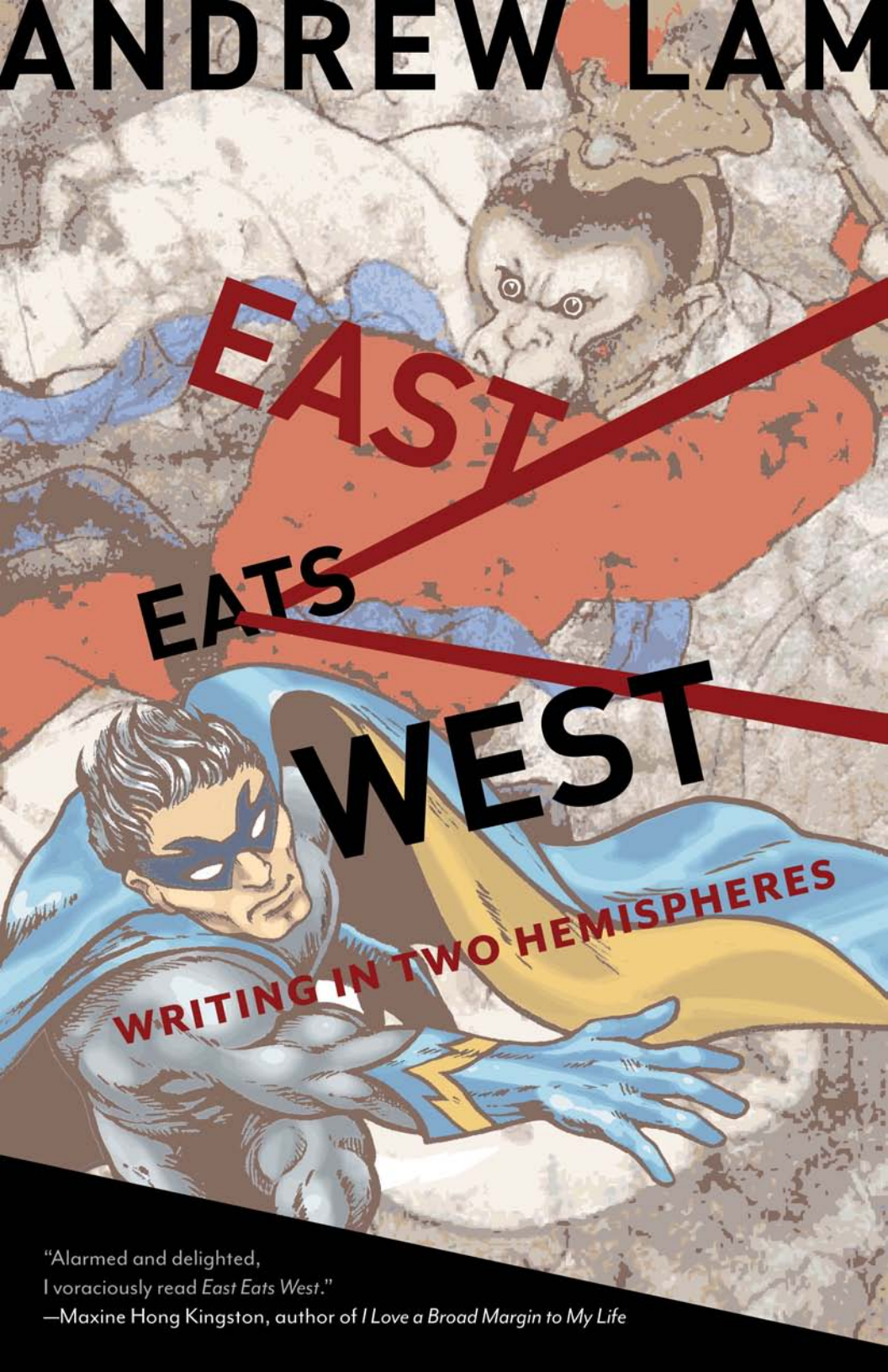


ANDREW LAM



~~EAST~~

~~EATS~~

~~WEST~~

WRITING IN TWO HEMISPHERES

"Alarmed and delighted,
I voraciously read *East Eats West*."

—Maxine Hong Kingston, author of *I Love a Broad Margin to My Life*

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	<i>vi</i>
Introduction	<i>1</i>
Ode to the Bay	<i>5</i>
Wild, Wild East	<i>13</i>
My Teacher, My Friend	<i>23</i>
Waterloo	<i>33</i>
One Asian Writer's Lesson: Love Your Immigrant Parents, Follow Your Bliss	<i>39</i>
From Rice Fields to Microchips: The Vietnamese Story in California	<i>51</i>
Who Will Light Incense?	<i>69</i>
Mourning the Loss of the Tiger	<i>73</i>
Singing in the Family	<i>77</i>
California Cuisine of the World	<i>81</i>
In Search of Hermes' Belt	<i>89</i>
Stress, Vietnamese-Style	<i>93</i>
Too Much Self-Esteem Can Be Bad for Your Child	<i>97</i>
From Mao to Yao Ming	<i>101</i>
Tragedy and the New American Childhood	<i>107</i>
Our Man Obama: The Post-Imperial Presidency	<i>115</i>
Ph(o)netics	<i>123</i>
Letter to a Young Iraqi Refugee to America	<i>129</i>
Can Ghosts Cross the Ocean?	<i>135</i>
Buddha and Ancestral Spirits in Suburbia	<i>139</i>
Letters from a Younger Brother	<i>159</i>
About the Author	<i>169</i>

INTRODUCTION

Whenever I hear the word *chua*, Vietnamese for “sour,” I think of tamarind, the sticky brown fruit that grew in abundance on shading trees in my old schoolyard back in Saigon, and its intense sour-sweet memories inevitably cause my molars to vibrate and my mouth to water. I hear “sour” in English and I don’t feel a thing.

And yet, it is in English now that I ply my trade, it is in English that I dream and think, and it is in English that I best express myself. Vietnam, its language, its memories, are reduced to a kind of lullaby, which is to say, visceral and yet out of the quotidian of my life.

Such are the strange bearings of those who lurk between East and West, between languages, between memories and desires. Where the two hemispheres overlap, however, is where I learned and relearned how to mediate opposed ideas and to bridge disparate viewpoints. A barely charted territory, it is fraught with contradictions and tensions, its waters treacherous with the various tugs and undercurrents.

Over the years I have watched the East and West pas de deux as forces of history as well as my own fragmented biography. The differences I learned very early on. In Vietnam you do not look your teachers in the eye unless it is to challenge them. In America if you fail to look your teachers in the eye they may think you shifty, that you have something to hide. Americans are fond of saying, “I love you.” Vietnamese don’t share words of

INTRODUCTION

affection very easily, if at all. No, they show it; it's all in the gestures—working three jobs so your kids can go to private school, saving the best apple for your spouse while eating the bruised one yourself. Americans celebrate birthdays. Vietnamese light incense and have feasts on death anniversaries of important relatives. American children can't wait to leave home at eighteen, Vietnamese children stay around long into adulthood, and often even after they marry. In Vietnam individualism is equated with selfishness. America elevates it to an ideology, it demands it: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. America whispers rebellion of the individual against the communal: Follow your dream.

Perhaps it is easier to abandon one system and swallow the new. Then perhaps life wouldn't be so difficult for those who migrate East to West. But the melting pot concept hasn't really worked. It is more like a blender into which differences are forced and then regurgitated as platitudes, sort of like Disney movies, which rewrite all complicated stories toward a single outcome, a thinning, predictable, happily-ever-after formula.

The modern condition, the reality, on the other hand, is messy, defined by mismatch and by an intensifying and growing complexity. Or rather, increasingly it is cosmopolitanism that is the norm. According to the French writer Pascal Bruckner, cosmopolitanism speaks of being rooted in the depths of several layers of memory, in numerous particularities. "It does not collect a trait here or there. It becomes incarnate. It means counterbalancing the land of one's birth with additional homelands." I think of it as something like Michael Ondaatje's novel *The English Patient*, in which a set of complicated characters with variant and divergent histories decide to populate an abandoned villa, and in it they argue and fall in love, and in between they tell each other their stories.

Here's mine. I grew up a patriotic South Vietnamese living in Vietnam during the war. I remember singing the national anthem,

INTRODUCTION

swearing my allegiance to the flag, and promising my soul and body to protect the land and its sacred rice fields and rivers. Wide-eyed child that I was, I believed every word.

But then the war ended and I, along with my family (and eventually a couple of million other Vietnamese), betrayed our agrarian ethos and land-bound sentiments by fleeing overseas to lead a very different life.

These days I regularly travel between East Asia and the United States as an American journalist and writer. My relatives, once all concentrated in Saigon, are scattered across three continents, speaking three and four other languages, becoming citizens of several different countries. Once communal and bound by a common sense of geography, we are now part of a global tribe. Still trying to adjust to the radical shift in our lives—once a very sedentary people, we have become a highly mobile clan with multiple affiliations—we thrive and prosper. It is that transition, that adding on of identity, that effort to adjust, that I mainly write about, both in fiction and nonfiction.

I think of that tongue-tied refugee child at the blackboard in seventh grade drawing pictures of helicopters and rice paddies, trying to tell his story to his new American classmates, sharing what he remembered, what he had lost. He knew it even before he could fully articulate it: between East and West lay a terrain that needed to be charted by stories, fused by his new eyes and imagination, and he needed to tell those stories if he ever hoped to be whole again. Decades later, I'm happy to report that—dancing at the far end of that continuum—he's still doggedly at it.

MY TEACHER, MY FRIEND

The year I reached puberty was also the year I became an American teenager, and the man who stood at the entrance to my New World was my first English teacher. Ernie Kaeselau was his name. He passed away recently, and though I hadn't seen him in more than three decades, the news of his demise left me unexpectedly bereft.

I remember a warm voice, expressive eyes, and bushy eyebrows that wiggled comically at a pun or a joke. I remember someone who treated me with care, made me feel special when I—a stranger on a new shore—was terribly lost and bewildered.

Having fled Saigon in spring of 1975 during finals in sixth grade, I landed in San Francisco a couple months later and attended summer school at Colma Junior High in Daly City, preparing myself for seventh grade. Never mind that I didn't speak English, only Vietnamese and passable French, and that two days after my mother, grandmothers, sister, and I left in a cargo plane, communist tanks came crashing through the gates of the Independence Palace in Saigon, and the war ignominiously ended. Never mind that in those few months before arriving in San Francisco I subsisted in two refugee camps and spent most of my nights in a tent praying for the safety of my father and other relatives and friends who remained behind.

I never knew what Mr. K's politics were—liberal is my guess—and if I had any then, ours would have surely clashed when it came to the politics of Vietnam. But when it came to

me—the first Vietnamese refugee in his classroom—his policy was plenary kindness.

Mr. K's first question was my name and his second was how to properly pronounce it in Vietnamese. He asked me to repeat this several times until, to my surprise, he got the complicated intonation almost right. A day or two later, he asked again and practiced it until it was perfect, and soon thereafter, the Vietnamese refugee boy became the American teacher's pet. It was my task to go get his lunch, erase the blackboard, and collect and distribute homework assignments. When I missed the bus, which was often, and sometimes deliberately, he'd drive me home, a privilege that was the envy of the other kids.

Back in my homeland, I used to bow when meeting a teacher. As a grade school student, with arms folded in front and eyes staring at my sandaled feet, I would mumble, "*Thua thay!*"—Greetings, Teacher! In fact, it took me half a year or so after having arrived in America to stop that kowtowing habit, which my American classmates in seventh grade found either funny or quite bizarre.

And I found them strange as well. American kids wore colorful clothes, smoked in the bathroom, and swore at each other and, sometimes, even at their teachers—something unheard of in Vietnamese tradition. At first I was terrified, fearful of the big, rowdy kids of all races who got into bloody fights in the schoolyard. But Mr. K's classroom was a haven. Lunchtime and the "good kids" made a beeline for it. Away from the schoolyard bullies, we ate our lunch, played games, and did our homework. I remember plenty of laughter, arguments, gossip, and, yes, even budding flirtations, and Mr. K reigned over the chaos with ease, sitting behind his desk, reading a newspaper or helping one of us with our assignments.

For a while, I was his echo. "Sailboat," he would say while holding a card up in front of me with an image of a sailboat on

it, and “sailboat,” I would repeat after him, copying his inflection and facial gestures. “Hospital,” he would say, with another card held up. And “hospital,” I would yell back like a little parrot. I listened to his diction. I listened to the way he enunciated certain words when he read passages from a book. If he could say my Vietnamese name, surely I could bend my tongue to make myself sound more American.

That first summer, he gave me A’s that didn’t count. He took our little group bowling, formed a little team, taught us how to keep score, and bought us soft drinks. Then, he took us on a field trip to a baseball game, my first. He took his time to explain to me the intricacies of the game. It was followed by a trip to Sonoma to see wineries and cheese factories. I remember crossing the Golden Gate Bridge for the first time, with Mr. K’s voice narrating its history, how it was built, and I remember that I asked him afterward, in broken English, if it was made of real gold, and the entire bus erupted in laughter.

Most memorable, however, were the books that came in a carton. Along with the bowling team, Mr. K had formed a little book club. And for a few dollars, we—children of the working class and immigrants—became owners of a handful of books. The box came one morning in the middle of class, and it felt a bit like Christmas in July. We jostled each other to be up front at his desk as Mr. K read the title of each book out loud, then matched the book with the name of its owner. My first book was *The Wind in the Willows*, by Kenneth Grahame, and I remember poring over its pristine pages in wonder. Wasn’t it then that the smell of fresh ink, paper, and glue became indelibly for me the smell of yearning and imagination? I did not yet know how to read in English—but oh, how impatient I was to learn!

That summer, I bought my first typewriter from a cantankerous junkman whose inventory was down the street and who my family was fond of calling “Old Angry Junkman.” It cost \$1.25

and some keys didn't work very well and the ribbon had long ago faded. Nevertheless, I typed out Kenneth Grahame's famous tale about Mole, who left his underground home and went up for air and ended up sailing down the river toward adventures. I read many sentences from *The Wind in the Willows* out loud as I typed. Precocious, perhaps, but by the time I joined seventh grade in the fall, I was something of a typist and a reader of the English-language novel.

If I pushed myself so hard to move forward, I had plenty of good reasons: In Vietnam, I was a child of an upper-class family, insulated in a world of villas, lycée, servants, walled gardens, and sports clubs. In America, I was the son of impoverished refugees who subsisted with another refugee family in a ramshackle apartment near the end of Mission Street, where the promises of San Francisco ended and the working-class world of Daly City began. My homeland abruptly evaporated, and my family and clan were torn apart, and my sheltered life was gone. Thrust upon an alien world, I understood intuitively that I had best run far and fast if I were to leave all my losses behind.

Thus, my world split into two: at night I wept myself to sleep, longing for my lost world, for my father, dreaming a recurring dream of a Saigon in smoke and myself abandoned in an old villa as the Viet Cong ransacked the city; but in the daytime—in school, at lunch, in English and art classes—I became a rowdy, giggly boy, chatting up a storm. I remember talking, a lot. When my vocabulary failed me, I resorted to using French words or drawing in my notebook or on the blackboard to convey my ideas and thoughts.

Within a few months, I began to speak English freely, though haltingly, and outgrew Mr. K's cards. I began to banter and joke with my new friends. I acquired a new personality, a sunny, sharp-tongued kid, and often Mr. Kaeslau would shake his head and marvel at the transformation. I remember his astonished face

MY TEACHER, MY FRIEND

when I argued against the class clown and won; my tongue was being sharpened even if my sentences remained fragmented.

I made friends—Samoans, whites, blacks, Filipinos, Chinese, Mexicans. I wrote valentine cards to giggly girls. I joined the school newspaper, became something of a cartoonist. My second year in America, I was getting straight A's, no fake A's needed anymore, thank you. I joined the honors club. I found my bearings; because it affectionately absorbed me, I enthusiastically embraced it. I was becoming, as my mother complained to my father, who had escaped Vietnam on a naval ship and joined us, "an American brat."

Here's what some classmates wrote in my eighth grade yearbook, one that I, since I was on the yearbook staff, helped design.

"Have fun talking your mouth off at Jefferson [high school] and maybe next year I'll go to the 'Lam' dunk contest..."

"To someone who is always talking. Have a nice time at Jefferson..."

"To a kid who was so loud in art [class] and wore funny hats..."

"Hope you never change from the kid I knew from Colma. The little but cool Vietnamese I used to go to school with..."

On its last page, in the lower lefthand corner, Mr. K, in his succinct and modest way, left this note:

"To my good Friend. It's been a pleasure to be your teacher & friend for 2 years. Don't forget to keep me informed of your progress. Ernie Kaeselau."

When I graduated from junior high, I went to say good-bye to Mr. Kaeselau and he gave me the old cue cards to take home as mementos, knowing full well that I didn't need them anymore. That day, a short day, I remember taking a shortcut over a hill. On the way down, I tripped and fell. The cards flew out

of my hand to scatter like a flock of playful butterflies on the verdant slope. Though I skinned my knee, I laughed. Then, as I scampered to retrieve the cards, I found myself yelling out ecstatically the name of each image on each one of them—“school,” “cloud,” “bridge,” “house,” “dog,” “car”—as if for the first time.

It was then that I looked up and saw, far in the distance, San Francisco’s downtown, its glittering high-rises resembling a fairy-tale castle made of diamonds, with the shimmering sea dotted with sailboats as backdrop.

“City,” I said, “my beautiful city.” And the words rang true; they slipped into my bloodstream and I was suddenly overwhelmed by an intense hunger. I wanted to swallow the breathtaking landscape before me.

But that was that, as they say. And I sailed on.

For it turned out I didn’t go to Jefferson, where many of my closest friends ended up. I went to Serramonte High, an awful, unchallenging school known for its smoking pit and frequent robberies in bathrooms. But thanks to a relative whose address was in a coveted zip code, I transferred to Lowell High School—a prestigious public school in San Francisco. Superior to any school around, Lowell provided high achievement standards and advanced-placement courses. I made new friends and ended up at UC Berkeley. That is to say, I left the working-class world where Mission Street ended and worked myself toward where Mission Street began, toward the city’s golden promises—and it is in one of those glittering glassy towers by the water that I live now.

I didn’t bother to look back, didn’t bother to keep my mentor and friend abreast of my progress. Several decades later, a seasoned journalist and essayist who had traveled the world a few times, I, on one whimsical weekend, decided to write an article about learning English, and Mr. K was featured prominently.

MY TEACHER, MY FRIEND

Did I know that Mr. K read and treasured that article? Did I know that he, in retirement, kept coming back to it, to my writing—to me?

No. Not until his best friend, another teacher, sent me this note to inform me of his passing:

Most of us know what pleasure Ernie got from your article. While he was proud he was also a modest man....He sent copies to many relatives back East. I'm sure he couched it in pride for what you have accomplished, but he was deeply honored. What no one knows is he was a bit unhappy that there was no retirement recognition. He told me many times he didn't want any big deal, but as the years passed, he would speak somewhat wistfully of the lack of acknowledgement. You gave him acknowledgement.

To be honest, it never occurred to me to see the story from Mr. K's angle. When I tried to see the classroom from behind his desk as the years streamed by—student after student, generation after generation—I could not see myself standing out. I might have been the first Vietnamese refugee to turn up in his classroom, but I was not the last. My cousins came, so did others, and surely, later on, other needy, traumatized refugee children from other bloody conflicts. I might have been precocious, but how could I have possibly stood out to a man who taught for decade after decade?

I had grieved for my lost homeland, for many other things. I had traveled to distant lands, to war zones, and even back to Vietnam to say my proper good-byes to my interrupted childhood, but I didn't go back to where Mission Street ended, to where that little junior high stood at the foot of the mountains amid cemeteries often veiled in the morning fog. Living nearby, I had felt, unreasonably, that were I to drive down Mission Street and peek through the window of my mentor's classroom, he would

still be there—that Mr. K would *always* be there, making other needy kids feel special, and that there would always be little bowling teams and little book clubs in the summer and rowdy speed tournaments at lunchtime. And in dreams and reveries, haven't I revisited him countless times?

But that's the trouble with childhood, isn't it, especially happy ones? Happy children don't question their contentment any more than fish wonder about the river's current; they swim on. My childhood, interrupted by war, was rekindled by kindness, and instead of cynicism and bitterness, my curiosity and imagination took hold and kept growing in the New World. And because I felt blessed and happy, I went on blessedly with my business of growing up. Mr. K opened America's gate and ushered me in, and I, so hungry for all its possibilities, rushed through it.

"I think your leading off would be very appropriate unless it makes you uncomfortable," wrote Mr. K's friend. "Lord knows I heard him talk about you several times. He kept mentioning it near the end."

The retired teachers sat on their pews to somber organ music. Wized, gray-haired, they rose, one by one, moving slowly, some in arthritic pain, to speak with affection and humor of a man who was known as much for his aesthetic sensibilities and practical jokes and friendship as he was for his devotion to the art of teaching and to his students. Shared memories echoed inside the gilded columbarium like some ode to beauty itself...

He was a talented organist...loved driving cross-country...Spanish architecture and colonial history of California...this thing where he mimicked people while walking behind them...created beautiful stained glass objects...collected antique silver and botanical prints...

He was especially fond of orchids...

MY TEACHER, MY FRIEND

To all this I would say still that his greatest talent was empathy: he intuited how one felt and, like a bodhisattva, performed his magic to assuage grief.

But if there's a sad statement about the American scholastic experience it is that the passing of a beloved teacher is often not mourned by his or her students, but by, if he or she were any good, mostly peers. Father's Day and Mother's Day are remembered, but a good teacher, alas, rarely receives a card from his former students on Teacher's Day. Drinking coffee and eating finger sandwiches after the service, I kept asking anyone younger than me if he or she had been a student of Mr. K. And the answer was always no.

"Teaching is not a lost art," the historian Jacques Barzun once observed, "but the regard for it is a lost tradition." The refugee boy not only led, as it turned out: he was the only former student of Ernie Kaeselau's to cry at his memorial.

Suddenly he stood by the edge of a full-fed river....All was a-shake and a-shiver—glints and gleams and sparkles, rustle and swirl, chatter and bubble. The Mole was bewitched, entranced, fascinated. By the side of the river he trotted as one trots, when very small, by the side of a man who holds one spellbound by exciting stories.

I did not fully appreciate the beauty of Grahame's words. Yet even then, not sure of what I read and typed, I knew that it had something to do with me—who, like Mole, albeit against my will, had also left my insulated world and sailed toward the unknown. I also knew by the end of that first summer that I too, for having set out unflinching, would be rewarded with friendship and new ways of seeing things.

A charmed life is one that goes down a river not knowing what's beyond the bend, but confident nevertheless that gracious strangers will be there in one form or another to aid and

EAST EATS WEST

abet and be a guide through turbulent waters. Charmed was how I felt when I first came here and more than three decades later, charmed is how I feel today—and much of that, I will acknowledge, has to do with Mr. K.

And so—the river glints and sparkles and I sail on. Because I did not go back, I will send ahead to the further stretch where I cannot yet go, to where the storyteller's flesh crumbles to dust but his stories, when told from the heart, may yet live on. For this, tendered by enchanted memories and tinged with regrets, is a story of requited love.

CALIFORNIA CUISINE OF THE WORLD

My sister and I were strolling down Larkin Street in San Francisco one breezy summer afternoon when there wafted by this pungent-salty aroma from some open window above. I was about to name the dish, but the couple walking ahead of us beat me to it. “Hmm, I smell fish sauce,” said the blond woman in her mid-twenties. “Yup,” her male companion with tattoos on his arms agreed. “Catfish in clay pot. With lots of pepper—and a little burnt.”

We had to laugh; he was, well, right on the nose.

Yet when we first came to San Francisco from Vietnam over three decades ago, my paternal grandmother made that dish and our Irish neighbors complained about a “toxic smell.” Mortified, we apologized and kept our windows closed whenever Grandma had an urge to prepare some of her favorite recipes.

Many years passed. Though she is no longer around, no doubt Grandma would appreciate the fact that what was once considered unsavory (or even toxic) has become today’s classic. For in California, private culture has—like sidewalk stalls in Chinatown selling bok choys, string beans, and bitter melons—a knack of spilling into the public sphere, becoming shared convention.

Or put it this way: the Californian palate has shifted along with the state’s demographics, where one in four is now an immigrant. Within a four-block radius from my home, I can have Thai, Chinese, Spanish, Vietnamese, Moroccan, Indian, French, Mexican, Greek, Italian, and Japanese food—not to mention the regular fare at diners and seafood houses.

The theme of hybridity is central to a global society, and a large part of that entails accommodating one's tongue to the delectable world's zests and zings. On its front page in April of 2006, the *San Francisco Chronicle* loudly declared: "America's Mean Cuisine: More Like It Hot—from junk food to ethnic dishes, spicy flavors are the rage." Californians were the first to give up blandness to savor the pungent lemongrass in our soup, and the first to develop a penchant for that tangy burn of spicy chili. It came as no surprise to Californians that Cheez-It came out with "Hot & Spicy" crackers flavored with Tabasco Sauce, that Kettle Foods has "Spicy Thai" flavored potato chips, and that Campbell Soup makes Vietnamese pho beef broth. "There are 15.1 million more Hispanics living in the United States than there were 10 years ago, and 3.2 million more Asians and Pacific Islanders," said the *Chronicle*. "And the foods of those countries—longtime favorites with Californians—are now the nation's most popular."

California wine, famous around the world, with over thirteen hundred operating wineries, dominates the American sense of culinary elegance and accounts for over 90 percent of total U.S. wine production, or the equivalent of 3.12 billion bottles of wine. The pasta bar, San Francisco sourdough bread, the screwdriver and mai tai and margarita cocktails, wine bars, and the steak-and-lobster dinner all originated in the Golden State. For that matter, so did Mandarin and Szechwan cooking, Mexican and Thai food, fortune cookies, French dip sandwiches, cioppino, and so on.

And let's not forget that greatest cooking show ever, *Iron Chef*, which before it became a national sensation on the Food Network and spawned two American versions, was first aired in San Francisco in Japanese with Chinese subtitles. Intended for a select ethnic audience, the show nevertheless garnered a large and diverse following, despite the fact that the majority of viewers understood neither Chinese nor Japanese. But crossover is a phenomenon that occurs frequently in California, like earthquakes, and

the languages of cooking and competition combined make for an explosive and enthralling conversation. A sake-soaked lobster burning on hot stones with sea kelp, foie gras seared on a burning pan, fresh yellowtail served with daikon radish, and the mad dash to meet the clock—we all watch and salivate and wish to God that we were there as one of the lucky judges.

Well, I was there—sort of. As a well-traveled writer, it turns out that my biggest hit at various dinner parties is not my stories of the time I spent with ex-Khmer Rouge soldiers in Cambodia in the early nineties, nor my trek to the foot of Mount Everest, nor my trip to Kish, Iran, where I talked with long-oppressed Iranian writers, nor my dusty camel ride into the Sahara Desert. No, it's the afternoon I spent interviewing chef Hiroyuki Sakai of *Iron Chef* fame, sipping his Riesling, eating his delicious fried sole, and listening to stories of his wins (the two-hour lobster challenge, his favorite and last show) and losses (hated the live octopus challenge; yelped when octopus wrapped tentacles around his arm). Friends and relatives in California all looked at me in awe when I told this story. It was as if I had come down from Mount Sinai after having dinner with God. "You live like a president," said an uncle-in-law who's a big fan of Sakai.

Irene Khin, chef and owner of Saffron 59, Inc., a catering business for upscale New Yorkers, told me she always regards California as the leading edge: "I have so many friends in California who are into wine and food. And you've got fresh vegetables and large ethnic groups—a great, great combination." Khin, who hails from Burma, consults with many restaurants around the world to come up with suitable fusion dishes. She considers the year-round fresh and "incredibly diverse selection" of vegetables in California a marvelous blessing. In her apartment overlooking Aster Place, Khin said she dreamed of California, especially during wintertime. "I'd love to wake up and go to an outdoor market to see what's available. It's a bit daunting,

though, in New York in February.” To be on top of the game, to remain what many consider one of New York’s top caterers, she said she travels time and again—to California and Southeast Asia—to sample new dishes and get reacquainted with the old.

Globalization is hardly a new concept in California. Latin and Anglo America came to an epic collision here, then gold made the state famous around the globe, and the rest of the world rushed in and created, perhaps for the first time, a global village. Since then layers upon layers of complexity—tastes, architecture, religions, animals, vegetables, fruits, stories, music, languages—have been piling onto the place, making it in many ways postmodern even before the rest of the world struggled to enter the modern era.

Andrea Nguyen, author of *Into the Vietnamese Kitchen: Treasured Foodways, Modern Flavors*, a truly authoritative book on Vietnamese cooking, declared from her Santa Cruz home that “California cuisine is intrinsically ethnic.” *El Cocinero Español*, she noted, the first contemporary work on Mexican food in the state, was written a good hundred years ago by Encarnación Pinedo. (Translated into English in 2005 by Dan Strehl, it is now aptly entitled *Encarnación’s Kitchen: Recipes from Nineteenth-Century California*.) Nguyen, who remembered her mother packing an orange notebook full of recipes when they were airlifted out of Saigon in 1975, said Vietnamese food is hot these days. “In the Bay Area, you’ve got restaurants like the Slanted Door, Crustacean, Tamarind, and Bui leading the charge in terms of crossover restaurants.”

West has changed the East, indeed, but in profound ways, East too eats West.

It did not always seem so. For the first few years in America my family and I were terribly homesick. At dinnertime, my mother would say, “Guavas back home are ripened this time of year, back at our farm,” or someone else would say, “I miss mangosteen so much,” and we would shake our heads and sigh. But then a friend, newly arrived in America, gave my mother some

seeds and plants. Soon mother's small garden in the backyard was full of lemongrass, Thai basil, Vietnamese coriander, and small red chilies. Homesickness was placated by the fact that home was coming, slowly but surely, nearer to the golden shore.

Now imagine my mother's garden spreading over a large swath of California's farmland. Southeast Asian farmers, in the footsteps of last century's Japanese and South Asian farmers before them, are growing a large variety of vegetables in the Central Valley and trucking them to markets all over the state. Hmong, Filipino, Thai, Cambodian, Vietnamese, Korean, Laotian, South Asian, and Latin American farmers join the rest and sell everything from live chickens and seafood to Thai eggplants and edible amaranth, from hyacinth beans and hairy gourds to oriental squash and winter melons, from Buddha fingers to sugarcane. I, for one, have learned not to underestimate the power of immigrants' nostalgia. In the Golden State, it often becomes retroactive; so much longing for home recreates it in the new landscape. On a sunny day, visiting the local farmers' market, there are fragrances and sounds so oddly familiar that, were I to close my eyes, I could imagine myself back in my hometown, in the verdant, fog-filled plateau of Dalat, Vietnam.

But if California food is intrinsically ethnic, there is another element that is just as essential: the nature of its transgression. It is here that the jalapeño meets star anise and they are paired with a dry, smoky Pinot. Or take the avocado. Though not served in Japanese restaurants in Japan, it is as pertinent to Japanese cuisine in California as sunny skies are to the myth of California living.

And if you haven't tasted a Korean barbecue short-rib taco, popularly known as a *kogi*, you must. Laced with chili salsa, kimchi and crushed sesame seeds, the *kogi* is an invention so new that it is sold only from two roaming trucks in Southern California. The drivers post their destinations on the social networking site Twitter, and folks line the streets in Orange County and Los

Angeles—sometimes waiting for up to two hours. Food lovers around the country are waiting anxiously for the trucks to go national. It makes sense that Latin America should meet East Asia in Los Angeles, land of silver screen and American imagination, in one savory bite.

“Foodies are very curious about exotic ingredients,” Andrea said. “They’re more open to venturing into Asian markets to get the ‘authentic’ ingredients. They’re wanting to explore jujubes, mangosteens, green papaya. Ethnic markets, particular chains like Ranch 99 and Mi Pueblo, are leading the effort to make things easier for everyone. They offer a wide variety of products. And check the aisle carefully—there are often Hispanic ingredients too at Asian markets, like tortillas.”

Take the sign that used to hang on the Sun Hop Fat #1 Supermarket on East 12th Street, a few blocks south of Lake Merritt, in Oakland. It said, “American-Mexican-Chinese-Vietnamese-Thailand-Cambodia-Laos-Filipino-Oriental Food.” Some saw it as evidence of diversity gone bad, a multicultural mess—that is, too much mixing makes things unpalatable. I, on the other hand, see all those hyphens as complex bridges and crossroads that seek to marry otherwise far-flung ideas, tastes, and styles. After all, creativity is fertile when nourished in the loam of cultural diversity and cultivated with openness and a disposition for experimentation. In terms of food, it results in an explosion of tasty concoctions. Consider some of today’s daring experiments: tofu burrito, hummus guacamole, spring rolls with salsa dipping sauce, lamb in tamarind sauce, lemongrass martini, wasabi bloody mary, crab cakes in mango sauce, french fries dipped in mint and cilantro chutney. You see the point: the variety is endless. Today’s bold fusion becomes tomorrow’s classic.

Seth Bowden, executive chef at Cortez restaurant in San Francisco, known for its creative Mediterranean cuisine with bold flavors (try the baked Monterey squid salad with coco vert beans,

and the cod with celery—olive oil mousseline), sums it up this way, “When I think of California cuisine I think of seasonality, Alice Waters, local and extremely fresh ingredients, a freedom from the confines of any one food tradition, and the influence of all the different cultures that make up California’s population. And a whole lot of fruits, vegetables, and herbs that are fairly unavailable in the rest of the country. And I think of it pretty much in that order.”

I think of it, in some ways, as parallel to my own transnational biography. When the Vietnam War ended I, along with my family (and eventually a couple of million other Vietnamese), betrayed our agrarian ethos and land-bound sentiments by fleeing to California to lead a very different life. Before, my inheritance was simple—the sacred rice fields and rivers that defined who I was. Today, Paris and Hanoi and New York are no longer fantasies but my larger community, places to which I feel a strong sense of connection due to familial relationships and friendships and personal ambitions. Once great, the distances are no longer daunting, but simply a matter of rescheduling. It is not an exaggeration, then, to admit that my tastes have become similarly complicated, taking their reference points from many different continents. Over the years, I’ve developed a nose for wine and made a habit of pairing it with the various foods that I prepare for friends and family. I’ve developed a propensity for serving Bordeaux from the Margaux and Haut-Médoc regions, and I’ve learned to discern the nuances between Oakville Cabernet Sauvignon grapes grown upslope and those grown near bottom.

Indeed, if there’s a theme to America 2.0, it is hybridization, remix, and diverse heritages. Ethnic tastes are so in favor that *umami*—Japanese for savoriness—has been proposed as the term for one of the basic tastes sensed by the human tongue. In my lifetime here, I have watched the pressure to move toward some generic, standardized melting-potted center deflate—transpose,

in fact—to something quite its opposite, as the demography shifts toward a society in which there's no discernible majority, no clear single center. Instead, the story I often see here is one in which one crosses, to various degrees, from ethnic to cosmopolitan by traversing those various hyphens that hang over the Sun Hop Fat supermarket. When one lives in an age of enormous options in an astoundingly diverse and fertile region where human restlessness and fabulous alchemical commingling are becoming increasingly the norm, one can't help but learn to refine one's taste buds accordingly, to reconcile with the nuances of the world.

How much do food and cooking have to do with my life in California?

I didn't really know the answer until I spent a week at a retreat in Bali recently, fasting and cleansing. For six days straight, I practiced yoga and ate nothing. It was supposed to be a spiritual experience. But it was difficult going, with only a few fruit drinks as my meals.

Hunger, they say, is a good cook. Each night I tossed and turned and became the possessor of strangely vivid dreams. Practically all of them were about cooking and eating. I would sear scallops and fry prawns and toss arugula salads and shave asiago cheese. I would wake each morning slightly disappointed at my failings in this spiritual quest.

But then, near the end of my fast, I had a dream so vivid and real it felt as if I were not dreaming at all: I am back in California, shopping at a local market. I can smell fresh basil. I can touch the glossy red heirloom tomatoes. Then I make this dish that I never made before, a Vietnamese beef stew with a French influence—in which fish sauce and red wine can be mixed and spiced with cinnamon, ginger, and star anise. My good friends gather around a table, waiting for me to serve it. Laughter and cheers ring in the air and there is the clinking of glasses in a shared blessing. I remember thinking, on a very empty stomach: it can't get more divine than that.

TRAGEDY AND THE NEW AMERICAN CHILDHOOD

Let me tell you a story. Once upon a time in a village full of ninjas there lived an orphan named Naruto. Because the head of the village sealed the powerful and malevolent spirit of a nine-tailed fox inside his belly when he was born, whenever Naruto lost control of his emotions, the fox took over and caused great havoc.

Naruto knew tragedy intimately. His own parents were killed in a war; Sasuke, his best friend, lost his entire clan to a murderous brother and became hell-bent on revenge; Jiraya, Naruto's favorite teacher, was murdered by another student, named Pain, whose aim was to destroy the world. The newest member to join Naruto's ninja team, Sai, in order to graduate from his martial arts school, had to kill many of his classmates.

Magic, romance, and martial arts aside, the story of Naruto is arguably on par with horror master Stephen King's novels. Except Naruto is a wildly popular Japanese manga (comic book or graphic novel) and anime (Japanese animation) series seen all over the world, including the U.S. Despite the subject matter, it falls into what we used to understand as children's entertainment.

Manga and anime have been a global phenomenon for two decades or so, and their popularity reached its peak at the turn of the millennium. Yet while many articles have been written about the ebb and flow of Eastern and Western cultural influences in the age of globalization, and in particular the enchantment of

the West by Japanese pop culture, what is barely touched upon is how the modern-day American childhood is increasingly informed by a set of narratives that diverge radically from those told to children a generation or two ago.

To put it simply: on TV and on the Internet and in graphic novels, *Naruto* and company are staggering in the footsteps of *Job*. There are few soft landings, very little candy-coated protection in these story lines from the Far East. For behind those round, puppy-eyed, and cuddly characters with their perfect Western features is a set of ancient Eastern sensibilities informed by human sufferings rarely encountered before in the land of happily ever after. It is why I, now in middle age, as someone who once fled a wartorn country, watch *Naruto* religiously.

A few years ago in Tokyo, I asked professor Koike Kazuo, the celebrated author of the *Lone Wolf and Cub* manga series and many others, about the difference between Japanese and American comic books and he said, “Japanese mangas tend to deal with complex characters that are suited for both children and adults.” Superman, Green Lantern, and other superheroes, he said, “are too overwhelming, like the U.S. military forces with their high-tech weapons. You grow up and get bored by them.” Not so with Japanese protagonists. “The characters may have some powers, but they are vulnerable. They might be beaten by somebody, and people who read manga sympathize deeply with these characters.”

Since manga can deal with modern demands, depicting family relations and love, he said, good mangas have plenty of adult readers in Japan, and many are treated on the same level as contemporary novels. “If Superman and Spiderman have wives and kids and real domestic dramas,” Koike said, laughing, “they will have adult readers.”

Koike, a history professor, could speak with authority. The first issue of the *Lone Wolf and Cub* series U.S. edition sold

around 120,000 copies in the late seventies, making it the best-selling manga in the United States for decades. The epic became one of the longest TV shows in Japanese history, and a six-film series. It's the story of a samurai who takes his baby boy, Daigoro, on the "road to hell" and becomes an assassin for hire while seeking vengeance against Retsudo, the powerful man who ordered the massacre of his clan and framed him for plotting to murder the shogun. Daigoro grows up watching his samurai-turned-assassin father slash, stab, and chop their enemies. In the final confrontation, with his father slain and Retsudo, their nemesis, wounded, the little boy picks up his enemy's spear and rushes fearlessly toward him. Recognizing spiritual kinship in Daigoro's bushido—warrior spirit—Retsudo embraces the boy and, pierced by his own spear, cries out: "Grandson of my heart!"

Not exactly kid stuff in the late seventies, but the other day as I watched two boys around eight or nine reading Koike's manga at a local bookstore, where half a dozen or so children and teenagers sat on the ground, their backs against bookcases and walls, with graphic novels in their hands, all entranced, it would seem that it is, now. And it would also seem that, as a result, the saccharine, happily-ever-after ending as spoon-fed by the church of Disney since the end of World War II is on the wane, or at least seriously challenged. And favored are dark and tragic narratives from the Far East with kinship to some of those folktales once told by the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Anderson.

Coined in 1815 by woodblock artist Hokusai, "manga" described his illustrated doodles, or "involuntary sketches or unintentional pictures." But manga didn't turn into entertainment for children in Japan until 1952, nearly a century and a half later, when Tezuka Osamu invented the story of Astro Boy, a robot with a human soul—a modern-day Pinocchio, as it were, but with a lot of firepower—who continues to have many incarnations, including a recent American movie.

Since *Astro Boy*, practically all the sadness, fear, joy, humor, and desire, not to mention aesthetic expressions and various sexual appetites of the Japanese people—a people who still have direct memories of a nuclear holocaust, who have experienced tsunamis and earthquakes—have found expression through graphic narratives. And, in time, they have found audiences throughout the world.

In the U.S., major outlets like Barnes and Noble and Amazon peddle an array of Japanese anime DVDs and mangas and related merchandise. On the various cable TV programs a viewer can watch some dozen anime shows catered to all ages. Most likely, however, one will pick from the thousands of stories—from robot romance to cooking obsession, from teenage alienation to various sexual dramas (including taboo subjects like brother-sister relationships and high school boys falling in love with one another), from government corruption investigations to intergalactic noir detective series—available online anytime via YouTube and Vimeo and AniLinkz and an array of other websites at the click of a mouse.

The business—manga, animated films, TV series, and licensed products like dolls and action figures and related video games—has saturated, peaking at around \$5 billion by 2005, and has suffered a downhill trajectory ever since. The main cause is, ironically, the enthusiasm of fans worldwide. An army of devoted admirers' constant scanlation—unauthorized scanning, uploading, and translating—is causing the global manga archive to grow online at breakneck speed, readily available for free.

On the subject of anime, Roland Kelts, an American writer with Japanese ancestry, notes in *Japanamerica* that it is “producing quality content at a time when quality is becoming endangered by advances in technology, which are outpacing attempts to control and even monitor distribution. And anime greets the American viewer with an enormous back catalog.”

What makes anime a powerful force in the digital age, he observed, “is its quality contents will arguably become even more greatly prized, as discriminating audiences have access to nearly everything and want only what is good.”

American animations, like those produced by Pixar and Disney, Kelts notes, are “like bursts of genius,” but for a reader wanting to sink deeper and deeper into a fantasy world, there’s nothing like the seemingly endless labyrinth of manga and anime, in which there’s always something more to discover. Its seduction is long lasting, often into adulthood and on to the grave.

Professor Koike, for his part, found it interesting that the Japanese imagination is what now sells overseas. “I never wrote my stories thinking they would be read by non-Japanese. But I am glad that the world is now fascinated with what we created to entertain ourselves.” Then he said, with utmost seriousness, “On the deepest level, serious mangas are about spiritual drama and love.”

Indeed, it is the spiritual drama in many of these stories that most interests me. Spiritual drama always moved beneath the unhappily ending folklore and fairy tales I knew intimately, growing up in Vietnam during the war. Those unbearably hot humid afternoons in Saigon, my older siblings and I would often throw a mat on the tile floor in our maternal grandma’s room, the coolest in the house, and beg her for a story before siesta. Decades and a continent away, I can still hear Grandma’s story-telling voice, low and sad, lulling her grandchildren toward phantasmagorical and melancholic dreams.

In Grandma’s stories, noble deeds are rarely rewarded happily ever after, broken love is the norm, and those who do good can be, and often are, punished.

The husband fled after he realized that he had married his long lost sister by mistake, but the faithful young wife kept waiting with their child, and then one night both mother and child turned

into stone on the sea cliff... The lovesick princess died and her heart turned into a ruby, and the grieving king had it carved into a teacup—and whenever he poured tea into it, the image of her paramour, the singing fisherman on his boat, appeared and floated to and fro... So that his jealous older brother would live happily with his new bride, the younger brother left home to die in the forest, and overnight he turned into limestone...

Though heartbreaking, these stories carry a mature wisdom in their resolutions.

The loyal wife's virtues were preserved forever in stone, and in time she became a local goddess known as the Stone Waiting for Husband... When the fisherman saw his own image in the ruby teacup he cried and his tears fell into the cup, which melted back into blood and disappeared, and the princess's love was requited at last... The older brother, wracked with guilt for distrusting his only sibling, sat on the limestone and he too died, turning into an areca tree. His new bride followed and she turned into a betel vine. "When you combine the betel leaf and areca nut and a bit of limestone paste and chew, you get a tingling sensation on your tongue," Grandma said as she chewed, then spat red juice into her spittoon, then laughed. "See, your spit turns the color of blood. It's true love, which is always sad and complicated."

Grandmother told fatalistic tales that are thousands of years old, some older than nations, and if they are sad and strange, there is a sound reason for this vein of morbid magic existentialism. Considering how many generations have seen war and experienced natural disasters, and how calamities have a way of destroying hope, these stories are concerned with the spiritual growth of the young, and not with convincing them that they live in a benevolent universe. The old tales have evolved over the millennia as a way to prepare and warn the next generation for cataclysm and grief. And at their best, they serve as medicine for the soul.

TRAGEDY AND THE NEW AMERICAN CHILDHOOD

It is spiritual drama, therefore, that draws me to *Naruto*. I recognize the Old World's sensibilities in his story and in many others told through Japanese graphic narratives. The nine-tailed fox is, after all, a creature of myth in the Far East as old as the Hydra or the Minotaur in ancient Greek mythology. In China the fox sometimes takes the form of a beautiful woman who seduces kings, and they in turn destroy their own kingdoms.

And despite the age of digital and high-tech wizardry, despite new creative inventions, manga and anime haven't changed much in their core messages, which continue to distill the ancient ethos from a cultural matrix shared between Japan and the rest of East Asia. They say sacrifice for others is more important than individual happiness, that to grow in strength and wisdom one must find something more precious to protect and love than oneself, that there is an inherent beauty in sadness, a spiritual growth to be had from suffering, and that honor and loyalty and duty sometimes far outweigh, alas, romantic love.

Now, as American children mourn *Naruto's* teacher's murder, as they watch him struggle to retain his sunny outlook so as not to turn, literally, into a destructive monster, it seems the Far East is not so far from the easternizing West.

A year after the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City were destroyed by terrorist attacks, I went and visited Ground Zero. There were many visitors and gawkers about, and next to me were a few teenagers, with their charming Midwest accents, snapping photos. And as they surveyed the terrible destruction before them—shattered concrete and melted steel of what was once an ivory citadel—one of them said with reverence in his voice, "Man, this is, like, right out of *Akira!*" *Akira*, if you have not read it yet, is a celebrated manga turned anime about a futuristic Neo-Tokyo (rebuilt after nuclear holocaust) in which many children possess psychic powers. After much fighting between them and various political

EAST EATS WEST

groups, the city is once more destroyed by an explosion that leaves few survivors.

In a post-9/11 world in which waging preemptive wars in the name of peace has become the norm and the sky is full of war drones, and as the polar icecaps melt and the sea keeps rising and polar bears drown, and as the ominous storms keep gathering and growing stronger—if not at our shores then at the edge of our collective unconsciousness—it may very well be that happily-ever-after narratives are no longer the right medicine, and that the stories American children are gravitating toward are alternative fairy tales that can assist them as they bear witness to the churning tides.

EAST EATS WEST

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FROM CUISINE AND MARTIAL ARTS TO SEX AND SELF-ESTEEM, *East Eats West* shines new light on the bridges and crossroads where two hemispheres meld into one global “immigrant nation.” In this new nation, with its amalgamation of divergent ideas, tastes, and styles, today’s bold fusion becomes tomorrow’s classic. But while the space between East and West continues to shrink in this age of globalization, cultural gaps remain.

In this collection of twenty-one personal essays, the award-winning author of *Perfume Dreams* continues to explore the Vietnamese Diaspora, this time concentrating not only on how the East and West have changed but how they are changing each other. Lively and engaging, *East Eats West* searches for meaning in a nebulous territory charted by very few.

“Don’t be fooled by the seductive beauty of [Lam’s] prose—underneath its iridescent surface, it comes with the wicked kick of Sriracha chili sauce.”

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“Future historians will have the pleasure of chronicling how through his deft essays Andrew Lam bridged, fused, and reconciled Asia, Vietnam, Vietnamese America, contemporary California, American culture as a whole, and the English language into one interactive symbiosis, his and all of ours, for now and for decades to come.”

—Kevin Starr, University Professor and professor of history, University of Southern California

