STEPHEN JOYCE

A River of *Han*: Eastern Tragedy in a Western Land

A Study of Korean American Literature

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For Kylie,

who not only put up with hearing about this as I wrote it

but also went so far as to read it;

words do not speak what can only be said in silence.

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1 The River

> "So this is the despair he had spoken of to me, the deathlike void"
> (So Young-eun, *A Walk in the Mountains*)

No literary form has inspired so much commentary and debate as tragedy. From the wilful and fated fall of Oedipus to the hesitation of Hamlet, people have argued and re-imagined and pondered the essence of tragedy, the nature of the tragic hero, and the forces that determine the course of our existence. Yet one question, which has been noted primarily in passing, has never been adequately addressed. According to many scholars, tragedy is a uniquely Western creation. Herbert J. Muller in *The Spirit of Tragedy* states:

> by general consent, there have been only four important periods, all of them brief: the ancient Greek, confined to Athens of the fifth century B.C.; the Elizabethan, in the generation of Shakespeare; the French classical, in the generation of Corneille and Racine; and the modern, inaugurated by Ibsen [...] furthermore, these periods have all been confined to the Western world; none of the great Eastern civilisations produced tragedy. (ix)

Clifford Leech concurs with this assessment: "Europe alone provided tragedy as we know it, until it lent its findings to the rest of the world" (12). Richard H. Palmer in *Tragedy and Tragic Theory* surmises that a striking difference between tragedy and comedy is that "tragedy flourishes almost uniquely in European culture, but comedy exists worldwide" (135). Even those too circumspect to make blanket statements about tragedy in other cultures still only discuss tragedies within the Western tradition. Scholars are reluctant to say that other civilisations cannot produce tragedy, but invariably find themselves caught short when trying to articulate what an alternative conception of tragedy would look like. The question, then, is easy to articulate: Is there a non-Western form of tragedy and, if so, how do we define its

particular aesthetics and their connection to its religious, philosophical, and historical roots?

This study attempts to answer that question in the affirmative by analysing the tragic concept of *han* as it manifests itself in Korean American literature. Although ethnic fiction is often seen as a niche area of interest, the significance of Korean American literature within the field of American Studies lies in its presentation of an alternative conception of tragedy, one which draws on the Western tradition but has its roots in a distinctive Eastern culture. It thus provides a vital comparative perspective on one of the most important literary forms, a perspective whose very existence has often been denied. Exploring this perspective teaches us not only about the significance of *han* but about the nature of Western tragedy.

Let me give some examples of the tragic expression of *han*:

> Oh, stars and moon, how have you the heart to shine? [...] can't you understand that it is over now? This national career of the people who have lived with you all these many ages, who have slept in your bosoms, whose blood you have drunk, whose muse you have been for countless years? You spirits of water, you ghosts of the hollows, don't you see how death has just come to this people established among you for the 4,000 years since the first king Tan-Koon appeared on the white-headed mountain by the side of the Sacred Tree? Don't you know the soul of Korea is gone, is passing away this night, and has left us behind like the old clothes? – from *The Grass Roof* by Younghill Kang (170)

> He looked up at the dark heavens. "In the dark of night I howl at the sky with all my sorrows," he said. Tears glistened in his eyes. "But there is nothing out there to listen to my story. Do you understand?" – from *The Innocent* by Richard E. Kim (93)

> In tears the air stagnant continues to sting I am crying the sky remnant the gas smoke absorbed the sky I am crying. The streets covered with chipped bricks and debris. Because. I see the frequent pairs of shoes thrown sometimes a single pair among the rocks they had carried. Because. I cry wail torn shirt lying I step among them. No trace of them. Except for the blood. Because. – from *Dictée* by Theresa Hak Kyung Cha (82)

> My mother said to me once that suffering is the noblest art, the quieter the better. If you bite your lip and understand that this is the only world, you will perhaps persist and endure. What she meant, too, was that we cannot change anything, that if a person wants things like money or comfort or respect he has to change himself to make them possible, because the world will always work to foil you.
> I will hear her voice always: *San konno san itta*. Over the mountains there are mountains. – from *Native Speaker* by Chang-rae Lee (333)

> There are times when the soul is filled with a desolation that stretches out like a surface of stone going on and on forever, farther than the eye can see, farther even than the reach of imagination. It is a barrenness borne of speechless tragedy, a river of silence having worn everything into a smoothness like the polished face of a marble slab. – from *Memories of my Ghost Brother* by Heinz Insu Fenkl (275)

The quotes demonstrate an array of styles coming from authors with different life experiences and working within different literary traditions – but there is an unmistakeable consistency of tone here, a sense of profound melancholy, a note of inconsolable despair. This tone is a signature feature of Korean aesthetics and represents a tragic worldview born of historical trauma and the deeply embedded philosophies of Confucianism and Buddhism within Korean society; its appearance in diasporic literature poses interesting questions about the utilisation of cultural heritage by ethnic authors, but there is no denying the tonal consistency of *han* that distinguishes Korean American literature.

In Korean culture, this tone is defined by the Chinese character 恨[1]. This character means “hate” in Chinese, “to bear a grudge” in Japanese, “sorrowfulness” in Mongolian, “hatred and grief” in Manchurian and “frustration” in Vietnamese, but the Korean concept incorporates and transcends all these ideas. In Korean culture, *han* represents a tragic worldview born of centuries of foreign invasions and domestic

[1] In the Korean phonetic alphabet, this is written as 한 (*han*), but when a word has multiple meanings Koreans will often include the Chinese character to distinguish which meaning is intended.

oppression, a fatalistic way of looking at life that emphasises the world's irresistible power, before which individuals are as helpless as straw before a tidal wave. In Richard E. Kim's extensive definition:

> One of the most important elements in Korean literature of the past and even the present – from the point of view of understanding Korean literature psychologically and philosophically – is the concept of *han*. *Han* is difficult to translate into other languages. It is a composite of ideas and emotions and everything that goes with a certain perception and understanding of humanity's misfortunes and tragedies – all compressed into a single Chinese character [...] [It is] a composite, as I have mentioned, of human responses and reactions to what we may call man's inhumanity to man [...] *Han* can be expressed individually as well as collectively. *Han* contains a range of human emotions derived from one's awareness of one's doom – and that awareness is expressed with (and I list the following in no particular order or sequential significance): lamentation; a sense of loss, doom and destruction; a certain amount of anger and resentment at one's perception of unfairness inflicted upon oneself, that is, one's sense of being an unfair victim; a fatalistic perception of a fundamentally, inexorably unfair cruel universe; and an equally fatalistic resignation and final acceptance of one's fate. ("Plenary" 25)

Han thus seems comparable (but not equivalent) to the concept of tragedy in Western culture. If Kim's definition seems extensive but imprecise, we should reflect that Western thinkers have been struggling with the concept of tragedy for 2,500 years and we still don't have a satisfactory definition. We can recognise their broad outlines, but these concepts are so active within both cultures they cannot be pinned down; their uses perpetually shift and thus both tragedy and *han* represent important cultural concepts that nonetheless defy precise definition as their meanings and uses shift over time.

Korean writers on *han* point out that it is intimately linked with Korean history. Korea (if one includes both North and South) is one of the world's most populous nations, with a combined population of approximately 73 million, but its geography is its tragedy. It is surrounded only by superpowers – traditionally China and Japan, and more recently also Russia and the USA – and its national history records

how frequently these powers have fought for control of the peninsula. The fate of the Korean people has often been determined in foreign capitals. In many ways, Korea is the weather vane of Far East Asian power relations; whichever superpower currently dominates it is also the dominant regional power. Korea had to fight off repeated invasions from Chinese and Japanese forces over the centuries, but for a long time it maintained security through a suzerain relationship with China. However, after China was weakened by Western powers during the Opium Wars, and Japan modernised under the Meiji Restoration, power in East Asia shifted towards Japan, which subsequently defeated both China and Russia around the turn of the 20th century and colonised Korea from 1910-1945. Koreans were to be turned into model but second-class Japanese citizens. The Korean language was progressively outlawed; Koreans were forced to take Japanese names and Japanese became the language of education and administration. Meanwhile, industrialisation uprooted the foundations of traditional Korean culture, transforming the country under Japanese supervision. Koreans generally view this period as an attempt at cultural genocide, and the depredations only increased during World War II, when millions of Koreans were used as slave labour, and about 200,000 young Korean women were used as sex slaves for the Japanese army.

After Japan's defeat in World War II, the country was partitioned by the USA and the USSR, which set up pro-American and pro-Soviet regimes in South and North Korea respectively. This situation led to the Korean War from 1950-1953, a civil war that rapidly became a flashpoint of the Cold War as U.S. and Communist Chinese armies struggled for domination on the Korean peninsula. The war ended in stalemate after three years of fighting with the peninsula still partitioned, except now three million Koreans were dead, families and communities were sundered by the partition, and national infrastructure was completely shattered, leaving both Koreas among the world's poorest nations. Both North and South were subsequently ruled by oppressive dictatorships, in many ways continuing the pre-colonization social structure of *yangban* aristocrats dominating the peasant classes. For much of their history, then, the Korean people have struggled against both internal and external forces, and it is from this history that the concept of *han* emerges. According to Andrew Sung Park:

> Koreans all throughout history have been continually invaded by surrounding countries [...] as a result Koreans have acquired a dejected spirit of life. Their music, poetry, drama, and linguistic expression indicate a *han*-filled spirit. In the English expression, 'a bird sings,' but in Korean, 'a bird cries' [...] to a certain extent, this racial despair, combined with a Buddhist worldview, has turned into racial nihilism in Korea. This is the abyss which lies within the dark soul of being Korean, a soul which has been engulfed by all the sorrow of historical tragedies [...] this sad passive collective unconscious *han*, accumulated through the memory of the past, controls Korea's present state of affairs and its future direction. (41)

Park is too sweeping in his judgments on *han*; any people who fought so tenaciously for democracy during the years of dictatorship surely aren't dominated by passivity, but he is correct in noting its importance within the arts. In her article "The Sound of Han: P'ansori, Timbre and a Korean Ethos of Pain and Suffering," Heather Willoughby begins by describing listening to music in a Korean taxi. "I hear a man's voice, it is harsh and certain tones are punctuated, as if his heart is broken and he is crying out in anguish [...] a great deal of Korean music is filled with *han*" (1). The joy of making music, which plays a significant part in everyday life in Korea, is offset by the pain the music often conveys. Park Kyong-ni, perhaps Korea's most important modern novelist, says that *han* "means both sadness and hope at the same time. You can think of Han as the core of life, the pathway leading from birth to death. Literature, it seems to me, is an act of Han and a representation of it" ("Feelings"). In her epic series of novels, *Land*, she exemplifies this principle by depicting the Korean spirit as tinged with mourning amidst joy, and a touch of hope even in despair. The novel begins with the harvest festival, described "as beautiful and boisterous, yet desolate and sad" (4), and is full of metaphors and similes which unite these opposites, such as when the narrator asks, "Isn't the harvest moon of the eighth month perhaps a festival that celebrates the closing of a sorrowful life, that resembles the pathos of hemp, revealing the art of renunciation to all living things, and especially to the poor? Over the autumn landscape rolls the dead fruit that has ripened and fallen, leaving its seed scattered here, there, and everywhere" (4). The same theme appears in modern Korean cinema; *Taegukgi* (2004), one of Korean cinema's most

successful movies ever, tells the story of two brothers who are accidentally caught up in the Korean War. As they see their country tear itself apart and watch their family become splintered and broken, as they see their loved ones die, they become separated and end up fighting on opposite sides and finally almost kill each other in battle, thus replicating the famous Korean War memorial in which two brothers fighting on opposite sides during the Korean War embrace each other despairingly in the midst of a conflict they cannot escape from or stop. Memories of the war, indeed of all the events in Korea's tragic history, are often portrayed through the lens of *han*.

The subject of *han* has been widely discussed in Korean literature, but there is great value in studying its manifestation in Korean American literature. For a start, all the authors studied here are acquainted with both Eastern and Western traditions; they know the 'rules' of Western tragedy, yet have chosen (whether consciously or unconsciously) the influence of their Korean heritage. As such, the distinctions between the Korean concept of *han* and the Western ideal of tragedy are brought into sharper contrast in Korean American literature than elsewhere. Moreover, the critical and commercial success of these works at a time when many have pronounced tragedy to be dead indicates that *han* has significant contemporary relevance not just in the East but in the West, too, where its particular philosophy and aesthetics may be more consonant with modern life than the classical spirit delineated by Aristotle. An analysis of its techniques and guiding principles may thus also be the key to a renewal of tragedy, one perhaps more suited to demotic life and times. Therefore, in this work I intend to explore the poetics of *han* in Korean American literature as well as some of its philosophical and historical underpinnings. I will then compare this notion with Western ideas of tragedy to see to what extent they are comparable and what we may learn from this comparison.

1.1 Asian American Studies

From a disciplinary viewpoint, any study of Korean American literature comes under the umbrella of Asian American Studies, which in practice means that the vast majority of scholarly articles on the works analysed here are written from an Asian American Studies perspective. Although

some recent studies deal with the tragic darkness in Korean American literature[2], the discipline as a whole is overwhelmingly dominated by political and sociological analyses rather than aesthetics. This unfortunately creates problems defined decades ago by F.O. Matthiessen:

> It is impossible even to understand a work of art unless you are devoted to observation and contemplation of the concrete work itself. And if, instead of keeping your eye trained on the whole object, you manipulate the content of a poem to cast light on historical tendencies, or, worse still, take lines out of their context and generalise upon them as sociological evidence, you usually end by reading into the poem the tendencies you want to reveal by it. (128)

Although Matthiessen's style of formalist criticism is out of favour, his criticism of contextual approaches is pertinent; *han*, with its eye for human weakness and emphasis on uncontrollable forces dominating the miserably lost individual, runs directly counter to the political goals of Asian American Studies, meaning that engagements with previous scholarship frequently turn into disputes over competing interpretations. In my own view, the weakness of politically engaged criticism is that it tends to read into texts exactly the kind of arguments it is hoping to make; this runs the constant danger of becoming textual manipulation rather than textual interpretation. A postmodernist might argue that there is no difference because interpretation is always already politically biased, yet just because nothing can be completely objective does not mean everything is completely subjective. The impossibility of objectivity instead suggests that literary scholars should hew as closely as possible to the text in question, rather than use the text as an occasion for an argument waiting for an opportunity to be made.

Because disputes with previous interpretations arise so frequently in this book, it is important to give some understanding of the origins, methods, and goals of Asian American Studies so that readers can understand the source of these disagreements. The idea of Asian

[2] See, for example, Keith Ames Russell's *Dislocated: Trauma and Narrative Distance in Korean American Literature* (2008) and Tracy Dianne Wood's *Korean American Literature: Literary Orphans and the Legacy of Han* (2008).

America arose out of the political struggles of the 1960s, when the Civil Rights Movement, supplemented by Black Power and the Black Arts movement, inspired a new generation of Asian Americans to organise along racial lines for political purposes. A collective identity was seen as the key to political activism and the task for Asian American intellectuals was thus to create a concept of Asian America. This desire for a distinct identity was driven not simply by identity politics but by changes to immigration law in 1965 which saw a new influx of Asian immigrants that American-born Asians wished to distinguish themselves from in the cultural imaginary. Asians have traditionally been seen as inassimilable aliens in U.S. society and a new influx of non-English speaking immigrants threatened to reinforce such views; the first object of attack for many scholars was thus the idea that Asian Americans were defined partly by their Asian heritage and partly by their American environment. Frank Chin and others "excoriated what they identified as the myth of Asian American 'dual identity' by linking this concept and experience with the dominance of Anglo-assimilation in the United States. Considered impossible to assimilate, Asians in America were described in various terms of inferiority having to do with being part-Asian and part-American" (Sumida 97). The myth of dual identity was to be challenged by reshaping the concept of America "so that it is understood that Asian Americans *are singularly American*" (98).

These ideas found their expression in literary studies with the publication of Elaine Kim's *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and their Social Context* in 1982, the first full-length study of Asian American literature, which related it to Asian American social history in order to illuminate the challenges posed by racism and discrimination and the strategies which Asian Americans used to negotiate the multiple barriers to full participation in American society. The text aims to show how Asian American experiences are a fundamental part of the USA's history and outlines a programme for Asian American studies. On the one hand, Anglo-American literature about Asians should be studied to reveal its Orientalist bias – "Anglo-American literature does not tell us about Asians. It tells us about Anglos' opinions of themselves, in relation to their opinions of Asians" (21) – and on the other hand the task for Asian American writers "is to contribute to the total image and identity of America by depicting their own experiences and by defining their own humanity as part of the

composite image of the American people" (22). Since then, Asian American Studies has established itself as an academic discipline and ensured that accounts of American history and the American literary canon reflect Asian American contributions and challenges within U.S. national culture, so one can see this programme as having been largely successful. Kim's work also set the tone for most later scholarship; as Viet Thanh Nguyen put it, "for better or worse, Asian American literary critics have generally approached Asian American literature as being symptomatic of ongoing historical concerns for Asian Americans – to read the literature, then, enables the critic to form political theses about the state of Asian America" (3).

However, the very immigration that helped power the critique of dual identity also emerged to challenge it in the 1990s when the children of post-1965 immigrants came of age. While the original constituency of Asian America consisted primarily of Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino Americans, the new immigrants came from across the Asian continent, with massive waves of immigration from, in particular, Korea, Vietnam, and India. Thus, although the actual number of Japanese and Chinese Americans has risen, their percentage of the Asian American population has fallen dramatically between 1960 and 2000. Japanese Americans have fallen to a mere 6% of the Asian American population, while Koreans have risen to 10%, Vietnamese to 11%, and Asian Indians to 22%[3]. These demographic shifts naturally prompted a shift in Asian American Studies as the children of new immigrants rejected the assertion that they were fully American and insisted on their dual cultural identity! "A shift began from the question, How do Asian Americans affect and reflect American history and culture?, to the question, How are Asian Americans related to and influenced by their Asian origins? This shift reinstates a concept of 'dual identity'" (Sumida 98).

The discipline thus required a new theoretical foundation, one that unified American-born Asians with Asian immigrants in a political coalition based on cultural identity. However, this task is complicated by the fact that Asian America involves lumping together under a single label people coming from such disparate national cultures as India, China, and Indonesia, three countries that already encompass a wide

[3] Source: Junn, Jane, et al. *National Asian American Survey*, 2008, p. 4.

variety of languages, religions, ethnicities, political systems, economic structures, and social norms:

> Asian American literary studies may be in a moment of crisis because of the very values of multiplicity and heterogeneity that had placed ethnic-identity literatures in sight in the United States. Asian American imagination, unlike that in African American writing, has no single unifying grand narrative to organise the vast materials on which Asian American writers call. It possesses no single linguistic Other, as in Latina/o writing, on which to hinge a counter tradition of stylistics. Instead, what Asian American works of imagination manifest in full is a plethora of seemingly separate threads – threads leading back to distinctively different national origins, first languages indecipherable to other Asian Americans, and cultural signs and codes of signification unintelligible to those identified as the same in census reports and academic discourses. (Lim et al. 2)

The primary solution to this challenge came in Lisa Lowe's 1994 book *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* and many other scholars rely extensively on her theoretical framework. Lowe's crucial step is to link both new Asian immigrants and American-born Asians as victims of the racist, imperialist, capitalist, patriarchal demands of the USA. Many newer immigrants, such as those from Vietnam and Korea, were originally displaced by American wars in Asia and thus suffered from the same forces that exploit Asian immigrants in the USA. "Asian Americans emigrating from previously colonised sites are not exclusively formed as racialised minorities within the United States but are simultaneously determined by colonialism and capital investment in Asia" (8). Crucially, "these Asian Americans are determined by the history of U.S. involvements in Asia and the historical racialisation of Asians in the United States" (16). If capitalism makes expansion into new markets and access to new sources of raw materials desirable and racism makes imperial wars against Asian nations possible, then Asians have suffered throughout the 20th century from a combination of racist capitalist imperialism. In addition, Asian American women have suffered under the constraints of patriarchy in both Asian and American communities. Like Kim, Lowe reads Asian American literature "in terms of its material contexts of production and reception [...] if Asian

American literary expression is evaluated in exclusively canonical terms, it reveals itself as an aesthetic product that cannot repress the material inequalities of its conditions of production" (44). The literary work is considered important because it reveals the Asian American position in the nation-state; Lowe's work thus builds on Kim's by continuing and extending her critique of white America's involvement with Asians, while reimagining Asian America not as an integral part of U.S. culture but as a site in which alternative visions of the relationship between the individual and the community can surface:

> Asian American culture is the site of more than critical negation of the U.S. nation; it is a site that shifts and marks alternatives to the national terrain by occupying other spaces, imagining different narratives and critical historiographies, and enacting practices that give rise to new forms of subjectivity and new ways of questioning the government of human life by the national state. (29)

There is, then, no fixed or essentialist Asian American identity but a recognition that "the articulation of 'Asian American identity' as an organising tool has provided a concept of political unity that enables diverse Asian groups to understand unequal circumstances and histories as being related" (70).

Mark Chiang views this shift to the politics of ideology critique as part of a strategy to establish greater institutional legitimacy within the academy. In Chiang's view, this transformation is seen most clearly in the rehabilitation of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée*, to which a whole chapter of *Immigrant Acts* is devoted. Ignored by Asian American critics following its publication because it did not offer a realist interpretation of the community's struggles, *Dictée* became central to the discipline after 1994 because its postmodernism allowed greater theoretical sophistication. "While Asian American Studies always recognised the need for autonomy from the educational institution, the changing political atmosphere of the 1970s and 1980s meant that the community demands for 'practical' scholarship became an enormous obstacle to academic legitimacy" (29). Ironically, this desire for legitimacy meant creating a certain amount of autonomy between academic practitioners of Asian American Studies and the community politics which had originally brought the field into being, a shift signalled by the rise in

interest in *Dictée*. "The introduction of *Dictée* into the Asian American literary field was one of the signal moments in the gradual disengagement of Asian American Studies from community politics, but this necessitated the rearticulation of political commitment, hence the turn from realist representation to a cultural politics of ideological subversion" (29). To a large extent, this attitude has set the tone for subsequent criticism, which focuses on how Asian American texts and criticism undermine the dominant hegemonic ideologies of the U.S. nation-state.

This is a difficult position to argue against because if one did one might come across as only moderately left wing, a serious drawback for anyone working in the humanities. However, we may safely conclude that the primary form of literary criticism within Asian American Studies is ethical criticism, which evaluates literature in relation to a potentially better future. As Northrop Frye explains, in ethical criticism "culture is treated as a human productive power which in the past has been, like other productive powers, exploited by other ruling classes and is now to be revalued in terms of a better society. But as this ideal society exists only in the future, the present valuation of culture is in terms of its interim revolutionary effectiveness" (346). Before the critic's eye is always the image of a better society and the critic's goal is to bring this society about. Such sentiments pervade Asian American literary criticism. Rachel C. Lee, for example, expresses "the hope that extending the self-critical lens to Asian American criticism will help fuel Asian American Studies' desire – always exceeding its present achievements – to envision and effect a better world" (*Americas* 146). Questions of race, gender, class, sexuality, identity, hybridity, and agency inevitably compare the present to a potentially better future, which must be interpreted by the critic from the author's literary texts. Texts are seen "as strategic interventions in American literary constructions of race, ethnicity, and gender" (Chu 11). However, if these categories are simply social constructions, then the critic's job is to imagine new and better social constructions. "If 'race' was constructed by people in society, historically, then it can be de-constructed by people. We intellectually will into existence a new concept of dual identity, one where the two sides of the duality are not fixed by powers beyond human agency but are continually under construction, and we monitor as well as participate in this making in real time" (Sumida 110).

Kandice Chuh in *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique* states, “Asian Americanists continue to search for ways to negotiate such differences so that the field can remain a politicised tool for social justice” (4). Such demands that literature serve political goals are common within the discipline.

An important question then is: whose political goals? The 2008 National Asian American Survey showed far more diversity in political views than we witness among Asian American scholars. In particular, when asked, “What, if anything, do Asians in the United States share with one another?” respondents were significantly less likely to answer “political interests,” with only 36% agreeing that Asian Americans generally share common political views (Junn et al, “Patterns” 8). When asked what were the most important issues facing the USA, with weight given for any mention and not simply the most pressing, respondents overwhelmingly answered the economy and the war in Iraq, while racism only featured eighth with 10% and ethics and values tenth with 4% (Junn et al, *Survey* 14). When asked what was most important to them personally, respondents said the economy, the war in Iraq, oil and gas prices, and health care (14). If these seem pretty close to the concerns of the average American voter, that’s because they are; the idea that Asian America marks out a site for alternative visions of the USA is clearly not one that has permeated the community. Lastly, it should be pointed out that these concerns themselves conceal inter-ethnic differences, with a majority of Vietnamese American voters generally ambivalent about a withdrawal from Iraq, possibly because many of them identify with what happened to South Vietnam when the U.S. Army withdrew, as opposed to the majority of Asian American voters, who advocated a withdrawal (17-18). Overall, prior to the election, 41% of Asian Americans intended to vote for Obama, 24% for McCain, and 34% said they were undecided (1). In terms of political affiliation, 32% percent of Asian Americans identify with Democrats, 14% with Republicans, 19% identify as Independent but the largest group is non-partisans with 35% (1), possibly reflecting the fact that 22% of Asian Americans say they are “not at all” interested in politics (Junn et al, “Patterns” 6).

The absence of community consensus may by why Asian American scholars have been willing to celebrate any kind of diversity *except* political diversity. As Viet Thanh Nguyen observes, “Asian American

critics have been concerned with the *demographic* heterogeneity of the Asian American body politic and not with its *ideological* heterogeneity [...] not willing to read for ideological heterogeneity, the critics betray their own ideological rigidity" (6-7). The discipline may be increasingly defined by its political commitments, but it would seem that these political goals derive their legitimacy not from the Asian American community but from the institutional position of Asian American critics. Perhaps Mark Chiang is right in saying:

> The yoking of an oppositional politics with aesthetic autonomy is the manifestation of the effort to combine the original political commitment of Asian American Studies to the Asian American community with the struggle for greater institutional legitimacy. The problem, however, is that in order to accomplish the latter objective, Asian American Studies as an academic field needed to achieve greater autonomy, which meant it had to distance itself *from* the community. (29)

By distancing itself from the community's concerns, Asian American Studies could gain greater academic legitimacy be gearing itself towards the politics of academia. Neil Gross and Solon Simmons' study, "The Social and Political Views of American Professors," establishes that professors tend to be highly liberal, with 44.1% self-identifying as liberal, 46.6% as moderate, and 9.2% as conservative (27). In addition, faculty in the social sciences and humanities tend to be the most liberal, at 58 and 52 percent respectively (28). A second study by Neil Gross and Ethan Fosse calculates the significance of occupation in relation to politics:

> Professors are on average 0.571 points more liberal than non-professors on the seven-point political self-identification scale. Although 0.571 might seem small, in relative terms the difference is substantial. One way to put the gap in perspective is to compare it to differences between other groups. The difference in political self-identity between professors and other Americans is over 1.5 times that between blacks and whites (0.352), over twice as great as that between the bottom and top deciles in constant household income (0.251), and more than seven times larger than that between women and men (0.078). (Gross and Fosse 35)

The institutional position of Asian American scholars is thus a more critical factor in political beliefs than race, class, or gender. Although there has been a lot of (often polemical) supposition about the reasons for this, Gross and Fosse advance the theory that 'professor' has become politically typed as a liberal occupation so conservative candidates don't aspire to the position, thus reinforcing ideological homogeneity. A comparison between communal and institutional politics thus suggests that the politics of Asian American scholars have far more to do with their profession than their ethnicity.

This ideological homogeneity among the intellectual class allows it to become the basis for unity in a discipline defined by the problematic categories of race and ethnicity. Collen Lye asks, "In embracing pluralism and cosmopolitanism – both worthy values – how can we guard against an ever-greater dependency on biological notions of identity to help us order our epistemological projects" (Lye 4)? The solution to the problem of deconstructing race through a field defined by race is grappled with by Kandice Chuh, who argues in *Imagine Otherwise* that the demographic heterogeneity of Asian America means that "current conditions call for conceiving Asian American studies as a *subjectless discourse*" (9). On the surface, this seems somewhat strange; surely a field premised on race and ethnicity can't deny them and still continue to exist as a coherent entity? Chuh's solution is to make the ideological homogeneity of the intellectual class the basis of Asian American studies. "Subjectlessness, as a conceptual tool, points to the need to manufacture 'Asian America' situationally. It serves as the ethical grounds for the political practice of what I would describe as a strategic *anti*-essentialism – as, in other words, the common ethos underwriting the coherency of the field" (10). To facilitate this, the idea of specific political commitments is undermined so that goals become vague and abstract; social justice, while desirable, is rendered ambiguous because:

> 'Justice' refers to a state as yet unexperienced and unrepresentable, one that can only connotatively be implied. Arguably, the overarching purpose of Asian American studies has been and continues to be pursuit of this (im)possibility, the pursuit of an as yet unrealised state of justice by tracing, arguing, and critiquing, and by alternatively imagining the conditions that inscribe its (im)possibility. (8)

One finds it hard to imagine Civil Rights activists marching under such a banner, but what Chuh appears to mean is that scholars should be committed not to defined ends but a set of values. “What is needed is not identity but a commitment to combating states of domination, to unifying for the sake not of the self but in the endless pursuit of justice” (148), even though “justice cannot be conceived within a politics of heterogeneity as a fixed goal but emerges rather as an orientation, as a commitment to an indefatigable and illimitable interrogation of myriad relations of power and how they give, shape, and sometimes take life” (150). Diversity within the community can thus be superseded by ideological unity within the profession.

What are the consequences for the study of literature? It should be obvious that when a non-representative group defines the study of fiction in terms of specific political values then its interpretations will be ideologically loaded. Some critics have themselves reached this conclusion. Viet Thanh Nguyen writes:

> The way critics have tended to read the literature, as cultural works that demonstrate resistance or accommodation to the racist, sexist, and capitalist exploitation of Asian immigrants and Asian Americans, may be as much a reflection of the critics’ professional histories, political priorities, and institutional locations as what may be found in historically framed close readings of the works themselves. (3)

Nguyen attempts to reread the Asian American canon and break down the distinction between writers who resisted racial discrimination and those who accommodated themselves to conditions. His analysis echoes the incisive comments of Northrop Frye, who wrote, “As soon as we make culture a definite image of a future and perhaps attainable society, we start selecting and purging a tradition, and all the artists who don’t fit (an increasing number as the process goes on) have to be thrown out” (346). Nguyen attempts to restore some of those ‘purged’ artists and argues against the reasons they were rejected from the canon. Similarly, Jinqi Ling decries the tendency to evaluate texts using a simplistic political/aesthetic binary, such that ‘bad politics = bad art’ and ‘good politics = good art.’ “Such a reductive view of the relationship between art and politics is not uncommon in Asian American cultural criticism in

general, namely, to see a text's ideological effect as equivalent to its literary effect or vice versa" (145). The conflation of literature with politics unfortunately encourages reductionism, both in choice of texts and interpretation of selected texts, which limits exploration of Asian American literature.

By far the most trenchant criticism, however, has come from Asian American authors themselves. Amy Tan writes sarcastically about the limits imposed on Asian American writers by Asian American critics: "Woe to you if the Asian-American reviewer champions both correctness and marginalism, and believes your fiction should not depict violence, sexual abuse, mixed marriages, superstitions, Chinese as Christians, or mothers who speak in broken English" (qtd. in Adams 188). Poet Garrett Hongo, in "Asian American Literature: Questions of Identity," says:

> I fear there will continue to be three dominant, ideologically narrowing modes out of which critical thinking (and the construction of the literary curriculum) will emerge: (1) the unconscious assumption that what is essentially Asian American is a given work's overt political stance and conformity to sociological models of the Asian American experience, (2) the related notion that a writer writes from a primary loyalty to coherent communities, and (3) vehement castigation or rude, categorical dismissal for literary qualities deemed 'assimilationist' or 'commercial.' (qtd. in Sue-im Lee 8)

Bharati Mukherjee has been particularly scathing of the work of politically committed literary scholars: "Contemporary scholars seem to have deliberately removed themselves from primary texts, so that not only do they sometimes get their data wrong, but they often discard those complexities in the text that don't fit their theories, and they devalue those aesthetic innovations that challenge their particular sociopolitical agendas" (Interview by Chen 85). She particularly derides the lack of attention to aesthetics within contemporary scholarship:

> All that, as a writer, I value – power of word choice and placement of punctuation, imagery, texture, pacing – all the strategies that I employ to articulate my vision as precisely as I can to the reader, these scholars treat as debris to be cleared for the exposing of camouflaged

> ‘hegemonic’ agendas in the narrative [...] for a lot of these scholars, judging from the papers that I’ve read, to worry about artistic or meter-effective placement of punctuation is to be sort of right-wing. (88)

As we will see in Chang-rae Lee’s *Aloft*, author criticism of the limited approach of scholars has now become a part of Asian American fiction itself, which suggests a shift in scholarly focus may be overdue.

Mark Chiang sees a tension between writers and critics because:

> The interest of the academic field in linking an autonomous aesthetic to an oppositional politics runs counter to the interests of the writers, who do not want to be evaluated according to political criteria. The issue here is not that writers refuse to be political. Rather, the threat that politics poses to art is that it undermines the autonomy of the field by forcing it to submit to external values and standards instead of the criteria that are entirely determined by artists themselves, that is, formal criteria. (24)

Although I agree with much of what Chiang says, he is making an overly simplistic binary between critics/writers and politics/aesthetics. Writers do not entirely determine what formal criteria are; the idea of what constitutes literary value is a complex one and has much to do with broader social expectations, a writer’s own tastes in literature, and the opinions of one peers, among other things. What is clear is that writers are frustrated with the narrow evaluation criteria of Asian American scholars, who, driven by the demands of ethical criticism, require fiction they can teach that will inculcate the correct values in their students. To quote Frye again, “Ethical criticism uncorrected relates culture only to the future, to the ideal society which may eventually come if we take sufficient pains to guard the educating of our youth. For all such lines of thought end in indoctrinating the next generation” (346). Indeed, Frye is once again prescient in his observations, for seizing control of the university as ideological state apparatus and using it for ethical ends is indeed one of the goals of Asian American Studies. Lisa Lowe declares:

> I want to cast the project of securing the conditions for teaching U.S. racialised minority, postcolonial, and women’s literatures in the contemporary university as [...] a collection of linked pedagogies central to contesting both the traditional function of the educational apparatus to

> incorporate students as subjects of the state, and the narratives through which that socialisation takes place [...] through concerted pedagogical and curricular changes taking place in different institutional sites, we can locate and displace the powerful ideological narratives that traditionally structure the current university. (*Immigrant* 58)

The brighter future ethical criticism envisions typically comes about by indoctrinating the next generation of students in the 'correct' way of thinking, which leads to an increasingly narrow set of criteria for evaluating Asian American literature. As Stephen Sumida states, "I find myself measuring works that newly appear by how they play critical roles, how they expose and question, rather than take for granted, structures of power, including the powers of love and of aesthetics" (112) It's not hard to see how this can, and does, frustrate Asian American authors. Bharati Mukherjee complains that "when this type of critics are teaching texts, they are looking not at the novelist's novel but only for their own criteria to be met in such academic courses; they are looking for texts to be used in courses where they can make the political and ethnic argumentation" (Interview by Rodriguez 62).

However, it would be patently untrue to say that Asian American scholars have paid no attention to aesthetics. Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong's *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance* develops the idea of intertexts to study thematic connections across Asian American literature; this study of recurring motifs provides many fruitful ideas and insights. Of equal importance, however, is Wong's attempt to redefine the purposes of Asian American literary scholarship:

> Students of Asian American literature tend to be united by a desire to ensure that voices of Asian Americans are heard and to make known the richness and complexity of Asian American writing. Just as the Asian American ethnic group is a political coalition, Asian American literature may be thought of as an emergent and evolving textual coalition, whose interests it is the business of a professional coalition of Asian American critics to promote. (9)

Although the literature is an analogue of the political coalition, the literature itself is not inherently political; rather, "writers are no longer responsible for directly producing politics, but for achieving recognition

in the dominant literary field" (Chiang 26) and it is the job of Asian American critics to assist them in gaining recognition.

Such efforts to move the focus of the field have met with limited success, however. The problematic diversity of Asian American culture has led scholars to engage in 'strategic deferral', a refusal to define the field: "Strategic deferral marks how literary critics have avoided defining and categorising what exactly hallmarks, embodies, and characterises Asian American literature, suspending any boundary making precisely because the contours of the racial community continue to change" (Sohn, Lie and Goellnicht 2). The diversity of the Asian American community has thus not only stymied attempts to construct political unity but also to define aesthetic similarity. In 2006, Sue-im Lee and Rocio G. Davis edited a volume of essays called *Literary Gestures: The Aesthetic in Asian American Writing*, which again lamented the lack of attention to aesthetics within Asian American literary criticism. As Lee says in her introduction:

> By positioning issues of literary criticism and formal analysis at the heart of Asian American literary studies, this volume seeks to counterbalance the prevailing dominance of sociological and cultural materialist approaches in Asian American literary criticism, to bring about a self-consciousness in the multidisciplinary uses of literary texts, and ultimately, to argue the complementary possibility of a historically and materially engaged analysis that *also* recognises the aesthetic as a rich critical variable. (1)

In attempting to refocus the field on formal considerations, the contributors attempt to bridge the ethnic/aesthetic divide, wherein ethnic fiction is valued for its sociological insights rather than for any literary value:

> Those concerned with Asian American literary studies need to be keenly self-conscious of the *verbs* that they employ as the agents of the critical 'representative' and ask how their own use of Asian American literature as 'attesting to,' 'exemplifying,' 'illustrating,' or 'testifying to' material and historical constraints and veiled ideologies may not adequately contest ethnographic assessments of ethnic minority literature. (6)

Concealed within every cry for recognition is thus an acknowledgment of inferiority; 'you should pay attention to these works because it is your moral duty, even though you would much rather read something else for personal enjoyment.' Such attitudes do attach themselves to ethnic fiction, which is often seen as a niche area of study, one of ethical, political, and sociological benefit, even if not particularly interesting in its own right. The current effort to emphasise the literary importance of Asian American works is thus long overdue.

However, even those critics who value the literary aesthetic are constrained by the field's overall ethical approach. Both Wong and Lee are careful to connect their analyses of aesthetics with the political goals of Asian American studies, with the assumption being that these two approaches can be complementary. Sohn, Lie and Goellnicht observe the same tendency when noting the recent "shift of attention among some scholars towards aesthetics in Asian American literary studies, with care being taken to stress the political dimensions of aesthetics" (2). This sidesteps the crucial question of what to do when ethical and aesthetic approaches come into conflict, as was shown by the crisis over the Asian American Studies' Fiction Award for 1998. The award was given to Lois-Ann Yamanaka for her novel *Blu's Hanging*, but immediately after this decision a resolution was introduced to rescind the award because the novel was deemed to contain racist depictions of Filipinos. The crisis demonstrated the potential conflicts between ethical and aesthetic evaluations of literature; for ethical critics, the novel had to be condemned because it did not pave the way for a better society, while those evaluating it in terms of aesthetics were forced to argue that literary representations are not coterminous with reality and one must grant authors a large amount of autonomy in what they choose to depict.

In truth, conflict between both approaches is inevitable simply because there's no reason a great and important work of art has to be morally good or emerge from a morally pure society. *Birth of a Nation* is one of the most important films in cinema history, and also one of the most racist; we would all prefer it to be otherwise, but the world is too complex to be neatly divided up into 'bad politics = bad art' and 'good politics = good art.' In my own view, the current dominance of ethical criticism is too restrictive and dogmatic; a critic can certainly pay attention to ethical concerns (I find it hard to imagine teaching *Birth of a Nation* without discussing its racism), but those ethical concerns should

not override the critic's responsibility to investigate art. This may sound appalling to some; allow me to offer the words of Orson Welles in *The Third Man* as an explanation:

> After all, Holly, it's not so bad. In Italy for thirty years under the Borgias they had warfare, terror, murder and bloodshed but they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci and the Renaissance. In Switzerland, they had brotherly love; they had five hundred years of democracy and peace and what did that produce? The cuckoo clock.

I'd love it if the Renaissance had happened in Switzerland and we could write about the Holy Trinity of art, peace, and brotherly love, about how moral right and artistic flair are intrinsically connected, but I just don't find cuckoo clocks that interesting. If you study art, you have to follow where it leads and not tell it where to go.

My reluctant conclusion is that the study of Asian American literature is restricted by an ideological horizon that limits the kinds of questions scholars choose to ask. For example, the only Asian American novelist ever to be nominated for the Nobel Prize for Literature is Richard E. Kim, but Kim's philosophical novels don't address the kinds of questions scholars want to ask, so the works of one of Asian America's finest writers are little studied. The beliefs that bind the discipline together also blind it to areas of interest beyond its general focus on social injustice. That these attitudes have become dogmatic can be seen in the increasing vagueness of the political vision; as the quotes from Chuh show, there is no specific goal in mind any more but simply an all-embracing commitment to a set of attitudes in search of a realisable political programme. When a set of attitudes and beliefs become separated from meaningful practice, we are left with a demand to believe in them because they are the right things to believe. This circular argument is generally a lot more successful than people suppose, particularly in a limited sphere like a profession, because as Gross and Fosse argue the profession then attracts people who already believe and repels those who don't. However, there is nothing inherently valuable in the stance that compels one to adopt it.

The root problem for Asian American literary studies is the monistic belief that all true things must form a unity and therefore a unified community politics must be reflected in a common set of literary

concerns. This is to pay lip-service to the concept of pluralism while draining it of its most important component – the understanding that rational beings may nevertheless possess incommensurable beliefs and goals between which harmony is impossible. Pluralism, in Isaiah Berlin's sense, involves recognising that there will always be disagreement but this doesn't necessarily entail conflict because we are free of the belief that truth is singular. Once we abandon the need for Asian American literature to express the political ideals of the scholarly community, and acknowledge that different authors may hold worldviews that are both understandable and irreconcilable, then our task as scholars is to chart the variety of perspectives without privileging those that share our views or insist that somehow all viewpoints must form an integrated whole. If this study separates Korean American literature from Asian American literature in general, it is because there is a particular pattern in Korean American literature that emerges from a distinctive Korean cultural heritage. There is no reason to insist it must form one part of the greater truth of the Asian American experience – it doesn't. What it does do is provide us with a comparative perspective on tragedy that has not previously been possible. From an aesthetic perspective, that is a sufficient reason.

1.2 Journey's Beginning

Where does all of this leave our study of *han*? I take this excursion through Asian American Studies to show one of the major difficulties we will have in pursuing *han* through the works of Korean American fiction. In the first place, *han* is a uniquely Korean concept and thus is of little use to those hoping to use Asian American literature to identify important socio-political themes. Therefore, although it would seem logical to use concepts drawn from Asian American Studies to scrutinise Korean American literature, we actually need to distance ourselves from such frameworks if we are to make progress.

More importantly, however, there is an irreconcilable antagonism between *han* and the worldviews that dominate the contemporary humanities. The very existence of Asian American Studies, for example, is predicated on the belief that the world can be transformed through collective action. This is one of the fundamental tenets of the

contemporary left and depends on seeing the world as something that human beings can shape and control. *Han*, on the other hand, is a tragic vision that emphasises a pessimistic fatalism and depends on viewing the world as implacable, cruelly indifferent, and inescapable. When we attempt to analyse a text dominated by *han* through the lens of contemporary theory, we find ourselves unexpectedly through the looking glass. Nietzsche once wrote, "If ancient tragedy was driven from its course by the dialectical desire for knowledge and the optimism of science, it might be inferred that there is an eternal conflict between *the theoretical* and *the tragic view of things*" (360). What he meant was that in order to see things in a tragic light we have to put aside "the belief in the fathomableness of nature and in knowledge as a panacea" (360). Nietzsche's ideas here are alien to the whole spirit of the academic enterprise, but he has a valid point. I initially thought I could apply fashionable concepts from ethnic studies, postcolonial theory, autobiography, contact zones, and autoethnography to Korean American fiction and had a fairly clear expectation of the results I would find; I was utterly wrong, because *han* intervened and turned the world on its head. From this new upside-down perspective (or perhaps we are now the right way up?) things fell into different patterns and everything had to be reworked.

Although scholarly works are supposed to explain all the theories they will use from the outset in order to give the impression of setting forth from a rock-solid standpoint, here that is both impossible and meaningless. *Han* is a mood or a worldview rather than a genre; as such, it is impossible to limit possible texts to a specific mode. It is resistant to cultural theory because these theories are predicated on fundamentally different beliefs. The standard vocabulary of cultural theory is enough to illustrate this point: minority fiction must always attack, challenge, counteract, destabilise, negotiate, question, resist, subvert, or undermine hegemonic ideologies, which will hopefully lead to an increasingly unspecified transformation of society. Behind all these verbs lies the belief that human actions can make a difference in the world. We are not dealing with such utopian notions in this book. This book is about a tragic vision, which shows us the world of necessity. Any Oedipuses reading this should probably consider blinding themselves now, rather than go any further.

What I propose is not a systematic method but a dialogical model, in which theory is brought into contact with the texts, but this will be a rather bruising encounter for both. The novels will not be used to justify some theoretical conclusion or buttress a particular concept; instead, they will challenge theory by situating it in a universe that is not malleable and beneficent but malign and uncontrollable. How exactly will the colonial sphere, postmodernism, autoethnography, and contemporary ethnic fiction look after we tumble down the rabbit hole? Were I to give descriptions of the current status of these concepts here, I would be misleading you because they do not demarcate the lines on which this inquiry will run. Instead, we shall meet all of these concepts as we go through the text, where they will be brought into dialogue with the works of Korean American authors, and hopefully our understanding of both will be transformed through the debate.

Our journey will begin by looking at the existentialist works of Richard E. Kim, the writer who most explicitly defined his work in relation to *han*; then we will look at Kim's postcolonial fiction in relation to the theories of Homi Bhabha; from there we will jump to Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée* and see how it engages with postmodernism, feminism, and ethnic studies; next we will analyse Heinz Insu Fenkl's autobiographical novel *Memories of my Ghost Brother* in relation to contemporary ideas about borderlands, hybridity, and contact zones; and finally we will look at the dense psychological novels of Chang-rae Lee in relation to concepts of agency in ethnic fiction. As we go we will observe some of the religious/philosophical roots of *han*, colonial influences on the concept, and how it interacts with contemporary ideas on postmodernism, hybridity, and modern ethnic fiction. Finally I will attempt to draw some conclusions about the aesthetics and philosophical underpinnings of *han* in relation to classical Western tragedy. I could advance these ideas in the introduction and then attempt to prove them in the texts (in the finest Euclidean tradition), but this approach has its own potential weaknesses. It imposes an external pattern on individual works and may thus obscure the texts themselves; I have attempted to deal with each text on its own terms and thus if we jump from existentialism to postcolonialism to postmodernism to ethnic autobiography to contemporary fiction, it is because that is where these particular texts point, not because I am attempting to use the texts to justify some new idea of mine in these

fields. New ideas do emerge during the course of the text, but that is a consequence of the dialogical approach rather than the aim of my study.

Moreover, the journey to *han* has its own value in that it allows readers to form their own impressions as we go. Stating one's conclusions at the outset conditions not just readers' own conclusions but the kind of questions they might ask; by leaving it open, readers have greater freedom to form conclusions as we progress. Hopefully this dialogue between reader and text will provoke more questions and issues for debate; the downside is that it makes it significantly more difficult to hold the various pieces of the study together when the overarching idea only emerges fully at the end. I think the risk is worth it, however, and hope the reader finds the more open and flexible scope of this study has not weakened its overall coherence.

The texts have been chosen because of their formal differences from each other, which allows us to see how *han* engages with theory across multiple contexts, and because of their powerful expressions of *han*. Some of these texts are well known and oft studied, like Cha's *Dictée* or Lee's *Native Speaker*, but no one has read them quite like we will. This does not mean I have developed an innovative new theory. My interpretations are primarily based on the time-honoured practice of close reading. I have also found it useful to look at texts the authors specifically reference in their works, because every writer is also a reader and often writes with specific books in mind, either as examples to be followed or conventions to be challenged. I also include in each chapter a short biography of the author, partly because the author's identity is a crucial component of the study of ethnic fiction but primarily because I feel it helps the reader to have a human-scale figure to identify with when entering a new landscape. Certain information about Korean and Korean American history may be more effectively conveyed through the authors' lives than through a chapter specifically devoted to the historical background, because what we are primarily interested in is not so much the events themselves as how these events are filtered through individual minds to produce art. My methods are relatively straightforward, then, but they will produce unexpected results because the study of *han* automatically pushes us to the other side of the ideological horizon, into a hostile world immune to human efforts at reform. Such a shift in critical attention, I believe, can be more productive than any amount of concentration on new theories.

Those who cannot read a murder mystery without skipping to the end to find out who did it may jump to the results of this study in chapter seven, where I draw my comparative conclusions on the similarities and differences between *han* and tragedy and on the literary techniques and aesthetics of *han*. For those who appreciate the journey, however, it is time to bring the preliminaries to an end and set forth down the dark river that wends its way through the major works of Korean American literature. Along its banks is where the path leads, and we follow where it goes.

2 The Whirlwind of *Han*

Han is a concept with deep roots in ancient religious and philosophical traditions. Many are the sages who have asked how we can live in a universe that cares nothing for us and is openly hostile to our existence; such questions are perennial and have recurred throughout both Eastern and Western culture. An in-depth exploration of such questions would take a lifetime, but fortunately for us many of these issues have been explored with great acuity in the novels of Richard E. Kim and so we turn to his work first to investigate some of the religious and philosophical worldviews that inform the concept of *han*. Kim's knowledge of philosophy and Korean culture allowed him to perceive similarities and resonances between *han* and Western religious and philosophical discourses, and what we undertake here is not just an attempt to understand his literary works but an opportunity to observe the worldview of *han*.

As we follow the river, we therefore come first upon the forgotten ruins of some of Asian America's greatest monuments. Between 1964 and 1970, Richard E. Kim produced three novels each shaped by a powerful vision of *han*, and all three explore ways in which people may live with dignity in a cruelly indifferent universe. The key question for Kim was: how can one live meaningfully in a world of suffering and horror? In his work he attempted to resolve this urgent but seemingly intractable difficulty. As he said in a plenary lecture at the "Asian Voices in English" conference:

> What I have been trying to find in and through my writing is nothing less than the ways and means – psychological and philosophical – to destroy the Korean version of *han* [...] *Han* – I realized – had made Koreans pliant before foreign powers and domination, subservient to foreign interest, and obsessed, masochistically and degradingly, with a petty, private and baser instinct for only one's survival [...] I found *han*, therefore, degrading and repugnant. It has – you see – a smell of defeat and a stench of death. ("Plenary" 26)