MAIL-ORDER BRIDES

The past lives in the present

By Mildred Hamilton
OF THE EXAMINER STAFF

The photographs go out from the young and hopeful Asian women who see in the mail-order marriage an escape from poverty and oppression. Too often their dreams of romance, independence and social status become nightmares of servitude and abuse.

A spotlight first focused on the plight of “picture brides” of the early 1900s has swung around to bare some frightening conditions today.

Dr. Alice Yun Chai of the University of Hawaii, who has been in California speaking before Asian-American groups, is the rare historian looking back into the experiences of Japanese, Okinawan and Korean picture brides who arrived in Hawaii. Most of them came to marry men already settled there and working on the sugar plantations.

She talked informally the other day about these “forgotten” early immigrant women and their contributions to the country as well as about the new, booming — and often disastrous — return of the mail-order bride.

From the early 1900s until the Asian Exclusion Act of 1924, Chai reported, more than 22,000 young women ages 17 to 25 arrived in Hawaii from Japan, Okinawa and Korea to marry strangers with whom they had exchanged photographs. Today, those who still survive are in their 80s and 90s. They are the grandmothers and great-grandmothers of many of Hawaii's professional, political and business leaders.

“We discovered suffering and courage and strength,” said Chai, of the comprehensive study she did with researcher Barbara F. Kawakami and university students in the Women's Studies Program. “For the first time there was pride in the heritage through the female line, and a feeling the women’s experiences were valuable and real. There has been an increased consciousness raising.”

Students of Asian-Pacific heritage sought out their elders, many of whom never before had sat

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A 1913 portrait of a ‘picture bride’ from Japan, one among thousands of ‘forgotten’ women.
BRIDES
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down to talk about their early lives. Old photographs were added to the tapes to present new perspective to the history of Hawaii's immigrants.

Some of the arranged marriages were happy, some were tolerable. Others were so harsh women ran away to become prostitutes. There were tales of husbands' selling or slaying their wives. But for nearly a century little about the women was known.

"There has been a gap, a lack of

A Japanese woman pain-
fully remembers how she
combined her fieldwork
with childcare. "Those days no more ba-
by-sitters, everybody strug-
gling, you know. So when
my baby was one year old, I
could not afford baby home
(take) because it cost $2.50
a month per child when I
make only $20 a month. I
use to carry my baby on
back and take with me to
canefields.

"I put up tent made from
abaca cloth and let him
sleep on straw while I
work. Sometimes baby get
sick and I don't know how
him. When baby cry, I like
to go, but if field supervisor
bad he'll scold, so I hold back.
Some kind say, 'No wor-
ry, mama-san, you give baby
milk.'"

"When baby small, time
hard, but when they start
crawling or walking
around, more worry, you
know. We hear sad stories
about children drowning in
irrigation ditches or walk-
ing into burning cane's"

Professor Alice Yun Chai, who studied picture brides
understanding and little commu-
nication with these women. I felt an
obligation to bring this information
about to the community." The commu-
nity has generally been fascinated. In
addition to Chai's many talks in Cal-
atia and California, she has been
asked to speak in Chicago and New
York where there are fields in
these

"I showed my slides to some
sixth graders in Hawaii. Their
reaction was startling. Ninety-nine
percent of them, boys as well as girls, got
mad at the men. One boy asked,
'How come the woman stuck with
that no-good man?"

"The only criticism in Hawaii
when came from white college
male academics, who asked, 'For whom
are these women important? They
are content to be invisible women.
Why do you want to stir up this
past?' These academics, the Japa-
nese and Korean specialists, seem
to be threatened that one woman of
Japanese heritage and one of Japa-
ese had studied the experiences.
But it is important to make the con-
nection between the experiences
of early immigrant women and the
"The background of Chai and Ka-
wakami was ideal for their project,
funded in part by the Hawaii Com-
mittee for the Humanities and co-
sponsored by Women's Studies Pro-
gram at the University of Hawaii.

Chai was born in Korea where
her early years were under the Jap-
anese occupation. She earned a de-
gree in music before the outbreak
of Korean War, worked for the
U.S. military in a war orphan
program, came to the United States
to earn a sociology degree at Ohio
Wesleyan, then a M.A. and a Ph.D.
in anthropology at Ohio State. Her
dissertation was on Korean mate
selection patterns.

She met her husband, also a Ko-
ran, at Ohio State where he was an
engineering student. They married
and returned home to be college
park in a period that included
"two sons and two revolutions."

Equal partners in a happy
marriage, they moved to Hawaii where
their daughter was born and where
they both teach. "Our Korean
friends say there is nothing Korean
in our family," she says. She has
pioneer work in setting up a
women's studies program also
"very threatening to Korean wom-
"n and men."

Kawakami, a second-generation
Japanese-American born on a Ha-
wanian plantation, was 53 when she
returned to the school where she had been
forced to leave at age 13. Her father
died, leaving her mother with nine
children. She worked as a seam-
stress, first to help her mother, and
later to support her own children.

Kawakami, who was one of
Chai's students, earned a master's
degree in Asian studies and is now
writing a book on immigrants in
the clothing industry. "For the first
time in my women's study classes,"
Chai said, "Barbara Kawakami felt
it was all right to talk and write of
women's experiences."

They found in their picture
bride project many parallels to
mainland U.S. experiences of wom-
en of European heritage. And they
also found some current discrimi-
nation against today's generation
in Hawaii. "Hawaii has the greatest
ethnic diversity of Asian women in
America and received the greatest
proportion of these immigrants in
both early and recent waves of in-
migration."

Cultural traditions make
many of these women feel it is shameful
to complain. "That situation goes
beyond Hawaii," Chai said. "In New
York, a wife abuse hotline recently
set up for Korean-American wom-
en was flooded with calls. They
could talk when they were desper-
ate and not give their names."

The mail-order bride business
is flourishing, both in Hawaii and
in many of the other 49 states. "It
has many hazards, and it involves rac-
ism, sexism and classism."

Many of the young women are
very poor and from the Philippines,
although Chai found some from Ja-
p. "Some young Japanese college
students submit their pictures be-
cause they don't like oppressive
Japanese men. They think Ameri-
can men are chivalrous. They mix
up having a date opened for them
with sexual equality."

"We can't understand why col-
lege-educated women from Japan
will do this. Most of the U.S. men
seeking these Asian bridens are
white, middle-class, rural, so-called
Christian, and far right politically.
They want submissive wives."

The woman comes, often after a
man has invested several thousand
dollars, to find unhappy conditions.
She is trapped, often like a slave.
She has no English, no friends, and
can find her mail and telephone
calls controlled.

"War brides at least meet their
future husbands, and the picture
bride of Hawaii in the early 1900s
we studied were more egalitarian.
They exchanged pictures at the
same time. The modern mail-order
bride businesses just offer the pic-
ture of the consummation."

"This is an international feminist
issue."

Whoopie stars in
'Public Enemies'

ASSOCIATED PRESS

LOS ANGELES — Whoopie Goldberg
grabbed the role in "Public Enemies,"
when she was written a "fat white male."

"She really looks for different
roles; she wouldn't be expec-
ting a role like this. She
wanted to do something dif-
ferent."

Think Slim.

Examiner/Paul Gines

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