

# Still Life With Rice

## *A Young American Woman Discovers the Life and Legacy of Her Korean Grandmother*

By Helie Lee

NEW YORK: SIMON AND SCHUSTER, 1996  
320 PAGES

While focusing on the remarkable life of her grandmother, Hongyong Baek, Helie Lee's *Still Life With Rice* provides memorable images of Japanese and Soviet occupation and civil war. Written with sensitivity and detail, the book is not only a tribute to her grandmother's will to survive, but to the courage of the Korean people. *Still Life With Rice* is recommended for high school and college literature, world history and Asian Studies classes.

Prior to writing this book, Helie Lee struggled with the Korean culture. "To me, my parents and grandmother were from Mars—out of sight and out of touch—too Korean for my good." After a visit with her family in Korea, the author traveled to Hong Kong and then Northern China where she discovered a community of Koreans who had fled Japanese occupation, but preserved their language and tradition in spite of war, the communist revolution, and their inability to return home. Helie was amazed at their tenacity and love for Korea ("they spoke about Korea as if it were heaven"). When Helie returned home, she explored her grandmother's and mother's memories, discovered her rich heritage, and began her promising career as a Korean-American writer.

Writing in her maternal grandmother's voice, the author illuminates the life of this courageous woman and her commitment to family and tradition in spite of great hardships. While Hongyong Baek's life was one of sorrow, we learn that it has also been a life of faith, hope and love.

Her story begins in 1912 with birth into a wealthy merchant family two years after the Japanese began their occupation of Korea. No longer a child by nine, Hongyong begins to learn the duties of a traditional wife. At twenty-two her marriage is arranged to a young man whom she does not know. Her mother is aware of her fears and tells her to "remember . . . a woman can always learn to love her husband." It does not take long for Hongyong to fall in love with the sensitive man she was obligated to marry.

As the Japanese gain total control over Korea, children are forbidden to speak or write in Korean. Unmarried women are recruited into the military under the "euphemistic name of volunteers."

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Hongyong's husband decides that his family must join other Korean refugees in China in order to live peacefully, speak their own language, and perhaps own a business.

In China they prosper as Hongyong proves resourceful in establishing a sesame oil business and then a more profitable but risky opium business. When she starts a restaurant to serve influen-

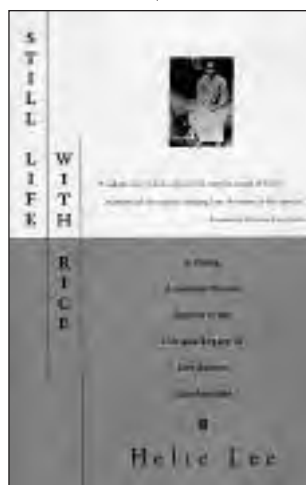
tial people, she succeeds and the family becomes rich; however, her husband now has the finances to visit the houses of the *kisaeng*. His wife is devastated. She also receives news about the massacre of people in Nanking, Shanghai, and Manchuria.

Hongyong begins to bribe everyone from Japanese soldiers to high-ranking officials to protect herself and her family. When she personally witnesses the decapitation of a Korean woman for stealing a chicken to feed her child, Hongyong convinces her husband that they should return to Korea. With the purchase of 238 acres of land, the family resettles in North Korea as World War II ends. Hongyong, now thirty-three, celebrates the end of colonial oppression and trusts that the Russians will help to preserve Korean culture. It is not long

before the Communists confiscate their property. "We had nothing left . . . we had our country back but no home."

In the following years Hongyong becomes a Christian, learns to read and write Hangul, discovers the healing art of *ch'iryo*, and restores some financial security to the family. Her husband and children become Christians, risking Communist persecution. With the outbreak of war, the family is separated and as they make a harrowing escape to South Korea, some of the heaviest bombing occurs. As Hongyong walks for weeks with her children without knowing if her husband and son are still alive, she sees death and destruction everywhere. "War forced people to close their hearts, to shut out the cries of other people's children. War forced us to worry only about our own burdens, and even that was a great responsibility to bear."

In the final chapters we find Hongyong, now a United States citizen, living in Koreatown Los Angeles, practicing *ch'iryo*, and enjoying her grandchildren (Julie and Helie). We learn her recent news that her son who had been missing since the Korean War was alive and living in Pyongyang. ■



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