

ONE MAN AND THE WORLD

TAKASHI KODAIRA  
HIROSHI TUSNEMOTO



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# ONE MAN AND THE WORLD



SELECTED ESSAYS AND  
ALL TABLES OF CONTENTS FROM  
*THE THOMAS WOLFE NEWSLETTER/REVIEW*  
1977–2000

EDITED BY

TAKASHI KODAIRA  
HIROSHI TSUNEMOTO

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“View of the Smoky Mountains near Asheville, North Carolina”

For

Richard S. Kennedy and Aldo P. Magi



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# SECTION I

## I—WOLFE AND THE WORLD



# Thomas Wolfe's Korean Connection



David Strange

**H**E BEGAN WRITING HIS FIRST novel in the late 1920s and continued working on it while he taught freshman composition at New York University's Washington Square College. In this poetic, autobiographical book, he wrote of growing up in an isolated mountain village and of his youthful dreams of artistic achievement and escape to shining cities ("I was born to be a wanderer all my life, with no home but the wide world."<sup>1</sup>) Maxwell Perkins of Scribner's was impressed and offered him a \$500 advance.

He was awarded a Guggenheim fellowship in the early 1930s, enabling him to travel in Europe while writing a second novel. In this equally autobiographical book he described his great journey away from home and his first visit to New York — "that magic city on rock yet ungrounded, nervous, flowing, million-hued as a dream."<sup>2</sup> He told of his education in Boston and his voracious reading in the great libraries there: "I browsed from shelf to shelf... anything that took my fancy.... Besides what I read thoroughly, I touched scattered pages of thousands of books."<sup>3</sup> He wrote passionately of his views on America: "in a flood of words... I tried to tell of my pursuit of life, life, more abundant life, and my feeling that America was the country of the present and the near future."<sup>4</sup>

He further saw the power of America symbolized by the grandeur of the Brooklyn Bridge: "this magnanimous gigantic structure.... Could nature herself with all her sweeping storms above and bursting volcanoes below affect earth so much?"<sup>5</sup>

In this second novel, readers could also see his love of trains and the opportunity for escape and adventure they represented:

The train was singing to me the American gypsy message, time, time to wander again, time to be starting, to be shaking off the past, beginning to start out to go and find something. (Just what it is nobody quite knows, but something.... Oh, yes, something big!)... the shiny new rails sprawled out on a vast continent, and all the succulent greased cogs and unaccountable wheels seemed built only to accommodate man's free lurching spirit, as he rides, rides at time in swift flight, into the unknown future over insignificant space, still seeking that something he doesn't know, but has to find.<sup>6</sup>

He scattered many such rhapsodic passages throughout these first two books, but did not allow them to overpower his finely drawn characters—the young, idealistic protagonist; his hard-working, long-suffering father; his huge, mountain-clan family; and of course, the mysterious Laura James.

In praising his first book, one reviewer described him as “a born writer.”<sup>7</sup> This reviewer—who had enjoyed a degree of success with his own first novel—went on to say:

with his great feeling for life, his sense of time and the human tragedy... he has made a record of man's wandering and exile upon the earth, and into it he has wrought his vision of joy, and pain and hunger, and in this is the first and most lasting importance of his book.<sup>8</sup>

He—this far-wandering writer of lyrical, autobiographical fiction—was Younghill Kang; and the author of that enthusiastic book review was Thomas Wolfe.

Younghill Kang and Thomas Wolfe first met in September 1929, just weeks before the publication of *Look Homeward, Angel*. They were introduced to each other by Homer Andrew Watt, their department chairman at New York University. With a few notable exceptions, Wolfe did not socialize much with other members of the NYU English faculty, but he and Kang became friends almost immediately. In fact, David Herbert Donald has said that “Wolfe virtually adopted Younghill Kang.”<sup>9</sup>

Though only three years younger than Wolfe, Kang was grateful for this “adoption.” He felt like an outsider at NYU and later recalled that in his first year there, “nobody really care for me except Tom.”<sup>10</sup> Wolfe's apartment became for Kang almost a second home—a place where he and Wolfe would talk for hours about life and literature. They would also get together occasionally after their classes, sometimes going to Chinatown where, according to Kang, Wolfe was particularly fond of Chinese wine. Wolfe, often accompanied by fellow writer and NYU faculty member

Vardis Fisher, was also a frequent dinner guest at the Manhattan apartment of Kang and his wife, writer Frances Keely.

During these lunches, dinners, and long bull sessions, the conversations naturally turned to their own writing. On one occasion, Wolfe asked permission to read the first four chapters of what would become Kang's first book, *The Grass Roof*. Kang allowed Wolfe to take the chapters home overnight, but Wolfe took them to his own editor at Scribner's, Maxwell Perkins, who encouraged Kang to keep on writing. Perkins sweetened this encouragement — as he did earlier for Wolfe — with a \$500 advance.

Two subsequent acts of kindness toward Kang may have capped Wolfe's "adoption" of him — helping to establish Kang as an important writer. The first of these was his review of *The Grass Roof*. Appearing in the April 4, 1931, issue of the *New York Evening Post*, "A Poetic Odyssey of the Korea That Was Crushed" was the only book review Wolfe was to ever publish. In it he praised Kang's characterizations, his "fertile and inventive mind," and his "gift of concrete and sensuous perception." He professed delight in the book's poetic passages: "the final meditation of Kang himself naturally and spontaneously condenses itself at every point into poetry — sometimes a line or two of his own, sometimes a verse from ancient Korean or Chinese poetry, of which his knowledge is great and fruitful."<sup>11</sup>

The second friendly act was Wolfe's effort to help Kang obtain a Guggenheim fellowship. His personal recommendation played an important role in Kang's receiving the award. With the Guggenheim, Kang was able to live for a time in Rome and work on his second novel, *East Goes West: The Making of an Oriental Yankee*.

The benefits of their friendship flowed in the other direction as well. Having an intelligent, thoughtful writer to talk to — especially one with a deep knowledge of another culture — was surely a supreme benefit for Wolfe. And Kang (who Pearl S. Buck was later to call "one of the most brilliant minds of the East"<sup>12</sup>) fit this description perfectly.

He was, in Wolfe's eyes, a fellow exile; a man who understood the pain of being an outsider. As a teenager, Kang had spent several years studying in Japan. Upon his return to Korea, he joined the nascent revolutionary movement against the occupying Japanese forces. Through Chung-Pa Han, his protagonist in *The Grass Roof*, Kang described the interrogation and torture he endured. Following a failed attempt to emigrate to America (a perilous misadventure that included traveling in disguise to China and then fleeing to Russia, only to be recaptured by the Japanese), Kang was once again jailed and tortured. Finally, with the help of a sympathetic American missionary, Kang was able to convince the Japanese "thought police" that he was harmless enough to obtain a passport.<sup>13</sup>



# SECTION II

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