

2-28-2000

## Gus Lee

John C. Hawley

*Santa Clara University*, [jhawley@scu.edu](mailto:jhawley@scu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarcommons.scu.edu/engl>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Hawley, J. C. (2000). Gus Lee. In E. S. Nelson (Ed.), *Asian American Novelists: A Bio-Bibliographical Sourcebook* (pp. 185-191). Greenwood Press.

*Asian American Novelists: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook* by Emmanuel S. Nelson, ed. Copyright © 2000 by Emmanuel S. Nelson. All rights reserved. Reproduced with permission of ABC-CLIO, LLC, Santa Barbara, CA.

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Arts & Sciences at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in English by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [rsroggin@scu.edu](mailto:rsroggin@scu.edu).

# Gus Lee

(1946– )

---

*John C. Hawley*

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Augustus Samuel Mein-Sun Lee was born in San Francisco on August 8, 1946, the only son of Tsung-Chi Lee and Da-Tsien Tsu. His three sisters had been born in mainland China and accompanied his mother on the difficult trek across China to India and then to the United States in 1944. There, the family rejoined Tsung-Chi, who had once been a major in the Kuomintang army and who, since 1939, had been working in San Francisco for the Bank of Canton. When Gus was only five, his mother died of breast cancer, and his father, two years later, married a severe Pennsylvania Dutch woman. Gus grew up in the Panhandle and the Haight, a predominantly African American area of San Francisco, and he had a difficult time becoming accepted. He joined the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) and learned to box. Later, with the strong encouragement of his father, he attended West Point but did not complete the program. He received his bachelor's degree from the University of California at Davis in 1969 (where he was named Distinguished Military Graduate), and a J.D. in 1976. He worked for the army's Judge Advocate General's Corps from 1977 to 1980 (receiving a Meritorious Service Medal and First Oak Leaf Cluster for criminal investigation and trial advocacy and an Army Commendation Medal for legal advising) and then for the Sacramento County District Attorney's office from 1980 to 1984. In the latter capacity he became a member of the Order of the Silk Purse for trial advocacy. In subsequent years he worked for the California District Attorneys Association and as director of legal education for the State Bar of California, receiving in 1988 the Outstanding Instructor Award. In recent years he moved to Colorado Springs and retired from the law to devote himself full-time to writing. He is married to Diane Elliott, a psychiatric nurse and educator.

The topics of Lee's novels have tended to follow his career. *China Boy*, published in 1991, tells of his boyhood in San Francisco. *Honor and Duty* (1994) recounts his struggles at West Point. *Tiger's Tail* (1996) draws on Lee's assignment in postwar Korea as one of ten army attorneys in the Connelly Commission that investigated illegal recruiting practices. *No Physical Evidence* (1998) is set in the law courts of Sacramento.

## MAJOR WORKS AND THEMES

Gus Lee's thematic preoccupations seem to stem from two sources: his as a Chinese American to find a niche in the larger and potentially dismissive American society and his desire to identify and cultivate the characteristics of masculinity as traditionally defined in Chinese tradition and, more importantly, in contemporary American culture. Along the way, especially in the first two books, Lee carries on a one-sided conversation with his surprisingly invisible father, who is bound and determined that his family will establish its American credentials.

The novels are decidedly autobiographical, though less so in the last two. In the first two, the protagonist is Kai Ting, almost a dead-ringer for Lee. In the third he is Jackson Hu-chin Kan, and in the fourth, Joshua Jin. In the most recent novels Lee is perhaps signaling that he has said enough about himself, and now, while incorporating the knowledge he has gained in his military and legal careers, he does not wish to write confessionally. In the four novels published to date, one can notice Lee's focus shifting gradually away from his early abiding sense of alienation. In its place have appeared more haunting questions of responsibility that the author, having himself come to terms with his own cultural assimilation as an Asian American, is apparently allowing to rise to fuller consciousness and examination—questions that are less ethnically based than were his earlier questions of identity.

A haunting presence in the novels is the author's mother, whose remembered warmth carries with it the Chinese wisdom that Lee attempts to salvage, along with the respect for scholarship that was a tradition in her family ("I was so happy to be her son, her strength and beauty a shield against the glare of complicated and misunderstood days" [*China Boy* 30]). Her courage in leading her three daughters out of China becomes symbolic for the author of a fortitude he seeks to emulate in the personal challenges of his early years ("She refused obsequiousness, rejected submission, and exchanged restraint for spontaneity. . . . She acted as if she were an enfranchised male" [*China Boy* 18]). Recognizing her importance in their younger brother's life, Lee's sisters hid from him for several months their mother's death from cancer—even writing him letters in her name. But it was not until he had become an adult that he felt a strong need to recover his memories of her. His sisters were the depository of those memories, and he quizzed them thoroughly before beginning his writing career.

Lee's stepmother, on the other hand, is portrayed in his novels as "Edna

Madalyn McGurk Ting," who, he writes in *China Boy*, "liked me until she heard me speak, watched me walk, saw my clothing, observed my skinniness, and realized that I ate Chinese food willingly" (67). She is everything that Cinderella might have wanted in a wicked stepmother, and in this first novel Lee does his best to punish her for her total rejection of all that the children associate with their natural mother—affection, storytelling, a warm home, self-affirmation, and, most pointedly, anything that would identify the children with their Chinese roots. Lee casts his father's relationship with his new wife in terms of the man's determined embrace of Americanism, and this complicates the author's own self-definition. "Father's heart belonged to Lillian Gish, the Barrymores, Thomas Jefferson, Joseph Stilwell, H. Norman Schwarzhedd [*sic*], the Springfield '03, the T-2 parachute, the Vought O2U pursuit biplane, C-rations, and the hot dog" (*China Boy* 33). It is this father whom Lee attempts to embrace and emulate, with only partial success, in *Honor and Duty*, his compelling account of his years at West Point. He describes it as "a process of attrition that would last for over three years," adding with trepidation that "I was the only Chinese I saw" (*Honor and Duty* 2).

With a somewhat distant father and as an only son with three older sisters, it is not surprising that Lee speaks through protagonists who valorize male friendship. In the first novel Kai Ting finds solace in an African American friend, Toussaint, who was important enough in his life that the author as recently as 1995 enlisted his wife's help in successfully locating his former friend, now a family practitioner in the Kaiser hospital system. At the YMCA he idolizes his boxing instructors, Hector Pueblo and Anthony Barraza, and in the Chinese community he finds a substitute for his mother's civilizing efforts in "Uncle" Shim. At West Point he seeks the attention of General Schwarzhedd, who had played a significant role in Lee's father's life and who has a better knack at accepting human failure. Ting responds with emotion to acceptance by an older male: "He gently took his eyes away from mine when he noticed that mine were wet, that I was losing control. I had experienced an urge to hug him" (*Honor and Duty* 400–401).

In *Tiger's Tail* the theme of male bonding plays itself out against the backdrop of espionage and consequent paranoia. Loyalty takes on personal importance for the protagonist, who is investigating the possible murder of his predecessor in the job. Much like the war movies that Lee's father found so compelling, in this novel the exigencies of battle force the men to forge friendships that last until death and even beyond. In *No Physical Evidence* the battle has shifted to the courtroom, and the intensity of the friendships seems consequently less significant. Nonetheless, even here the theme assumes an importance that suggests that the young boy who wanted so much to find a formula that would mitigate his daily beatings on the street continues to test the waters in any new setting. He wishes to fit in and remains aware that he stands out.

Questions of ethics and spirituality have assumed a larger role in the third and fourth novels. In the early books there was unfair suffering by the protag-

onist, but he is presented as too young to step outside the situation and ask how responsibility should be assigned. In the last two books, on the other hand, there are bad men and good men. There are some, like the two protagonists, who are a little of both. This growing sophistication in addressing ethical questions has its roots in Lee's relationship with his mother, who converted to Christianity in China. This was not of much immediate importance to the author as a young boy, who was sent by public transit to a new church each weekend by his wicked stepmother, but as an adult it has assumed a more prominent role. In talking about his mother with his sisters, Lee writes that "I discovered . . . how far away I had traveled from her hopes. The last thing she wanted me to be was an agnostic and I was" (Stone 48). At the time, he had been having trouble with his marriage, and his wife was concerned that he had become overly stern with their son. Entering therapy, he was led to a men's group at his local church, and a deeper form of male bonding began to change his life. "Christianity," he recently remarked, "gave me a sense of genuine humility and hope for my children. I no longer have the things I feared most in myself, attitudes that I saw in my father and stepmother. Without my faith, I couldn't have done it. In my original culture, Chinese fathers literally have the power of life and death. What I found through faith is that children learn respect if you respect them" (Stone 48).

The role of father, in fact, assumes increasing importance in the novels. In the first two, Lee speaks as a child who must come to terms with his own early struggles with his father's severe expectations and apparent emotional distance. In the two more recent novels, however, he writes from the viewpoint of an adult protagonist who is haunted by the loss of a daughter. In *Tiger's Tail*, the story of espionage is bracketed by Jackson Kan's nightmarish memory of a young girl dying in his arms, a girl he had mistakenly shot. As the story progresses, this dream reasserts itself at troubling times, until Kan is able to sublimate his anguish and offer compensatory love to a young Korean girl whose life is precarious, at best. In *No Physical Evidence* the central case that is being brought to trial is one of rape of a young teenage girl, and prosecutor Joshua Jin finds himself learning as much about himself as about the criminals as he assumes the role of foster father to the thirteen-year-old victim. "In the United States and Canada," he writes, "six hundred thousand kids were in the six-billion-dollar-a-year child sex industry, perishing before they died" (*No Physical Evidence* 385). The reader recognizes that Jin's obsession with the case springs less from this appalling statistic than from the fact that he is estranged from his wife following the death of their eleven-year-old daughter. The fact that the personal crises are finding manifestations and even salvation in the external world seems, now, less ethnically based—and simply American.

## CRITICAL RECEPTION

Although Lee has had enough financial success from his books that he is finally able to devote himself full-time to his writing, and even though he has

met with quite favorable reviews in the press, he is only now beginning to figure prominently in critical literary studies of Asian American writers. Perhaps this is because he was not trained as a novelist and, as Kiki Olson remarked in the *New York Times Book Review* regarding the voice in *China Boy*, "Kai's voice is original, elegantly naive. His conflicts are narrated in a direct, affecting, unique language, an abracadabra stew of metaphors, aphorisms, hyperbole, a patois of American, Chinese and Mexican words and street lingo." In other words, the voice is hard to pin down as "typically" Asian American: Lee's autobiographical writing reflects, like a chameleon, the hybrid culture in which he shaped his identity as an American.

But reviewers universally agree that, as Andrea Kempf notes in *Library Journal*, "Lee is a born storyteller." She is speaking, in particular, of *Honor and Duty*, which John Mort describes as "a great leap forward from Lee's first novel, the endearing but clunky *China Boy*" (*Booklist*). This is his best book, to date. Kathleen Norris evaluates this second novel as "a big book, and at times Mr. Lee seems too bent on getting it all in," but like so many others she is impressed by the strong characterization and the often moving descriptions of memories ("Maybe all families seek to hide precisely those things that writers must embrace. Gus Lee embraces even the most painful circumstances in a spirit of forgiveness").

In the third and fourth novels the malleability of Lee's narrative voice continues to draw comment. *Tiger's Tail* incorporates a M.A.S.H.-like familiarity with army language that can be off-putting for the civilian reader, despite its obvious success in placing us in the scene. "At times," writes Scott Martelle for the *New York Times Book Review*, "the dialogue is so filled with military jargon that the book almost needs English subtitles." Others object to an uneven tone, as in Emily Melton's criticism in *Booklist* that "Lee's writing is a curious hybrid, interspersing hard-core military jargon and in-your-face violence with often heavy-handed and perhaps intentionally overdone attempts at lyrical descriptive passages." It may be too strong to describe the novel as a genre-bender, yet some of the confusion over the tone may well arise from Lee's attempt to write a thriller through the eyes of a protagonist with the hard-bitten attitude we have come to expect from army novels, tempered by a sensitive underside that has been influenced by an Asian American cultural heritage and a traumatic experience in an earlier war. As the discerning writer for the *Sewanee Review* notes, "[T]he bitter agnosticism that resulted from his Vietnam experience (and that has alienated him from his family's values) is challenged, and to some degree overcome, by the mystical culture of Korean female shamanism that he has to rely on in his investigation. A resonantly complex work, *Tiger's Tail* is less a detective story than a serious and effective novel that happens to have a plot based on criminal investigation" (461).

That sort of investigation and Lee's genre manipulation continue in *No Physical Evidence*, with a similar fluctuation of tone and skewing of reader expectations. He plays with the hard-bitten Jack Webb jargon ("just the facts, ma'am") that readers of detective fiction recognize, and even the novelist's use of an

intriguing (and hopeless) case to lift his protagonist from the depths of depression will be familiar. But the fact that the detective in question is Chinese American breaks the stereotype, as other writers of detective fiction have done by casting a gay male in the role. The book is overplotted, as *Tiger's Tail* may have been, but reviewers praise it for strong atmospheric passages and for its compelling depiction of the misuse of children.

Christine So observes that the shifts in voice in Lee and other Asian American writers suggest "breaks in traditional American narratives of belonging" (So 141). What she finds notable in Lee, however (and this may be what others decry as a weakness), is the use of jokes. "In the process," she writes, "he also complicates our understanding of ethnic humor and its correlation to acculturation by drawing comedy not only from the tension between the majority and minority, but also from the relationships between minority cultures" (143). Lee is, thus, typical of ethnic writers who use humor to extend the moment of potential assimilation "indefinitely, even as the novel moves towards establishing belonging" (143). She is speaking of *China Boy*; in reviewing all four novels, however, one can see two movements: the humor broadens beyond the ethnic joke, and the protagonist's sense of assimilation asserts itself with greater assurance.

John C. Hawley investigates the role played by sexuality in *Honor and Duty*, asking if "Lee is seeking to right the balance in the sexual politics that have cast Asian men as unattractive to Caucasian women, and Asian women as delightfully submissive to Caucasian men" (187). Hawley's principal aim, however, is to compare Lee's troubled relationship with his disapproving father with those of other Asian American male writers. He concludes that "Gus Lee's protagonist, intent on building up his muscles and becoming a man, nonetheless admits in a quiet moment that 'for all the gahng and shiao, the math and Confucius, the hunger and hard times, I just wanted my dad to like me'" (194). The early consensus seems to be that Gus Lee is surely among the most important Chinese American novelists and that many more books are in the works.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### Works by Gus Lee

#### Novels

*China Boy*. New York: Dutton, 1991.

*Honor and Duty*. New York: Knopf, 1994.

*Tiger's Tail*. New York: Knopf, 1996.

*No Physical Evidence*. New York: Columbine, 1998.

### Studies of Gus Lee

Hawley, John C. "Gus Lee, Chang-Rae Lee, and Li-Young Lee: The Search for the Father in Asian American Literature." *Ideas of Home: Literature of Asian Migration*.

- Ed. Geoffrey Kain. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1997. 183-95.
- Kempf, Andrea. Rev. of *Honor and Duty*. *Library Journal* 119 (January 1994): 162.
- Martelle, Scott. Rev. of *Tiger's Tail*. *New York Times Book Review* 101 (April 21, 1996): 26.
- Melton, Emily. Rev. of *Honor and Duty*. *Booklist* 90 (January 1, 1994): 90.
- Mort, John. Rev. of *Tiger's Tail*. *Booklist* 92 (February 1, 1996): 899.
- Norris, Kathleen. Rev. of *Honor and Duty*. *New York Times Book Review* (February 20, 1994): 8.
- Olson, Kiki. Rev. of *China Boy*. *New York Times Book Review* (July 21, 1991): 11.
- Rev. of *No Physical Evidence*. *Kirkus* 66 (August 1, 1998): 1059.
- Rev. of *Tiger's Tail*. *Sewanee Review* 104 (July 1996): 461.
- So, Christine. "Delivering the Punch Line: Racial Combat as Comedy in Gus Lee's *China Boy*." *MELUS* 21.4 (Winter 1996): 141-55.
- Stone, Judy. "Gus Lee: A China Boy's Rites of Passage." *Publishers Weekly* (March 18, 1996): 47-48.