"Mrs. K." : Oral History of a Korean Picture Bride

Alice Y. Chai

Follow this and additional works at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/wsq

Part of the Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
https://academicworks.cuny.edu/wsq/331

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Archives and Special Collections at CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Women's Studies Quarterly by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact AcademicWorks@cuny.edu.
see in developmental models is their tendency to become reified. This model is meant only as a conceptual framework, an attempt to understand graphically a process that many of us have gone through. It is not a prescription for future generations of feminists, who must chart their own course.

On request, I built in developments in feminist activism. Compensating corresponds with a reformism that seeks more slots for women in the existing socioeconomic structure. Here, too, I put the first critiques of sex-role socialization, which underscore women’s right to behave in ways previously defined as masculine. Criticizing comes with the discovery of oppression and subsequent analyses of patriarchy, such as the study of rape as a “normal” phenomenon and exposés of institutional sexism. Under Collecting and Constructing, I placed most alternative feminist institutions—self-help health clinics, presses, women’s centers, etc.—some of which claim to be drawing on a pre-existent female culture. What form Conceiving will take outside academe remains to be seen.

Despite the subdued discussion that first day, it was soon apparent that “Cheri’s model” or “that thing on the board” had made some difference. In class and in their journals, students reported that it gave them hope of overcoming their despair, a vision of better things to come, and a sense of direction. One woman, for example, resolved to stop dwelling on the irrelevance of political science to women and start working on devising a feminist political theory. This pleased me, naturally, but I was even more gratified when the class suggested improvements in the model itself, based on their experience. We decided that development is not unidirectional, but that you can move back and forth at random or at will. Each time you move or slip back toward “The Pit,” you bring along new insights from the Collecting and Constructing stage that give you a new perception of the pattern of oppression. Since development is cumulative, no stage is to be avoided. It might even be worthwhile to lower yourself into the negatives now and then, to regain the impetus for overcoming the pitfalls on the way up. We also agreed that it is possible to be in several stages at once, with reference to different aspects of experience. The static, linear configuration of the graph could be very misleading, and it would be better to visualize it in three dimensions and in constant motion.

Our most nagging question about the process was, “How will we ever make the leap without plunging into the abyss?” This threatened a new despair, until someone had sense enough to ask, “Is it necessarily a leap?” An answer was suggested on the last day of the quarter, when a team of students conducted a class on Adrienne Rich’s feminism and its implications for feminist learning. In her poem “From a Survivor,” we read:

... the leap
we talked, too late, of making
which I live now
not as a leap
but a succession of brief, amazing movements
each one making possible the next

Maybe the seminar has even been one of them.

Cheri Register is Assistant Professor of Women’s Studies at the University of Minnesota.

“Mrs. K.” : Oral History of a Korean Picture Bride*
By Alice Y. Chai

Introduction

In 1923, Mrs. K., a nineteen-year-old picture bride-to-be, left a small mountain village in Kyong-sang province, Korea, to marry a forty-five-year-old Korean immigrant who awaited her arrival in Honolulu, Hawaii. Now seventy-five years old, Mrs. K. has spent fifty-five years of her life as a resident of the island of Oahu.

For Mrs. K., one of the 101 remaining out of 1,000 Korean picture brides who came to Hawaii between 1910 and 1924, life in Hawaii followed a similar pattern to that of other picture brides. She worked alongside her husband at an army laundry service; then she ran a laundry shop, a boarding house, a vegetable farm; and finally she built and managed multi-unit apartment buildings. Mrs. K.’s life story reads like an American dream-come-true.

The primary emphasis of this study is her description of her life in her own words, recorded during extensive, open-ended interviews. As she speaks of her past, Mrs. K. punctuates her story with laughter and tears. Her speech is “Korean-American,” which can largely be understood in context. The following is Mrs. K.’s own story of her experiences as a Korean-American woman in Hawaii, as told to me and to another interviewer. This story not only has intrinsic value as a woman’s own life history told in her own words, but also has special

* This is a revised version of a paper originally presented at the Sixth Annual Conference on Ethnic and Minority Studies in April 1978 at the University of Wisconsin/La Crosse. A longer version was published in Bridge Magazine, which has given us permission to reprint it.
importance to those interested in understanding the roles of first-generation Korean-American women in American society.  

In Search of Freedom and Economic Prosperity

I was born in 1904. My parents were very poor. One year, a heavy rain came, a flood; the crops all washed down. Oh, it was a very hard time, you know. My place was a very small country village, only about 100 houses. People can’t talk, can’t walk around. Under the Japanese, no freedom. Not even free talking. A very hard time. My auntie told me that my cousin was living where picture brides come, Hawaii. Always I heard Hawaii stories, that time. I thinking when I grow up I like going Hawaii. Hawaii’s a free place, everybody living well. Hawaii had freedom, so if you like talk, you can talk; you like work, you can work. I wanted to come, so I sent my picture. 

That time girls in my village can’t walk even ten miles outside. Can’t go any place, only to Sunday School. I came to Hawaii. It was very unusual, because girls always only were home their whole life before they marry. Never went out, only stayed home—cooking, sewing, working. That time a girl very seldom went out to a foreign country. 

Nobody know I was going to Hawaii. If they know, everybody have a big surprise! Only my auntie and I know. My auntie living in Pusan. I went to my auntie’s house. My cousin was getting married and I was going to sew clothes. I was telling a lie. So, I came there and I secretly make my passport ready. I make it secretly because that time me going to Hawaii alone is just like girl selling. I make everything ready. For twenty days I can’t see my mother and father straight because of tears coming down. I cried. About two weeks before I have to leave, I tell my father and mother. My father was very angry. My mother was very sad, and my father only blame my mother, fighting, you know. But they can’t stop me. No, they can’t. That time all was ready, everything ready. Until then, I can’t tell them. I was so scared, afraid of father and mother. I only cry by myself. 

On the day I leave, the first train I catch was 4:30 in the morning, so nobody else see me leave. Only my mother bring me to the train station. I was very sad because of my parents. Father was still mad. I came to Pusan, my auntie’s house, and stay two days. I left in the small boat, across from Pusan to Shimonoseki, all night, you know. Until the next morning across, I cried. 

Getting Married

I came to Hawaii and was so surprised and very disappointed, because my husband sent his twenty-five-year-old handsome-looking picture. . . . He came to the pier, but I see he’s really old, old-looking. He was forty-five years old, twenty-five years more old than I am. My heart stuck. I was so disappointed, I don’t look at him again. So, I don’t eat and only cry for eight days. I don’t eat nothing, but at midnight when everybody sleeps I sneak out to drink water, so I don’t die. I was so angry at my cousin because she arranged the marriage. If I don’t marry, immigration law send me back to Korea free. Oh, I was thinking, thinking. I came once, better I marry and stay here. That time it was hard to come out, so how can I go back? My parents would be very shame, so I can’t go back. So, after eight days, I made up my mind, I told my cousin to help me get married. I better marry and live in Hawaii. 

Then, I didn’t talk to him for three months, living together in the same house. Morning time early, I got up, cooked for him. Then, I go back to sleep, get up, I eat, I clean up, I go to my cousin’s house. I help her. Then, evening time I cook early. I eat first. I made ready for him eat. After three months, well, God give me my life, I can’t help him being too old. I cooled down, make everything nicely, make each other talk. So, thirty-four years we lived together before he died. 

That time in Hawaii Korean women very important, more than men because men were drinking so much. My husband was drinking lots. But I can’t blame them. All single men, they came here, stayed in boarding houses, eat and sleep. The sugar plantation paid for their work, 75¢ a day. The men were lonesome. So much drinking. So, I’m very much suffering. My old man drink so much, he hardly talk, you know.

A Working Woman

Then, I told my husband I want to work, too, but there was no job in Honolulu, so we move to Schofield. An army soldiers’ laundry was there. I find a job to help my parents in Korea. I like to live well. I was working sixteen hours every day. No Sundays off, even no Christmas, no New Year’s Day. I missed church, but I cannot go. It was too far and they don’t give me a day off. That time they make us work like animals. Two ladies were cooking for fifty working people, including eighteen ladies. Families had a house, I mean a tent, for living. If it was raining, we move the bed this corner, that corner. The rain was leaking in the tent. Our life was hard then. We work, work, work, and earned money. I worked hard. My husband got $70 a month washing clothes, I $30 a month ironing, together $100 a month, with both of us working so hard. Hard work but only less than ½ pay to women. But we women weren’t mad, because men were working more hard hand-washing clothes. That time no washing machine, only hand-washing. Women only ironed.

After I worked about two years, I had a baby girl born. I worked one day until two o’clock and went to the hospital next morning at nine o’clock. Because my baby was upside down, I went to Queen’s Hospital, stayed three days because that time no more money. I went to working again, just leave the baby alone. Nobody else was inside, all outside, so I take care of the baby when working. I work, the baby cry, I cry too, because I can’t go. At coffee time I run, change diaper, and go back to work.

That time I sleep only about two to three hours. That time we were very tight, you know. For two or three months we never eat meat, always eat only vegetables. But I was very strong, healthy, not sick. Never sick because our country village was

1 The other interviewer was Esther Kwon Arinaga, of Honolulu, who interviewed Mrs. K. for her article, "Contributions of Korean Immigrant Women," in Montage: An Ethnic History of Women in Hawaii, ed. N. F. Young and J. K. Parrish (Honolulu, 1977), 73-81.
Korean picture brides in the 1920s. Courtesy of Alice Y. Chai and Esther Kwon Arinaga (whose mother is at top, left).

very poor, too, and that time we eat wheat, potato leaves, pumpkin leaves, but we find out that is very good for vitamins. I had no cavity for seventy-five years. Today, they say vegetable is very good. That's why I think I'm so healthy.

With some money earned, we moved to a farm in Palolo Valley in 1928. Then one year a heavy rain flood came, the farm and my house and everything I had, all washed down. No more—nothing left. Even nothing for cooking meals. So, neighbors brought some rice and shoyu. They all helped me. My house was kind of high up, so nobody got hurt. But my garden place was no more, every drop of dirt all washed down. That time all my neighbors were Portuguese or Hawaiian. They all come look. Everybody was crying out to me, "Oh, Mrs. Kim, you worked so hard for all these years, and everything washed down. Now you have nothing!"

For three years, one day no miss, I beg to God, "Please help me to go see my mother. My mother born six children, but me the only daughter, she has to see me. Mother can die or can get better after she sees me. I must go see my mother. Please, God, help me." I pray for three years. One day no miss. That's not easy. Every night, I make my baby sleep quick and then I get up and under the bed, I cry and pray, pray. Then, God give me an idea! That time plenty ladies came from Masan and Pusan. ... I tell all my friends and every place I go that I'm going to Korea and they can send something to parents, I would take it. Then, all kinds and sizes packages came in and with packages everybody give me money. Oh, I collected about $250, everybody gave me big boxes, one big trunk I took, no limit. Plenty thing I took over, no charge, you know. I am not seasick so I went on a small boat. That time small boat round trip only $55, believe it or not, so cheap. So I went to Korea myself. That time I had two girls, one boy. My younger daughter was nine months old and still taking my own breast milk. That time I don't know how to feed bottle milk. So, I give her to somebody. "Please take care for me. If she is really hungry, she will take milk bottle."

I took the President Lines boat and for one week I was very sick because my baby wasn't drinking my milk. But, every day, I go stand up at the edge of the boat and I pray, pray to God, "Please, God, help me. I am bad mother. If I am doing bad by leaving my baby, God, give me punishment. But I am going to see my mother, my mother wants to see me. So, I have proof. "Please take care for me. If she is really hungry, she will take milk bottle."

After seeing my mother, I work so hard. Small babies follow me. Night time I work until three