

# Conversations with Elaine Kim

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## ABSTRACT

This is the text of an interview with Elaine Kim, the author of the ground-breaking *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context* and a founding member of the Asian American Studies Program at U.C. Berkeley. The interview explores the changing meaning of "Asian American Studies"--whereas once the main social-literary issue was the problem of abandoning one's Asianness in order to be assimilated and identified as an "American," the central issue now is the definition and expression of one's (original) Asian identity within or against the background of American culture--in the context of contemporary cultural issues (race, gender, cultural pluralism) and literary-political theory (cultural studies, post-colonialism, feminism) and with reference to several contemporary Asian American works of fiction.

## KEY WORDS

Asian American  
power politics  
race  
feminism

social movement  
cultural identity  
gender heterogeneity

Professor Elaine Kim (K), author of the ground-breaking *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context* and a founding member of the Asian American Studies Program at UC Berkeley, earned her master's degree in English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University and her doctorate in Education at UC Berkeley. Active, articulate, versatile, and knowledgeable, she has written numerous articles on Asian American literature, compiled several anthologies, and served as co-producer of a video commentary entitled *Sa-I-Gu: From Korean Women's Perspectives*. The author (L) of this interview was delighted to have this opportunity to discuss with her some issues in Asian American literature. The interview occurred at Room 3337, Dwinelle Hall in the mid afternoon of December 9, 1993.

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L : How did the Asian American Studies Program of Berkeley come into being? What was your role in its establishment?

K : Berkeley's Asian American Studies Program started officially in 1969 when Professor Ling-chi Wang, one of my colleagues, taught a course on Asian American community. The program was established as a result of the students' strike. The students, consisting of a coalition of Native, Chicano, African, and Asian Americans, demanded that a program that would be relevant to their history of the United States be set up to serve their needs and that such

a program not educate them away from their communities, but instead educate them to return to their communities, including Indian reservations, Chicano barrios, Black ghettos, and Asian "towns." At this juncture, I happened to be a graduate student in the English Department. The Program needed someone with a master's degree to teach a course on Asian American literature. Five of us, including four males and me, had master's degrees. Each taught a class. The program, having no reason to trust me, put my name on the course list, but asked other students to teach the course. Finally, they decided that I could manage this class.

My interest lay in the African American civil rights movement. I had not thought of the role of Asian Americans in this movement, owing to the fact that the world of the East coast was mostly dominated by black and white people. When I first came to Berkeley, I knew very little about Asian Americans. As time progressed, I was introduced to the idea that Asian Americans were a racial and cultural minority. Most of the Asian American students faced a certain kind of cultural discrimination in regard to their English proficiency. Many people thought that they were foreign students whose command of spoken and written English was bad and inadequate and that Asian Americans were only good at mechanical things and microchips.

At that time, we established an alternative English literature curriculum in which Asian, Native, Chicano, and African American writers were used as the materials for this class. Literature from Asia, Africa and Latin America (either in English or in English translation), was also selected. We had a complete set of readings different from those of the English Department. We set up an alternative English Literature and American English language program as a kind of general university requirement and

forced the administration to allow students to satisfy the English literature and English composition requirements by taking this course. It, of course, took a lot of political maneuvering before the administration caved in. It was really a victory for us. The principle underlying it was why we should necessarily read Henry James or Herman Melville. Is literature in English by Jamaicans or Australians not "English literature"?

We ended up serving thousands of students by offering this kind of course. Students who were admitted into Berkeley and whose English was not considered good enough were required to enroll in remedial English classes. Most of the students enrolling in this program were from a racial minority. They had to pay 45 dollars and receive no course credit to register for this course, attend five lectures per week, and submit writing assignments on topics such as Bob Dylan and the Beatles, figures from the mainstream culture. We established an alternative class in which minority literature was being taught. As a whole, Asian American Studies Program calls into questions such as What is American history? What is American Literature? What is English Literature? Who can be an American?

- L : Can you identify some of the unique themes and characteristics of Asian American literature?
- K : In the past, Asian American literature dealt with the question of what it means to become an American. The possibility of becoming an American seemed to be very limited in the 1940s, '50s, and '60s. Two possibilities were available for the Asian Americans, namely: 1. to deny or suppress racial and ethnic characteristics and to achieve the ideal of assimilating into the American society; and 2. to remain subjugated, other, and foreign. Nowadays, the question of "becoming American" or how you can transform the meaning of "American" are still literary

issues. Experience indicates that culture intersects. As situations change, Asian American literature becomes very diversified in these days. Today, a lot of writers feel that they have more room for exploring individual themes such as sexuality (sexual orientation) and border crossing.

L : Is there any ideal reading position or strategy for Asian American literature?

K : I prefer the idea of looking at the social contexts, of understanding the location of writers, and of the readers' understanding of their own location. Readers must be subconscious of their own location, race, and gender.

L : Should Asian American literature be evaluated by its "representativeness" and "authenticity?" Is it really important to be Asian Americans to interpret their literature?

K : We should not expect anybody to be the representative of Asian Americans, for demanding representativeness suggests inferiority and subordination of the group. Referring to your second question, being an Asian American certainly offers no guarantee of a successful interpretation or reading of Asian American literature just as Asian Americans may have an insightful analysis of Anglo-American literature. Japanese, for example, fail to detect the kind of racism directed against the Japanese Canadians in *Obasan*. Asian American consciousness or, if you will, sensibility, is an advantage and can certainly help to identify some of the subtleties in the literary productions by Asian Americans. Many non-Koreans have completely ignored such important aspects as nationality and Korean American ethnicity in their readings of *Dictée* as a postmodern text because they do not know the references.

L : What is your thought on the power politics within the field of Asian American studies?

K : A lot of arguments have been going on within the field of Asian American studies. One of them is that people who specialize in the sociological aspect of Asian American

studies worry that the field will become highly professionalized and thus neglect the communities and the social movement out of which it is born. People will concentrate on the exegesis of the text. Generally speaking, the arguments, I think, have something to do with fame and money. It has created conflicts in Asian American literature.

A case in point is Toni Morrison, who has just won the 1993 Nobel Prize in literature. Several African-American --mostly male--writers claim that Morrison's works are not that good. Journalists bring out such conflicts which constitute an interesting spectacle and rich materials for them to write about. The so-called conflict between Frank Chin and Maxine Hong Kingston, for instance, turns out to be an issue that the mass media love to write about. The same is true for the "conflict" between John A. Williams and Toni Morrison which has been exaggerated and blown out of proportion. In the dominant view, it may be pleasurable to see the subordinated people fighting among themselves. Then, they will never get ahead and will not pose any threats to that society.

L : It has been eleven years since the publication of your pioneering work (*An Introduction to Asian American Literature*). With demographic changes and new developments in strategies and narratives, what kinds of revisions and directions will you make or take if you want to put forth a second edition of your book?

K : I completed that book's manuscript in 1980. Currently, I have no intention to revise my book. Instead, I am contemplating writing a new introduction to it. The main reason is that it is no longer desirable to use the umbrella term "Asian American" because there are so many different groups and political as well as aesthetic interests among them. It might have been possible to draw boundaries between Asian Americans and non-Asian

Americans in the 1970s.

As far as my research orientation is concerned, I will write about specific things such as the issues within Korean American literature. In terms of a possible revision, the compulsory heterosexuality and the male-centrality in that book must be corrected and the plot summaries reduced. Due to multiple meanings, subjects, specific issues, and authors, I think it is unfruitful to put the writings published after 1980 into a basket so as to make it fit into Asian American literature.

L : The scope and subject matter are too confined for Asian American writers if their intended audience is Asian Americans. What is your opinion?

K : The scope and subject matter are not confined at all. In response to your question, I want to draw your attention to W. E. B. DuBois, who once wrote that Black theater should be written by Black people, for Black people, and in their neighborhood. Only then can it be free of appropriation and have originality and creative content. The same is true of Asian American literature. "The San Francisco *Chronicle* put forth a bold claim that Asian American literature was passé by 1993. On the contrary, Asian American literature not only flourishes but also becomes increasingly popular. The market for Asian American literature is viable. Asian American writers are active. A strong reading audience exists. Asian American literature has its particularity and different specific markets. The market is by no means confined.

L : What is the position of Asian American writers in American literary history?

K : Asian American writers did not have any position until recent times. However, they are now occupying important positions. At present, U.S. culture is in crisis because Americans refuse to admit the importance of race in American history, culture, and contemporary life. Inspiring

and creative, Black literature asserts its greatness in American literature. Likewise, Asian American literature and minority literature have been producing the most interesting and vital cultural expressions in the United States. We maintain good position not only because Asian Americans themselves are reading their own literature, but because Chicanos and African Americans, as well as European Americans, also read Asian American literature. *Making Waves*—an anthology which consists of the writings by and about Asian American women—is widely read and well received in America.

- L : What kinds of functions can the Asian American writers display in their works? Who do they talk to?
- K : Asian American writings inspire students to write and imagine themselves as writers. A case in point is the second edition of *Making Waves*. We have received 750 submissions for the second volume. Asian American writers not only inspire self-expression, but also suggest a possibility for Asian Americans, who used to be thought of as technicians, to speak about our inner life and psychological dimension.
- L : Autobiography seems to be the most popular genre among Asian American writers. Are there any advantages and disadvantages in the use of this genre?
- K : One of the disadvantages is that people tend to treat autobiography as an “authentic” representation or as a generalization of the whole group, completely devoid of imaginative dimension. All they need is the flat-footed facts. Fictionality of Asian American literature enables it to transcend the boundary of autobiography. As far as the advantages are concerned, can we consider *Framer Framed* and *Dictée* as autobiographies? These two narratives certainly defy the genre of autobiography. *Framer Framed*, in particular, even demolishes the boundary between autobiography and film. Instead of fixing the discrete

space, boundaries are blurred so as to weave personal experiences with the so-called "objective" facts. Feminist writers insist on narrating their personal experiences in the highly intellectualized arena. People can pretend to be "universal," but in fact they have particular social class and gender positions.

L : The issues raised by Asian American writers in their writings seem to create a generational gap between the old or middle-aged and the young. The younger generation think that many of their imminent problems have seldom been treated by Asian American writers. What is your comment on this issue?

K : It is true that many writers became famous by re-telling their childhood experiences in the 1950s. The year 1965, when the U.S. immigration quotas were revised, permitting the entry of hundreds of thousands of new immigrants from Asian countries, presaged a huge change. Younger generation or the third-generation immigrants are facing difficult problems nowadays. Without any doubt, there are more potential writers now than ten or fifteen years ago. After 1965, the third-generation immigrants were coming of age and became highly educated. Contemporary issues will eventually be treated. *Charlie Chan Is Dead*, for example, is an anthology encompassing stories on a variety of subjects such as incest, sexuality and violence. People do not necessarily fit into one neat category. Heterogeneity does exist among writers.

L : Some Asian American writings, such as *Dictee* and *Framer Framed*, are overwhelmingly dominated by postmodern ideology and other art forms. In so doing, it not only imposes a problem for readers but only puts a cap on the creativity of the writers. What is your thought?

K : Instead of being limited and stifled by postmodern language and approaches, young Korean writers are liberated. Postmodernism can also be seen as a way of

expanding their creativity. It is stupid enough to follow trends without any reflection. However, we cannot deny the fact that postmodernism opens up certain possibilities for students to find out things for themselves. The focus on indeterminacy and interstitiality and the critiques of binarisms have been very valuable to Asian Americans.

L : The concepts of border, boundary, and identity seem to play an important role in Asian American literature. Why?

K : The Japanese internment best illustrates the extreme oppression of border and boundary since the Japanese Americans, who were considered as abnormal and unacceptable, were segregated into the concentration camps. Racial segregation or racial borders drawn around people of color in the United States is in a way the history of America. The history of racial relations in America deals with drawing boundaries around all people of color in different periods of history. On the one hand, the borderland is oppression; and, on the other hand, it concerns how people react to oppression. By saying that this is you and that is us, we are in fact not you. This assumption completely leaves out some people of mixed race or homosexuals. These people, whom you divide by a straight line of A or B, are prevented from their identity and subjectivity in the United States. This is the reason why the concept of border is so important.

In addition, many Chicanos may be concerned with the concept of border because they, who once occupied part of California, New Mexico, Colorado and Texas, became subjugated citizens when the United States overcame them and took over their land. The same is true to the Native Americans. Who decides that this boundary is an American boundary? As history indicates, the population of most Native Americans is spread from Canada to the southernmost part of South America. Taiwanese live in America and San Francisco where they can read newspapers and

novels, watch news, television broadcasting and videos from Taiwan. Who can say that they are not in Taiwan in their imagination?

L : What is your current research orientation?

K : At present, I am working on a book about Asian American visual artists. This book is an attempt to look at various artists who raise questions of identities and boundaries. I choose those artists who address thematic issues on boundary or U.S. displacement. Again, the boundary between written and visual culture or the boundary between the Asian American literary production and the visual art form should not be so distinct. In addition, I am engaged in another project that concerns the narratives of Koreans in Los Angeles. The Los Angeles "riots," in my opinion, mark a turning point for Korean Americans and ties them together with other Asian groups whose "American dreams" have been challenged. Despite the fact that Chinese Americans followed the system and obeyed the law in order to establish some kind of fairness, they were excluded. Koreans also followed the rules but it didn't work out. I am interested in interviewing Koreans at the moment when they may have changed their mind about America and when they are wondering who can be American. How can you become an American? What is the American dream? Do they have this kind of dream? Is this dream a mistake? Have they misunderstood their dreams? Whose dream is it, after all? In my project, I will try to shape narratives out of these interviews. Each narrative has a particular theme. All of them call into question American identity, the Los Angeles crisis, and American dreams. Each person has a particular position: rap artist, merchant, and old maid. I intend to write 35 stories out of these interviews.

L : How would you proceed to teach Asian American literature to students in Taiwan, or Hong Kong, or Mainland

China?

K : I have heard that Amy Tan's play, *The Joy Luck Club*, was not well received in Mainland China because people don't understand it. As far as teaching Asian American literature to foreign students is concerned, I would show the lines of affinity and difference between Chinese and Chinese American, for people tend to have a stereotyped image of an American. Chinese Americans are in fact Americans too, but they come from an immigrant culture. Who is an American anyway? It is not only a dilemma but also a paradox. It deals with the question of orthodoxy and gender patriarchy. In addition, I will identify some of the similarities between Filipino American literature and Chinese American literature such as the commonality of U.S. colonization.

## Contributors

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