

PICTURE BRIDES: Lives Of Hawaii's
Early Immigrant Women From Japan,
Okinawa And Korea

A series of free public slide and
panel presentations

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Funded in part by the Hawaii Committee
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Hawaii -Manoa, Hawaii State
Commission on Status of Women,
Honolulu United Honpa Hongwanji
Buddhist Women's Association, United
Methodist Women of Harris United
Methodist Church and Christ United
Methodist churches of Honolulu, and
Women's Fellowship of Korean Christian
Church of Honolulu.

Panel Members

Barbara F. Kawakami, Project Director

Alice Yun Chai, Principal Humanities
Scholar, Associate Professor,
Women's Studies Program, University
of Hawaii

Marie Hara, Teacher,
Writer and Journalist

Rachel Lee, Tae Kook Club, Wahiawa

Gayle Fujita, Assistant Professor,
English, University of Hawaii

Information: 948-7464 (Women's
Women's Studies Program)

Schedule by Location

Lihue, Kauai

Lihue Neighborhood Center (Isenberg
Tract)
3352 Eono Street
Thursday, January 9, 1986 9:30 AM

Kahului, Maui

Hale Mohaolu Elua Sr. Citizen's
Housing Project
200 Hina Avenue
Friday, January 17 9:30 AM

Hilo, Hawaii

Seven Seas Community Center
Piilani Street
Wednesday, January 22 10:00 AM

Kamana Senior Center
127 Kamana Street
Wednesday, January 22 1:00 PM

Kona, Hawaii

Yano Memorial Hall
Captain Cook (across Manago Hotel)
Thursday, January 23 1:00 PM

Waipahu, Oahu

Waipahu Cultural Garden Park
94-695 Waipahu Street
Friday, January 31 9:30 AM

Honolulu, Oahu

Lanakila Senior Center
1640 Lanakila Avenue
Wednesday, February 5 9:30 AM

Wahiawa, Oahu

Hale Koa Wahiawa Rec. Ctr.,
1139-A Kilani Avenue
Monday, February 10 9:30 AM

Wahiawa Hongwanji Mission
1067 California Ave.
Wednesday, February 26 9:30 AM

Lives of Hawaii's Early Immigrant Women from Japan, Okinawa & Korea

PICTURE BRIDES

See back
for schedule



Susannah Wesley Home

A series of free public slide and panel presentations.

SPONSORS: Funded in part by the Hawaii Committee for the Humanities, and co-sponsored by
Women's Studies Program at the University of Hawaii-Manoa.

PICTURE BRIDES: Lives of Hawaii's Early Immigrant Women From Japan, Okinawa, And Korea

by: Alice Yun Chai and Barbara F. Kawakami

I. Description and Goals of the Project

Partial funding for this work was provided by the Hawaii Committee for the Humanities and co-sponsored by the Women's Studies Program and Ethnic Studies Program at the University of Hawaii, the Hawaii State Commission on the Status of Women, Honolulu United Honpa Hongwanji Buddhist Women's Association, United Methodist Women of Harris United Methodist Church and Christ United Methodist Church, and the Women's Fellowship of Korean Christian Church.

Hawaii has the greatest ethnic diversity of Asian women in America and has received the greatest proportion of immigrants from Asian countries in both early and recent waves of immigration. In 1985, Hawaii has been commemorating the centennial of the arrival of Japanese immigrants in Hawaii. It is also an opportune time to take a new look at the "forgotten" immigrant women in Hawaii and their impact on various institutions in Hawaii. This project was designed to bring forth new information on Japanese, Okinawan, and Korean picture brides who immigrated to Hawaii in the early decades of the twentieth century.

The years 1885, 1900, and 1903 marked the first arrivals of immigrant laborers and their families from Japan, Okinawa, and Korea, respectively, but few women came until the turn of the century. Women were prevented from coming to this country by labor recruiters' profit motivation, restrictive immigration laws, the temporary sojourner situation of male laborers and cultural traditions of female seclusion and family obligation.

When the large numbers of male workers began to realize that their original intention of returning home with savings would not be possible, they arranged picture marriages. Starting from 1908, after the Gentlemen's Agreement of 1907, many picture brides arrived. Their immigration continued until 1924, when the Asian Exclusion Act was passed. From 1908 to 1924, over 14,000 Japanese, over 7,000 Okinawan, and almost 1,000 Korean picture brides between the ages of 17 and 25 arrived in Hawaii. Those who still survive are now in their 80s and 90s, thereby making it a matter of urgency to obtain information on their experiences.

The project consists of two parts, a

series of life history interviews, and public slide and panel presentations. The fifteen life history interviews were conducted in the women's native languages and then translated into English. In selecting interviewees, a special effort was made to locate women with varied backgrounds in terms of regional origin, religious affiliation, and life experience.

The format of the slide show will follow the subtopics of the interviews: background, economic, domestic, social and symbolic adaptive strategies and inter-generational relationships. The life histories of these picture brides have been incorporated to create an overview of their experiences, highlighted by some unique responses to their common situations. The slides will include photographs of the women from their private collections, copies of photographs in public and private institutions in Hawaii, and photographs of documents. The English narration accompanying the slide presentation will include direct translations of excerpts from the interview tapes.

The goals of the project are: 1) to make available to the public, knowledge concerning the lives of early Asian immigrant women from feminist, historical and anthropological view points; 2) to visually affirm the experiences of ordinary women by celebrating the significance and diversity of their lives through the facilitation of dialogue among cultural groups, social classes, and generations of people; and 3) to encourage women to see themselves as resource persons and ethnographic historians.

II. Humanities Approach

Since the Civil Rights and Women's Liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s, there has been a change in the conceptualization and interpretation of history and anthropology, including that of immigrant women. There is now a new and positive emphasis on the struggle of immigrant women to resist oppression within the limits imposed upon them, and to live in a new land on their own terms. Feminist historians and anthropologists have begun to ask about the actual experience of women in the past, using women's letters, diaries, autobiographies, and oral histories as primary sources. This shift from male-oriented to female-oriented consciousness leads to challenging new questions and interpretations. The newer scholarship tends to portray

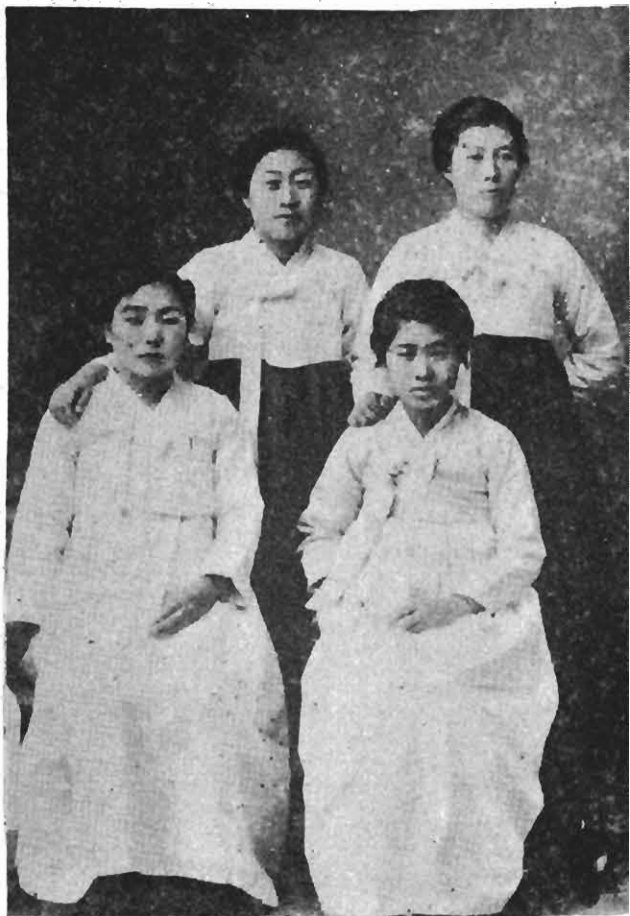
immigrant women as strategists who demonstrated patterns of resistance, protest, and creative adaptation.

Literature searches and consultation with scholars reveal that little research has been done on the early Asian immigrant women. Much of the literature on immigration has been male-centered, taking their experience as the norm and assuming that women's experiences were either identical or not important enough to warrant separate and serious attention. The story of the early Asian immigrant women as active participants in the making of Hawaii's history has yet to be written. Certainly, like men, women faced poverty, loneliness, discrimination, and physical danger as they struggled to build new lives in a new land. However, being female shaped the opportunities and roles available to them in the family, and community. Using life histories of early Asian immigrant women, this project offers a woman-centered perspective on Hawaii's immigration history.

Women have a particular heritage that is a distinct part of the general experience. It is the body of traditions and knowledge that has been and is continually passed from one generation or group of women to another through time. This project affirms the need to recover and articulate this collective heritage. It affirms that the legacy of women's relationships is of value, that women's lives have a special rhythm and that this female world leaves room for celebrating diversity. The project in its largest sense is an affirmation of the historical visibility and various realities of women.

Life history reconstruction is based on the collection, analysis, organization, and presentation of information about actual experiences of women. The information collected spans the individual woman's entire life cycle stages. This project tries to widen our understanding across cultures and generations by making us "insiders" to their worlds from a particular historical time. As the novelist Virginia Woolf said, in order to learn about our past "we think back through our mothers if we are women."

The slide and panel presentation will be based on an analysis of women as active strategists and creators of a woman-centered women's culture in sociocultural and historical contexts. The specific questions and sample excerpts from the interviews to be considered are:



4. SOCIAL STRATEGIES: What did they do to support each other to achieve their goals?

Through their familial and female networks, and church and women's groups, the women were able to give emotional and financial support to one another and learned how to organize, implement ideas, and work together for a common cause. Bonds between women were often stronger than ties between husband and wife, since they had more contact with one another than with their husbands, who preferred to socialize separately and often had little in common with their wives.

Through kye groups, Korean picture brides gave each other financial support to purchase real estate and to pay for visiting homeland to see sick mothers. In fact, for many women, owning income producing property provided more security than marriage. Similar to Japanese tanomoshi, a kye group was made up of ten to twenty-four women from the same home village, province, or church, who met monthly for fellowship and recreation as well as for economic cooperation. The main motive for participating in the kye was to have access to a large sum of money.

A Korean woman proudly says:

"One day a friend told me about a rooming house for sale on Hotel Street. The owner wanted \$1,400. Because of the Depression, times were hard again. I worked in a Navy laundry during the day, and I ironed shirts for a cleaning shop until midnight, five cents for one shirt, fifty cents for ten shirts. After five years I could only save \$400. How could I get the other \$1,000 I needed? My friend loaned me the money. Then I paid her back with cash I got from the kye. Now my family had property. We could make money and live better."

5. SYMBOLIC STRATEGIES: What were their female experiences through the life cycle stages?

The most significant challenges faced by these picture brides were the many responsibilities for themselves and their children in the event of a husband's illness or death. Because the husbands usually were much older and some of them were heavy drinkers and habitual gamblers, wives were compelled to become the major economic providers, emotional supporters, and disciplinarians for the children. With financial help and moral support from their friends and a strong religious faith, they somehow managed to fulfill their provider roles.

Widowhood was not only hard for mothers but for children, especially the oldest daughter who did everything her mother normally did, starting as early as age 13.

An Okinawan woman relates how her oldest daughter sacrificed for her family.

"Because my husband left plenty debt, I had to work for 20 years as a live-in maid for the military families. In 1920, I was making \$40 a month when plantation women were earning 75 cents a day. That was real good for a month's pay. I think my oldest daughter suffered the most because she had to do all the housework and take care the young ones and be like a mother to them. She even did the laundry for the Filipino bachelors. She only went half-way through the fifth grade. In the olden days, mothers suffered a lot but the oldest girl suffered just as much. Even to this day, I feel sorry for that girl to go through so much. But without my daughter's help, we could never have survived. That is why all my other children are very good to my oldest daughter now."



6. INTER-GENERATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS: How did they relate to their grandmothers, mothers, sisters and daughters?

Many picture brides sent hard-earned money as remittances to help support their parents and siblings. They all yearned to make a trip to their home village to see their ailing or aging mothers before it would be too late. Many could not visit home while mothers were still alive because of financial difficulties. Many said they persevered through their economic hardships and domestic difficulties by modeling themselves after their mothers' persistence and strength. Some picture brides, with the support and assistance of their village women, raised enough money, by ingenious ways, to be able to visit their mothers after many years of struggle in Hawaii.

A Korean picture bride tells of a dramatic reunion with her sick mother in Korea after a long absence:

"In 1932, after ten years in Hawaii, my mother in Korea became paralyzed. My brother wrote me and said, 'Mother is waiting for you, her only daughter. If you don't come, she can't get better, she can't die. You better come see her.' Every night, I pray to God, 'Please help me to go see my mother. Then, God give me an idea! That time plenty ladies came from my hometown Masan."

"I tell all my friends that I'm going to Korea and they can send something to parents, I would take it. Then, all kinds and size packages came in and everybody give me money. I collected about \$250. Those days small boat round trip only \$55. I went to Korea, leaving three children with my friends."

"Nobody knows I was coming. When I came in, it was like a funeral house, with everyone crying. Oh, I cry too. We all cry."



1. BACKGROUND: Why did they come?

From the poor and densely populated farming villages, the early Asian immigrant women came, envisioning a land of economic opportunity, political freedom and personal autonomy. Some Christian Korean women, who had been political activists, came in order to continue their protest against Japanese oppression in Korea. Others desired to be free from social and cultural constraints unique to them as women. A few came on their own initiative, independent of and in opposition to the wishes of their parents and families. Frequently, single women emigrated to avoid marriage and the poverty that would result. Others came because they preferred the freedom and independence of even poorly paid work in Hawaii and married life without servitude to mothers-in-law. For many women, because of the lack of other alternatives, marriage was a means of achieving individual goals of adventure, social status enhancement, and an independent life. In fact, some women were so eager to come to Hawaii that they arranged their own marriages.

An eighty-three year old woman explains that her search for freedom was the reason for leaving Korea:

"I was born in 1900 in a small village in the mountains. My parents were very poor. So much hardship. Those days, girls in my village can't go any place, only to Sunday school. Girls all the time were home before they marry, cooking, sewing, and working. When I was eight years old, I became a Christian. My parents all Buddhists. Korea under the Japanese had no freedom. People cannot free talking. My auntie told me Hawaii's a free place, everybody living well. I make up my mind to come. So, I sent my picture."

2. DOMESTIC STRATEGIES: How did they respond to their subordinate status?

Their anticipation of a "dreamland" was shattered soon after their ships docked at Honolulu harbor. Upon arrival, some were bewildered, because their grooms did not look like their photographs. The men frequently had sent pictures of themselves taken ten to twenty years before, or pictures of younger and better-looking friends. Many of the picture brides cried bitterly; some persistently refused to marry their intended grooms and were sent back home or took refuge with church agencies. A number of picture brides were physically abused by the grooms who had paid the passage. Afraid of being shipped back home as if they had been rejected, most of the brides were forced to stay and accept their unhappy married lives. Some women who ran away sought refuge at Susannah Wesley Home. Others gradually adjusted to their marriages and grew to love their husbands. Many women, having nowhere to go or being unable to return home, persevered hardship created by husbands' heavy drinking and gambling and sometimes physical abuse.

This is a story of how an Okinawan picture bride endured her marital difficulties:

"My husband made good money as luna, but every night gamble, gamble! So I never had any money. Alone with the children at nights, I did sewing until the wee hours of the mornings after working in the fields all day. How many times I thought of dying but when I saw the innocent faces sleeping, I couldn't. There was no place for me to go. Times like that I thought that if I could walk across the ocean, I would have. I really gaman (endured) because I kept hearing my mother's voice, 'Once you marry, stay with your husband, no matter what.' These words stuck with me throughout my life."



3. ECONOMIC STRATEGIES: How did they survive?

Many husbands' wages alone could not cover all the household expenses, so the early immigrant women worked ten hours a day in the fields, often taking their infant children with them. Then they worked far into the night caring for their families and doing housework. In addition, it was not uncommon for them to cook and do laundry for a dozen or more bachelor laborers. Immigrant wives in town also worked to supplement their husbands' meager wages. Some opened small dressmaking shops, ran laundry services, or managed boarding houses. Without electricity or washing machines, the women did the laundry by hand and had to heat the charcoals for the iron.

A Japanese woman painfully remembers how she combined her fieldwork with childcare:

"Those days no more baby-sitters, everybody struggling you know. So when my baby was one years old, I could not afford baby home because it costed \$2.50 a month per child when I made only \$20 a month. I used to oppa (carrying a baby on back) my baby and take with me to work in canefields. I put up tent made from ahina cloth and let baby sleep on straw mat while I hoe hana. Sometimes baby get sunburn, also get plenty insect bites, real pity you know. When baby cry, I like to go but if luna bad, he scold, so I hold back. Some luna kind and say, 'No worry mama-san, you give baby milk.' So I take baby and open my breasts, then I see my nipples all covered with depo (dust) so I wipe with my saliva. 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 walking into burning canes."