

Book Review

The Calligrapher's Daughter by *Eugenia Kim*

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An American-born daughter to Korean immigrants, Eugenia Kim grew up hearing fascinating stories of her parents' lives in their home country before they moved to the United States shortly after the Pacific War. Her desire to write about her mother's life led her to interviews with her mother for additional and missing details and to extensive research into the history and culture of Korea. To capture her mother's story with better literary skills, Kim took courses in the MFA program at Bennington College. To be able to release the story with more dramatic details, Kim chose to use the genre of fiction. The result is *The Calligrapher's Daughter*, which won, among others, the 2009 Borders Original Voices Award and a Best Book of 2009 Award by *The Washington Post*.

Set in Gaesong, the novel depicts the life of Najin, a precocious, spirited girl who grows up in an aristocratic family in early 20th-Century, while Korea was invaded and ultimately colonized by Japan. Najin avoids an arranged marriage by serving as a princess's companion during the last days of Emperor Gojong. Following her marriage to a man whom she falls in love with, she attempts to travel with her husband to the United States to study. The Japanese colonial government, however, rejects her passport application. Separated from her new husband, she is forced to stay in Korea with her in-laws and later with her own parents until she is reunited with her husband years later. In this life story of a young woman, the author explores the human capacity for sacrifice, hope and love.

Kim is not the first to write in English about the painful experiences of Koreans under the Japanese colonial regime. Younghill Kang's *The Grass Roof* and Richard E. Kim's *Lost Names* deal with the same period

in Korean history; Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman* and Chang-rae Lee's *Gesture Life* focus specifically on the comfort women issues. *The Calligrapher's Daughter*, however, is the first to fully investigate the period from a female perspective, showing what it took for women to find freedom against the forces of history and culture.

Kim is particularly successful, thanks in part to her careful research, at describing and explaining the intricate family dynamics, the complicated protocol of behavior at the royal court, and the history of Korea immediately before and after the annexation by Japan. The use of Najin - a young girl who is curious and frequently rebellious - as the main narrator appears to make the task of cultural explanation and translation easier than otherwise. With Najin asking numerous questions to her elders and running into trouble for "misbehaving," we as readers eavesdrop on her conversations with her parents and teachers and learn about Korean culture and history.

Kim is quite a raconteur, taking us on a roller-coaster ride of hope, despair, love, suffering, and forgiveness. The genuine care and feeling with which the author explores her mother's life through the fictional account - in addition to her skillful character development, narrative control, and description - make the novel a must read for *Asian Women* readers.

Biographical note: **Seiwoong Oh** is Professor and Chair of the English Department at Rider University, New Jersey, USA. He received his Ph.D. from the University of North Texas, and has written articles on Asian American and British Renaissance literature.