of the special family event in traditional Korea. In addition, they may give readers sense of becoming spectators in this ceremony. Finally, Park picturesquely portrays the capping ceremony in terms of Young-sup’s eye:

Kee-sup’s hair was twisted upward and around itself until it formed a smooth knot on top of his head. The topknot was tied firmly in place with silk thread. Kee-sup rose to his feet and turned to face his father. On the low table before them lay a finely woven horsehair cap. His father placed the cap carefully over Kee-sup’s topknot and tied the silk ribbon under his chin. It was a plain narrow ribbon, such as those worn by the unmarried or by ordinary men. Semiprecious stones or silver beads on the ribbon indicated a family man of substance and wealth; the chin strap of the boy’s father was strung with coral beads. (19)

Through the detailed description of the capping ceremony, Park first helps readers understand this unfamiliar ceremony in traditional Korea. Then, she reveals the importance of this ceremony in the fourteenth-century Korean society; it was the
symbolic transition from childhood to adulthood: “The capping ceremony was symbolic of a young man’s readiness for marriage; in fact, many families included it as part of the wedding ritual” (22). In addition, Park uses this ceremony as the symbolic motif which develops Young-sup’s conflicts with his other family members, Kee-sup and Father. In these first few chapters, Park primarily introduces the origin of Young-sup’s conflicts with his family in terms of illustrating Korean conventions such as Father’s favoritism and the capping ceremony.

While observing Kee-sup’s capping ceremony, Young-sup recalls a journey to the mountainside gravesite of their ancestors. Simultaneously, he becomes angry again because as a result of the discriminatory treatment, he has been excluded from this exciting trip: “It’s not fair. [. . .] I’ve passed eleven New Years already. Why I can’t go?” (20). Young-sup cannot see the significance of the capping ceremony nor can he understand his older brother’s new social position in the family. Because of Kee-sup’s new status, Young-sup should show a submissive demeanor and respect to his older brother, but he simply rejects it because he thinks that his brother simply wears different clothes: “You just look different in that cap, that’s all” (22).

However, the capping ceremony certainly differentiates between the two brothers’ lives and attitudes because Father begins to treat Keep-sup as an adult, first. And then, he anticipates that his first son is willing to take his upcoming
responsibilities—taking an examination at the King’s court in order to not only become the new head of his family but also become a scholar who attains honor for the family. To satisfy these expectations, Kee-sup should spend more time to perform his new responsibilities as an adult. Thus, he cannot spend too much time to pursue his personal pleasure with his younger brother. However, Young-sup cannot understand Kee-sup’s sudden change of the attitudes, especially his pretending to be adult. Furthermore, both Father’s favoritism for his first son and his scolding of Kee-sup’s impolite manners toward his older brother make him angrier and alienated from his family.

While executing the royal command, Young-sup concentrates on helping his brother’s work as well as suggesting the best way of making a kite. However, Kee-sup continuously refuses Young-sup’s suggestions and ideas. Out of frustration, Young-sup impatiently argues with his older brother. At this very moment, Father scolds Young-sup’s rudeness toward his older brother, and it leads Young-sup to recollect Father’s one-sided favoritism toward his first born son: “Your brother has been capped. He is no longer a boy. You must not forget this. You cannot quarrel with him as if he were a puppy. You will not treat him so discourteously again” (43).

Father’s reproaches first make Young-sup angrier because he cannot understand Father’s favoritism toward his older brother. Additionally, Young-sup cannot accept Father’s stern order for him to be more submissive to Kee-sup.
However, he decides to pretend to follow Father’s order because he cannot change the fact that “Kee-sup had been born first” (45). Finally, this realization of his destiny as the second born son who takes over Father’s rice business makes him deeply frustrated because he knows all too well this “age-old tradition” in Korea (45). Once again, he feels deep alienation from his family.

However, the two brothers’ cooperation with each other bears the fruition because they successfully complete making the best kite for the King representing his majesty and honor just before the beginning of the New Year. They bring their completed work to the King’s court; the boy-King is extremely satisfied with the kite. At the same time, the boy-King issues another royal order for Young-sup to fly the kite in the New Year festival as a representative of the King: “As for you, Young-sup—I want you to fly it for me. But I don’t want anyone to know that you’re my flier. If people find out, it would be the same as if I were flying it myself—no one would try to beat you” (66). It is the best honor as well as an excellent chance for Young-sup to show off his talent. However, Father’s interpretation of the King’s order makes Young-sup’s conflict with his older brother much worse:

At last [Father] spoke, addressing Young-sup. “You are to fly the kite. Was this commanded by the King?” Young-sup hesitated. “I—I’m not sure, Father. No, it was not exactly a command. More like a request.” His father nodded. “His majesty knows
well the teachings of the master Confucius. In his youthful enthusiasm he may have forgotten.” His voice held a tone Young-sup had heard many times before. He squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, as if to quell the rising dread in his heart. “Always the eldest son represents the family. When you next see the King, ask him if he would be so good as to grant my wish for Kee-sup to fly the kite at the festival.” (71)

Father’s wish based on his favoritism of the first born son brings tremendous bitterness and frustration to Young-sup. At the same time, Kee-sup uncomfortably keeps silent on this matter. However, Young-sup cannot see Kee-sup’s feelings and mind because he cries out with a blend feelings of fury and frustration: “Nothing else matters! Second son—what’s that? I might as well be a dog! I don’t matter to him—he doesn’t care anything about me” (72).

The deep frustrations and furies originated from father’s favoritism, “the Elders first,” make Young-sup see his present life as hopeless because he is already destined to take over his father’s business as a rice merchant. Consequently, Young-sup thinks that he doesn’t need to study hard despite his enjoyment of the challenge of memorizing the words on the scrolls. While Young-sup despises both his older brother and his future lives, Kee-sup uncomfortably sees his younger brother because Young-sup cannot see his father’s love and his older brother’s responsibility as the eldest son. Thus, their conflicts are worsening.
A few days later, Kee-sup reveals that he bravely asked Father to allow Young-sup to fly the King’s kite in the New Year competition: “I told him that only the best flier should represent our family honor—and that you were the best” (79-80). Kee-sup’s thoughtful behavior facilitates Young-sup to realize how he has misunderstood his older brother. His realization causes him to cry tears of joy and regret. Simultaneously, he recalls how he has challenged and disobeyed his father’s decision, first. And then he decides to earnestly admit the greatest order found within one of the Five Virtues of Confucius: “Between older and younger: consideration from the older, respect from the younger” (75). Here, Park introduces the other Korean traditional manner, the New Year festival to readers in order to conclude the story of two Korean brothers through winning the championship in the kite flying competition:

The New Year was approaching. It was the biggest holiday of the year. The celebration lasted for fifteen days—gifts were exchanged, grand meals were eaten, visitors came and went. [. . .] Every year the holiday culminated in a kite festival. Hundreds, even thousands, of people traveled to the royal park in Seoul to fly kites. And the most important part of the festival was the kite fights. (49)

Through this illustration, Park introduces detailed information about the New Year, first. And then, she helps readers imagine themselves who just wait for the open the gate of kite fighting stadium with overflowing curiosity and excitement.
Finally, Park guides her readers to the New Year competition and immerses them into observing Young-sup’s kite flying.

First, Park introduces the meaning behind the kite competition in the New Year festival through the boy-King’s opening declaration:

My people! I greet you on this fifteenth day of the New Year. May our ancestors bless our land and our people in the year to come, with good fortune for all! [. . .] It is my first official act of this New Year to open the kite festival. I honor our traditions by performing this duty with the release of the first wishing kite.

(102)

And then, she explains to the readers what the wishing kite is in fourteenth-century Korea: “the King’s kite had been painted with the Chinese characters ‘Bad luck-go!’ Tradition had it that the kite would carry away a whole year of misfortune” (103). Finally, she demonstrates how Young-sup reconciles with his family by participating in the kite flying competition in the king’s court. It means that Park’s exploration of the imaginative Korean childhood through representing Korean traditions and manners in the fourteenth-century also ends.

4.2 Korean Art: *A Single Shard*

*A Single Shard*, the third book of Linda Sue Park’s historical novel series, is a story of ten-year-old Tree-ear’s coming-of-age. In this novel, Park
demonstrates how Tree-ear continuously devotes himself to achieve his dream, becoming a potter who specially makes a celadon vase with an indomitable artistic spirit. To create the story of the Korean child protagonist’s self-development, Park uses the traditional plot of the Bildungsroman. Then, Park portrays the little boy’s climbing up the social ladder from an orphan boy to a celadon pottery artist through representing Korean traditional art, the celadon pottery in twelfth-century Korea.

Like her previous two historical novels, *Seesaw Girl and The Kite Fighters*, in *A Single Shard*, Park represents various historical events, traditions, and manners of her parental homeland, Korea. Park reveals that she obtained some ideas of the celadon pottery in Korea while conducting research for writing *Seesaw Girl and The Kite Fighters*: “I kept coming upon the fact that in the eleventh and thirteenth-centuries Korea was considered the best in the world at pottery. I thought it was amazing” (“Who-Files”). This curious discovery inspires Park to creatively imagine the life of potters, the potters’ village, and their devotion and artistic craftsmanship in twelfth-century Korea. It also leads Park to interweave a story of orphan boy’s coming-of-age in the twelfth-century Korea with the procedure of making a celadon pottery, one of the representative traditional arts in Korea.

In the beginning, Park introduces the protagonist Tree-ear’s social position as a no name orphan boy to readers. And then, Park reveals that he lives
in terrible circumstances, but he is not servile. Finally, Park illustrates that her protagonist is very fascinated with making pottery. Park uses unfamiliar historical and geographical settings, the twelfth-century Korea, but she reveals that her protagonist shows universal qualities of children such as naivety, cheerfulness, optimism, and curiosity. Interestingly, Park gradually unfolds the story of the protagonist’s mastering the pottery in order to help readers more clearly understand Korean traditional art, the celadon pottery.

In the beginning, Park unfolds this story through illustrating Tree-ear’s first encounter with Master Min. While secretly observing the Master Min’s ceramic works, he accidentally drops them. At this moment, he is accused of being a thief by Master Min: “Thief! [. . .] How dare you come here! How dare you touch my work!” (16). Even though Tree-ear continuously makes a plea for his innocence to Master Min, he still accuses Tree-ear as a thief. In addition, Master Min complains his current situation of not being able to keep the deadline: “Ai, three days’ work, and for what? For nothing. I am behind now. The order will be late. . .” (18). At this moment, Tree-ear wants to find the best way to help Master Min because he is sorry for breaking Master Min’s ceramic works. In addition, he naively believes that he well knows how to make a ceramic ware:

Honorable potter? Could I not work for you, as payment? Perhaps my help could save you some time . . . [. . .] You would not need to teach so much as you think, sir. I have been watching you for many
months now. I know you mix the clay, and turn the wheel—I have
watched you make many things. . . . (18)

After listening to Tree-ear’s naïve explanation, Master Min reluctantly accepts
his offer even though he thinks that Tree-ear does not know anything about the
pottery. As a result, Master Min annoyingly orders that Tree-ear will voluntarily
work in his pottery during nine days. Here, Park fully guides readers to see the
inside works in the Master Min’s pottery through Tree-ear’s perspective who
becomes a voluntary worker.

Tree-ear simply thinks that “mixing clay” and “turning the wheel” are the
only procedures involved in making ceramics. Thus, he naively decides to begin
to work in the Master Min’s pottery. It is the best moment for him because Master
Min’s acceptance offers a great chance to him who is very eager to learn making
ceramics in the same miraculous way as Master Min’s. It also brings a new hope
to Tree-ear because he naively expects that he will be a potter as quickly as
possible. From the beginning, Park unfolds the story of Tree-ear’s first transition
from an orphan boy to a voluntary worker in the Master Min’s pottery through
illustrating Tree-ear’s nine days of work.

Actually, his surreptitious observation leads him to possess a vague vision
of his future vocation, and both his self-reliance and self-esteem let him
voluntarily be the temporary worker for Master Min. Thus, Park develops Tree-
ear’s step-by-step learning process through his obedience to Master Min’s orders.
Park also picturesquely illustrates how Tree-ear gradually acquires the basic knowledge of pottery by undergoing various hard tasks.

Min’s first order is far from Tree-ear’s naïve expectations because he has imagined himself at the wheel, a beautiful pot growing from the clay before: “Fill the cart with wood. [. . .] Dry wood, not wet. Do not come back until the cart is full” (19). Even though it is a too difficult task for ten-year-old Tree-ear, he is willing to spend several hours chopping wood without a single bite to eat and takes the long and hard trip back down the mountainside with the wood-filled cart, because his strong desire makes him endure this rough work.

However, this lowest working job for the Master Min brings a little change of Tree-ear’s life because he has a title, “Min’s new boy,” which means that he is no longer an orphan beggar (28). Finally, he completes his nine days of temporary work in the Master Min’s pottery, but his eagerness to be a potter brings him to ask of Master Min, again: “It would be a great honor for me to continue working for the potter” (30). His request is rewarded with Min’s positive answer: “Clay today, not wood” (31). At last, Tree-ear becomes a Min’s new boy as a novice apprentice.

This new task, clawing the clay, is too hard to do for Tree-ear because he does not have any experience in this type of working with the spade, but he is willing to endure this painful work because he as a lowest level apprentice will be offered dinner from Mrs. Min. It also means that he will be a trained apprentice
who can learn the way of making pottery from Master Min, someday. Several
days later, Tree-ear learns a new skill, the draining of the clay. First, he regards it
as a tedious work, but he gradually shows interest in this work. Concurrently, he
begins to show a different attitude for Master Min’s reproach of his mistakes
because he does not feel resentment but shame: “Throughout the first few
scolding, Tree-ear braced himself, ready for the pummeling that would surely
follow, like those he had endured when caught reading a rubbish heap. They had
not come, then or over, even at the height of Min’s scorn and rage” (42-43). Now
he is willing to repeat the procedure of draining the clay—“stirring,” “sieving,”
“settling,” and “bailing”—any number of times until Master Min is satisfied with
the residue.

Although it is too hard to satisfy his master’s fastidious taste for Tree-ear
as a novice, he endures it because he gradually understands that the drainage is
the most important process to decide on the creation of the celadon glaze, and in
the end the color of the celadon would represent the pride of the potters:

How proud the potters were of its color! No one had been able to
name it satisfactorily for although it was green, shades of blue and
gray and violet whispered beneath it, as in the sea on a cloudy day.
Different hues blended into one another where the glaze pooled
thickly in the crevices or glossed sheer on the raised surfaces of an
incised design. (44-45)
As he repeatedly does the procedures of draining the clay, he can feel the difference between the results of the first draining and that of the third. However, he cannot find any differences after the third and initiates questioning the difference between his master’s and his feeling: “What was it that Min felt? Why couldn’t [I] feel it [myself]?” (44). This desire for knowing difference makes him work harder because it also means that Tree-ear unconsciously takes the lesson of apprenticeship: “Tree-ear would stay behind to attend to the draining, resigned and envious in the knowledge that Min was taking the clay to the wheel” (44). Even though Tree-ear does not learn the way of sitting on the wheel, yet, he gradually masters the essence of each work while conducting Master Min’s orders.

As Master Min begins to prepare works for a royal commission, Tree-ear also has to spend more time to assist him: “The endless cycle of work for Min continued: chopping wood, cutting clay, draining clay. Sometimes there would be a small diversion, like the time Min sent him to the beach for seashells” (51). However, in order to conduct these consecutive difficult processes, Tree-ear gradually revises his rash plan in terms of a more realistic goal, “sit at the wheel,” because he unconsciously learns the way of patience to be a potter. Through this realization, Park tells readers that Tree-ear is fully ready to transit from the lowest worker who simply conducts basic works such as chopping wood, cutting clay, and draining clay to an apprentice who is gradually equipped with the aesthetic sense. Thus, here, Park unfolds the story through illustrating Tree-ear’s
observations of Master Min’s endless devotions and efforts for making perfect pottery.

Tree-ear’s realization makes him spontaneously advance to a regular apprentice position in Master Min’s house because he gradually appreciates the beauty of his master’s artistic works and understands his devotion for making perfect celadon pottery. At this time, he gradually constructs his own aesthetics of celadon pottery: “It would be a prunus vase—the most elegant of all the shapes. Tall and beautifully proportioned, rising from its base to flare gracefully and then round to the mouth, a prunus vase was designed for one purpose—to display a single branch of flowering plum” (52).

Now, he as an apprentice gradually establishes his own vision which makes him not only evaluate other potters’ works but also find the differences between his master’s works and others:

Min’s work was far superior to Kang’s. Everyone in Ch’ulp’o knew this, and Ch’ulp’o had seen it for himself. Kang’s work was skillful enough, his vessels well-shaped and his glaze a fine color. But he lacked patience. Firing—the final step in the process that determined the color of the celadon—was handled well by no man. (62-63)

Furthermore, Tree-ear can fully understand his Master’s real intention without additional explanation or instruction for making celadon pottery. Thus, as Master
Min orders Tree-ear to set up planks to display his ceramic works for a royal emissary’s visit, he exactly understands his master’s mind: “Though Min did not explain, [I] knew why. It was so the emissary would see how [his] vessels captured the elusive green and blue and gray hues of the waves” (65-66).

Here, Park well demonstrates how Tree-ear successfully advances himself from a temporary lowest worker to an apprentice of Master Min. As he conducts Master Min’s orders, he spontaneously masters the essence of each work and continuously revises his simple and naïve assumption of pottery. In addition, he not only acquires the new position as Master Min’s boy but also possess his own aesthetics of pottery. This means that his transition from a lowest worker to a regular apprentice is successfully completed. Thus, Parks begins to unfold the story of Tree-ear’s third transition from an apprentice to a protégé of Master Min who makes not a celadon pottery but an artistic work. Furthermore, through illustrating the process of Master Min’s making a celadon pottery, Park helps readers clearly understand that a potter in traditional Korea is not simply a ceramist but a real artist with his own craftsmanship.

After emissary Kim visits Master Min’s stall, Min is growing more and more nervous because Master Kang made an “inlay work” for receiving the royal commission. Finally, Master Min decides to make inlay works also. During the next few days, Master Min makes five replicas of the melon-shaped vase. Tree-ear is amazed by Master Min’s unbelievable concentration on his works and his
artistic talents. Finally, he completes five inlay vessels, but Tree-ear sees that all the vessels are destroyed by his master. This instigates him to think about the main reason of failure as a potter:

The inlay work was flawless, the floral design intricate and graceful even on the incomplete pieces he held. But the glaze. . .

Tree-ear frowned and squinted. The dreaded brown tint suffused the glaze of every piece; some of them were marred with brown spots as well. They were fragments of the same vase, but the destruction of all five meant that every vase was flawed. Min had done the mixing of the glaze himself, so the mistake could only have been in the firing—the part of the work over which not even Min had complete control. (85-86)

Indeed, Tree-ear finds the cause of failure without any other’s help. Afterwards, he rushes to drain the clay for glaze.

Here, Park reveals that Tree-ear unconsciously advances to be a potter because he fully understands Master Min’s intention without further instruction and possess his own aesthetic values to appreciate potters’ works. Therefore, he can find the causes of both success and failure of inlay works by himself. However, Tree-ear is not a real potter yet because he did not learn the most important skill of pottery on the wheel, “molding.” After this accidental realization, Tree-ear completes the third transition from the apprentice to the
potter by mastering the most important skill of pottery, molding, by himself.

In the first half, Park primarily demonstrates Tree-ear’s physical and social transition set in the potter’s small village, whereas, here, she traces how Tree-ear spiritually is growing up through the realization of real craftsmanship and courage by illustrating his travel to Songdo. Thus, Park unfolds the story through illustrating Tree-ear’s travel to Songdo in order to deliver Master Min’s works to a royal emissary. In this novel, Tree-ear’s travel to Sondo is very important to him because it makes him a real potter who possesses real craftsmanship and self-pride for making his celadon potteries as artistic works.

Tree-ear begins his travel in order to bring Master Min’s potteries to emissary Kim, and he gradually advances to his destination. When he arrives at the Rock of the Falling Flowers in the city of Puyo, he encounters two robbers. Then, he has to look on as they destroy his master’s finest works. It is an unexpected tragic accident for him and brings immeasurable desperation and frustration. Through this situation, Tree-ear regards himself as a “failure” (126). As a consequence, he decides to fall down from the edge of a cliff. At that very moment, he remembers Crane-man’s advice for Tree-ear’s journey: “Leaping into death is not the only way to show true courage” (126).

From that time, he desperately seeks the second vase with a lingering hope for its safety, but he just finds the largest shard which is the size of his palm. Tree-ear is deeply frustrated at first, but he picks up this piece and swishes it
through the water to rinse off the sand. As he is washing the piece, he sees part of an inlaid peony blossom with its stem and leaves twined along the groove. He can see that the glaze still shines clearly and purely, the same as it did before the tragic accident. Thus, he safely wraps it with the clay turtle from his waist pouch and puts the clay-bound shard into the pouch. At last, he climbs back to the path and heads toward Songdo to complete his mission in a hurry.

The tragic accident at the Rock of the Falling Flowers facilitates Tree-ear to not only possess his own artistic vision of pottery but also to restore his self-esteem. It also gives him true courage to continue his travel to the final destination, Songdo. Finally, Tree-ear arrives at Songdo, and he heads straight to the palace. Even though his appearance is shabby, he is not concerned about this. He stands proudly in front of the gate because he knows that he is Master’s representative appointed to bring Master’s ceramic vase with pride: “Humblest apologies to the honorable emissary. [. . .] It is but a fragment, Honorable Emissary. And yet, I believe that it shows all of my master’s skill” (137). At last, Tree-ear successfully completes his mission because as a result of his visit, royal emissary Kim assigns a commission to his master. In addition, he also completes his last transformation into an artist by learning about the profound craftsmanship and true courage through his travels.

Here, the author, Linda Sue Park winds up a story of Tree-ear’s self-development from an orphan boy to a real potter through representing one of the
representative Korean arts, a celadon pottery. However, Park also implies that Tree-ear’s self-development will continue because he develops a new dream, “becoming a master” just like his adoptive father, Master Min.

4.3 Korean Domestic Life: *When My Name was Keoko*

*When My Name was Keoko*, the last book of Linda Sue Park’s historical novel series, is a coming-of-age story of a Korean child protagonist, Sun-hee Kim. In this novel, Park demonstrates how the young protagonist pursues her spiritual growing up in Japanese-occupied Korea during World War II. To create a coming-of-age story of Korean child protagonist, Park first explores various historical events, culture, and manners of her parental homeland, Korea.

Interestingly, Park gets some ideas from her parents’ childhood memories, especially her mother, Jung Sook Park in Korea during World War II: “It’s about World War II in Korea, when it was occupied by Japan and the Japanese forced Koreans to take Japanese Name. Keoko was my mother’s Japanese Name. That’s where the title comes from” (“Who-Files”). This curious discovery leads Park to initiate broad researches for various historical and cultural resources, first. Then, it also provides Park with the great opportunities to spread freely her imagination to explore a child protagonist’s domestic life, suffering, courage, and accomplishments in Japanese-occupied Korea with American perspective.

In this Korean childhood narrative, Park primarily conveys how a little
girl Sun-hee Kim faces up to various adversities originated from tragic history of Korea, first. Then, she unfolds the story of her struggles to preserve her cultural heritage and national identity. Finally, Park concludes this coming-of-age story through illustrating Sun-hee’s beautiful transition from a child to an early adult in terms of establishing her own vision of life. Here, Park negotiates portraying a Korean child protagonist’s self-development and representing various historical and cultural matters in the middle of twentieth-century Korea just like her previous historical novels.

Park begins this childhood account from illustrating Sun-hee family’s dinner table. At the dinner, Sun-hee’s father and uncle worry about the rumor in town, but they do not explain it to her because Korean social conventions, especially patriarchy, has compelled the little girl be quiet at home. Sun-hee wonders what the rumor is. Then she guesses it through her limited knowledge and naivety. Thus, she recalls what Japanese imperialists have done to Korean in order to find the answer. Here, Park descriptively explains unfamiliar Korean history to readers through Sun-hee’s recollection, first:

A long time ago, when Abuji was a little boy and Uncle just a baby, the Japanese took over Korea. That was in 1910. Korea wasn’t its own country anymore. The Japanese made a lot of new laws. One of the laws was that no Korean could be the boss of anything. [. . .] All our lessons were in Japanese. We studied
Japanese language, culture, and history. Schools weren’t allowed to teach Korean history or language. Hardly any books or newspapers were published in Korean. People weren’t even supposed to tell old Korean folktales. […] We still spoke Korean at home, but on the streets we always had to speak Japanese. (3-4)

In this description, Park introduces her protagonist and brief historical information about 1940s Korea to readers. In addition, she also provides readers the clue of this childhood accounts which primarily deals with Sun-hee Kim’s undergoing hardships in Japanese-occupied Korea during World War II.

Sun-hee was born during the middle of Japanese colonial reign. She does not have any ideas about cultural and national identity in Korea. She lives her everyday life in her home with other family members. Thus, she just passively thinks that a rumor will restrict one more thing from her routine. From rechristening to Japanese, Park unfolds the story of Sun-hee’s first realization of her circumstance and reality in her domestic life. She unconsciously accepts her Japanese new name, “Keoko.” Furthermore, she feels curiosity of her Japanese name.

As a little girl, she cannot fully understand the meaning of losing her Korean name because she does not have strong identity as a Korean. Thus, in spite of changing her name from Korean to the Japanese language, she cannot find any differences between “Sun-hee” and “Keoko” because she uses Korean with
her family members and observes Korean culture and tradition in her house. Her classmates have a difficulty using about Japanese names at school, rather, Sun-hee is quickly accustomed to her new identity, “Keoko.”

At this point, Park guides readers to Sun-hee’s school life and illustrates how she feels the pain of losing her cultural identity and a nationality from unexpected happening in her school. Sun-hee accidentally calls her classmates in Korean, and she is beaten by a teacher in front of them in her classroom. At this time, first, she naïvely complains her teacher’s punishment in a hurry without giving any grace period to be accustomed to use a new name: “It was so unfair. First our names were taken away, and then we weren’t given even a few days to learn everyone’s new name” (17). This feeling of unfairness leads her to cry with anger: “I wanted to say angry about losing my name” (17). Finally, Sun-hee is angry about using her Japanese name at school, but it is just originated from her simple antipathy for her teacher’s merciless punishment. Thus, she just naïvely denies her Japanese name because she cannot find any meaning or value from her Japanese name, “Keoko.” As Sun-hee is accustomed to use a Japanese name, she becomes the class leader at the start of her second year. Here, Park unfolds Sun-hee’s the other realization of her current situation which urges her to learn Korean but not the Japanese language.

Sun-hee enjoys learning kanji in Abuji’s home lesson because she has been fascinated in the combination of kanji character as a magical thing, even
though Tae-yul hates learning it. Thus, she is getting to learn more and more, and it makes her be a special prize for her language skills at the end of the fourth year of school. At this time, she is very proud of herself because she naively believes that everybody would envy her high language skills and congratulate her on the great achievements. However, her naïve expectation is broken up by her classmates’ reactions. A gang of boy from school throws a volley of pebbles at her and blames her as “chin-il-pa” meant “lover of Japan” (22). Here, Park introduces the origination of kanji through Abuji’s explanation:

You know, Sun-hee, kanji was not originally Japanese. [. . .] Both Korea and Japan long ago borrowed the system of character writing from China. The Japanese use it with their alphabetic writing. But the characters are the same. [. . .] Your grandfather was a great scholar. He knew much of the important classical Chinese literature. In his time and for hundreds of years before his time we Korean always considered Chinese the highest form of learning. [. . .] To excel at character writing is to honor the traditions of our ancestors. (23)

Abuji’s explaining both origin of kanji and family heritage make Sun-hee inscribe the honor of scholar. It also leads her to initiate a naïve vision for her cultural heritage: “If those boys called me chin-il-pa again, I could reach inside and hold on the knowledge [Abuji had] given me” (23). Furthermore, it helps readers
understand unique letter system of Korean and the long tradition of Korean language. Here, Park conveys how Korean possesses not only a unique letter system but also long historical traditions. And then, Park begins to reveal the story of Sun-hee’s undergoing the other adversity in her home.

Due to the war in Manchuria, Sun-hee’s family is getting to suffer from the shortage of food. Thus, their staple food is gradually changed from rice to millet. At this time, Japanese government issues a new official order—“replacing the Rose of Sharon with Cherry trees”—to make Korea more beautiful. Consequently, Sun-hee’s family unwillingly has to follow this order, and finally, Tae-yul chops down the Rose of Sharon trees and digs out their roots. At this moment, Omoni’s plan inspires Sun-hee with Korean heritage.

After digging out the Rose of Sharon trees, Omoni and Tae-yul transplant it into a small pot in order to keep Korean heritage, even though Japanese government orders burning them. First, Sun-hee is afraid of her mother’s breaking the law, but she is also proud of her mother’s brave act. Then, she imagines what her parents would look like and portrays herself who has to follow rules of Japanese requirement. She realizes how Omoni’s brave act would be precious in the future while watching her mother’s secret care of the little tree in the small pot. In addition, she not only understands Omoni’s intention but also vaguely dreams of an independent Korea: “Truly, Rose of Sharon trees are not as beautiful as cherry trees. But if that little tree were ever planted outside again, I knew it would
be the most beautiful tree in the world” (35). In consequence, Sun-hee knows the cruel reign of Japanese imperialist in both school and home in terms of her own experiences. Thus, she gradually establishes her cultural and national identity as a Korean.

From the opening scene, Park unfolds the procedure of Sun-hee’s small realization of her domestic life as a child in Japanese-occupied Korea. Here, Park unfolds that Sun-hee advances to the adolescence period because she suffered from the result of her naïve behavior which made her uncle escape to Manchuria as well as begins to pessimistically see her current life. At this moment, Sun-hee initiates the introspective observation of her reality in Japanese-occupied Korea, and it also facilitates her spiritual growing up:

After Uncle left, I couldn’t trust myself to speak. It seemed that my mouth and heart and eyes were all connected. When I opened my mouth to talk, my eyes would fill with tears. To keep from crying I had to close my mouth. So I didn’t talk much. But that was all right. To talk you have to think. And I couldn’t think either. It was like being frozen—not outside, since my body still moved and did the things I needed it to do. But inside, everything—my mind, my feelings—was like ice. (87)

Here, Park well demonstrates that Sun-hee no more sees her world and life naively because she also suffers from losing her cultural identity and pride just
like other family members. Simultaneously, her school life makes her more depressed in spirits because she has to conduct unwilling hard and laborious works to support Japanese soldiers’ battle.

In the later half, Park primarily illustrates Sun-hee’s young adult experiences that deal with the procedure of finding her own vision in hopelessness and meaningless life. Amazingly, Park juxtaposes illustrating Sun-hee’s personal life and representing various historical and cultural matters in terms of her own perspective, especially “keeping a diary.”

Sun-hee’s first entry is “Paper fell from the sky today,” but she has to write it in Japanese because she cannot write in Korean (93). It initiates Sun-hee to question about the necessity of learning Korean, *Hangul*: “Could Korean thoughts be written in Japanese?” (93). Now, she decides to learn *Hangul* because as a Korean, she wants to express her thoughts in *Hangul*. However, the reality doesn’t allow her to do this promptly. Thus, she starts expressing her feelings and thoughts in Japanese to wait for achieving Abuji’s vague promise: “I promise one day to teach you Hangul” (93). Both Sun-hee’s consecutive existential questions and leaflet of American soldiers trigger realization of her duty to keep a diary.

They also inspire the necessity of preserving Korean cultural and national identity. As a result, Sun-hee observes the cruel reign of Japanese imperialist with more mature vision, and she begins to keep a diary to let other people know about the truth. Now, Sun-hee does not need to answers for the questions because she
knows that she will not only find her own answers but also establish her own vision while keeping her diary. This realization also makes Sun-hee begin to see both her and others' life more objectively. As Sun-hee begins to objectively describe her life, feelings, and thoughts through her keen observations, she unconsciously goes through the rite of passages and advances to the next stage of life, early adulthood.

After the end of World War II, Sun-hee is no more frustrated by cruel violence of Japanese colonialists. She no more suffers from pain of unexpected loss such as Korean name, cultural identity, friends, and uncles. In addition, she can choose her own life in terms of her will because she is living in the free country. Thus, with her older brother, Sun-hee transplants the Rose of Sharon to the front yard, again. She flies a Korean national flag on the gate. At the same time, Sun-hee dreams of being a scholar, although she knows that girls hardly ever become scholars in the Korean social conventions. Here, the author, Linda Sue Park concludes Sun-hee’s self-development story in terms of featuring her learning Korean Alphabet, “Ga, na, da,” as the first step to achieve her dreams in the future (193). Simultaneously, she winds up representing Sun-hee’s domestic life stories set in the middle of twentieth-century Korea.

Linda Sue Park was born as the daughter of Korean immigrants in 1960, and she grew up in Urbana, Illinois. Park’s parents, Eung Won Ed Park and Susie Kim, immigrated to the U.S. in the mid-60s and worked as a computer analyst and
a teacher, respectively. During her childhood, Park did not get a chance to learn about Korea because her parents strongly desired their children to be as American as possible beyond racial and ethnic prejudice. Thus, they did not teach Park Korean nor its history and culture. However, her parents made efforts to offer various educational opportunities to their daughter.

According to Linda Sue Park’s biographical information, she was raised with little understanding of her Korean heritage due to her parents’ strong desire for their daughter, becoming one hundred percent American. From her childhood, Park has felt psychologically displacement from her parental homeland because her parents continuously eliminate cultural identity and pride from young Linda Sue Park. As her children grew up, Park gradually realized that she could not tell stories about Korea to her children who were half-Korean. Simultaneously, she wished that her children would have a “better understanding of their heritage than she had” (Peacock 18). As a result, she began learning all she could about Korea and Korean culture through her own reading and research. The more she learned about her ancestral culture and history, the more curious she became about Korea.

In 1997, Park began writing *Seesaw Girl* set in the seventeenth-century Korea in which she blends Korean context and her own imagination. It was her first book and was published in 1999. After publishing *Seesaw Girl*, Park has steadily built her reputation as a children’s book writer. Furthermore, she published three more historical novels centered on childhood set in traditional

In 2001, Park published her third historical novel set in twelfth-century Korea, in which she eloquently narrated a rags-to-riches story of a little orphan boy, Tree-ear. It earned Park the Newbery Medal in 2002 as well as made her one of the most recognized Asian American writers because she was “the first Asian-American author since Dhan Gopal Mukerji to win the John Newbery Medal” (Park “Linda Sue Park” 239). In 2002, Park published *When My Name was Keoko*, which is set in Korea during World War II, and she beautifully created coming-of-age stories of a brother and sister. To illustrate these Korean childhoods, Park utilized the childhood experiences of her mother, Susie Kim, who endured oppressive conditions by Japanese imperialists. It was Park’s last historical novel set in Korean history and culture.

Writing historical novels mainly demonstrating Korean culture is the huge challenge to Park because she has to not only depend on her researches and readings but also depend on her own creative imagination in her Korean childhood narratives. However, while conducting wide researches for her parental homeland, Korea, she realizes that Korean has perpetual history and splendid culture. This realization gives Park a desire for writing children’s books celebrating the splendid culture and eternal history about her parental homeland,
Korea. Furthermore, writing these historical accounts seems to allow Park to negotiate her own sense of cultural displacement because she restores her Korean cultural heritage which she lost as a child. Furthermore, writing Korean historical childhood narratives facilitates the Korean American writer, Linda Sue Park, to reestablish her authorial vision for children, making new American childhood narratives such as *Project Mulberry* (2005), *Archer’s Quest* (2008), and *Keeping Score* (2010) which satisfy a real demand for books about contemporary children’s experiences in America.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION

This study gives scholars a new opportunity to explore Korean American novels in both fields of Asian American studies and children’s literature by dually examining nine childhood accounts written by three Korean American writers—Sook Nyul Choi, An Na, and Linda Sue Park. These writers emerge from three distinct groups—a foreign student in the 1950s, a daughter of early immigrants in the 1960s, and a child of the post-1968 immigrants—, and they initiate their writing projects from different rhetorical exigencies and personal backgrounds.

As a first generation, Sook Nyul Choi recollects her immigration experiences and childhood memories in order to give an understanding to Korean Americans, like her two U.S. born second generation daughters, of their roots that brought them to their present life. As a 1.5 generation, An Na captures the various problems and afflictions of contemporary Korean American young adults in order to help them find the answers to the questions they may have encountered as they grow up in America. As a second generation, Linda Sue Park celebrates the splendid culture and perpetual history of her parental homeland, Korea, in order to help Korean Americans reshape their cultural heritage. However, while examining these writers’ nine childhood narratives, I gradually find that they share many common grounds beyond ethnic background as Koreans. First, they started their
careers as writers after 1990 and have represented Korean or Korean American history, community, and culture in order to bridge gap between American readers and their homeland, Korea. In her three autobiographical novels, Sook Nyul Choi objectively narrates unknown “sad” historical matters in Korea. In her three contemporary novels, An Na realistically illustrates various young adult matters in Koreatown located in Southern California. In her three historical novels, Linda Sue Park imaginatively explores various cultural matters in traditional Korea.

Second, all three writers primarily illustrate the Korean or Korean American protagonists’ coming-of-age on behalf of a child or young adult. However, their childhood accounts are designed for the general reading public in America because their Korean American childhood accounts are beautifully interwoven with universal matters concerning children such as family dynamics, sibling rivalry, school life, friendship, love, and adventure. Thus, their childhood accounts enable all three authors to cross the boundaries. As a result, they have received high acclamations from both mainstream scholars and the general reading public. Furthermore, their literary works have been widely circulated in academia, schools, and publishing markets. At last, they became major awards winners in the field of children’s literature.

As I explored these nine Korean American novels, I found more meanings in this study; all three authors pursued self-development like the protagonists in their literary works. While writing her three autobiographical
novels, Sook Nyul Choi continuously recollects her painful traumatic experiences which are all rooted in specific historical and sociopolitical circumstances. Thus, Choi’s autobiographical novels provide her ample opportunities to not only heal her trauma but also restore the self-esteem of her authorial vision: a “cultural ambassador” for the American reading public who deals with bridging the difference between her native country, Korea, and her adapted country, America.

While creating her three contemporary YA novels, An Na continuously explores various problematic matters as a contemporary Korean American young adult in Koreatown. As a consequence, Na’s contemporary YA novels allow her to not only review her own young adult experiences but also establish a more specific vision as a contemporary YA writer: to be a “cultural teacher” who fills the growing appetite for books featuring young adult protagonists in multicultural America.

While creating her three historical novels, Linda Sue Park continuously confronts her own sense of cultural displacement. She is able to restore her Korean cultural heritage which she lost as a child. Thus, Park’s historical novels enable her to reestablish her authorial vision which is to make new American childhood accounts that satisfy a real demand for books about contemporary children’s experiences in America.

As an Asian Americanist, I cautiously regard this study as an important academic accomplishment because it would be a burgeoning area of research
regarding Korean American juvenile literature, accomplished by examining the complicated relationship between the authors’ consciousness and the texts created out of the authors’ intentions. As I conclude this innovative research, I would like to see more scholarly works about these writers because they are not simply Korean descent writers but contemporary American writers who possess clear visions for writing such as being cultural teachers in multicultural America.
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BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Seung-Won Kim was born and grew up in Seoul, Korea. He attended Soongsil University, where he earned a Bachelor of Arts in English in 1998. In 2000, he received a Master of Arts in English from Soongsil University. He came to the United States in 2001. In 2003, he was awarded a Master of Arts in English from Texas A&M University-Commerce. This dissertation project completes his requirements for the PhD in English at The University of Texas at Arlington in December 2011. His specialty is contemporary American literature and culture including Twentieth-Century American novels, film, drama, and children’s literature. His research interests concentrate on interrelationships between Asian descent writers and their literary works. His future research includes American literature, children’s literature, life narratives, and American popular culture.