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# The Mobility of Identity: The Cosmopolitan Vision in Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life*

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**Abstract:** Chang-rae Lee, a contemporary Korean-American writer, is renowned in the literary world for his rich imagination, delicate emotional expression, unique transcultural perspective and idiosyncratic narrative technique. He is one of the representatives who succeeds in transcending the classical paradigm of ethnic literature. Cosmopolitanism stems from ancient Greek philosophy, further developing in the age of Enlightenment and thriving in the era of globalization. Taking close reading as the primary methodology and cosmopolitanism as the major theoretical framework, this research attempts to provide a multi-dimensional, interdisciplinary and in-depth interpretation of Lee's *A Gesture Life*, and finds that Lee has expressed his ideal vision that rejects the essentialist paradigm of unchanging cultural identity and upholds cosmopolitanism which embraces cultural diversity and heterogeneity. Additionally, through the depiction of cosmopolitan community, Lee has expressed his expectation for peaceful coexistence, communal solidarity, and mutual assistance among various ethnicities, and he has visualized a picture that different ethnic groups engage in transcultural communication in a harmonious way. In conclusion, *A Gesture Life* has widened the boundaries of Korean-American literature, and the cosmopolitan vision in the text has contributed to the development and prosperity of American ethnic literature.

**Keywords:** Chang-rae Lee; *A Gesture life*; model minority; transgression; cosmopolitanism

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## 1. Introduction

Chang-rae Lee (1965–), who was born in South Korea and migrated to the United States at the age of three, is one of the most important leading figures of Korean-American literature. He is renowned in the literary world for his penetrating portrayal of characters, delicate and vivid emotional expression, unique transcultural perspective, and idiosyncratic narrative technique. His contributions have significantly shaped the contemporary landscape of Korean-American literature, whose development is closely connected with the history of Korean immigration. Since the first wave of Korean immigrants arrived in the U.S. in 1903 (Schaefer 2015, p. 302), a small group of Korean-American intellectuals have perceived the hardships faced by immigrants, and have begun to express their dissatisfaction with the current situation. It was then that Korean-American literature began to emerge, and the autobiographical experiences of authors are valuable resources for their writing. Later, as the Civil Rights Movement swept America in 1954, the social status of the people of color, including Asian American, experienced a series of changes. The passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 removed the discriminative law against non-Western ethnic groups and made it easier for well-educated Koreans with professional skills to migrate into the United States. This wave of immigrants is accompanied by the further development of Korean-American literature, and there were a few female writers appearing in the literary field and they illustrated women's fate in America.

Since the mid-1980s, with the irreversible trend of globalization, Korean-American literature has entered into a stage of accelerated development. Plenty of Koreans from well-to-do middle-class families immigrated to the U.S. when they were very young, and they

were equipped with a bilingual or even multilingual ability and a transcultural perspective. This group of immigrants belong to the "1.5 generation", whose characteristics are clearly demonstrated in the literary field and contribute to the immediate flourishing of Korean-American literature. Chang-rae Lee is one of the most important representatives in this group. Unlike the traditional Korean-American writers who are inclined to voice something autobiographical, he is unwilling to follow the long-established conventionalities and brave enough to transcend the classical paradigm of ethnic literature. Lee has, in total, published six novels so far,[1] and with the publication of each new novel he makes experimentation with new narrative perspectives and transgresses both thematic and formal paradigms of Korean-American literature. According to each works' commonality and discrepancy in theme and narrative skills, Lee's novels can be divided into three categories which, respectively, represent his early, mature, and prosperous periods as a novelist.

*Native Speaker* (1995) and *A Gesture Life* (1999) fall into the first major phase of Lee's novel-writing, which emphasizes on immigrant's quest for identity and assimilation, but Lee "subverts entrenched formulas and audience expectations through his restructuring of familiar plots, tropes, and icons" (Huang 2010, p. 5). The publication of his debut novel *Native Speaker* was a smash hit and helped Lee gain celebrity and fame as an ethnic writer overnight. The ambiguity of the title, the depiction of immigrants' intergenerational conflict, and the exhaustion to establish their identity in a foreign land, all factors mentioned above, seem to suggest that Lee still remains "on the beaten path of immigrant fiction" (Huang 2010, p. 5). However, Betsy Huang proposes that one of the most distinctive features of this novel is the genre experimentation that Lee has deployed: it is the creative combination of the immigrant novel and the spy thriller. This innovative blending not only challenges conventional narrative structures but also deepens the thematic exploration of identity and belonging in a transnational context.

His second novel *A Gesture Life*, the novel going to be discussed in this thesis, continues to destabilize the predetermined knowledge of Asian-American literature through Lee's reinvention of the assimilation plot. Franklin Hata, a Korean man who used to work as a medic for the Imperial Japanese Army and later immigrated to the U.S., has been haunted by his memory that his (in)actions have directly endangered a Korean comfort woman during WWII, Kkutaeh (K), and his adopted daughter, Sunny. However, as the elder Hata reflects upon his past, he realizes his own guilt and decides to compensate for his past mistakes. In the process of redemption, he manages to unlearn his racial bias and prejudice, and ultimately reconciles with Sunny and projects his love to Thomas, his mixed-race grandson. Furthermore, he also decides to leave behind his obsession with acculturation, choosing to lead a wandering life and being a cosmopolitan citizen.

*Aloft* (2004) and *On Such a Full Sea* (2014) can be classified as his experimental novels. In *Aloft*, he creates a narrator of another ethnicity, so "the novel refracts the Asian American experience through the lens of a white character rather than presenting it . . . through a figure assumed to be a fictionalized double for the author" (Sohn 2014, p. 25). The racial difference between the author and the narrator creates the effect of racial asymmetry, which prevents readers from conflating the protagonist's experience and the novelist's autobiographical information. *On Such a Full Sea* takes a much bolder step, and once again reveals Lee's determination "to 'widen the stage' for how Asian American literature is received" (Page 2017, p. 4). He employs a creative narrative style, utilizing first-person-plural narration and elements of dystopian fiction, to insinuate the realities of contemporary life. The ethnic experience that Lee once relied upon in the early stages has been replaced with such universal themes as human companionship, class stratification, environmental collapse and rampant crimes, and the motifs of diasporic lifestyle and cosmopolitan concerns recur in Lee's another two works, *The Surrendered* (2010) and *My Year Abroad* (2021).

*The Surrendered* and *My Year Abroad* are novels bursting with creative power and brave breakthrough. A sense of racial asymmetry continues to be applied and further improved in *The Surrendered*, and it is the first time that Lee has utilized the detached third-person perspective to narrate a tale encompassing the intertwined destinies of three characters with

disparate traumatic experiences and cultural backgrounds. This novel follows the depiction of war and the ideas of anti-war, which can all be traced back to *A Gesture Life*, but it puts more emphasis on the victims' mutual assistance and understanding that transcend race and nation in the aftermath of horrible wars. *My Year Abroad*, Lee's latest published novel, portrays an idle white American college student with one-eighth Korean descent, Tiller Bardmon, who receives the first-hand material of transcultural experience in his investment trip with Pong Lou, a Chinese-American chemist. In this novel, Lee continues to deploy the strategy of racial asymmetry and genre integration: he combines travel literature with traditional literary genre, bildungsroman. In doing so, he made the theme of the work more profound and focused, and engraved it with distinct traces of the times—the era of globalization.

Compared with his other novels, *A Gesture Life* has some distinctive features. First, the prototype of the cosmopolitan community begins to take shape. In *Native Speaker*, there is a somewhat "failed" cosmopolitan community since Henry Park with Korean ancestry and Lelia Park from a Scottish-American East Coast family are still in the process of adjustment. In *A Gesture Life*, however, the close friendship among Hata, Renny with East Indian blood, and Liv Crawford with Caucasian heritage is worth noting. Three of them with different cultural backgrounds are capable of getting along when they are willing to strive for common ground and respect each other's differences. They like to handle potential cultural contradictions through effective communication and negotiation rather than simple opposition or entrenched prejudice. The scope of cosmopolitan community continues to expand in Lee's subsequent works, but the small-scale one in *A Gesture Life* marks its very beginning.

Moreover, it is in *A Gesture Life* that the positive symbolic connotation of mixed-race children is represented for the first time. As a concrete representation of racial integration, mixed-race children carry a rich and dynamic cultural metaphor: their hybrid identity is a challenge to pure ethnic races. According to Elaine H. Kim, "most of the stories about Eurasians end with the death of the protagonist" (Kim 1982, p. 9), which is also applicable to the racial integration of other ethnic groups. However, the role of Thomas, Hata's grandson, in *A Gesture Life* in connecting different ethnic groups may indicate a kind of emotional attachment and the possibility of cultural integration. In addition, there are a few other representations that seem transgressive and different from the traditional pattern of Korean-American literature: Hata's self-reflection on identity, his questioning on racial stereotypes, and the clear transition from the essential to cosmopolitan ways of thinking all serve to indicate the work's cosmopolitan engagement.

Cosmopolitanism is the idea that human beings regardless of their racial origins and national affiliation can break up entrenched stereotypes set by ethnicity, class, and gender, treat one another with hospitality, shoulder responsibilities for both indigenous peoples and strangers, respect difference and diversity in this multi-ethnic world, and erect the grim determination to solve global risks with international efforts. Because the scope of the theory of cosmopolitanism is extremely broad and complex, this paper defines it mainly based on the specific content of *A Gesture Life*, so there are certain limitations in the applicability of the theory. Cosmopolitanism can be traced back to Diogenes and Stoicism in ancient Greek philosophy. The former identifies himself as "a citizen of the world" (Miller 2018, p. 288); the latter believes that each person lives simultaneously in two communities: one is assigned to us in terms of our birthplace, and the other is an inclusive and wider one of human ideals and aspirations, "which is great and truly common, embracing gods and men, in which we look neither to this corner nor to that, but measure the boundaries of our state by the sun" (Long and Sedley 1987, p. 431). This suggests that humanity should not be limited by geographical and cultural boundaries, and there are shared human ideals and aspirations that are defined by universal principles and the common good.

Later, in the age of Enlightenment, Immanuel Kant made the most important contribution to the definition of this term. Kant argues that all human beings have a universal priori nature—namely, the ability to use their reason (Kant 2006a, p. 5). Based on this

premise, in his essay "Toward Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch", Kant declares that the cosmopolitan right shall be limited to the conditions of universal hospitality: strangers should not be treated by hostility upon their arrival on the foreign land; instead, universal hospitality is the treatment that they deserve. Given that all humans are entitled to equal rights to the common possession of the Earth's surface, any hostility towards strangers is unjustifiable and, in his words, "contrary to natural right" (Kant 2006b, p. 82).

Kant's concept of cosmopolitanism articulates his ideal ethics of the other, and it is an important concept that has been developed further by many subsequent cosmopolitans in the context of globalization. Kwame Anthony Appiah does believe that one important strand of cosmopolitanism is to recognize our obligations to other human beings based on a humane outlook, but "how much do we really owe to strangers" (Appiah 2006, p. 158) is the topic he focuses on. In his view, the moral imagination is limited, and the difficulty of universal hospitality "is not that we can't take a moral interest in strangers, but that the interest is bound to be abstract, lacking in the warmth and power that comes from shared identity" (Appiah 2006, p. 98). Therefore, in Appiah's view, cosmopolitanism in Kant's case seems to be an abstract and metaphysical theory existing in mind; but it should be a theory of action (Appiah 2006, p. 98). The visualization of the stranger greatly enhances the feasibility of cosmopolitanism, and the seemingly grandiose theory becomes a practical philosophy that can be applicable in everyday life.

In addition, the elements of heterogeneity and difference symbolized by the Other are highly prized by cosmopolitanism. Although Hannah Arendt did not specifically write a book on cosmopolitanism, her political theory is replete with traces of cosmopolitan representations. "Politics is based on the fact of human plurality" (Arendt 2005, p. 93). "Human plurality", focusing on the differences between human beings, is a central concept that cuts across Arendt's cosmopolitan imagination. She recognizes and appreciates the existence of absolute differences, and believes that out of the plurality of man arises the whole realm of human affairs (Arendt 2005, p. 49); she also asserts that excessive emphasis on homogeneity can lead to the rise and spread of totalitarianism, such as racism, imperialism, and extreme nationalism (Arendt 1973, pp. 301–02). Additionally, German sociologist Ulrich Beck proposes that the irreversible process of globalization blurs the boundary between Self and Other, so cosmopolitanism should rest on a "both/and" principle rather than "either/or" dualities. Similarly, Beck regards difference as a principle required to embrace instead of problems waiting to be solved and eradicated, and he tends to treat cosmopolitanism as an effective way to deal with global risks (Beck and Grande 2007).

Cosmopolitanism's appreciation of difference can be extended to the critique of the essentialist mindset and the emphasis on the fluidity of identity. According to Cyrus R. K. Patell's detailed analysis of *Othello*, he believes that the triumph of essentialism and cultural purity can only lead to the failure of cosmopolitanism (Patell 2015, p. 40). Being influenced by mainstream opinions and becoming trapped by social stereotypes is preventing one from developing a cosmopolitan perspective, and this essentialist position is evident in Hata's early life experience. In addition, cosmopolitanism has spared no effort in emphasizing the fluidity of cultural identity. Stuart Hall illuminates how identities are not fixed or inherent but are instead continuously shaped and reshaped through "memory, fantasy, narrative and myth" (Hall 1990, p. 226). His conception is that identity is "never complete, always in process" (Hall 1990, p. 222). In *A Gesture Life*, Hata's life experience and personal epiphanies fully prove this.

In summary, many ideas in *A Gesture Life* have since sprouted and echoed in Lee's subsequent works: the vision of cosmopolitan community has gradually taken shape; the ideal of racial integration has gradually taken root; and the representation of cosmopolitanism has been more and more obvious, concrete, and practical. Therefore, this paper aims to elucidate Chang-rae Lee's cosmopolitan vision and trace its development in *A Gesture Life*. It also seeks to demonstrate Lee's thematic and aesthetic transcendency, as well as the techniques he employs to challenge readers' pre-determined expectation. More importantly, through offering a cosmopolitan perspective in analyzing literary works, this

research deliberately breaks away from the fixed and rigid pattern in analyzing American ethnic literature so as to blur the constructed boundaries between American ethnic literature and American mainstream literature, and hopefully to help reconstruct world literature which has long been criticized as the mere presentation of Eurocentrism.

## 2. A Cosmopolitan Tragedy in *A Gesture Life*

*A Gesture Life* is in part a cosmopolitan tragedy. It is told, not in the chronological order but full of flashbacks, from the first-person point of view of Franklin Hata (Jiro Kurohata, hereinafter referred to as Hata), who is an ethnic Korean during the time of Japanese colonization. He is born to Korean parents and later adopted by a Japanese family, joining the Japanese Imperial Army as a medical officer during WWII and eventually migrating to an affluent town in the United States. The shortage of love and experiences of discrimination deprive himself of a sense of belonging, and, to be accepted by the mainstream, he always unconsciously follows an essentialist mode of thinking, which sees identity as something fixed and permanent, rather than as an artificial production that is "constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference" (Hall 1990, p. 235). This perspective is clearly at odds with the principles of cosmopolitanism. Based on this essentialist logic, Hata goes to great lengths to identify himself either as an obedient Japanese soldier in the army or as a decent model minority in America. However, his pursuit of a stable identity and his desire for recognition are always in sharp conflict with reality, especially when he is forced to deal with the relationship with a Korean comfort woman, Kkutaeh, in the army and with his rebellious adopted daughter Sunny in Bedley Run. In addition, he might be unaware that his adherence to stereotypic images of identity makes him an accomplice of Western hegemonic power, which seeks to reinforce racial stereotypes.

### *2.1. A Model Soldier in the Imperial Japanese Army*

In *A Gesture Life*, the reason for Hata's flat rejection against his Korean identity and his identification with the Imperial Army can be traced back to his troubled childhood: he is an inferior Korean subject suffering from Japanese colonialism. Korean subjects at that time were deprived of subjectivity, agency, and other basic human rights simply because of their race, so they were forced to hide their Korean identity for fear of systemic barriers and discrimination (Tai 2004, p. 357). In Hata's case, his parents' deliberate rejection of Korean identity and the systemic discrimination circulating in society unexceptionally exert an imperceptible influence on Hata's thinking and make him internalize a sense of racial inferiority.

According to Cathy Caruth, "the wound of the mind . . . is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor" (Caruth 1996, p. 4). Traumatic childhood experience as a result of racial discrimination reappears in a belated form, repeatedly urging Hata to assimilate into the dominant culture and find out his essential and stable identity so as to be accepted by the mainstream. During the wartime, working as a medic for the Japanese army, Hata makes strenuous efforts to integrate into the Imperial Japanese Army by identifying himself with the imperial spirit and wartime culture. He does not attach brutality or evil to the war. Surprisingly, he would rather regard his participation in the war as an important approach to erecting his identity and establishing confidence. He believes that a young man who is confused about his identity and prospect "could find meaning amidst the camaraderie of his fellows working in such shared purpose, and that in fact there was no truer proving time for which he could hope" (Lee 1999, p. 224). He is deeply immersed in the sense of complacency that he can be accepted by his comrades, a feeling that he has rarely experienced during childhood. He warmly responds to "the wartime culture of shared sacrifice and military codes of conduct" (Lee 1999, p. 68) as if they are inviolable natural laws, and as a result becomes complicit with the imperial force.

But his efforts to integrate seem not to be satisfactorily paid off: both his colleagues and superiors often treat him with contempt. Particularly, his superior Captain Ono, who comes from an elite family and who is "highly skilled and noted throughout our theater of operations for his innovations in field surgery" (Lee 1999, p. 178), takes a perverse pleasure in teasing his ordinary family background and insulting him. However, Hata's desire for assimilation is so strong that he does not cast doubt on the personality of Captain Ono. Hata holds Ono in high regard, not only because of his authority in the medical field, but, more importantly, because he is "born into an elite caste" (Lee 1999, p. 172), for which Hata enthusiastically longs but can never get throughout his life. In addition, his aspiration for public recognition deprives him of his conscience: he almost neglects the abnormality during the wartime, unconditionally obeys his order, and believes that everything Ono does is reasonable and justifiable. When Captain Ono conducts human experimentation in the outpost, cutting open a dying man's chest, taking out the heart that is slowly beating, massaging it with his gloveless hand for the so-called high-sounding purpose of instruction, Hata is completely unaware of the cruelty and inhumanity in this scene, and it seems to him "more academic than anything else" (Lee 1999, p. 76). In Hata's view, he can always find an excuse for Ono's abnormal behavior: Captain Ono's hardness and atrocity towards subordinates or comfort women is "his necessary mode, his own way of focus and concentration" (Lee 1999, p. 179).

His essentialist logic has not yet disturbed other people. However, the arrival of five Korean comfort women marks the exacerbation of his racial bias, which eventually results in irreparable harm to those under his control. Hata is responsible for the girls' health to make sure that they are free from venereal diseases. He gradually gets acquainted with Kkutaeh (usually abbreviated to K), and he even feels that there is a bond between them. Hata's delusional belief that he is involved in a romantic relationship with K gives rise to a spirit of rebellion for the first time: he intends to protect her from any potential harm "in any way I could" (Lee 1999, p. 251).

Nevertheless, when K witnesses the death of her sister and knows that she is going to serve Captain Ono, she asks Hata to kill her as a way of eternal relief. The first major contradiction occurs in the novel, and Hata is forced to make a tough choice between the so-called "romantic affair" and his urgent desire for recognition. "Fulfilling K's request would have meant breaking rank, transgressing not only military code but also his Japanese and masculine identifications" (Cheng 2005, p. 562). Apparently, although Hata does espouse the notion of protecting her, he unconsciously sides with the Japanese abusers throughout the course of the narrative, and he can never "imagine myself (himself) challenging him (his superior, Captain Ono), or being insubordinate in any way" (Lee 1999, p. 255). He is not different from the rest of the soldiers in the camp, since he has sex with her twice without her consent. In Hata's view, K represents merely an object or tool, or the thing that he can "keep it with you (him) like a pelt or favorite stone" (Lee 1999, p. 300), which can only provide him with sexual pleasure. Moreover, when Captain Ono brings K food and tenderly pleads with her to eat it, it suddenly occurs to Hata that Ono's tone and behavior resembles those of him. "To hear him (Captain Ono) was to realize how I must have sounded when I was with her" (Lee 1999, p. 296). The parallelism between Hata and Ono implies that Hata has failed to distance himself from the imperial ideology, and he in fact never shoulders the responsibility for protecting K.

When Captain Ono finally comes to K, Hata intends to strike him on K's behalf, thereby demonstrating his "true love" and resolve. However, he is too reluctant to abandon his hard-won Japanese identity and the sense of belonging he has sought since childhood. It is K who takes the initiative and kills Ono with a scalpel, once more urging Hata to relieve her of her wretched circumstances.

"Yet I could not shoot. I could not. Whether for love or pity or cowardice" (Lee 1999, p. 301). Absolute obedience, a trait deemed essential for a model soldier, has been deeply engraved in his mind. His incapability to transgress the essentialist mode of identity and his wish "to be part of the massing, and that I pass through with something more than a

life of gestures" (Lee 1999, p. 299) further drive K into the formidable abyss. Ultimately, she is gang-raped by almost 30 brutal men and dismembered in the end, and Hata is haunted by the traumatic experience, which he initially fails to perceive as the accident occurs, but the incident intrudes upon his memory "in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena . . . with the belatedness and incomprehensibility" (Caruth 1996, pp. 91–92), for the rest of his life.

### *2.2. A Model Minority in the United States*

"Just as Hata is unwilling to risk his place in Japan, he is equally unwilling to risk his place in America" (Motuz 2013, p. 422). After the war, Hata relocated to the United States, embarking on a new chapter of his life. However, the psychological trauma he had endured and the pervasive racism in American society prompted him to unconsciously replicate his previous ingratiating behavior. His anxiety about assimilation has not been alleviated due to the alteration of the external environment; rather, it has intensified. At this juncture, the essentialist perspective, which champions cultural purity, retains a dominant position, while the cosmopolitan outlooks that espouse cultural diversity and miscegenation have been eclipsed.

In America, Hata renames himself as Franklin Hata, and his first name is the last name of Benjamin Franklin, one of the most eminent representatives of the ethos of the American Dream. Hata obviously regards Benjamin Franklin as a role model to follow and considers the achievement of the American Dream as the quickest route to gaining social acceptance. As a shopkeeper of a medical supply store and the owner of an "immensely beautiful" (Lee 1999, p. 16) mansion with a swimming pool in Bedley Run, the best and the most affluent town in the area where the white population is the majority, Hata has undoubtedly achieved economic independence all by himself.

Moreover, Hata sticks to the principle of moral goodness and tries to behave like a model citizen. What he intends to achieve is to enter this white-dominating community in a way "silent and unseen" (Lee 1999, p. 24), and he is determined to learn the "unwritten covenant of conduct" (Lee 1999, p. 44), which, he believes, is shared and circulated in Bedley Run, so "the delicate and fragile balance" (Lee 1999, p. 44) that the town used to contain can be maintained. He endeavors to align his conduct with the preferences of his white neighbors so that he can give them an impression of being a wealthy, considerate, and well-educated middle-aged Asian man.

Thanks to Hata's unremitting endeavor, his neighbors seem to think highly of him, "and he's enjoying the high golden hour of a well-deserved retirement, for having been a business and civic elder and leader" (Lee 1999, p. 136). However, things are usually much more complicated than they look: the hypocritical praise gives him the wrong impression that he is truly loved and respected by his neighbors. One might discover that the townspeople get used to calling him "Doc Hata" instead of "Franklin", the name that he has carefully selected for himself. The townsfolk seem to regard him merely as a sign for "a monetary reassurance", and Doc Hata in their eyes is "no more than a name for an 'impressive' property" (Moraru 2007, p. 26). Hata once confides to Mary Burns, his ex-girlfriend, that he does not like this title, "but nobody seems to want to call me Franklin" (Lee 1999, p. 45), and nobody seems to care about what he really wants. His disheartening self-confession implies that the townspeople usually refer to him by a name that aligns with their personal preferences, without considering his own personal will. Despite Hata's attempts for assimilation, he remains a racial minority who is not fully recognized by his neighbors: he "is not in control of his own identity" (Carroll 2005, p. 598), and he is still deliberately excluded from the mainstream.

This time, Hata unconditionally caters to the stereotypes that the mainstream has constructed and enforced upon Asian Americans, the myth of model minority, but this strategy for assimilation is still not proving particularly effective. The glorification of the success of Asian Americans can be traced back to the 1960s. Both scholars and the mass media spare no effort to laud the distinctive qualities and remarkable achievements of

Asian Americans, thereby contributing to the formation of a seemingly positive discourse on racial stereotypes (Peterson 1966; *U.S. News & World Report* 1966). In contrast to the previous pejorative representation of Asian Americans as the "yellow peril", the myth of the model minority appears to be a laudatory endorsement from the American mainstream. Nevertheless, it seems "different from other kinds of racial stereotyping, but they are hardly separate or distinct from them" (Ang 2011, p. 121). They are all powerful accomplices of racism: "the act of labeling some minorities but not others as good" (Ang 2011, p. 120) is not as benign as it seems. It is virtually an imperceptible form of racism, which can still "perpetuate the kind of systemic violence that affects all minorities" (Ang 2011, p. 120) under the cloak of appreciation. Consequently, racial identities for Asian Americans are further solidified: they can only gain recognition from the mainstream through acting as a model minority, and those who do not conform to this paradigm are denied the opportunity to step into the mainstream.

What is worse, fitting into the mold of a model minority turns Hata into "a racist Asian or an Asian Oriental" (Rhee 2012, p. 103) who has internalized the fear of racial miscegenation and the perpetration of racial discrimination against other minority groups. When Sunny is introduced to him at the orphanage, her "thick, wavy hair and dark-hued skin" (Lee 1999, p. 204) betrays the fact that she is certainly a girl of mixed race. Upon learning this information, Hata is visibly disconcerted and believes that he will never be able to form an intimate father–daughter bond with this child, whom he regards as a "product of a much less dignified circumstance, a night's wanton encounter between a GI and a local bar girl" (Lee 1999, p. 204). In a word, his internalized racism prevents him from establishing close affinity with Sunny.

"Hata's fear of miscegenation becomes a maddening fury when he learns that his already-soiled lineage is going to be almost 'blackened' at the third generation" (Rhee 2012, p. 107). Sunny is in her first pregnancy at the age of 17, and telephones Hata for help. Before that, she has been away from home and lived with her boyfriend Lincoln Evans, a man of African descent, for quite a long time, so the child is destined to be a mixed-race kid. Hata suggests that Sunny should come home, and they will decide what to do next after the examination. Indeed, Hata has already decided to induce the abortion, since he telephones Dr. Anastasia as soon as he knows that Sunny will be back.

When she comes back, Sunny is near her full-term. "Anyone else would have thought that she was too long with the child, that it was much too late, that there was nothing left to do" (Lee 1999, p. 339) except give birth to the poor child. Even Dr. Anastasia, who ultimately agrees to perform the operation under Hata's pressure and entreaty, initially declines to take such a reckless action for the sake of his patient's safety. But Hata is too resolved to concede, and at that moment, he is completely overwhelmed by his rage and fear of racial miscegenation regardless of Sunny's personal safety and her feelings. If Sunny successfully gives birth to this miscegenated child and marries a colored man, "the protagonist's lifetime project of demarcating himself off from the colored race" (Rhee 2012, p. 106) will certainly meet its doom. Therefore, the mere thought of "the imminent disgrace and embarrassment that would hang about the house" (Lee 1999, p. 340) and the destruction of his hard-earned model minority image makes him annoyed and disgusting.

By accepting his role as a model minority in order to integrate into the mainstream, Hata has not only been constrained by numerous unwritten rules and lost his personal particularity, but also internalized a whole set of racial prejudices, causing significant and irreparable harm to those around him. This seemingly positive stereotype is only one of the many forms of racial discrimination, an artificial construction that is "burdensome to the people so labeled" (Schaefer 2015, p. 296) in a racist society. For Asian-American immigrants, the invention of the model minority stereotype is "a misleading overgeneralization" (Zhou and Bankston 2020, p. 233) that can only give rise to a fixation on cultural identity and homogeneity in society. Moreover, the term "minority" in this phrase alludes to the fact that Asian Americans always exist as "others" and "strangers" in American society. As long as this illusion persists, they will continue to experience difficulty in defining

their identity. Last but not least, the features attributed to the model minority are not intrinsic traits determined by genetic inheritance. Rather, according to *Orientalism*, they are human-made ideological constructs created by white people to control, manage, and manipulate minorities (Said 1979, p, 12), thereby ensuring their productive contribution to American society without challenging the white majority's superior position.

Therefore, whether Hata chooses to establish himself as a model soldier in the Imperial Japanese Army, or blindly imitates the stereotype of a model minority in the U.S., he has unexceptionally fallen into the trap of essentialist logic and has entirely deviated from the principles of cosmopolitanism that advocates for diversity and hybridity. It is noteworthy to point out that Hata's identity has "undergone constant transformation" (Hall 1990, p. 225) as he lives up to various standards that mainstream society dictates when he attempts to integrate into different cultures. Unfortunately, he does not discern his change and still adheres to the essentialist view. Consequently, *A Gesture Life*, Lee's second representative novel, so far presents a cosmopolitan tragedy where Hata, greatly influenced by imperialism, Western hegemony, and his early traumatic experience, has facilitated an essentialist way of thinking. He chooses to define others based on their nationality or skin color rather than on their actions, and such an anti-cosmopolitan mindset can only result in the redrawing of old boundaries and the emergence of new forms of prejudice.

## 3. Vague Signs of Cosmopolitanism in *A Gesture Life*

Actually, there are traces that Hata wants to make tentative attempts to circumvent established limitations and restrictions. Just before his living room catches fire, Hata is sticking to his routine of morning swimming, and he is struck by an idea that he seems to swim not in his own pool, but "in a neighboring pool or even a pond" (Lee 1999, p. 22). His whim of swimming in his neighbors' private pools or public ponds rather than in his own pool suggests his desire for normal socialization. Nonetheless, the subconscious desire for rebellion and freedom is thwarted by the influence of the model minority stereotype, which then exerts a high-handed domination over the individual. Not until the fire accidentally breaks out will the sense of transgression smoothly enter his consciousness and begin to manipulate his behavior.

After his morning swimming that day, Hata returns to his family room and stokes up a fire for warmth with "the decades-old files and papers and other expired and useless documents" (Lee 1999, p. 24) and "some old photographs" (Lee 1999, p. 25). His choice of tossing these documents into the hearth indicates that he has shown the inclination to "destroy the recorded part of his entire past" (Lee 2009, p. 75) and to summon up the courage for moving forward. The fire is burning fiercely, and its spark ignites the carpet outside the fireplace, causing a fire disaster. On the one hand, the great fire causes damage to Hata's gorgeous house, "a manifestation of his economic stability and social status within the Bedley Run community" (Motuz 2013, p. 427). On the other hand, it also represents the remarkable change in Hata's mind: he has begun to cast doubt on the "principles" he rigidly stuck to in the past, such as his pursuit of self-isolation, his devotion to the model minority stereotype, and his conviction in the myth of assimilation.

One of the most noticeable changes in Hata following the fire is his different attitudes towards his racial visibility, which he was keenly aware of in the past. After the fire, when he is discharged from the hospital, it seems that he is capable of accepting his physical difference and is no longer concerned about being noticed. Liv Crawford, who rescues Hata and restores his house to its former glory, comes to congratulate him on his recovery and sends him home on the day he leaves the hospital. On the way home, she keeps asking Hata if it is necessary to put up the roof of her convertible to block the heat or rushing air, but Hata politely declines her offer since the fresh air is "so good to me (him)" (Lee 1999, p. 130). When they drive into the populated commercial region, their convertible is compelled to come to a halt because of the traffic jam, and they are surrounded by a constant stream of people. Hata's non-white appearance has been exposed to the public, but this time "I don't mind the sudden heat and exhaust and crowd" (Lee 1999, p. 130).

It appears that his sudden exposure does not bother him much, and he is not afraid of people's attention. Compared with his past self who feels extremely awkward when he merely communicates with his friendly neighbors on the street, Hata has made tremendous progress right now.

In addition, his attitudes toward companionship and loneliness have undergone a significant transformation. In the past, he mistakenly presupposes "self-sustaining solitude" (Moraru 2007, p. 22) or a "filter of associations and links" (Lee 1999, p. 68) as the prerequisite for immigrants' success in America. However, when he is in the hospital for treatment, it suddenly hits him that "being alone is the last thing I would wish for now, which is probably strange, given how I've conducted most all the days of my life" (Lee 1999, p. 68). When Liv and Renny take him home, Hata is deeply touched and feels extremely grateful, not only for their meticulous care in the hospital or the restoration work here at home, but for "the simple fact that they are present" (Lee 1999, p. 139): they are here busy preparing food, walking back and forth, speaking and joking and "filling the house with the most pleasing, ordinary reports" (Lee 1999, p. 139). The convivial ambience allows Hata to experience the healing power of social interaction and companionship.

Here, a small-scale "cosmopolitan community" emerges. One of its most important features is that its members are from different countries and ethnicities, with different religious beliefs and local customs. Actually, Doc Hata's encounter with Mary Burns and their short-term romantic relationship can be seen as a cosmopolitan community, but it has soon met its doom because of Hata's essentialist logic. But when he is befriended by Renny with East Indian blood and Liv with Caucasian heritage, this community can be successfully maintained because of each members' selfless dedication. It is Liv who rescues senior Hata from the smoky living room and saves him from the brink of death. It is Renny who comes by anytime and leaves his phone number to Hata for emergencies. It is Hata who witnesses the stunning love story of Liv and Renny, playing the role of their "private elder" (Lee 1999, p. 319), and gives them far-sighted advice and wise suggestions. All of them treat people of different ethnicities with respect and grant cultural diversity with positive values, and they are willing to handle possible cultural shocks via communication and negotiation rather than fierce opposition and open hostility.

Now, his grand house is replete with laughter and vitality that Hata has never experienced before. He no longer wants to distance himself away from any genuine relationship, no matter if it is friendship or kinship. He is now very conscious of the fact that "association rather than autonomy is the rule of the self-making game" (Moraru 2007, p. 24), and the past experience of his self-separation is "not his namesake's self-nourishing independence but deceiving isolation, loneliness constructed by others' gaze and imaginings" (Moraru 2007, p. 25). He feels free to express his genuine thoughts and opinions and decides to open his mind to embrace new possibilities, to establish connection with the uncertain world, and to transcend the previously rigid boundaries he had unconsciously set for himself.

In addition, Hata begins to deviate from the essentialist constraints of the model minority paradigm and gradually learns to shed his disguise. He used to be a kind-hearted model citizen who was willing to organize the garbage and clean the sidewalk to make the district neat and cozy. Nevertheless, he is no longer fastidious in the sanitary conditions, even in his own marvelous house: the floor has not been swept for a long time; the dishes have not been rinsed; piles of mail have not been organized and read; and heaps of laundry are waiting to be done. Hata seems not to be subject to external recognition and other people's remarks, and he tries to lead a life that can please no one but himself only.

His different attitude towards racial miscegenation is another salient feature suggesting the inefficacy of the essentialist logic. Mixed-race children represented by Thomas were once the target for Hata's rejection and contempt, but they now turn out to be "the source of pleasure, possibility, and choice in life to Hata" (Lee 2009, p. 75). Hata in his midlife could never have imagined that holding a mixed-blood boy's small hand would fill him with "the kind of modest, pure joy" (Lee 1999, p. 333) that he has never felt before. Additionally, it is for the sake of Thomas that Hata is willing to give a shot at things he does not dare to

try before. Because of Thomas' enthusiasm for swimming, Hata brings him to the public beach where "the whole town seems to be here" (Lee 1999, p. 306), and a great number of them are African-American families who are enjoying their pastime. Thomas is very soon acquainted with his new friends, children of different racial groups in Bedley Run, and Hata does not interfere with their contact as he did to Sunny's socialization a few years ago. Instead, he is overwhelmed by a sense of well-being that he can have the opportunity to "sit close by and hover and let him do his child's good business" (Lee 1999, pp. 306–7). He "finally overcomes his prejudices and reaches out to people of other races and ethnicities" (Lee 2009, p. 77), and the acceptance, if not yet fully appreciation, of the cultural diversity and racial difference are exactly the flying spark of cosmopolitanism in Hata's case.

The portrayal of children from different cultural backgrounds interacting with one another on the public beach abounds with profound symbolic meaning. It is the children's interaction that brings together larger familial communities and makes possible the transcultural communication. They provide a platform to prompt mutual understanding among different racial groups and offer them a chance to unlearn "certain ideologies engraved in his (their) mind by the nation-state" (Lee 2009, p. 70). Lee might, with this harmonious picture, express his expectation that the younger generation will shoulder the responsibility for the reduction in, if not the eradication of, the prejudice and partiality that have poisoned this world for so long a time. They will be more open-minded to embrace the multi-ethnic world, and less confined to the essentialist view that defines human beings with different labels and divides them into separate, sometimes hostile, groups.

Last of all, when Hata chooses to feed the fire with the stuff that are closely related to his own personal trajectory, it suggests "the beginning of a killing off of his projected assimilation narrative" (Motuz 2013, p. 428) and his determination to write his own unique life story. The senior citizen makes up his mind to be a man "particular to himself" (Lee 1999, p. 353), which eventually earns him genuine respect and recognition. Sunny willingly forgives him for what he has done to her, and they have built a much closer father–daughter bond. His mixed-blood grandson Thomas is fond of him and enjoys his companion so much. Thomas calls him Franklin, a name that Hata has consciously chosen for himself as a symbol of his dream, instead of Doc Hata, which is merely an impersonal title that signifies the owner's socioeconomic status and nationality. The recognition of his self-given name implies that Hata has eventually gained control of his own identity, "moving away from his entrapment within assimilation's melancholic framework" (Motuz 2013, p. 428). He "can finally write his Franklinesque story" (Moraru 2007, p. 33), which is not in accord with the traditional version of the American founding father, but one that is tailored for Hata himself and opens to a bigger world.

In this peculiar version of Hata's story, he has resolved to sell his wonderful house, a symbolic figure of his socioeconomic status, and to start a journey without a specific plan yet and "live out modestly the rest of my (his) unappointed days" (Lee 1999, p. 355). His different attitudes towards his material possession, his deep reflection upon "rootedness", and his plan to take on a journey with no clear destination can demonstrate a courageous boundary-crossing behavior tinged with cosmopolitan ideal, which is characterized by obvious openness, diasporicity, and fluidity. For cosmopolitans, "we do not need, have never needed, settled community, a homogeneous system of values, in order to have a home" (Appiah 2006, p. 113). They are not individuals who are feeling at home everywhere, but people who are "not fully comfortable—never fully at home—anywhere" (Patell 2015, p. 4), and they are always prepared to "make a virtue out of discomfort" (Patell 2015, p. 4). The cosmopolitan tenet exactly echoes the denouement in Hata's story: he will "circle around and arrive again. Come almost home" (Lee 1999, p. 356).

## 4. Conclusions

The development of Korean-American literature is closely associated with the history of Korean immigration. The direct connection between them inevitably results in the limitation of Korean-American literature to a specific set of themes, such as diaspora,

the immigrant experience, the "Americanization" of immigrants, cultural identification, repressed national history, and intergenerational conflicts. In Chang-rae Lee's six published novels, however, he boldly challenges the conventional paradigms and destabilizes the constructed knowledge of Korean-American literature, while at the same time innovating genre, theme, style, and form, constantly transgressing the single-dimensional ethnic perspective to achieve the grand cosmopolitan vision in his works.

Through the detailed analysis of *A Gesture Life* with the assistance of an interdisciplinary methodology, such as cosmopolitanism, post-colonialism, and trauma theory, this article reveals that Lee has diminished the prominence of ethnic elements and represented noticeable cosmopolitan characteristics in this novel. Through his creative reconstruction of an immigrant story, Chang-rae Lee intentionally breaks with precedent and frustrates the audience's expectations of Korean-American writers. In the first half of the story, Lee has exposed the dark side of assimilation, and he has interrogated the legitimacy of cultural purity, prejudicial stereotypes such as the model minority, and the logic of essentialism, all of which hinder the progress of cosmopolitanism and give rise to a cosmopolitan tragedy that marks the re-erection of barriers among people. However, there are vague signs of cosmopolitanism lurking between the lines. Hata's alienated interpersonal relationship, the unendurable sense of being alone, and the broken father–daughter bond lead him to question his strong desire for acculturation and his obsession with being a model minority. A fire disaster destroys Hata's family room, and along with it Hata's essentialist mindset. He has experienced a transformation in his attitudes towards cultural stereotypes, companionship, racial miscegenation, and self-identification, and he accepts the mobility of identity and the possibility of cultural miscegenation. Taking ethnicity as merely the starting point, Lee's focal point is to portray the fundamental human desires: the aspiration for connection and recognition. From this perspective, this novel, though labeled as the "Korean-American novel", has successfully transcended the limitations of ethnic categorization to embrace a pluralistic cosmopolitan vision.

According to Patell, "cosmopolitanism is best understood, I think, as a structure of thought, a perspective that embraces difference and promotes the bridging of cultural gaps" (Patell 2015, p. 8). The cosmopolitan reading practice I have adopted in this research could, hopefully, provide researchers with a new perspective of analyzing literature; the cosmopolitan way of thinking could also inspire readers to reconsider the real world where different cultures collide, cooperate, and negotiate with one another, so that we can better adjust ourselves in this increasingly heterogenous society.

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## Note

[1] As of May 2024, Chang-rae Lee has successfully published six full-length novels: *Native Speaker* (1995), *A Gesture Life* (1999), *Aloft* (2004), *The Surrendered* (2010), *On Such a Full Sea* (2014), and *My Year Abroad* (2021).

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